

The Ranger Lord

The tall dark form shuddered as he passed through the wet morning grass, stalking his unknowing target down a dark forest path. His mark snapped a twig, but continued on, oblivious to the hunter who stalked his every movement. As the target, a short fat man in casual clothes, rounded a bend in the path, the unseen assailant struck. As he dove out from the tall grass, his dagger plunged for the unlucky victim's throat. With more than ten years of practice behind that blade, the man never stood a chance.

Anariel Veraleese shivered with apprehension, her pointed ears twitching, as she surveyed the scene before her. A human diplomat had been killed while walking down the forest path. Not much evidence had been given, but as a Ranger Lord of Markhalen, it was her duty to track down and kill the assassin, or assassins responsible for the foul deed. Her graceful form patrolled the scene with a fluidity that only an elf could possess. Her slender figure seemed to blend with the movement of the trees at times.

Her tipped ears perked, as she heard footsteps behind her.

"Ain't this work a might gruesome for a fair elf such as yerself?" asked the dwarven inspector who was investigating the crime.

The investigator looked the part of a typical dwarf, short and muscular, with a very large, fiery red beard on his face, braided at the ends.

"It's my duty to take part in this investigation, you know that Grimm,"

replied Anariel, slightly annoyed.

"Aye, that I do lass, and I'm sure ye'll do a fine job of it, just anxious that's all. The humans been on my back fer days now, e'er since their damned diplomat went missing. This'll be a bad sign girl, mark my words."

"I'll be sure to," answered Anariel, amused at the dwarf's morbidity.

"Who is this diplomat anyway?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Lord Farseal of Lockhaven" replied the surly dwarf.

“Well then I guess Lockhaven is as good a place as any to start investigating this murder,” she reasoned.

“Aye that it is, let’s get a move on then, I don’t want the damned humans breathing down my neck even more!”

“Very well, just let me gather my equipment from my lodge, and I will rejoin you shortly.”

“That supposed to be a joke?” her vertically challenged friend asked, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Anariel walked away from the scene, with a melodic elven laugh on her lips.

As Anariel approached her cabin, she marvelled once again at its beauty. She had commissioned an Arch Druid to craft it, a woodland priest by the name of Forlash. Her cabin was literally woven from wood, a structure that was merely a different section of the existing tree, attached to it and intertwined with it. As she entered the front door, she thought:

I wonder where Forlash is now? Probably frolicking with some woodland creatures, she decided. Sometimes those druids were so in love with nature, that they were almost animals themselves.

As she saw her bow, arrows and leather cuirass, thoughts of the grisly murder returned to her head. Who could have killed the man so easily? There were no signs of any kind of struggle, and evidence pointing to nothing other than a quick and clean kill. She dismissed the ponderings from her mind, and broke off into a run, returning to her dwarven friend and partner.

As she returned to the path, she found Grimm waiting for her, leaning impatiently on his axe.

“Well then elf, s’about time ye got back here,” roared the irritated dwarf.

“Yes, yes, let’s get going now before we waste any more of your precious time now shall we?”

“Now yer talkin’ elf, let’s go” her friend answered, his stubby legs pumping in a furious stride.

As Anariel started walking gracefully beside her friend, they both slipped into their own thoughts about the murder. Who had done it? Obviously someone with great skill and training in the matter of murder, for the diplomat had been reasonably well trained in unarmed combat.

As the sun started to flirt with the distant hills, the unlikely pair decided to make camp for the night. They chose a small grove, not far from the forest path. As they lit a campfire, they spoke some of the thoughts that had been on their mind for the whole day.

“So, Grimm, any ideas to the culprits?”

“I’ve nothing sure now elf, but I’ve heard rumors from back in Hammerforge of a dark and sinister new guild. A guild that needs innocent blood spilt. A guild of damned, filthy assassins.” He spat on the ground.

“Really? That’s very interesting...If those rumors are true, then this, Assassin’s Guild would be our prime suspect. As far as I know, Lord Farseal never did anything wrong.”

“So elf, did yer fancy Ranger skills track ya down any evidence at the scene?” asked Grimm.

“Unfortunately not. Whoever killed Lord Farseal is exceptionally good at what they do, they left no trace whatsoever.” The dwarf took on a somber look at this.

“Well we should probably be gettin’ some sleep ther’ now elf, here’s fer hopin we find some clues in Lockhaven.”

“Indeed, I’m intrigued by this case as much as you are, good night,” she said as she lay down in her sleeping bag.

The black clad figure knelt before his black robed guild master in a dark room. The walls were of old brick, and posters depicting previous targets dotted the room. There was also a chest full of glimmering gold pieces. His latest assassination had brought him great rewards, but also the ire of a Ranger Lord.

“Go find this so called “Ranger Lord,” and eliminate her; she has been a thorn in my side for far too long,” said the dominant guild master.

“As you command my lord, I shall kill her swiftly and quietly, though she does not deserve it,” replied the kneeling figure.

“Excellent, now go, we have wasted too much time already”

As the two companions walked thoughtfully down the path, a town with a large tower in the center came into sight in the distance. Lockhaven. As they broke into a run, they were stopped at the gates of the town.

“Stop!!”, said a strong male voice. “State your names and business in Lockhaven.” Before they could respond, a different guard’s voice sounded.

“Grimm? Grimm Ironbeard, is that you?”

“Jonathon! Boy tell this flea headed nitwit questioning us to open the doors and let us in. We’re fer investigatin the killin of one of YOUR diplomats, so if ye want our help then ye better open up!” The door was hurriedly opened.

“Care to introduce me?” asked a curious Anariel.

“Ah, Anariel, this is Jonathon, he ‘elped me out a few years ago in a spot of trouble with the human patrols.” He grimaced at these words.

“A pleasure to meet you,” said the human.

As Anariel and Grimm walked through the marketplace, Jonathon filled them in on the details of Lord Farseal’s departure.

“Alex Farseal was on a mission to the gnomish kingdom of Karven. We had wanted to make an alliance with them, given the increase in monstrous activity in this region, particularly that of orcs.” Both he and Grimm spat on the ground at this, and shared a laugh.

“The only reason I could think someone would interrupt this mission, is if they wanted our entire town to be destroyed.” said an intrigued Jonathon

“And would there be any reasons as to why someone would want the town destroyed?” asked Anariel, eager to get on with the case.

“The only thing close to a reason I’ve ever heard is an old legend.”

“Well then lets ‘ear it boy!” Grimm piped in.

“Very well we’ll go to my house and get something to eat. I can explain the tale to you over dinner”

Jonathon’s house was small, but it had a cozy feel to it. A fire burned healthily in the grate, and the companions sat around it, digging into cuts of the finest pork, fresh grown carrots and potatoes, with rich melted butter topping it all. Needless to say, they were satisfied.

“So Jonathon, what of this legend you spoke of?” Anariel asked, eager to move on.

“Ah yes, I’d almost forgotten. In any case, make yourself comfortable, for I’d rather not have to stop.”

Some minor shifting among the two, but when silence ensued, Jonathon continued.

Long ago, it is told that a great wizard lived here in this very town. Before his coming, it was a minor village at best, always on the brink of being overrun with fiends. But once this wizard, a great man named Vaerlash came to call, the town had strokes of great luck. Visitors from all the realms came to see this legendary wizard. As such, many people were staying at inns and buying our goods, and the town made a great deal of money.

Eventually we built up, from a small unprotected village, to the fortress you see today. The tower in the center of the village was where Vaerlash used to live. And for years he stayed happily and contently in this village. However, one day his time came and a spell went badly wrong. He was killed in the process.

Legend has it that his effects, his robe, staff and tome are hidden somewhere, deep in the catacombs below the town. If someone of a dark heart were to get his hands on these items...” he shuddered at the possibility, “in any case, let’s just say that it would be very, very bad.”

“I see now,” said Anariel, “the assassins are evidently after these great artifacts you mentioned. It would bring them great power, even just one of them.”

“Now yer talkin lass, so we’ve got to go down into them damned catacombs and get them there artifacts afore the assassins do, sounds simple enough.”

“Indeed,” replied Jonathon, “but since the assassins likely already know where the artifacts are, you can bet you will have some clash with them. We will have to proceed with caution, and the first ingredient to caution is a well rested body. I suggest we all get some sleep before we go after the artifacts tomorrow.”

“Good idea John, Grimm and I will get a room at the Inn, and we’ll meet to tomorrow,” said Anariel.

“Until tomorrow then,” replied John.

As the companions met in front of the former wizard’s tower, Anariel questioned,

“John, are you sure you want to come with us? You don’t have to come you know”

“I’m sure,” he replied “I don’t want to just sit here and wait around for the news of whether my town lives or dies.”

“Very well, let’s go then” she said as they entered the tower.

“Legend tells of the entrance to the catacombs being in the basement” said John.

As the comrades stepped into the gloomy basement, a stone sunk down under Grimm’s foot.

“Gah!, blast damned wizard tricks”, he said as the footswitch triggered a wall to slide open.

“Nice work Grimm” Anariel said, descending into the gloomy passageways while grabbing a torch from the wall.

As the team moved through the labyrinth-like corridors, they began to wonder if they would ever find the artifacts, let alone find an exit.

When the group was nearly about to give up hope, they rounded a bend, and found not another cramped corridor, but an open hallway, with a large altar at the end. Upon this altar, were the legendary wizard artifacts.

The Robe. A rich, deep blue colour, trimmed with black cloth, and on this black were etched wizardly runes in glimmering gold.

The Staff. It had a long, black metal handle. At its tip, held in place by four claws of metal extending from the handle, was a deep red sphere.

The Tome. A large and thick book, bound in black leather, with small red runes all around the edges and on the spine. And the cover was inset with a large, triangular green gem.

As each of them took one of the items, Anariel the Tome, Grimm the Staff and John the Robe, a dark form stepped out from the shadowy edges of the hall.

“Ranger Lord Anariel Veraleese, so glad we can finally meet” said the dark voice, in a voice as melodic as her own.

“And you are?” replied Anariel coldly.

“Ah, forgive me, I am Vokaten of the Assassin’s Guild of Markhalen. Now if you could just hand over those artifacts there, everything would be oh so much easier.

Anariel made a sharp gasp when she saw the assassin’s black skin and slender fingers. A Dark Elf! They were as wicked a race as there was. There was no doubt in her mind, if this dark elf was an assassin, she had to kill him, for all the people he had undoubtedly killed.

“I do not hand over power to assassins you black skinned fiend!!” she cried, letting fly several arrows, though the assassin dodged them lithely.

Grimm and Jonathon gave a war cry in unison and charged the assassin, with axe and sword, but two other forms appeared and kept them both busy.

“It would seem that it is a fair fight after all, would it not, Lady Anariel?”

She snarled and shot another arrow at the dark elf, who deflected it off his own short sword.

As the assassin moved closer and closer, her every arrow failing her, she had a thought. What if she used the magic of the tome to strengthen her own arrows. She opened the magical book and touched an arrow’s tip to the paper. The arrow glowed, but gave no signs as to what magic it had gained.

She had no other option, so she let fly the arrow at the assassin, who was but a few feet away from her at this point. At first it seemed nothing had happened. But then the assassin had a perplexed look on his face, and she noticed the hole right through his chest, the arrow had gone on through him, to blast the other two foes that her companions were fighting.

Once they had stripped the bodies of any useful equipment, the comrades departed to find an exit. To their delight, behind the altar was a hidden set of stairs leading to the count's castle. As they emerged through a wall behind a bored count in his throne, they nearly frightened to death the count in question, who was at the time listening to boring crop reports.

"Count, your town is no longer in any danger. We have retrieved the wizard's artifacts and killed the persons responsible for the death of your diplomat, you may rest easy again sir." Anariel informed the startled count.

"Anariel Veraleese. You have performed exceptionally well, you shall surely have a reward. As well as a glowing recommendation to the Grand Ranger General." said the count, once he had regained his composure.

"Actually, a fitting reward would be the very artifacts you three obtained, you all may keep them. I feel they would be very well protected in your hands"

"Thank you count, a most generous offer." replied Anariel, flattered by the magnitude of his offer.

Urgently, Jonathon interrupted.

"Sir, I have served this town well and loyally for years as its gate master. But I am informing you that I am leaving Lockhaven, leaving to travel with Grimm and Anariel. After an adventure like this, there's no way I can simply return to my normal town life. I harbour no hard feelings to you, or the town of Lockhaven, but this is something I must do."

The count nodded, "I understand", he said. "I, too was something of an adventurer when I was young and I know the calling of it. You have my blessing in all of your journeys. And an invitation to

visit Lockhaven whenever you are nearby in your travels. I bid you farewell and good luck, Jonathon Keeneye.”

As the three companions walked out of Lockhaven, Grimm asked,

“So what’re we to do now elf?”

“Whatever pleases us, perhaps we will track down my old friend, Forlash, He is an Arch Druid of considerable power, he will be able to tell us of any...hidden powers our new equipment may have.”

“Then we should get going, I’d rather not have a magical robe explode in my face if I can help it.” said John.

As the sun set behind them, the three companions shared a laugh as they walked down a scenic mountain trail, all thoughts of assassins gone from their heads.

Elsewhere, in a dark castle, deep in the dark elf forest of Shadowmoon, a black robed figure was in an explosive rage. He had lost the wizards artifacts and three of his best assassins. It had not been a good day. But suddenly he calmed down, and returned to his desk scheming. For Thalamaer the Soul Magus did not give up easily. He would have those artifacts. And any other trinkets their possessors led him to. Lightning struck as he let an ominous laugh escape his lips. He would have those artifacts. One way, or another.