

Balance

The powerfully-built man burst through the undergrowth with an impatient growl. He stepped into the woodland glade and was glad to once again see sunlight upon verdant grass, rather than the gloomy murk of the Glimmerwood that he had been fighting his way through since daybreak.

Gethrum Zohle hated this forest, well, all forests really. He was a man of cities and of stone; comfortable only in places where the works of man were paramount over those of nature. Still, the warmth of the sun on his broad face was pleasing enough for now. Just to be out of the dense woodland, with all its strange scents and sounds that befuddled his senses, was a welcome respite.

He stooped to run a large, calloused hand over the blades of grass at his feet. His tongue ran over his dry lips as his eyes scanned for the presence of water to refresh his flask. The atmosphere under the thick forest canopy was sweltering on such a warm day and he had drained his sizable reserve of water quickly.

A glint of light betrayed a small stream on the other side of the glade. Gethrum smiled at his good fortune and crossed over in a few wide strides. He was an imposing man; strong, broad, and tall with it. He enjoyed the feeling of power his size gave him over other men.

He drew his clay flask from his belt pouch and removed its cork stopper, before dropping to his knees and submerging it in the narrow stream. Before it was full he retracted it and drank greedily, reckoning that it was wise to imbibe as much as possible now as well as to stock up for later. Water ran down his square, clean-shaven chin. Gethrum breathed deeply, his thirst satiated for now. A faint flavour resided on his tongue, which he put down to the mineral content of the water.

A snarling sound emanated from some bushes nearby; not deep enough to indicate a sizable predator that might cause him concern, but one that never the less broke his repose and returned a little of the foul mood that had bedevilled him through the woods. "Damned vermin," he hissed, before raising his free hand towards the bushes. A beam of blue-white light burst from his palm, incinerating the bush and turning the foliage to ash. A yowl of fear and pain from that direction indicated that Gethrum had not been successful in dispatching the animal, but had certainly taught it a lesson. *I am master here now, you mangy cur*, a thought that gave him a sense of grim satisfaction. He topped his flask once more from the fresh, clear water and fixed the cork back into place.

The pleasing, but fleeting, sentiment of dominance he felt eased the oncoming black mood that threatened to take hold of his mind once more. Ever since the injustice he suffered at Tovenhal, much of his time had been given over to dark brooding, or to blind rages that sometimes came when his recollection of that day obliterated his sense of self-worth. His loss in the Great Arena had released a new cruelty in him, and his desire to control everything he saw was made all the greater.

In rare moments of rational consideration this troubled him. He had been instructed all his life that the powerful should be responsible; that the strong should not be trifled with such base desires and needs. This was the training of his house, that of Travium, House of Power. What had happened to him on that day and ever since then he was unable to process in his mind, and certainly he could not move on from the memory of it.

To lose a duel to *her*, in such an effortless fashion, had been more than his excessive narcissism could take. To relieve the pain of his defeat Gethrum's mind had duly thrown up the possibility that he had been unlucky, or had even been cheated. Those were things that fit into his view of the world and of himself, and so he grasped these possibilities eagerly and fiercely.

That is why he was here, after all. To take his revenge on the person that had cheated him of a deserved victory. This person was a woman - a tiny frail old woman to make matters worse, one that had clearly used devious trickery and dishonourable action to achieve his defeat. In his mind, there could be no other reason for a loss to an old woman. The fact this particular old woman had a vicious grizzly bear as a companion, as well as being the most successful duellist Wizard in living memory did not belabour his consideration.

His fury also stemmed from the fact that his standing in the House had been diminished with the loss. Gethrum was no longer seen as a potential leader, but merely an acolyte that could

be of some modest use to the grand aims of Traviium. His future had been swindled away from him by a beggar-witch! He believed that only by righting this wrong would the destiny he had always imagined be realised. With a grunt, and a powerful desire of correcting this injustice, Gethrum rose and stowed his water flask, before storming off back into the wood.

Many hours passed in wandering through the dense wood, and once again Gethrum's flask ran dry. This time, there was no water to be found anywhere. The darkness in the forest had now become near absolute, for the light of day had long since departed. The dark was no cause for fear to Gethrum, however, for he had a faith in his own strength and power. The lessons of the Masters of Traviium he had learned well, and his own arrogance only magnified their respect for self-reliance.

Gethrum Zohle raised his left hand and summoned a trickle of Ghyr, the Root of Power, causing it to blaze with luminescence. The surrounding forest was bathed in an eerie blue light, revealing the presence of a number of small mammals going about their business and scores of gnarled trees stretching out in every direction.

Gethrum turned his head one way and then the other, scanning the limits of his vision. He had a strong feeling that he had been here before, in this place. The shape of the trees, the placement of certain roots and detritus on the floor, and the growth of fiercely red mushrooms on an overhanging branch seemed to confirm this. "Blast," he spat as he allowed himself to accept the truth. "Deceiving strumpet!" he cursed in a fury, his teeth grating in ire at the girl that had lied to him and caused him to become hopelessly, bewilderingly lost.

Before his journey, Gethrum had researched his foe in great detail. He knew that the witch helped young maidens from the villages near the Glimmerwood deal with their 'family' troubles. He had paid out a lot of gold to find one brave enough not only to admit to this, but to offer up the location of the witch's shack. Now he found that the prodigious amount of sovereigns had been wasted, that he had been swindled again by some backwards fool on behalf of this witch!

His blood boiled with the injustice of his life. It seemed as though everyone was against him, and yet all he wanted to do was lend his considerable power to the work of his house. All he wanted to do was help the people!

The squeaking and chittering of the small creatures ended abruptly as they all scampered to hiding places. Gethrum's eyes narrowed as he detected the sound of something large moving through the woods towards him. A rumble - the low growl of a forest bear, preceded its arrival. The Wizard's keen sense of smell detected a familiar musky scent. Gethrum's eyes went wide in surprise; wondering if this was the very bear that he had faced before in Tovenhal. His teeth ground together involuntarily as he became certain of the fact, though he still could not see the animal for confirmation. The creature had stopped just out of sight beyond the treeline. He could smell it though, the pungent aroma of unclean fur and whatever rotten meat that had passed for its last meal.

"Reveal yourself!" he thundered, fully aware that the bear was never to be found far from its mistress. "I have come to exact justice for all that which you have taken from me by trickery!"

A rasping, cackling laugh was the reply to his words.

Gethrum craned his neck; he could not be certain from which direction the sound came, though it did not appear to be in the same direction as the bear.

"I know why you have come, musclebound oaf," Yulia replied. "You strike out in *impotent* fury at the world because the lie of who you are has finally been revealed. Your *weakness* is now plain to all!" The old woman's voice was filled with spite and an impatient honesty.

Gethrum howled in rage at the insult and loosed beams of power from his hands in all directions. The forest blazed as rays of Ghyr immolated the dry leaves and branches of the nearby trees. From his hiding position, Vushka the grizzly bear roared in challenge, for the creature

recognised that another being had challenged his position as alpha of the wood. The foliage burst apart as the grizzly bounded through to attack the interloper. Zohle managed to stagger away from its savage bite in the nick of time, Vushka's jaws snapping shut on the space where he had stood just a moment earlier.

The bear raised itself up to full height, dwarfing even the burly Gethrum Zohle, and it swung its heavy paws at him, trying to rake the man with its sharp claws. Gethrum dodged the clumsy blows; he was a proficient fighter and had faced this creature before, learning its movements. He had trained extensively on the hope that he would one day be able to kill this beast and take its pelt as a trophy. Gethrum wanted to be able to warm his toes on the fur each morning as a reminder of his victory over the Witch of Feylyn.

The Wizard summoned Ghyr to his fist and loosed a blow at the animal. The proximity and size of his opponent meant the strike could not miss, and a wave of force sent the beast tumbling backwards. Gethrum kicked out a heavily muscled leg at the bear as it tried to roll off of its back, and was savagely thrilled to feel a bone snap in Vushka's ribs. The grizzly roared in pain and lashed out with a paw. Gethrum tried to avoid the blow but the best he could do was limit the impact. Three long red lines appeared on his broad chest where the beast had broken his skin and drawn blood.

"Vushka, my love!" screeched Mother Yulia in dismay and concern for her companion's well-being. "Come to me now!" The bear issued a grumpy hiss but immediately complied. It was fast, despite its huge bulk, and Gethrum Zohle watched dumbfounded as it quickly disappeared back into the woods. He darted after the bear, eager to build upon this early exchange. He knew he was more than a match for a mere animal, and despite wanting to hurt it and break some of that old witch's spirit, he knew he needed to kill the bear quickly and to not waste any more energy than was necessary.

The sound of a wounded bear was not difficult to follow, and despite not being able to match the animal for speed or for familiarity of the terrain Zohle managed to stay close behind as the bear ran for safety. Gethrum was confident that the old woman could never keep up with them, which would make killing the animal a trifling formality.

He could feel the wounds on his chest burn as he pursued, and as blood was pumped out of the rents at a greater rate due to his exertion. It dripped down his hairless chest to his waist and was being absorbed by the fabric of his breeches. To his alarm, the material had turned from a light grey to a blotchy and deep crimson due to the volume. He thought that perhaps the bear had cut him more deeply than he had first believed, and his head swam a little as he considered it.

He slowed down as the vegetation became ever denser and Gethrum lacked the momentum of the bear to effortlessly pass through. His frustration grew as he realised his quarry was escaping him and he could do nothing about it. Gethrum felt suddenly very tired and became violently sick. He lost his footing and fell, striking his head on a rock. The last sight he saw was the brilliant luminescence of Ghyr rapidly fading as he began to lose consciousness.

Gethrum Zohle awoke with a start. A shaft of sunlight had pierced the dense foliage and he could feel its warmth upon his skin. He ached everywhere and found he could barely move. With a great effort he turned his head to the side to get a better look at the place in which he lay. The vacant eyes of a skull leered back at him from a few inches away; a yellowing and ancient skull, threaded through with roots and detritus from the forest floor. Despite his pain, surprise caused him to try and rear back from the unexpected and gruesome sight.

He saw that the small clearing was littered with more than just this solitary skull, the bones of many creatures, many of the human, were strewn the ground. Some looked freshly gnawed, which filled the Travium Wizard with fresh alarm.

Mother Yulia shuffled into his field of vision, her stiff and irregular walking testament to the arthritic joints of a body that had seen too many winters. The charms and vials she wore around

her belt clicked and clacked as she moved, and the colourful feathers that were mounted on her staff shook gently in the soft breeze. She gazed down at Gethrum, lank and wiry grey hair obscuring some of the heavy lines of her face.

"Why did I leave you alive in Tovenhal?" she croaked at the fallen Wizard. Her voice had a thread of sadness in it; an acceptance of an inevitability that had now come to fruition.

Gethrum, went to speak, to curse her, but his throat was parched and curiously swollen.

Yulia waved her hand. "Do not try to speak, you fool. It was a rhetorical question. I haven't lived so long or so hard merely to chatter with lumpen idiots such as you in my dotage. I am just in the habit of speaking out loud to myself." She shuffled over to a stump and unceremoniously deposited herself on it. Her knees cracked as she sat, drawing a deep scowl from her ancient face.

"The answer to that question," she carried on – as much to herself as Gethrum, "is the vain hope of an old fool." Yulia sighted wistfully. Her grey eyes scanned the prostrate form of the big man and she shook her head.

Gethrum tried to get up, but whatever strength he had known previously seemed to have departed him. *I'm at her mercy*, he thought, and his eyes must have transmitted this concern as it drew an irritated cluck from the old woman.

"If I had wanted to take your life I could have done that in Tovenhal, or at any point since you entered the Glimmerwood. Or for the day you have been unconscious, you stupid man! Madly crashing through my wood like a bear with its paw in a trap! You think you can thunder into my domain and teach me a lesson? Idiot! What lesson can I learn from you that I have not already learned from those that came before you?" Yulia gestured angrily to the skulls that littered the grove.

"You are not the first to come for me," she said with a smug pride, "I have made many enemies in my life, and all of them were more of a threat than you! They all reside here now; home to the crawling, squirming, and creeping things that live in the soil." She nudged the yellowing skull with the sole of her moccasin shoe and a centipede crawled out of the nasal socket.

"I gave you your life so that you might learn some lessons of your own, even though I knew that you would spurn my gift and I would one day find you at my door. I hoped that perhaps, this time, just one of you imbeciles would finally come to your senses."

She spat out some rheumy spittle and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Yulia fixed Gethrum with an icy gaze. "Is it so hard to believe that you are not the fulcrum on which the world sits? That there are others out there that may be your better, no matter how they might appear to you?" She snorted in derision. "The arrogance of youth!"

Gethrum tried to reply, to muster up the venom in his heart for this woman just to scorn her before the end, but the best he could manage was a weak cough. He felt an odd scratching sensation in his throat as he coughed and a cloud of particles erupted from his mouth. He struggled to raise a hand to his mouth and he apprehensively reached inside with dirty fingertips. It felt different; soft and rubbery to the touch. Something was very, very wrong.

Yulia nodded sadly, as though she could hear his very thoughts, his worry. "You big brutes all come here thinking that you are the masters of this place. You think that the *feeble* wilds are no match for you city-dwellers with your drains and your towers and all of that." She sighed again. "If any of you had just a bit of sense then perhaps you wouldn't drink from the first stream you see. Sleeping Gods above! Just to drink and to not consider what might be in the water..."

At this point the true horror of his predicament dawned on Gethrum. He grabbed his throat, forcing another cloud of plant matter to erupt from his open mouth. His jaw moved as he made the action to scream but no sound came, save an unpleasant, moist sucking sound. His breath became laboured as he felt a tremendous pressure from within his chest.

Yulia spat again. "You think yourself better than you really are, and it's the conceit of that superiority that always does for you here. Well not always perhaps, sometimes Vuskha will maul a

fool to death and chew on his bones, but most of the time it's the Glimmerwood that finishes you. I gave you the chance to thrive, to go on living and hopefully make some children less stupid than you are," she sighed and shook her head, "but here we are."

Mother Yulia pushed herself to her feet. She looked down with pity on this man, now well on his way to being eaten from the inside by a particularly aggressive strain of fungus. "I suppose you are too far gone to appreciate the irony, really. I gave you your life when you looked only for death - my death. Now you come here to try to reclaim the life I already afforded you and shall force my hand to give you death anyway. Soon you will be begging for me to end it, I imagine."

Gethrum shook his head the best he could, releasing another cloud of tiny, glimmering fungal spores with the movement. The cloud was now disturbingly much denser and tinged with the crimson of his blood. In his mind he tried to think of a way out of this, to still come out on top and to prove to others, and more importantly to himself, that he had *value*. That he was a man of intelligence and of great power.

At his lowest ebb an epiphany came to him: that his need for recognition was the very thing that had now killed him. All his anger for Yulia dwindled away in the blink of an eye. She had merely let others see what he had always secretly known and had done his best to conceal: he was weak and very foolish. The knowledge of this was what had always made him angry.

Yulia hobbled closer to him, watching the stages of realisation play out on the face of the younger Wizard. She wasn't much for the feelings and thoughts of others, but she wasn't heartless either. It was always the same with these big ones; it was all about the feeling of power. Or more accurately, the lack of it she supposed.

They didn't understand the thing that she had known since she was a little one, that the lives of mortals are nothing in the grand scheme of the world. Men are born, and men die. Aggrandisement was just a challenge to the natural order to knock you off of whatever lofty perch you took a seat on. It had happened to greater races than man, and in the fullness of time, it would happen again to those that came after.

She watched as the convulsions began, as the parasitic plants bred inside him with such rapidity that it moved his body. She thought of her companion as she watched the man suffer. Vushka had earlier tried to take a bite out of him, if for nothing more than to repay the fool for having broken a rib, but she had warned him off with her staff, much to the bear's annoyance. She wouldn't have her one friend in the entire world laid low in such a cruel way by eating this idiot. The day was full enough of tragedy as it was. She smiled a little to think of the ornery, mangy bear, probably sleeping at her hearth having raided her pantry for some food.

Gethrum wheezed loudly; a hideous intake of breath that signalled the end was near but unfortunately for him, not near enough to ease the excruciating pain. The fungus had started to blossom all over his skin, and one of his eyes started to collapse as it was being colonised from the inside. He was beyond the ability or the need to give her consent now; she knew what she had to do.

Mother Yulia whispered certain words of power and a green light erupted around her. Her form was remade by the power of Wyvvic, changing from the frail old woman into something altogether less than human. Her senses unfolded as she transformed into a state that was neither truly beast or man, but an amalgamation of the best elements from both.

In her new state, she heard the call of the forest, her home for these many years where she had roamed and hunted in the form she now assumed. Through keen, golden eyes she looked down on the pitiful creature that was once her opponent in the Great Arena. He had been too weak to truly challenge her skills, or he might have seen her like this before.

Her snout wrinkled at the scent of corruption that permeated the dying man. He had been big and strong, but now was wasted away and debased. The sorrow she had felt for him as a human was replaced by an animalistic revulsion for his weakness. Still, she was aware of what must be done, even for a pathetic creature such as this. Yulia saw the fear of what she had become in his remaining eye and it pleased her; she smiled down at him, revealing a row of sharp teeth - a carnivore's teeth.

Her arm moved like quicksilver and sharp talons sliced at his neck, rupturing his jugular. Gethrum's eye went wide for a moment in surprise, and then glazed over as death mercifully took him.

Yulia shook her arm, hissing at the unpleasant mixture of the man's blood and remnants of the invading fungus that had sprayed all over her fur. It was time to find a pool to bathe in and remove the foul stink of him. Unlike this weakling, she knew which ones were safe for use and which ones were not.

As she scurried away, feeling the thrill of painless movement and the rush of blood in her veins, she heard the raspy voice of her human-self in her mind, chiding them both. "Haven't you learned by now, you old fool? Whatever you give you will also have to take. That is the way of the world... It is the way of balance."