

Lookout Hill

"..at the foot of the Quivini Mountains (D4). A high sacred hill of Killard Vale. Deloradella wove the Blanket of Gloom from the foulthorn bushes that grew on the hill, so the Thunder Brothers burned them off." - Dragon Pass, p 38

They waited, pausing at the foot of the hill, making sure that not only were their weapons ready, but the masks and other symbols of the gods they represented were in place. This was the one area where Tarki still had doubts about her own competence for the position she had held, and held successfully, for the last eight years, since the last leader of the Kheldon warband had been killed in battle. Rituals. Fights where the idea where was not so much to win as to repeat what had happened in the Godtime. Where you chose your team not for being good in a fight, but for how well they matched the people - beings, rather - who had participated originally.

At least in this case the idea was to win, and it was a simple enough job. Go to Lookout Hill. Find it mysteriously dark. Burn down bushes. Fight trolls. Darkness vanishes. And the team was "the Thunder Brothers", which meant they were all warriors. Well... She glanced back at her King, who would be leading the ritual as Orlanth. Ferenan *had* been a good warrior. Still was, in many ways, but now, in his late fifties, he was well past his prime. His Storms would do a good job of protecting him, but she still worried about him. Still, he understood rituals, as a king should. He'd known that this one would work better if they had representatives of as many of the Thunder Brothers as possible, and had the connections to get them: with the Lunars trying to forbid worship of any of Orlanth's faces, that was getting harder and harder. Some of those strangers were with them now, masks in place, gathered around him. No point in expecting them to act as one with the usual warband, they stayed close to the man to whom they owed their loyalty: today.

One of his choices, though - she still wondered, even after hearing his explanation. Asking his niece to come home to represent Vanganth. Ferenan didn't usually over-favour his kin at the expense of the tribe, but he had a soft spot for this girl - just look at the trouble it had caused all those years ago when she'd been stupid enough to be taken as a tax hostage. Tarki vaguely remembered her from before that as a stubborn, annoying teenager, throwing tantrums if she wasn't allowed to fight. Since then - well, the arrangement she had come to with her uncle was that if she wanted to fight the Lunars, she could do so elsewhere, and as a result she had barely been back on the tribal lands since. From the stories Tarki had heard, she was profoundly glad of it: the girl seemed to have a definite talent for causing trouble. Whether she had any others was the question, and one that she'd been sufficiently worried about to ask Ferenan directly. She'd expected a sharp retort, but instead he had smiled, almost approvingly. "That," he said gently, "is the question that at the end of today, I will be asking you."

Reassuring in some ways, worrying in others. "This is a test, then? You're considering her for the warband?"

"Hardly. I doubt if she would want that, and the decision would in any case be yours, not mine. But yes, I will be interested in your opinion of her, and I hope that today will give you the opportunity to form one."

Vanganthi were good for two things in Tarki's opinion - scouting, and showing off. Well, and countering enemy flyers, but the trolls had never had flyers any other year, and if there was one good thing about these ritual fights, it was predictability. She already knew what to expect, but there was no harm in getting an extra scouting report, and today it didn't even matter if the girl got careless and let herself be seen: the trolls knew they were coming. Even so, there was a limit to how long Tarki was prepared to wait. Where was she?

Ferenan touched her arm. "Coming in, from the sun."

The one direction trolls wouldn't be looking. And coming in fast, too, minimising the time spent in the open air. That could be competent professionalism, or it could just be the desire for a dramatic entrance. It was certainly that - concentrating, Tarki could see the great air-haggar she was riding, wings folded back in a dive, then spreading at the last moment to slow. Despite herself, Tarki ducked to avoid the impact, unlike Ferenan, who had presumably seen this before. The huge bird faded from sight inches before the wings would have struck them, and it was just Kallyr standing there. She had matured since Tarki had last seen her: no longer a gangly teenager but an attractive young woman, with the poise and confidence that accepted attention rather than seeking it. She *was* drawing attention, though, not only from the overly-dramatic entrance, but from the

tightly-laced leathers. Yes, Tarki could see that heavier armour was a bad idea for a flyer, but did she have to be so... provocative?

"Everything as expected?"

She was frowning slightly. "No, not quite. There's a patch of darkness where it should be, though bigger than you described, and of course I can't see through it to tell what's in there without them knowing I'm doing it. That must be where the command group is. But there's a couple of dozen trolls behind it, not just in it, and some wearing black and red. A lot more trollkin than we expected, too."

"One of the berserkers'll be warlord. Wave of trollkin, then they'll hit us." Tarki considered that, remembered previous fights, mentally compared their own strength to what had been adequate then. "All right. It'll be tough, but we can still do this. They'll use simple tactics, nothing to worry about there. Metisa, you're the troll expert, anything to add?"

"It's an odd mix. Berserkers usually mean less trollkin not more. And why the change, anyway? They can't be expecting to win, surely? Usually they do a token fight, then run, or send the expendable ones, someone they want to get rid of. There's politics behind this. There's been odd things going on over the last few weeks, groups of trolls fighting each other. I don't know what's going on here, but I don't like it."

Ferenan frowned. "If they do one unexpected thing, they might do another, and when we're in ritual combat, unexpected is dangerous." He drew himself up, the formal mask of Orlanth the King overlaying the mild-mannered old man. "Vanganth, my son. You will not join this fight. Fly high, and watch them from above. I trust not this foe of darkness. Look for ambushes, look for tricks."

Tarki half-expected a protest at that, but Kallyr just nodded. "And if I spot them? Who's staying in reserve - you and the byrnie?"

It made sense, and Tarki was both relieved that Ferenan would be out of danger and worried that with their forces split, they would be hard-pressed to handle the main attack.

"No. Orlanth leads his sons, he does not cower behind them. If - when - you spot something we have not planned for, I cannot tell you how to deal with it. Act as you see fit: be my Javelin."

That was more trust than Tarki wanted to give an unknown quantity, and the words seemed wrong in the context somehow, but he was right. Even so, she couldn't resist. "Make sure you don't get seen." Not that there was much risk of that from trolls, in daylight.

"It's all right, I'll stay in the clouds."

They all looked up: way, way up: and the older man tailing her sighed reluctantly. The breeze that they had brought with them had blown away the earlier flocks of sheep and even the alynxes, only the hawks were left. "That's high."

She smiled. "I know - too high for you. Doesn't matter. You stay with the King."

Giving Ferenan that bit more protection: good. Tarki remembered Offir as having been a very good fighter, when he was around to be useful. Not that that had been all that often, even before he got assigned to keep the girl out of trouble. Now, though, he was fussing over her rather than taking up his new and more honourable position, checking her lacings, suggesting extra furs. How long did he think they had? Treating a scout as if she was a weaponthane....

"If you've quite finished....?"

He gave her an icy stare. "It's cold up there, and the winds are strong."

Kallyr flashed him a warm smile, melting the ice a little. "And I can think of more heroic ways to go than being lashed to death by my own bootlaces - but that's enough for now. Nothing's come undone in the last two minutes, and I'm not likely to get bitten by a cloud. You protect the people who need it."

Tarki resisted the temptation to snap back at the implications of that last remark, turned her attention to the important members of the warband. Ferenan would make sure each of the mythic roles was handled correctly, but she had to take care of the mundane part. The Burners in the centre, carrying Mahome's torches to burn down the bushes. Not much point in winning the fight if they didn't manage that much. Some had suggested there should be actual Mahome worshippers, but bringing unarmed women into a battle was too risky, the enchanted torches had always been good enough. Javelins ready for a first flight into the darkness surrounding their target. And a good heavy guard around the King in the centre, including anyone whose magic was strong against trolls. All set, and she nodded to Ferenan – to Orlanth. Think myth, think of herself as Vinga, protecting her “father”. With the mask on, he was standing straighter, looking more like the warrior he used to be. She moved to take Vinga's position on the left-hand side of the warband, the shield side. Protect him, even if her part was indirect.

Forward, now, the waiting over. That first flight of javelins – no squeals from within the darkness, this time, though. Some javelins flew back – strange, trolls usually used slings. Metisa had said there was something odd going on, and it looked like she was right. This wasn't going to be the usual walkover. Still, it was ritual... the only way to do ritual was the same as before. Anything else was too dangerous to even consider. Fortunately “the same as before” was just what she wanted at the moment: most fights, you hit the enemy at a full charge, but entering the Darkness, they always went in at a walk, not knowing what lay just inside it. Step in, shoulder to shoulder, and expect to be attacked as you did so. Darkness and cold closed about her, and a weak blow struck her side. Trollkin – she slashed at it automatically, already changing her stance for the back-swing to take out the second one, and was taken aback when her blow bounced back, almost hitting her own leg. Armoured trollkin? But it wasn't – as far as she could see in the darkness, it had no more than the usual rags. Magical protection of some sort, it had to be – she'd met it before, but not from trolls. Still, it didn't matter, not from trollkin, all they had to do was push forwards and not bother hitting them at all. Shields down, just push them out of the way: and as they moved further into the Darkness, look out for the bushes. Foulthorn was nasty, the pain from a scratch might only be trivial, but it never seemed to heal properly. A bush loomed up ahead of her, and she pushed a trollkin towards it, experimentally. It screamed, and fled. Fine, though it was promptly replaced by more.

Over to her right, a light flared: the Burners had reached the bushes, too. She knew from past years that the firelight would aid them for a few minutes, then the smoke from the burning plants would counteract it. A quick look around while she still could – the real trolls were approaching, heading for the flames. They usually kept as far from fire as they could. Different, again, and she realised with a sinking feeling that if they, too, were protected by the same magic as the trollkin, neither shoving nor thornbushes would work against their greater weight and tougher hides, and their better weapons and greater strength could not be simply ignored. Then one of the fires caught, blazed, despite the trolls surrounding it and she felt relief - this was going to work after all. It blazed higher - higher than she had ever seen, and the lighters jumped back. Not fast enough - there were screams as one man's arm was caught by the flame. *The enemy were controlling the fire.* Their main weapon, turned against them just as her sword had been: and she wondered, now, about those returning javelins. This was going wrong. If it had been a normal fight she would be withdrawing by now, but this was a ritual, and that decision would be Ferenan's - Orlanth's - not hers. As long as he chose to stay, the Loyal Daughter would fight to the end to defend her kin. Around her, others seemed less sure, starting to back off. “Stay together!” If they got separated in this, they had no chance. She swung her sword, desperately, putting all of her magic behind it, and felt it bite home. The next blow, however, did not, bouncing back again. Looking over at where Ferenan was surrounded by his Storms, she saw that they were having similar problems. Would he withdraw? They were losing, badly, and hadn't even seen the berserker charge she had been expecting to be the main danger, yet.

There *was* a movement forward from the darkness, though, now, but not an uncontrolled charge. One huge troll, clad in red and black over the lead armour, swaggering slowly towards the fire. *Into* the fire. He stood there, wreathed in flame, surrounded by his followers, laughing at the ineffectual humans. The warlord, the champion, it had to be, and immune to fire. This had to be the focus of the danger, the strangeness. He had to go, now: and before Tarki could order the warriors around her into a charge, suicidal as it would probably be, she saw Ferenan's group, closer to start with, do just that. The great mace swept down to meet them, beating their puny weapons aside, the flames leaping out to burn them as they fell. The other trolls were closing in, too, all round their Death Lord: but that smaller figure, behind him, wasn't a troll! Not with red hair. Metisa, with her magic: the trolls didn't know she was there! She wasn't even trying to hit the warlord, she was concentrating on the mace he wielded. If she could disarm him.... but she'd become visible as soon as

she attacked. The mace shuddered, trembled, but its wielder spun round and grabbed her, throwing her back into the crowd. Their best chance – failed. The Death Lord strode forward, a wave of his paw dimming the fires to a thick, choking smoke. Forward, towards Ferenan and what was left of his guard.... Tarki knew what would happen when they met, and it didn't leave time for the despair she felt. She had to get there, somehow, had to at least slow the monster by a few seconds, enough for her King to get away, but she couldn't even break through the lesser enemy surrounding her. A javelin, across the battle? Difficult enough under normal circumstances, but in the darkness, and the smoke...

If only she could see!

She remembered coming up here at midwinter to sacrifice to Rigsdal. Then, it had been night, but a clear cold night, bright with stars, none of this confusion and fear. Light, that was what they needed. Light to see by, to throw by. This was Rigsdal's hill, and he'd promised to defend the Storm Tribe. He still watched over them, she'd been told that, pointing out trolls in the darkness, the Star Javelins they saw flashing through the sky were proof. She'd rarely addressed a prayer directly to any god herself, but it was all she could think of, now. She knew so little about this one, she didn't even know what to ask for except in the most general and desperate terms... *"Help! Please, it's your place, our King... anything, whatever sacrifice it takes, but help him!"* Not that she expected it to work, only a child expected help. Her shield slammed up, blocking yet another mace, she'd given up trying to attack with her sword, only parrying now. Down again, countering the lower blow she'd left herself open for, and as the shield dropped, the light in the sky became visible beyond it.

Light? Or lightning? Something incredibly bright, streaking towards the battle from far above, the shape becoming clearer with every second. A star javelin? A star captain, even? It looked more like a bird - a huge bird, in a steep dive, blazing with light. Rigsdal's white raven, Ternveka? But it had two heads... and she recognised it – didn't believe what she was seeing, but recognised it. The last time that had dived towards her, she'd flinched away, even knowing she was safe. This time, it wasn't going to pull up short. She'd seen a peregrine stoop before, knew what that could do to prey when it hit claws first. This hit with claws and with its rider's spear, then vanished as it touched the ground, leaving Kallyr standing in the middle of the remains of the Death Lord, still blazing with light. The trolls scattered - the Orlanthi nearly did, too. The figure facing them now was barely recognisable as the girl who had flown away. This could easily have been the Star Captain she had prayed for - if you ignored the leathers instead of armour, and the lack of any weapon or shield. It didn't seem to matter. The light was armour enough, and weapon enough.

But the darkness was still there, around her. Around them. The fires were gone, now, and Tarki was uneasily aware that beyond the light Kallyr cast, she could still see nothing. This wasn't over. The real battle was still to come, and she didn't know what was going to happen next. This wasn't the right story, it was a new one, she didn't know her part, none of them knew their parts...!! no, no panic. The basic story was the same: "fight trolls, remove darkness".

Darkness wasn't just a means of hiding enemies, it was an enemy itself: the enemy they had come here to defeat. Kallyr was staring into it, poised, ready for an attack that perhaps she alone could sense. Tarki tried to work out whether she was Vanganth or Rigsdal, now, gave up. The Thunder Brothers, fighting trolls, fighting the Darkness, that was what she needed to know. Did it have a focus, something they could hit? Shadows crept around the edges of her vision. There *was* a darker form, in there, Tarki could almost see it. Was it her imagination, the result of strain and fear, that made enemies of bushes when you were on night patrol? No. This time the shadows didn't resolve into harmless mundanity, they solidified, moved. Another huge troll: but no red cloth, no lead, no spiked mace. Just darkness... and a swarm of trollkin around her. "Her" - that much was clear. Robes, no weapons. Tarki realised that she had stopped breathing, that every eye in her warband was drawn towards this centre of the magic that was overwhelming them. This was the real menace, the real power. She carried no weapons, but the dead berserker seemed harmless in comparison. She didn't need weapons. She *was* power, and darkness, and horror, and she drove back the light before her. Perhaps she wouldn't attack, if they stayed very still and very quiet. The silence was muffling, drowning even thought, until its focus broke it.

"You killed my brother." The Sartarite was heavily accented, but intelligible. "For that, the Darkness will swallow your lands forever. No more light. No more sight. The Dark will eat you all." And Tarki could believe it. They had brought Fire, as Orlanth and the Thunder Brothers had done, and it had been turned against them. They had brought Light, and it had only achieved a temporary victory. She stared at the huge dark figure, numb. This fight could not be won with swords, nor by doing what had been done in the past. Unless

Ferenan could think of something? But he, too, was simply standing there, not responding. Kallyr was between him and the enemy, but how long could even that protection last?

Those fangs bared in a smile – or hunger? “The Dark will eat you all,” she repeated. Softly, but in a rumble that seemed to come from all around them, edging in, like the shadows. The fires were out. The only remaining light was Kallyr, and even that last hope was dimming. Tarki remembered, now, that this wasn't a Star Captain, this was a kid, pretending. She wouldn't be able to do anything, not against a real enemy. All she might manage was to annoy the priestess, make their position even worse. Would she have the sense to surrender?

Kallyr's head jerked up in the rebellion Tarki remembered all too well. “Oh, yeah? Bets?”

The response of a stubborn child who didn't know when to give up, and Tarki despaired. She wasn't even armed, just those silly little Vanganthi daggers: even she must realise how futile they were, for she hadn't drawn them.

The deep laughter from the Darkness showed only contempt. “Bets? *You* would gamble against *me*? Did your mother teach you nothing?”

“Yeah.” Kallyr wasn't backing down, even now. “‘Never abandon your family’, that's what my mother taught me.” She was still standing there, between her uncle and the threat. Still, like everyone else, facing the Dark, but unlike them, shining with enough Light herself to drive it back a little. Only a little. That wasn't an attack that could win, it was barely a defence.

Tarki stayed frozen, watching the giant queen troll for the inevitable attack that would end them, unable to take her eyes off her. How long could this stay as just words? Taunts? The alynx playing with the mouse? It should have been Ferenan, Orlanth, accepting the challenge if anyone did, but... the Thunder Brothers could act on his behalf, and when only one of them could act at all...

“She was a fool. A wise fool, but a fool. *Look at me when you speak to me, girl!* I do not tolerate rudeness.”

Kallyr glared at her, furious, fists clenched, that light pulsing, echoing the ultimate childish response. “*Won't!*”

She deliberately dragged her gaze aside, looking around with elaborate casualness at the dark shapes that everyone had almost forgotten surrounded them: and snapped out a crisp warning: “Tarki, left flank! They're behind us, get them!”

What??? The spell that held her attention was broken, she jerked round to find a group of trolls only feet away – no wonder she'd thought the shadows were creeping up on her! Her sword was in her hand, and she obeyed automatically, wondering as she did so why it seemed so natural to take this girl's orders. No rebounds. No frustration. The helpless horror was over, she waded into the fight with relish, knowing that around her others were doing the same, their paralysis over.

And then the last opponent faded before her, the darkness faded, the priestess shrank into obscurity and defeat, and it was light. They stood on the empty hillside – no bushes, no shadows, only the clear light of dawn. No trolls. Around her, friends were getting to their feet. “Metisa?” She, too, was alive, uninjured. “Metisa, what *was* that? Was it real?”

Her fellow Vingan was almost smiling, wryly. “That was proof of that saying about the female of the species. Proof of everything we believe in – and I almost wish we were wrong. That, my friend, was a healer protecting her children and her family. We women, you may remember, can defend ourselves.”

“A healer? That was a healer?” Tarki compared her fading memory of that overwhelming power and majesty to the quiet, gentle, women she had known by that name in the past. “What was a healer doing leading a warband into battle?”

“A good question. Given the rather useful brother, and the gamble they took, my guess would be a crown test. A change in troll politics: and it failed.”

It was much later when Tarki managed to get Ferenan alone, to say what had to be said. To kneel, and to hand him her sword.

"I failed you. As warleader and as warrior, I failed."

He did not take it. "Not as badly as I failed you. Metisa warned us to expect the unexpected, she warned us of troll politics, and I ignored it. I put you in an impossible position. No blame to you for the result." He pushed the sword back towards her. "Keep that, use it in the tribe's service. I still need my warleader, and others will in the future."

She stood, reluctantly, slid the sword back into the scabbard, raised her eyes to find him holding out a goblet of wine. "Now, if that is dealt with, I need my warleader's advice. I said that after this was over, I would be asking your opinion. What do you think of her, now?"

"Her?" But she didn't need telling who he meant, after that. She had to be fair: her own dislikes were irrelevant. She sipped the wine, thinking, pushing preconceptions aside. "Better than I expected. I still say she's too rash, too impulsive, gambles far too high. No respect for the risks she's taking. It's hard to tell what or who she *does* respect – well, besides you. She's impressive, I'll grant you – too impressive. After that, the warband would follow her anywhere, but I dread to think where she'd take them."

"The young and impressionable will be impressed, yes. The troublemakers... as a focus for those who are too young to remember that attacks provoke responses, I find it hard to think of anyone better qualified. And the rest, too, though that matters less. She copes well with the unexpected, would you agree? Better than most – better than I do."

Tarki knew what he wasn't saying, there. She *had* failed him, in the way she had always known she would. She only knew how to do rituals the way they had always been done. When more was needed, she had frozen, unable to think. Ferenan trying to take the blame on himself wasn't right – he was a good king, but he needed a better warleader. A younger one. One with the flexibility she lacked. It wasn't his fault, it was hers.

"You couldn't have expected that the whole thing would have been changed so much – that it would have become a Crown Test!"

Ferenan smiled slightly. "Actually, I did expect it to be a Crown Test - just not for the trolls."

She stopped, not quite believing what he must be implying. "You're not seriously suggesting...?"

He shrugged. "Think about it. You said the warband would follow her anywhere. I agree with you, but I would rather have you leading them. If the warband would follow her, would the tribe?"

And Tarki was silent.