

*Tangled Elves*

*by Marc H. Wyman*

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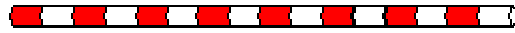
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The body lay in the road, a crossbow quarrel sticking out from the throat.

Cornell of Cayaboré halted his horse and peered down at the dead man. The blood pooling under his neck was still fresh. No sign of vultures or buzzards in the air. And there were the tracks of a carriage leading away down the road, along with the hoofprints of at least four other horses galloping after it.

He shook his head, patted his stallion's neck – then gave his spores to the horse's sides. The stallion snorted, then sprang into action, rushing along the dirt road. Dust rose, testament to the dry spell that had recently fallen on the Arrufatian province of Zepol Olyaj. For the last week, Cornell had only heard about failing crops in the villages he'd been passing through on his way to Faithold. It would be nice to get a bit of distraction.

The tracks careened around a bend in the road. Warcries sounded in the distance, somewhat familiar. Three hundred yards further, a second body lay on the ground, his arm and chest peppered with quarrels. Calmly Cornell drew his own crossbow from its hook on the saddle, hurrying his stallion onward. Trees had been planted along the side of the road, masking sight of what was happening ahead.

He loaded the crossbow single-handedly, loosened the knot around his sword.

A loud crash. Screams. More warcries. They sounded scratchy, harsh. Elves? The local baron's death squad?

The first part of his suspicion was proved moments later when his stallion rushed around another curve, and Cornell saw riders ahead, stowing their crossbows. Chainmail armor on their bodies, metal spikes along the arms. No helmets. Unmistakably elves, with their blue skin and cyan hair. Not to mention the heavy armaments that were laden on their horses. Mercenaries or the baron's men?

Behind the elves, he saw the carriage. A stagecoach, actually, with a closed passenger compartment. Its drivers dead, the horses had run out of control, and the coach had toppled over at the curve, sliding into the next tree, while the horses... One was already dead, the other was struggling to free itself from the gear – but the nearest elf drew his sword and slashed its neck open.

The three remaining elves approached the coach, readying their swords.

"Hey, blue boys!" Cornell yelled, leveled his crossbow at the elf closest to the coach and shot the quarrel.

The bolt flew true, embedded itself in the elf's neck. Arrogant bastards should consider wearing helmets.

Two elves whirled their horses about to face the new threat. The third leapt from the saddle, behind the coach, sword and crossbow in his hands.

Cornell threw his own crossbow away. No time to load it again. His sword flew into his hand, he ducked close to the stallion's neck, the horse still rushing forward.

The third elf fired his weapon. Cornell clung to the neck, the quarrel missed.

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Then he reared up, zig-zagged his horse, swinging his sword. Just in time to meet the blades of the two elves near him. Parry right, parry left, parry right. He slipped one foot from his stirrups, kicked the horse left to him. The animal protested, stumbled aside and tried to bite at the offending foot.

That distracted the left elf enough that Cornell could concentrate on the one to his right. He flung himself forward, slashed his sword under the elf's defense, scoring a hit on his armor. No good. The other one was ready again, but Cornell had no desire to resume fending off two foes. He hurried his stallion forward, straight through the elves' gauntlet.

Then his plan backfired.

For an instant he'd forgotten about the third elf behind the coach. He remembered when his stallion suddenly reared up, and Cornell was flying from the saddle, one foot tied up in the stirrup. Pain lanced through him. He tried to roll, hang on to his sword – then he smashed into the ground.

One elf jumped from his horse, sword arcing down towards Cornell's abdomen.

The Cayaborean brought his blade up, parried, smashed his free foot up, kicked the elf back a step. The next moment his stallion started running, and he was carried forward, straight at his opponent. He flashed his sword up, sliced into the elf's leg – his own thrust and the horse's movement enough to cut through the armor into the flesh.

The elf yelled, stabbed his weapon down. He missed.

Cornell twisted about, slashed the stirrup free from the horse. The stallion rushed off, while Cornell bounded up to his feet, twirling his sword about before getting his bearings. None of the elves was nearby, his blade cut empty air. For the moment.

"Die, human!" a grating elven voice screamed from behind him.

Cornell dropped to the ground. A sword stabbed the air above him, and Cornell thrust his sword upward at the elven chest following the weapon. Chains splintered open, the blade pierced the armor. The elf's warcry died in a gurgling sound along with himself. The body fell down, onto the Cayaborean, its weight pushing the air out of Cornell's lungs.

He heaved the body away as fast as he could, hearing the second elf's footsteps, knowing that the man would use Cornell's defenselessness if –

The second elf made a gurgling sound as well, then his sword clattered down. Stunned, Cornell stopped pushing the body on top of him, staring as the second elf joined his fellows on the ground.

But there was the third one left!

He gave the deadweight on him another push, freed himself, rolled over, pulling his sword from the body, ready for a round with the last of the elves.

Instead he saw the back of a slim man wearing a black wizard's robe, his dark hair stylishly tied into a knot over his neck. "Thank you, kind sir," the wizard said, watching the road for signs of other adversaries. He held throwing daggers in each of his hands. A similar dagger protruded from the nape of the second elf. "I'm sure we would have –"

"Barandas?!" Cornell gasped.

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The wizard froze, his head jerked up – then he swiveled his head to take his first close look at his sudden rescuer. “Cornell?” he blinked, his narrow face as blank as the Cayaborean’s.

At least that’s what the latter’s face had looked like. Now it turned to disgust and frustration as he got back up to his feet, shoving the sword into its scabbard. “All right, Barandas,” he muttered, “what have you stolen from these elves?”

“Excuse me?” the wizard said indignantly. “Why is it that every time we meet you accuse me of thievery? I am Barandas the Magnificent, I don’t steal!”

“Unless we’re talking about, oh,” Cornell started counting his fingers, “magical appliances, magical artifacts, anything valuable, something to get you close to a pretty girl, or anything else that suits your fancy.” He waved the now open hand at the wizard. “Did I miss anything?”

Barandas shrugged. “Whatever. That doesn’t change the fact that I haven’t stolen anything. I won the book fair and square at cards.”

“How did you cheat?”

The wizard cursed inaudibly. “Hard as it may be for you to believe, Cornell, I didn’t cheat, either.” He paused, shrugged, then continued with a wide grin, “It wasn’t necessary, you see? Natural wins all the way. The acorns just kept popping up in my hands, like magic.”

“Not that you’d know anything about magic,” Cornell countered. “Have you ever cast a single spell in your life? Except for little light shows?”

“Shut up!” Barandas hushed urgently, pointing at the stagecoach. Its door – now located on top – was open, and two people were clambering out of the passenger compartment. “My employers, they, uh, don’t know me as well as you do. They bankrolled my way into the game, thinking – forget it, and *please* be quiet now.”

The first thing Cornell noted about these employers was their long, unkempt hair. Which happened to be a bright cyan color underneath a layer of dust and dirt. Blue-skinned faces, eyes various shades of purple. Ears tapering to elegant points. More elves?!

Seeker elves, to be exact, Cornell realized a moment later when he saw the simple cotton tunics on the man and woman. Both clothes and the elves themselves looked as if they hadn’t been cleaned in months. Typical of seeker elves, always concentrated on their search for the elves’ Eternal Forest rather than the mundane necessities of everyday life.

“You work for seekers?” Cornell blinked.

“For the moment,” Barandas shrugged, switching on fake confidence and elation as he turned to the elves. “Ah, Siayos, Deimitra, it is safe now. Please, join us and meet my friend. His sword and my magic have defeated our assailants. This is Cornell of Cayaboré.”

The seekers were tall for their kind, the man about 5 feet 6 inches, the woman a little over five feet tall. She kept a pace behind him, shaking her long hair in front of her face – not enough to hide the beauty under the layer of dirt. Cornell sneaked a suspicious glance at Barandas. Was that the reason for his association with the seekers? The girl? Barandas had always had a penchant for landing himself in trouble because of the ladies.

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The man – Siaxos – was a good deal older than Deimitra. Probably into his third century, unless his elven blood was diluted a lot by human infusions over the generations. “Master Cornell,” the elf nodded slowly, “I extend my gratitude to you for assisting the wizard in defending us. Thus the book of spells is protected, and our search may yet yield us the path to the Aionios Dasos – which you call the Eternal Forest.”

*The book?* Cornell repeated in his thoughts. “Sure. No problem. Were they after you because of that book?”

Barandas frowned – just for a moment, then returned to the effusive blankness of before. *You don't me to know too much about this book, right, old friend? Just what kind of a spellbook is this that you're so interested in it?* But before Cornell could pounce on the wizard and find out what exactly he was hiding, Siaxos responded with a gentle shrug. “No, kind sir, I am afraid that these are relatives of ours, members of the clan of Hexaphie'al. Over there,” he pointed at the man that had fallen on Cornell, “lies Xenipherios, second nephew of mine and first cousin to Deimitra. Zika'el, third cousin to me and fifth cousin to Deimitra, was slain by Master Wizard's dagger, as was Thermiadal, first uncle to me and third cousin to Deimitra. Taken by your crossbow was Soktaphios, second nephew to Deimitra and second cousin to me.”

Cornell raised his eyebrow at the dispassionate listing of Siaxos' kin, sounding much as if he were reading from an army roster. “Why did they try to kill you?”

“Well,” Barandas interjected quickly, spreading out his arms, “we don't really have to –“

“They have rejected us,” the woman Deimitra said, moving a shock of cyan hair from her face. She shook her fingers vigorously, sending clumps of dirt flying. “They care not about the sacred grove of our ancestors, they wish no return to the tranquil ways of yore. They have encased themselves in the vile ways of war and mundanity.”

Siaxos raised his hand. “Thank you, my niece, that will be enough. Our tired tale is surely of no avail to the master warrior, and we do not wish to repay his kind assistance with boredom.”

“Surely not,” Barandas said, his bright façade crumbling bit by bit.

No, the wizard didn't like to spend time with the seekers, Cornell concluded. Neither did he. Ordinary elves were bad enough with their love for fighting and cruelty, but seekers had turned the ferocity of their kind into a maniacal search for their mythical homeland. Supposedly the gods drove them out three millenia ago, for some terrible sin they had committed. The Cayaborean remembered as much from his tutors' lessons at home, and those dry words had little more meaning today than they had in his childhood.

The elven male continued with a slight nod to his niece, “Little Deimitra here is the daughter of the clan patriarch. Old Hienamyos is enraged that she joined me on my sacred quest, for thus she has marred his honor. To remove the taint, she must be killed. That is all this has been about. The book or the wizard are of no consequences to Hienamyos.”

Cornell frowned and cast a closer look at Deimitra. “The patriarch's daughter you say? That means the elves will continue to pursue you.”

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Barandas' head jerked up an inch, telling proof that he hadn't realized this part. *He's probably stopped thinking about anything after figuring out that the woman's an elven princess.*

"Yes," Siaxos confirmed calmly. "But the remaining parties will not be nearby. This one was composed of lesser warriors of the clan, else I fear that the battle might have had a different outcome. I predict that we will have quiet for at least a day, possibly three. Enough for the wizard and us to reach our goal and effect the transit to the Aionios Dasos."

*Again with the Eternal Forest and a pathway there,* Cornell thought and started to ask about it – only to be cut off by Siaxos who said, "Therefore we have no need of further protection, Master Cornell. You may continue on your way."

"Uh, Siaxos," Barandas said carefully, "are you sure? We could use Cornell's sword in case your family attacks us again."

Deimitra flashed her eyes at him, for a moment revealing all her beauty. "But, Master Wizard, surely your magic will be enough to keep us safe."

"Well, I –" Barandas stuttered.

"As I said," Siaxos nodded to Cornell, "we have abused your kindness too long already. Also, I must admit that your presence is unsettling to us. We are peaceful seekers of the sacred grove; weapons are what cast our ancestors from their homeland. Please, Master Cornell, heed our wish and leave."

The Cayaborean looked at Barandas. The wizard tore his eyes away from the elven woman, facing Cornell straight. "Well, as the dear lady said, my magic is quite potent, and it is less offensive to seekers than your sword is." His words sounded honest and confident, but to Cornell's satisfaction, his eyes lost that sheen and converted to their more usual shiftiness. Right after finishing speaking, the wizard mouthed, "Stay!", careful not to let the elves see it.

Cornell grinned, then bowed to the elves. "I am sorry to have caused you discomfort," he said, and patted Barandas on the arm. "Take good care of these two elves. I have my own business to attend to." He enjoyed the shock on the wizard's face – wondering why Barandas didn't up and leave the seekers. Something about the spellbook, probably. It didn't matter much to Cornell what nefarious business his friend was up to this time. Unfortunately the wizard wasn't likely to get out of this mess on his own. As usual. "First of all, I have to get a new horse. That crossbow quarrel took out mine... Well, but you're in the same predicament, so –"

"Do not worry about that," Siaxos replied. "Deimitra."

The woman nodded and walked off toward the bend of the road.

While Barandas was visibly fidgeting, Siaxos went to the overturned carriage. "My niece has a way with animals, as you will soon see. Now I will retrieve the book, and when Deimitra returns, we shall leave." With that, the elf climbed into the coach's passenger compartment.

Once he was out of sight, Barandas shot out his hand to grasp Cornell's arm. "Don't you dare leave me alone! Those bloody elven soldiers are going to slaughter me, and –"

"Then leave the seekers," Cornell retorted.

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“I *can't*,” Barandas groaned. “That book was written by Alwoudiss of Daeshael, one of the greatest wizards ever. But the bloody fool wrote it in code, and the seekers have the key. They’ll only give it to me when –”

A whicker interrupted him. Both men turned to see Deimitra return, leading three chainmailed horses in tow. “Forgive me, Master Wizard,” she said, “but I only found these. Perhaps I might ride with you?”

Barandas managed a weak smile, torn between the prospect of having the girl close to him and the risk he was braving by said prospect.

Cornell rolled his eyes, leaned forward and whispered, “Risking your life for a spellbook is foolish.”

“I know!” The wizard’s words were loud enough for Deimitra to look their way, and Barandas quickly put his happy façade back on. “Certainly, my lady, I will be delighted to have you share my ride.”

# # #

“Barandas the Magnificent,” Cornell snorted. He was following the tracks of the other two horses, as best he could. The road was dry, and the wind was blowing over the hoofprints, merging them with those of other travellers of recent days. “A stupid fool, that’s what you are. Can’t you see how they’re playing with you?”

At least his horse was obeisant, in good shape, and having armor on it felt a bit like the rides he knew from his home. Except, of course, that his favorite ride at home was a female horse dragon named Tempest. With her under him, and a couple of hundred yards of air, he wouldn’t have had much of a problem tracking the elves and the wizard. Alas, he was stuck with a horse and land travel.

He kept on grumbling about the wizard while following the tracks – until they veered off the road and lost themselves between the ash trees planted aside it. Blades of grass grew in clumps on the ground, some bent and broken by hoofs. Cornell slowly guided his horse through the trees, then scanned the environs under the shade of his hand.

The land was mostly flat, with a few hillocks here and there. Hardy shrubbery grew in a few places, but little else survived the scorching sun. Even less cover than the road provided in case of an attack. Did the elves worry that little about their clan pursuing them?

Seeker elves!

Cornell shook his head. He knew rather little about these. Too little perhaps. They were like monks of dirt, appearing here and there, spouting their mumbo-jumbo about the Eternal Forest, and how they wanted to plead for the gods to let them return. Of course the other elves disdained them, even though seekers were recruited from their own numbers – after all, who would like to have his brother (or his daughter) amongst fanatics who never wash themselves, who don’t keep any goods besides their clothes and beg for food and drink?

He frowned.

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Seekers didn't have money. How could they have given Barandas enough to make his way into that card game?

Perhaps their vows of poverty could be pushed aside if it was for the good of their search. Cornell wasn't sure, but he seemed to recall that there had been instances when seekers had stolen items supposedly from the Eternal Forest.

"Whatever," he sighed and signaled his horse to start moving again. The chainmail jingled softly, in tune with the sound of the hoofbeat on the dry ground.

# # #

Deimitra snuggled close to Barandas' back, tightening her grasp around his midsection. "Is something wrong, Master Wizard?" she asked. "You have been looking back a lot."

Barandas forced a smile onto his face. "Only to make sure that you're secure in the saddle, my lady." Under different circumstances, he would have enjoyed having her sitting behind him, her body molded to his. Granted, she could use a bath. On the other hand, she didn't reek as badly as some other seeker elves he'd met. There was a slight hint of perfume about her – she probably hadn't shed the (few decent) ways of her people all the way yet.

"I am safe, Master Wizard," she assured him. "Or may I call you Barandas? Barandas the Magnificent."

*Cornell would beat me over the head for being an idiot right about now*, the wizard thought. *And rightfully so.* "Call me anything you like," he said cheerfully, adding softly, "Deimitra."

"My name sounds nice on your tongue," she replied, "Barandas."

Barandas tried to ignore the woman behind him and focus his thoughts. She'd only grown interested in him after the battle. Because he'd been such a grand wizard to defeat their foes? Well, he had killed two of them – with daggers rather than magic, but she didn't know that. Or did she?

*Just give me the key to Alwouldiss' book, and I'll be off.* "How far is it?"

Deimitra looked about. He felt her breath wander about on his neck, before she said, "About two hours more. We'll get to a brook in half an hour, follow its course, and then we'll be at our homestead. Then," she took a deep breath, "you can use the book and follow the great Alwouldiss to the Aionios Dasos. Won't that be wonderful, Barandas? Your name will be spoken along with that of Alwouldiss of Daeshael!"

*That would be wonderful*, Barandas thought. *If I could work that spell.* Despite all his claims, Cornell was right about him and magic. They didn't quite agree with each other. Sure, Barandas could create some small spells, and he knew a great deal more – some of them so advanced that only the most experienced wizards would brave their knowledge. Yet he only had a paltry access to magic, far too little for any of them. Maybe if he practiced more often. As if he had the time for that!

But that book... It was authentic, he'd checked before entering the game. Late period, perhaps the last book that Alwouldiss had written before he disappeared some seventy years ago. Siaxos claimed that he had gone to the Eternal Forest and stayed there. Not that Barandas cared much about that.

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All he wanted was the book and the spells; they could unlock so many secrets of magic – perhaps an easier way of amplifying his own potential, without having to spend months or years practicing.

“Alwouddiss of Daeshael,” Deimitra whispered behind him, “and Barandas the Magnificent. Two of a kind.”

# # #

The saddle had begun to grow uncomfortable to Cornell’s backside after about an hour. What had that elf been wearing under his chainmail and pants? A pillow, to make riding all day bearable?

He heaved a sigh of relief when he reached a brook running through the landscape, with grass and bushes adorning its banks. The hoofprints were more visible, and by his estimate, Barandas and the elves were no more than twenty minutes ahead of him. Enough time for a short break, he decided and halted the horse. It whickered softly, then dipped its head into the water.

Cornell slipped off the saddle, stretched his legs and looked around. Nobody was in sight. Certainly no enraged elves, out to kill the precious daughter of their patriarch. “Good,” he smiled, then massaged his behind for a moment, groaning as the pain subsided.

“Barandas, you’re going to pay for this,” he muttered while looking over the saddle for a waterskin. He’d occasionally been checking on the possessions of the horse’s former owner, finding little of interest. A large assortment of weapons, the whole lot rather ordinary. Now if there had been a sword made of elfwood, that might have given him cause for cheer. Elfwood swords were rare, harder than diamond and sharp enough to cut through stone. Of course, the elf would have used that instead of the metal blade, but a man could hope, right?

Instead he now located a bottle, underneath a leather bag containing a blowpipe and several darts certain to have been dipped in poison. Cornell unstopped the bottle, smelled its contents. Water, he supposed. With a sigh, he poured it over a bush. The clear liquid did no harm at all, so it wasn’t acidic. “Better safe than sorry.”

Cornell filled the bottle with safe water from the brook, took a deep draught and rejoiced when the water hit his parched throat.

The horse had finished drinking. It looked at its new owner as if deciding whether to run away or patiently wait for him to resume the ride.

The Cayaborean smiled, drank another swig, then started to put the bottle back to the saddle. He stopped when he noticed the letters engraved on its back. Elventongue, curly and elaborate. *Yerizas, son of Klehidryon, Clan of Ta’enisi.*

Clan of Ta’enisi? Hadn’t Siaxos claimed that he belonged to the clan of Hexaphie’al?

And there hadn’t been a Yerizas in the list of relatives he’d run down.

Something else suddenly caught Cornell’s interest, on the saddle where he had sat before. The sigil of the baron of Zepol Olyaj. This elf – Yerizas – had been a member of the baron’s death squad, his secret police.

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Those henchmen were sworn to the baron's duty, his bodyguards as well as those who swooped down on any dissenters to his rule. And the baron was very much a human, not a clan patriarch.

All right, the horse might have been stolen. But why would a new owner not use his own water bottle? Or at least replace it with his own quickly.

No, Cornell decided. It didn't add up. Not when considering the inconsistencies of Siaxos' and Deimitra's behavior. The elves had lied.

Which meant they had probably lied to Barandas as well about the spellbook and their plans.

"Damn you, fool," Cornell muttered, climbed back into the saddle and pushed his spores into the horse's flanks vigorously, urging it into a gallop.

# # #

Deimitra jumped from the horse, whooping joyously as she landed in the lush grass surrounded by a nearly perfect circle of oak trees. She ran to the biggest tree, wrapped her arms around it as far as she could and planted a kiss on the gnarly bark.

Barandas frowned at the display, wondering how a tree could elicit such behavior from her – and not a wizard. His disappointment turned to trepidation when the bark seemed to move under her touch.

"Welcome to our homestead, Master Wizard," Siaxos said. "You may dismount now."

"Yes, Barandas, do get down from that horse," Deimitra seconded, releasing her hold on the tree and smiling at him invitingly. "Sit down here," she said, patting the bark.

The wizard shook his head. It must have been his imagination, seeing the wood curl. Subconsciously he checked the daggers hidden inside his sleeves, the apparatus that would thrust them forward into his fingers at a sudden jerk of the wrist. This place looked odd, such lush growth during a period without rain. Could the nearby brook provide that much water?

He got down from the horse. Deimitra slid down along the tree, folding her legs under her, and patted a tangle of roots next to her that seemed to form a cradle. "Here, Barandas. You can rest here, and the book... Oh, Siaxos, bring us the book so Barandas can find the spell, won't you?"

The male elf nodded, turned to the saddlebag. Deimitra waved for the wizard to come to her.

Barandas craned his head to look up. The oak trees formed a roof of leaves over the small clearing, entangled so closely that the sunlight barely pierced it. A shadowy cool was here, filled with the scent of the plants, so calming, so pleasant.

"Barandas, please," Deimitra repeated. She was starting to sound exasperated, while the wizard was watching the leaves, the patterns they wove, their movement in the breeze, their –

They didn't move in the wind!

His heart skipped a beat when he realized that the leaves were undulating in waves, convulsing, expanding, like a heart pumping blood through a body. Magic! Only magic could have affected them, yet only clerics could enchant matter and living things.

Clerics – and druids...

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Druid *elves!*

He had no time to draw any conclusions. A tiny dart suddenly hit his neck, and Barandas felt a wave of sleepiness wash over him. He slumped down, caught by Siaxos. Through his blurring vision Barandas saw a blowpipe in the elf's hand, and he heard Deimitra say coldly, "Drag the wizard over here. Conscious or not, the trees will feast on his magic."

# # #

The horse shied back when Cornell tried to make it walk closer to the densely grown copse of oak trees. It neighed, cast a pleading glance at its rider. Cornell stopped pushing the animal further, instead focused his attention on the copse. At first it seemed to be ordinary – although oaks were rare this side of the Seculas mountainchain. A closer look didn't do much to change his impression of the trees. They seemed like any other gathering of oaks he'd ever come across, especially back home in Cayaboré. Yet Cayaboré's climate was considerably kinder to oaks.

The horse took a careful step back, waited a moment for its rider to countermand, then trotted further away from the copse.

Cornell pulled the reins in tight, eliciting a protest from the horse – which turned into a relieved whicker when the Cayaborean dismounted. He patted the animal's neck, led it over to a nearby ash tree and tied the reins to a sturdy branch. The horse wasn't quite satisfied, with the trees decidedly too close. "Stay," Cornell muttered as he got his crossbow and sword ready.

Then he walked towards the grove of trees, looking for the nearest entrance. The branches of two oaks were interwoven in a strange way, making them look much like a gate – just wide enough for a horse to pass through. They seemed to move out of rhythm with the wind, but he couldn't be sure.

A woman laughed in a shrill tone of voice beyond.

Cornell stepped through the gateway.

# # #

There was something in his mouth.

Someone was laughing. Not very melodiously. The voice reminded him of his ex-wife. But it couldn't be Solania. She was still at the academy back at Mercurham. No, this had to be –

His meandering thoughts were cut off by a sudden pain shooting through his chest, emanating from a glowing hot point right at the center. Barandas' eyes flashed open, took in the sight of the grove. It no longer was as peaceful as it had been before: the light had dimmed, the roof of leaves shutting out the sun, and the trees themselves... The bark was writhing on them, moving, twisting, turning. Flakes were breaking off here and there, tumbling to the ground where blades of grass dived for them, absorbing the bark with crackling sound.

More importantly, there were branches all around him, binding him to the thick stem of an oak, the rough bark wrapped around his neck, his wrists, one branch forcing open his mouth as an

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effective gag. And another branch, like a tentacle, was writhing on his chest, the tip... the tip *burrowing* into his flesh?

Barandas couldn't see it, but the pain told as much.

"Awake, wizard?" a woman asked.

Deimitra stepped into view, changed as well. She must have taken a bath, exchanged her dirty tunic for a long flowing robe as green as the oak leaves. She was beautiful. That thought floated through his mind, undisturbed by the pain, nor by the coldness of her eyes as she observed him.

He tried to speak, but the branch in his mouth was immobile.

Deimitra glanced cursorily at his attempts to remove the branch, then chuckled. "It's no use, wizard. You cannot cast spells with your hands and mouth bound by the trees. They will drink of your magic to fuel the merger."

"Hunh?!" The noise was both a question and a sign of Barandas' struggle against the tree.

"Look up, wizard," she said and pointed over his head.

His eyes slid up, as far as the hold of the branches allowed, and icy cold flooded through his heart.

There was the book, the precious spell book of Alwouldiss of Daeshael, transfixed by twigs running through its covers, oak leaves fluttering along with the pages, strangely synchronized. The letters were wavering, and the covers – were changing. Ridges were deepening, others appearing, like a rash, making the leather look more like the bark of a tree.

"Who needs the ancients' Eternal Forest," Deimitra laughed, "when we can make our own?"

# # #

Cornell had barely entered the grove when massive branches swung from nowhere at him. He had just enough time to throw himself to the ground when the branches snapped through the air above his head. *A booby trap?* He was ready to start crawling onwards, checking for more traps – when the branches suddenly beat down into his back rather than continue on their way.

He fought down the sudden pain, frog-leaped forward – only to see the large roots move, dig themselves free, ready for an assault of their own.

Cornell slashed his sword upward. The metal impacted two branches, chipped off pieces. Other branches slammed into him. His right leg went numb – the one that was still hurting from being dragged in the stirrup earlier in the day. Yet for an instant the branches and roots held off their attack, writhing around him – in pain?

He didn't ask any further questions but rammed his sword up again, let it bite deep into a thick branch. The bark burst open, exposed the lighter wood beyond. Sap went flying like a tiny volcano.

And the branches hesitated again.

Cornell whirled about, grasping the hilt with both hands, chipped at another branch, and another. He fought the branches back as fast as he could, yet he was still lying on the ground. Too much of him was exposed to the roots he felt crawling towards him.

A branch got through his defense, crashing into his midsection, driving the air from his lungs.

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*Gotta get up!* His right leg defied his orders to move, and the first root started entangling his left foot. Cornell rushed up, arced the sword over his head, bumping into several branches on the way before the blade hacked down into the root.

The left foot was free, but the right... He took the time to smash the sword's butt into his thigh, the pain the first sign of life in his leg again.

Some branches took the opportunity of his exposed back to pummel him. Adrenaline charging through his veins, the Cayaborean shook the hurt off, rolled sideways, over roots that were too slow to react.

His right leg was hurting!

*Good. Better than numb.* He lopped off a thinner branch with his blade, then planted his fists on the ground in the same motion, pushing himself onto his feet. A branch crashed into his back, propelling him up faster than he had planned. More were rushing towards his head.

Cornell swung his sword around, stabilizing himself – and succeeded in holding off the branches for an instant longer. He stepped sideways, to avoid the approaching roots, twirled his sword about, side-stepped the roots again, realizing that he would not be able to keep this up for long.

He didn't have to.

Suddenly the branches retracted, swung up and away, clearing the way further inside the grove. There was a clearing inside. For an instant, Cornell saw Barandas entangled in a maze of branches and roots, Deimitra standing next to him – then he saw Siaxos, holding a blowpipe to his mouth, ready to shoot the poisoned dart at Cornell.

# # #

Barandas noticed the commotion at the grove's edge a moment before the elves did. *Cornell! About bloody time!* His attempts to free his right hand, enough to snap a dagger into his fingers, were going nowhere, and now he decided that he didn't have to work so hard anymore.

After all, Cornell had finally gotten here, and he would rescue the wizard, right?

Deimitra smiled and motioned to Siaxos. The male elf pulled the blowpipe from his belt, filled it with a dart, and there still wasn't an angry Cayaborean bursting into the clearing to kill the elves and free his best friend.

*Bloody tides of magic, don't be so slow!* Barandas' mind cried. *I'm damn sure this is not a sleeping drug!*

Siaxos readied the blowpipe.

The branches cleared away, revealing the bedraggled Cayaborean, blood streaming from plenty of cuts on his face and body.

Siaxos shot the dart.

Barandas resumed his frantic attempts to free his hand.

# # #

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Time slowed down to a crawl when Cornell saw Siaxos' cheeks bulge with the breath and relax when the dart got on its way.

He heard the air swoosh with more branches coming at him from behind. Only those in front had stopped attacking him.

His mind claimed to see the tiny dart rush through the air.

Cornell twisted his upper body aside, pain shooting through his hurt mid-section. His chest hit a bevy of branches waiting for the chance to strike at him again.

The dart missed his neck by inches.

The branches shoved him back, the force of trees behind their push.

Then a wail sounded through the grove. It wasn't human. Cornell had a sudden picture of a dozen trees screaming in pain.

He fell backwards. There weren't any branches waiting to pummel him. Instead he fell to the soft forest ground, the pain negligible compared to what he had suffered before. His glance slid up, and he saw the elf's dart embedded in a branch. White lines ran from the point of impact across the bark, cracked and forked like lightning.

The branch drooped down. A moment later it broke off.

The inhuman wail continued when the branch fell on top of Cornell.

# # #

Barandas wasn't paying any more attention to Siaxos and Cornell. For all he knew, the Cayaborean had already gotten himself killed rather than rescue the wizard. That man was really a pot worth of troubles and attitude, but did he ever do much besides accusing Barandas of stealing? Like anything worthwhile, for instance?

The branches holding him trembled, writhing around, loosening their hold. The branch digging into his chest swooped up sharply, releasing him completely.

Never one to question miracles or unexpected gifts, the wizard snapped both his hands sharply up. Daggers slid forward automatically, ready for his fingers to grasp.

"Siaxos!" Deimitra cried. "The wizard is free, he'll cast a –"

Barandas slid his arms from the vanishing hold of the branches, swung them backwards and loosened the daggers.

Deimitra threw herself to the ground, the blade flying clear over her head. Siaxos was less quick to react. A dagger's hilt suddenly sprouted in his neck, blood squirted from the wound, and the elf fell.

"Siaxos! No!"

Barandas jerked his hands down, thrusting the upper two daggers into position. He struggled his legs free, wanted to roll away from the tree – just in case it regained its strength – but his legs were cramped. "Bloody –"

"Die, wizard!" Deimitra yelled, making Barandas look up.

---

Just in time to see her raise the blowpipe Siaxos had dropped and fill her cheeks with air to send the dart at the wizard.

# # #

Cornell rolled up from the ground. Woozy he flailed his arms for a moment, but the dizziness wouldn't leave his head. Before him was the clearing, he saw the body of the male elf on the ground, and there was the girl. Holding something to her lips.

He didn't think. He started running and leaped forward a few yards away from her.

# # #

Barandas' breath stopped when a dirty figure shot through the air and tackled Deimitra across the clearing, slamming her body hard into the nearest tree. Cornell? He was still alive?

*All right, now that was useful*, he allowed himself to think, then pushed against the branches around him as hard as he could, paying enough attention to the scene ahead.

The branches were resisting, starting to move again. Dread filled the wizard, and he hacked at the branches with his daggers, while raining curses on his legs to get over the cramps and start moving.

Ahead, Cornell rolled away from the girl, staggering to his knees, bringing his sword up. Deimitra's upper body jerked forward, convulsing running across her chest. Her hands rushed to her mouth, her eyes were bulging out.

Barandas frowned, while he hacked the last resisting branch into submission. She was clawing at her neck, as if she had swallowed something bad and –

*Oh. I think she has swallowed something bad*, the wizard grinned as he freed himself. *Poisoned darts are bad for your health.*

# # #

Cornell's breath came ragged. The girl keeled over to her side, her fingers stuck inside her mouth. A line of blood ran from her lips, spread over one of her hands. The wailing of the trees was cut off abruptly when the convulsions of Deimitra's body stopped.

"Well, you took your bloody time," the all too familiar voice of the wizard complained. "I could have been killed here, are you aware of that?"

Cornell looked at his blade. The edges were serrated and dulled by chopping at branches. *The sword ought to be good enough for chopping off a no-good wizard's head, though.*

"Tides of magic," Barandas continued, "did that girl have to kill herself? What a waste of good woman – Oh, bloody abysses, the book!"

"What?" Cornell muttered and turned his head tiredly towards the wizard.

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Barandas was clambering up the tangle of branches that had held him. They were now as still as a tree ought to be, and the wizard treated them as negligently as if they hadn't been rather mobile a little earlier. Above him was his target, a clump of twigs, leaves and branches that looked like a natural growth. Inside the growth, though, Cornell saw with a touch of surprise, was what looked like a leather-bound book. Or what had once been a book.

Now it had merged into the oak wood around it, part of it converted to tree's bark, a few pages still fluttering free. Barandas snatched one, tore it free and stared at it. "Bloody tides!" he yelled and threw the shred away.

It settled next to Cornell. The shred was a mess of wiry lines, only faintly reminiscent of letters, more of the pattern on oak leaves.

"It's ruined!" Barandas screamed.

Cornell chuckled. All was turning out fine on this day, after all. "Are you going to spend the rest of the day playing a monkey?" he laughed. "Or are you going to agree that this was a daft exercise of futility? You don't have the book, and you could have been a lot safer if you had left the elves earlier."

Barandas cast a withering glare at the Cayaborean – then stopped as a frown washed over his face, followed quickly by a bright grin. "A monkey, eh?" he said as he clambered down again. His robe was torn open in the front, a dark bruise in the middle of his chest. Absently Cornell wondered how exactly the wizard had gotten it, but he was distracted when Barandas rushed over to one of the horses and dug in its saddlebags. After a short while, the wizard procured two heavy leather bags, checked their contents, then held them out towards Cornell. "I may be a monkey, but I'm a *rich* monkey. There's even more gold in here than I've won at the card game. Hah!" He folded his hands before his chest, cradling the two bags. "Barandas the Magnificent never loses!"

"Oh, shut up," Cornell groaned and settled back against a tree. His body was complaining worse now that the rush of battle was fading. The Cayaborean closed his eyes when he saw Barandas inspecting the remainder of the saddlebags for any other valuables. "Barandas the Magpie will steal anything he sees."

"Quiet, now," Barandas said, whooping when he found something good. "We'll talk your share after we sold all of this stuff. What do you think is the going rate for a second-hand saddle with chainmail armor these days? We'll probably have to sell it in another province... Did you notice there's the baron's seal imprinted on this saddle?"

Cornell closed his eyes and wished fervently for the wizard to go away. Without taking along all of the horses and selling them at the nearest market.

Come to think of it, walking might not be such a terribly bad idea, compared to the company of Barandas.

"Whoa, you look bad," Barandas said a while later. "You ought to have a healer look after you. Fortunately, you have enough money to pay him, right?"

"Barandas the Magnanimous. Isn't that out of style for you?"

"Yes, well, I have my good days. And it's Barandas the Magnificent. Now open your eyes, get up and let's ride out of here. This place is giving me the creeps."

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Cornell sighed. At their next stop, he'd part company with the wizard. That much was certain. As usual, things didn't work out the way he was hoping for.

T H E E N D

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