

The Battle



After being swallowed by the dark cave, Aryac took a while for his eyes to adjust to the inky darkness. He walked warily through a small network of narrow paths that bisected a cavern filled with stalactites. Running water trickled down the walls giving them a silvery sheen that reflected in the darkness. As he picked his way carefully in the gloom, time crept by inexorably slowly to Aryac's mind. Only the calming presence of Flint, who was loping tightly by us side, gave him any comfort or confidence.

The tunnel suddenly turned a corner; Aryac and the wolf found themselves in a cavernous room with a ceiling that seemed to reach up for ever. It glittered with a sapphire sparkle, which Aryac realised was enough treasure, packed into this cave, to purchase an entire kingdom. A rush of wind filled the cavern; it came from another entrance, the one open to the elements, which was on the other side of the mountain and had a sheer fall that stretched into nothingness. There was no way in or out of the cave that way, as there were no footholds, paths or rocks to clamber down: just sheer nothingness.

In front of the entrance, to his left, sat a throne and upon that lofty perch, there was the skeleton of what was obviously an ancient ruler or king. Despite being only bones, the figure had an aura of regal power radiating from it. That it was a noble being in life, was plain to see. In a glance Aryac took in: the stone throne; ancient armour; the wooden crown on the head of the skeleton and scabbarded sword at the foot of the throne. However, Aryac's eyes were drawn to what was gripped in the skeletons bony fist, across his lap. Had he finally made it? Was it the ...?

Suddenly Flint bared his teeth and growled. A shadowy figure detached itself from around the throne and stood resting his hands casually on the stone. The figure drew back his cowl and suddenly grinned. It was the stranger from the village and - prior to this - Aryac's traveling companion. Before he could greet him, the stranger spoke which stopped his words dead.

"Ah, Aryac I knew you were a fool, but I never in a million years thought you would make it this far!" he smirked.

"You left me," Aryac accused "I could have drowned and you left me."

"And you should have drowned or dashed yourself to pieces climbing this accursed rock," the man suddenly snarled. "That was the point. Imagine my shock to the find the last Guardian, the only one capable of destroying me, a snivelling wet-behind-the-ears boy."

"Destroy you?" Aryac questioned. Then suddenly it hit him, "Then that means you are...?"

“Kristen, your people’s destroyer and your doom,” the stranger suddenly shouted and whipped his mace through the air straight at Aryac. Fortunately it was a glancing blow on his shoulder, but was enough to send him crashing to the floor. That would have been it, if not for Flint. As the warlord advanced on Aryac to finish him, the wolf leapt at him from the shadows and bore him to the ground in a welter of blood, fur and cloak. Just when it seemed the wolf would crush the warlord’s throat, he suddenly gave a yelp as he was raised from the floor by its neck and thrown with bone shattering force against the rocky cavern wall. Aryac howled with rage, yet could not even mourn, as Kristen had turned with a triumphant grin to finish the last Guardian.

It was then that it hit him. Just as his enemy had stated. ‘He should be dead!’ However, he was not and, in a rush of understanding, the truth was suddenly clear. The bear saving him in the river, the snow-leopard on the mountain and now poor Flint had who died in his place. He remembered his forest friends back home, the reaction of the moose, Reebus his owl and (his hunting hound) Baran. He was not dead because they had saved him, they trusted him and gave him comfort. Now he knew why. He was indeed the last Guardian. Armed with this new realisation, Aryac ignored the advancing killer, closed his eyes and simply thought about his friends.

Out of the sky suddenly streaked the blurry form of an owl that tore straight into the face of the warlord, who shrieked and covered his eyes. Talons gouged and wings beat furiously as Reebus screeched his fury. Next, out of the shadows, came the snow leopard, who ripped his teeth into the calf of the struggling tyrant. As the stricken warlord fell back, the cavern reverberated with the deafening roar. Out of the darkness the huge black shape of the bear lumbered out of the cave and bowled straight at Kristen smashing him off his feet with a terrible blow of his mighty paws. Although he struggled to adjust, the wounds healed as quick as the creatures made them and Kristen began to get his footing and raise his magic staff, but Aryac had now finally fully realised why he was here; he had raced to the foot of the throne while the animals had distracted his enemy.

It was as though the skeleton actually handed the Bow of Ithaca to him: passing it on to one of his own blood. He held it up and nocked an arrow and turned to Kristen – whose eyes had widened in surprise and an awful recognition of the truth.

“For my people,” Aryac said softly and sent an arrow straight and true to the warlord’s heart. As he clutched at the arrow buried deep in his chest, Kristen’s eyes widened in pain and shock and yet, before he could collapse to the floor, he received another smashing blow from the bear that sent him spinning out of the cave and into the void. He was swallowed up in an instant and was gone.

Aryac lowered the bow to the floor and sank to his knees. The animals came forward and arrayed themselves protectively around him. It was over!