

## Enter the Damned

“We are so very dusted,” Katha declared quietly yet intensely, looking over the top of the hill they had just climbed. In the valley below, half a dozen giants, the smallest easily three times their height, seemed to be playing a game which involved throwing boulders at a target far away.

“Maybe there’s a path around them,” Naeline suggested doubtfully as the echoes of a boulder crashing into a distant, rocky hillside reached them.

“You saw the chasm to the left,” Katha sighed.

“Yes, and the cliffs to the right,” the noblewoman agreed with a frown. “I’m beginning to see why they call these the Damned Reaches.”

“No you’re not,” Garnell contradicted from just a little ways down the slope behind them. “But if we manage to continue, I have no doubt that we all will understand.”

“My axe and my armor are enchanted enough that I could take down one of the giants,” Denny stated from where he stood on tiptoes looking down at the playing monsters. “And that’s not bragging. Unfortunately, there are six of them.”

“Hey, that’s a good point. I could distract them for you,” Katha suggested with a quiet yet intense enthusiasm. “The enchantment on my armor allows me to blend in with whatever’s behind me. I’ll activate it, get into position, deactivate it, then get their attention and run and hide while you kill one. Then I’ll distract them again while you do for another. We’ll just repeat the process until they’re all dead.”

“You’re assuming that they’re stupid,” Naeline said, shaking her head. “Underestimating an enemy is a good way to end up dead. And your leather armor isn’t going to stand up well against a giant or one of their boulders if they somehow figure out where you are.” The distant crashing of a boulder seemed to emphasize her point.

“Oh, like you’re some great general or something,” Katha snorted, despite her concerned look back in the direction the crash came from. “In that case madam general, you come up with a better plan.”

“Naeline’s right,” a new voice said from the bottom of the hill causing them all to spin around hastily and in Garnell’s case, nearly fall back down the steep slope. “Giants aren’t stupid. Most of them anyway. You’ll need to come up with a better plan than that.”

“Well, well,” Denny frowned. “The apprentice returns.”

“Is he...?” Naeline began but didn’t finish.

“Yes,” the man at the bottom of hill acknowledged with a frown. “He’s passed on.”

“I’ve seen many wizards in my time. You, my friend, are a most powerful apprentice,” Father Garnell said as he slid down the hill on his backside. “Do you think you might be able to distract the witch queen while we find the source of the soul-metal within our world?” The others followed him, sliding down the hill with various degrees of dexterity and grace.

“I am not your friend. And yes indeed, I can and will happily keep Cindar busy,” the wizard replied with a hint of unholy eagerness.

“Umm, not to denigrate your skills,” Naeline began cautiously, “But your master wasn’t even sure he’d be able to hold the witch queen at bay long. We’d love for you to come along but not if you’re just looking for a way to commit suicide.”

“Speak for yourself,” Denny stated. “I’m not so sure I want him along at all. He’s hiding

stuff from us. Like that trick teleporting out with his master. They could have done that at any time to get us close to Yal Funus. We'd could already be there with a real wizard instead of only an apprentice."

"You are partially correct," the magic bender replied with a tight smile. "I could have taken you straight there. But then you would be ignorant of what lay between your home and Yal Funus. And you would therefore be dependent upon me to get you home. Also, and my suspicions were apparently correct in this, I didn't think any of you had worked together, much less fought together. You're going to have to be very good at working together if you want to get past a few giants... much less the horrors that you'll find at Yal Funus."

"We can handle the damned giants!" Denny declared on the verge of being angry.

"If you prepare properly and if your companions are as well equipped as yourself... you just might. Of course, success or failure gets back to this whole 'working together' notion of mine."

"Equipped? Are you suggesting...." Naeline began when she was interrupted.

"Shut up! Look apprentice, no one put you in charge of anything. Your assistance will be appreciated when asked but...." The big man fell silent when he noticed Naeline's sword point at his throat.

"Did you just tell me to shut up soldier? Did you just tell a noblewoman of the line of Bristone to 'shut up'? The noblewoman your knight general commanded you to serve? Is that what you said? Because if it was, you are in more trouble than you can easily imagine."

"I... I'm sorry Lady Naeline. I... I forgot myself in my anger." There was a long moment of silence during which the pretty noblewoman studied the much larger man.

"Very well," she said at last, sheathing her blade. "I shall forget this ever happened. None of us can afford to lose our tempers. We are in enemy territory. And matters are only going to get worse." She turned to the wizard, "You mentioned something about equipping us like Denny. Not all of us can easily wield a soldier's axe and even if we could it would not be half so proficiently as the good sergeant."

"What I meant was that each of you should be equipped for your task as well as the soldier has been equipped."

"What do you suggest?" Katha asked, giving Naeline a dark look.

"I went to one of my vaults and picked out a few things I thought might be helpful. Those items are over there in the travel pack."

"Can't be much there," Denny muttered as an openly curious Father Garnell led the way.

"One?" Katha mouthed with a quick look to the big soldier.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," the wizard replied to the big man with a smile that failed to reach his eyes.

Lady Naeline reached the travel pack first. "May I?" she asked, poised to open it up.

"Please do," the wizard replied with wave of his arm.

"It seems rather full," she muttered.

"Yes," he agreed with a faint grin. "The sword on the right is intended for you. Beneath it is a suit of chainmail which I believe will fit you. I also took the liberty of having a tabard made with your house crest upon it. Same crest on the shield as well."

"Demons farting in the breeze! How deep does this pack go?" Katha asked, looking into the pack from the side.

"The inside of the bag is about the size of a common room at an inn," the wizard replied. "I've got the stuff I thought your little band could use on a table just under the opening." They

stopped to stare at the wizard a moment. Katha was the first to turn back to the bag.

“Don’t you mean ‘our’ little band?” Father Garnell asked gently.

“No,” the wizard replied.

“This little box is locked,” Katha stated, holding a small box as long as her forearm up for the wizard to see.

“Indeed, that one goes to the Lady Naeline as well. The medium sword and short sword are for you. Yes, that’s them. The cloak and throwing spear are for the soldier. *That* sword is for Father Garnell. Yes, that shield goes to the good father as well.”

“Are all these items enchanted?” Lady Naeline asked, apparently stunned.

“Yes. I’ve picked them up along the way in my travels. A few have been out of service for far too long.”

“These items represent a lot of gold,” Katha breathed.

“I suppose,” the wizard replied with a shrug. “Father Garnell. The suit of scale mail is also for you.”

“It umm... looks heavy,” the good father muttered.

“Looks that way, doesn’t it? I couldn’t help but notice that you could do with losing a little weight. Wearing the armor will help with that. Trust me, when you get to Yul Funus, you’ll need all the strength and mobility you can get. The sword was dedicated to your archangel long ago. The shield by comparison is fairly new.”

“I’m just big boned,” the priest muttered, fingering the mail he pulled out of the bag.

“Dream on father,” the wizard replied with a chuckle and sardonic grin. “Denny is big boned. You’re at least twenty pounds overweight. Time to convert that fat to muscle.”

“What is this cloak supposed to do?” the big soldier asked, interrupting whatever reply the priest might have made while holding the cloak out as though it were covered in filth.

“It provides some small extra protection against physical dangers but the primary enchantment protects the wearer from spells, hexes, and other dark incantations.”

“Oh,” the soldier muttered before promptly putting the cloak over his shoulders.

“What’s in this box?” Naeline asked.

“Open it and see,” the wizard absently replied.

“It looks like a wand of some sort.” Turning to Katha, she frowned, “I thought you said this was locked.”

“It was locked for anyone but yourself,” the wizard stated, interrupting Katha’s indignant reply before it had a chance to begin.

“That can’t be an easy magic to do,” Naeline stated, alternating her looks between the wizard and the wand in the box. The wizard chose not to reply. “Randal, why did you give me a wand?”

The wizard sighed. “My name is not Randal. Randal died the other day. He was my apprentice for forty or so years but never learned the immortality trick. He died from old age and was apparently ready to do so.” He pulled out a flask and took a long pull. The others looked shocked and more than one jaw literally dropped.

“*You’re Callidus!*” Father Garnell declared.

“Yeah,” he acknowledged, taking another deep pull on the flask. “That’s me.”

“But you look so... ordinary,” Katha frowned. “Shouldn’t you be wearing robes and carrying a staff instead of wearing worn leathers and a dirk?”

Callidus laughed. “Randal loved the stereotype. Tried for years to get me to dress in robes as he did. Thought it looked more dignified..

“But why?” Lady Naeline asked with a frown. “Why the whole ruse with Randal? Why not just tell us the truth of who you were?”

With a frown the wizard put away his flask. “I frequently get tired of being Callidus the Great Wizard. Callidus gets too much attention. People want him at parties. Other wizards require his opinion on various topic rather than thinking matters through for themselves. Kings and queens need him at court. And the common people fall over themselves being polite and awestruck. No, I frequently prefer to be simply Randal. Or Hal. Or Logan. Any of the other names I’ve gone by in days past.”

Turning to the priest, he said, “Put your armor on father. You’re about to get your first taste of battling giants.”

“The archangel Rafael does not like those dedicated to her taking lives,” he replied with a frown.

“True enough. However, if you’re not dressed for the fight, you will not be able to help those in the thick of it. And since that sword was long ago dedicated to the archangel you serve, I rather strongly suspect that Rafael would prefer you killing a bunch of evil giants rather than allowing your companions to get squashed by them... thus effectively ending the quest she put forth unto thee.” Looking troubled, the priest began donning his armor.

A minute later, Naeline walked over to the wizard who seemed lost in thought. “Why did you give me a wand? I’m no witch.”

“I’m about ready to leave this world. I’ve grown sick of the word ‘wizard’. I think I preferred ‘mage’ or perhaps ‘magiker’. Here males are wizards and females witches. Not very original. To answer your question, you have the spark within you. The gift. Whatever you care to call it. Lift the wand and I’ll let you prove it to yourself. Go ahead, it won’t bite you.” With obvious reluctance, Naeline picked up the wand.

“There you see? Nothing. You were simply... mistaken.” The tip of the wand had begun glowing red. “Oh dear.”

“Point the wand at that stump over there. Yes, that’s it. Now, I want you to think this word at the wand,” he leaned forward and whispered a word into her ear.

Looking doubtful, she adjusted the wavering point of the wand to once more threaten the stump. Suddenly a small ball of red light flashed from the wand burning a spot on the stump. Naeline jumped and very nearly dropped the silver trimmed length of white wood.

“That felt... strange. Very, very strange,” she muttered, slowly regaining her composure..

“Yes, I imagine so,” Callidus agreed before walking up the hill.

“Where are you going?” Katha asked.

“To look upon these giants you are about to dispatch into what comes next.”

A few moments later the entire group were back on the edge of the hilltop. “Why don’t you just turn them into rabbits or something?” Katha asked in a whisper just before the crash of a distant boulder washed over them.

“Because I already know how to kill giants,” the leather-clad wizard replied. “I know how to fight together even when my band is apart in the field. I know where my courage lay and just how far I can push it. But *you* do not. This is your big chance to learn about yourselves individually and possibly begin turning yourselves into a cohesive unit. And if you cannot manage to kill a few giants, then you might as well turn around and go back. There’s a lot worse waiting for you the closer you get to Yul Funus.”

“You’ve spoken before as though you have personal knowledge of what awaits us in Yul

Funus,” Naeline said, splitting her attention between the wizard and the giants below. “How do you know about that place... and what do you know?”

The wizard was silent a moment before beginning, “I’ve been hearing about Cindar for years. Centuries even. When I was young, she was already a powerful witch and an unparalleled warrior. In the east, her influence grew along with her prowess as a witch. Before long, her battle skills won her a small kingdom. Despite her considerable powers of witchcraft, she is said to be a nigh invincible warrior. Anyway, years later she quietly took over another small kingdom. Time passed and she took yet another. Eventually folks figured out she was either immortal or very long lived. A few centuries later she had conquered the entire eastern lands. Peoples around the world grew wary that she would lead her armies out of those lands. Instead, she seemed to turn her energies and efforts inward. That was when she converted what had been the Thambold people’s funeral mountain into Yul Funus.

“Fortifications were carved out of the mountain itself. Bolstered with metal and magic, the entire mountain became a mighty fortress as well as a city. Long ago did the first rumors reach our lands. Rumors of unnatural peoples walking the halls of Yul Funus. Rumors that demons and devils roamed the city freely. Rumors that the dead no longer slept there but restlessly walked and roamed the dark corridors beneath the mountain. Word came to us that all the Thambold people had been put to death. Tens if not hundreds of thousands. Mostly these rumors were dismissed. Mostly.

“By that time, I had become powerful enough that my curiosity about the Cursed City led me to my scrying orb. And I saw for myself that the rumors seemed to be true. Then I was attacked through my orb; a magical attack that surprised me destroyed said orb. Through more cautious scrying, I learned she had a number of dark wizards guarding against scrying and attack. There were other... things... guarding the fortress city as well. Since then, I’ve checked on what happens there every decade or so. Cindar has been building her powers and her power-base for a long time now. What her ultimate goal is remains a mystery.”

“Now you know,” he said, looking around the small group. “And now I’d like to hear your plan for defeating these giants.”

“You gave me a weapon,” Denny told him quietly. “I do not like to enter battle with an untested weapon. The spear is enchanted. Even I can feel that. However, I do not know what it does or what its limitations are.”

“See the inscriptions and how they weave together? When you throw it, the enchantment activates. This spear will strike your target with the force of a lightning strike. A hit anywhere on one of the giant’s torsos should be enough to kill it.”

“I think we should start by separating them,” Naeline suggested thoughtfully.

“That sounds like a good beginning,” the wizard replied. “And what after that?”

Looking at the now resting quest band, Callidus shook his head. The battle hadn’t been a complete disaster but it certainly had gone neither as planned nor smoothly.

The idea to have Katha hide across the valley and flash a mirror to lure away a few of the giants had been a good one. And it had indeed lured two of the six giants away from the main bunch. Naeline luring a couple of others to the cliff face had seemed like a good idea as well. However, the landslide she triggered with her wand only covered the pair up to their waists and knocked neither of the giants down. And this left the two giants not only angry but also up to their waist in rocks they

could throw. Which they immediately did. Naeline was forced to hide behind a huge rock or be squashed.

On the up side, Denny's surprise throw with the spear had been dead accurate. The big sergeant really knew his business. Burning the air with an intense blue-white light, the spear had struck one giant in the middle of the back and the impact combined with the clap of thunder had thrown the giant a good sixty steps across the valley floor. The surprised giant next to him had turned around just in time to find an enchanted great axe in his knee. Screaming in pain, the huge creature had dropped.

Father Garnell had prayed for and received a greater binding spell from the archangel he followed. However, the spell wasn't powerful enough to completely stop the first of the giants which had begun running back from unsuccessfully searching for Katha... it only slowed the creature.

Watching with an amused interest, the wizard had caused a boulder to roll over into the path of the other fast approaching giant, sending him flying through the air as the boulder tripped him. This gave Denny enough time to maneuver around the thrashings of his wounded giant and strike him an ultimately fatal blow to the neck.

Meanwhile, across the field Katha, worried that her slow giant would make one too many giants, had chased after the magically slowed monster. Catching up so that she ran unnoticed between the monster's legs, she'd held out her swords, one to either side, and the slowly running giant had kicked the back of his feet back into her bared blades. The simple sandal straps the creature wore had severed as had important tendons in the back of it's legs. With a great bellow of pain, the giant had stumbled and then crashed to the ground. Katha only narrowly avoided being crushed. And then she realized she was within arm's reach of a hurt and furious giant. With nowhere to hide, she'd hidden her swords behind her back and activated the blending ability of her armor.

One of the two giants stuck up to his waist had realized that something was going on behind him. Spotting Denny and his two dead companions, he immediately flung a boulder at the soldier. The huge rock missed but only by a few paces. With a growl, the big man ran onto the body of the first dead giant and pulled the spear from it's back. He then turned his attention back to the giant throwing large rocks at him just in time to artlessly dive out of the way of another boulder. Rolling back up, he began trotting towards the pair of stuck giants.

Seeing this, the first giant got the other's attention and they both began throwing boulders at the approaching warrior. The second giant was oriented in such a way he was having to more throw the huge stones over his own head to get them in the right direction. He'd been much better situated to throw rocks at Naeline.

Denny did well enough dodging them until one of the boulders took a strange bounce and hit him a glancing blow. This knocked the big man off his feet and apparently rendered him unconscious.

"Denny!" Katha screamed, surprising her giant greatly. Realizing that her giant now knew where she was, she ran up the front of the giant. Demonstrating that she too knew which end of a weapon went into an opponent, she drove both her blades up under the giants chin and into it's brain. Even as the giant toppled over, she turned and ran for the big man whom the two stuck giants were trying to bounce boulders off of.

"You know," the wizard had called out. "I bet Denny could use a little *healing* about now." Apparently started, Father Garnell had turned a quick look to the sitting wizard before running towards the fallen man. "Good," Callidus murmured to himself. "Skill and courage as well. Combine that with some practical experience in dealing with the horrors this land has to offer and they just might have a chance. Probably not but you all just might surprise me."

“Hey you!” Naeline yelled from just outside her cover. “Yes you! The ugly one! You don’t have to worry about them because *I’m* going to kill you.” If she had been hoping to distract the giants, her plan worked very well. Both giants flung boulders at her and her scream of pain suggested they’d done so with some accuracy. Concerned, the wizard began walking towards the young noblewoman’s position. Meanwhile, out on the valley floor, a red-faced Father Garnell tried to simultaneously breathe and work a magical healing upon the fallen Denny.

A white glow surrounded the pair as Katha came skidding to a halt. Furious, she grabbed up the spear and charged towards the two giants.

Now the giants weren’t stupid. They’d figured out for themselves that the spear was quite likely what had killed their companion. As they did not particularly care for the idea of meeting such a fate themselves, they had begun throwing large rocks at rapidly approaching woman just as quickly as they possibly could.

Meanwhile, behind them the wizard dropped down the cliff to land next to the Naeline. She was not doing well, her right leg had been crushed between a boulder and one of the stones the giants had thrown. With a gesture, the man flipped the rock off her leg. The very pale woman winced but didn’t cry out.

“When they draw back to throw,” he told her kneeling next to her. “Hit him in the armpit with a blast from your wand.”

Pointing her wand at a giant, she asked through gritted teeth, “Why isn’t my leg bleeding?”

“Maybe it’s a lingering effect of the blessing. Possibly the main blood vessel was pinched off. Either way, let’s hope it stays that way for a little longer.” A bolt of red light sped from the wand to strike the leftmost giant in the arm instead of the armpit. However, the result was still good in that the giant dropped the stone.

Both giants turned to look at them. And it was at that time that the spear again flashed through the air and crashed into a giant. The force of the blow ripped the giant clear of the landslide he’d been stuck in and flung him against the rocks where he lay unmoving.

Stunned, the other giant turned back to find that Katha was almost upon him. However, it was not Katha who first struck him but rather Denny’s great axe, thrown once the now healed soldier realized that he wasn’t going to be able to catch up with the much lighter and faster woman. Apparently, the axe held more than one enchantment. Shocked to find an axe in its belly, the giant had looked down upon it in disbelief. Not slowing her run, Katha leapt from a boulder onto the head of the axe and then sprang up, driving her sword through the giant’s eye. The giant toppled over backwards and she rode the body as far as it went before pulling her sword free by way of jumping off the corpse.

“Father!” the wizard yelled, “Get here fast, you have another patient.”

Hours later, the leather-clad man sat surveying the sleeping group. Denny had not been badly injured from the bouncing boulder. The enchantments on his armor had been as strong as the soldier had hinted. Naeline could walk again but not well and not without a great deal of pain. The priest would perform another healing on the leg the next morning.

All things being equal, the situation could have been worse. Father Garnell had put together a solid band. As the wizard turned his gaze towards the next part of the Damned Reaches he planned to take them, his thoughts turned inward. It was one thing battling giants. They at least were creatures of the natural world. He wondered how well they’d stand up against creatures much less natural.

They’d all find out soon.