“Randall, have you gone completely mad!”

Randall looked up at his father, whose face was already turning red as he rose up from his chair. The two were seated in front of the fireplace in the family’s home. Randall had just informed his father of his choice of rite.

A rite was chosen by young boys at the age of eighteen to symbolize their entrance into manhood. A rite was not required, but it precluded a young man from public service and certain careers and rights. Randall’s choice was to find the Cave of the Creator.

“I know what I’m doing, father.”

“No one is even sure that there is a Cave, much less where it is.”

“I’ve done my research. It exists and I know where it is.”

“Enlighten me then, Randall.”

Randall hesitated, and then spoke.

“It’s in the Barrens.”

Randall’s father turned a new shade of red.

“Orc territory! It’s suicide!”

“I have a plan.”

Randall’s father sat down.

“This conversation is over. Choose another rite or forget the whole thing.”

Randall rose from his chair and then stormed out of the house.

*Dad doesn’t understand! I have to do this rite! This is my one chance to speak to the Creator face to face. I have so many questions! I’m a believer and I love the Creator, but there are doubts that nag at me. Everything would be clear if I could just speak to Him. This is something I have to do.*

Randall came up with a plan. He entered the house and then quietly walked through the den. His father didn’t acknowledge his presence. Randall entered his room and then retrieved his backpack and rite paper. To avoid his father from discovering his plan, Randall quickly strolled into the kitchen and out the back door.

*I hate disobeying my father like this, but he doesn’t understand.*

Randall quickly made his way to the town hall.

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Barrenwatch was quiet as Randall walked down the main street. Barrenwatch got its name from its proximity to the Barrens. It acted as a guard post and staging area for orc conflicts. It had stores and a town hall like normal cities, but the high walls and moat were evidence of its true purpose.

Randall obtained his sword and scabbard from his pack and then strapped it around his waist. Everyone in Barrenwatch was required to carry a weapon and all men had to wear armor of some type. Knowing this law, Randall had put on a leather shirt and jerkins. In his backpack, he had a chain mail shirt and wooden shield for when he entered the Barrens. Randall, rite paper in hand, entered the town hall.

The hall was almost empty. A few men stood around talking to Boris, the magistrate. Randall went to a table in the back. Using the quill and ink well provided, Randall forged his father’s name on the rite paper. Randall felt a churning in his stomach, not from food but from what he was doing.

*I can’t believe I’m doing this! It is in clear violation of the Writings, but I have no choice.*

Randall wanted to approach the magistrate’s desk, but he knew that there would be questions about his rite paper. He needed a way to distract the magistrate.

The door to the town hall opened, interrupting Randall’s thoughts. Huros came in with his two boys and approached the magistrate’s desk.

“How are you doing, Boris?”

Randall quickly lined up behind the two boys as the magistrate looked up.

“Just fine Huros. What can I do for you?”

“Me and the boys here are going hunting.”

Huros handed a hunting permit to Boris and the magistrate stamped it. His two boys each handed him a hunting permit. Randall handed him his rite paper last and Boris, distracted by the men chatting about hunting, stamped his paper without looking at it. Randall took his now official rite paper and then made his way to the city gate.

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Barrenwatch’s east gate was never busy, though many guards were nearby. Through the east gate was the Barrens, the territory that orcs and humans often fought over. Guards were needed to watch for a possible orc attack. It took the gate guard a few seconds to notice that Randall was standing behind them.

“What do you need, boy?”

“I wish to pass.”

The gate guard, along with the guards nearby, laughed.

“I think you got turned around somewhere. This is the east gate.”

“I know that this is the east gate. I need to enter the Barrens.”

“I can’t allow anyone to enter the Barrens. Best go home, son.”

“I’m not going home. I must fulfill my rite.”

Randall held out his rite paper.

“Rite? Let me see that.”

The gate guard took the paper and read it.

“This is official, so I can’t stop you, but I’ll ask you to reconsider. The Barrens are very dangerous. It’s been quiet lately – too quiet.”

The gate guard handed the paper back to Randall. Randall put the paper in his backpack.

“Since you can’t stop me, then step aside.”

The gate guard grumbled as he stepped aside. The guard on the battlement opened the portcullis for Randall.

“Don’t expect us to come rescue you, boy.”

Randall did not answer the guard as he walked through the portcullis. The Barrens was an appropriate name. The landscape was rather flat, with a few rolling hills. All the battles that had taken place here had left its mark on the land. There was little to no vegetation except near the river. Randall headed east towards his next goal, Red River.

*I’m not too sure about this, but finding the cave is worth the risk.*

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Randall reached Red River about mid-afternoon. Red River had gotten its name from the countless battles here. The water was not actually red; in fact, there was a rather lush forest around the river. Randall now had to find a way to cross the river; the cave was on the other side.

Reaching the riverbank, Randall quickly found out that crossing the river would not be an easy task. The river was about a stone’s throw wide, with a few boulders standing against a moderate current. The boulders were too far apart to jump across and the river’s depth and current made it impossible to wade through. Looking to the south, Randall saw an old rope bridge. It didn’t look very reliable, but Randall had no other options.

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Randall looked down the riverbank again when he reached the rope bridge. There was no other way to cross as far as he could see. So, reluctantly, Randall slowly made his way over the bridge.

Tragedy struck as Randall was halfway across the bridge. A fireball burst in front of him. Randall was stepping with his left foot when it exploded, so his left side was singed. He flew back and then fell into the river. While the water cooled his side, he was now flowing with the current and sinking from the weight of his clothes and equipment. His right hand brushed against a rock and Randall quickly grabbed hold on it.

He knew where the fireball came from. An orc had cast it at him. Randall said a quick prayer to Emaius, knowing that the orc sorcerer would soon cast another fireball to finish him off.

The second fireball never came, but Randall was still in trouble. All that was keeping him from sinking into the river was his hold on the rock with his right hand. His left hand was numbed by the blast so his right hand was all that he could use. As this hand started to fatigue, Randall frantically looked for a way to get out of the river.

Randall felt something bump under his feet and start to rise up. It felt like a table was under him. As the “table” rose out of the river, Randall saw that he was on a turtle’s back. The turtle was big enough for Randall to lie on his back. Randall let go of the rock and then took hold of the turtle’s shell. The turtle had no trouble traversing the current, even with the extra weight. A few minutes later, Randall was safely on the other side of the river.

Randall looked back at the turtle. The turtle blinked his eyes a few times and then crawled back into the river. It soon disappeared from sight, leaving Randall perplexed.

*Why would a turtle save me?*

Another thought made him jump up, bringing sharp pains on his left side.

*Where was the orc sorcerer?*

Randall readied his sword and then scanned the tree line. He soon saw an orc lying face down between two bushes. Randall cautiously approached the apparent corpse. As he reached the orc, he knew that it wasn’t faking. Three circular wounds were in the orc’s back – obviously the cause of death. Only one weapon could make such a wound…

*A trident!*

Randall looked around for the orc’s attacker.

*But tridents are only used by aquians and an aquian would never help a human. It would explain the turtle rescuing me. It is said that aquians can command marine animals. I hope that I get the chance to thank him someday.*

In fact, if he had looked down the riverbank, he would have seen a rather different looking, but beautiful aquian woman walking down the beach.

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Randall was in no condition to travel anymore that day, so he made camp near the riverbank. He inspected the damage from the fireball. His leather shirt was ruined by the blast, but his body was only slightly burned. He may be a little stiff in the morning, but some walking should cure it. He replaced his leather shirt with a simple blue tunic and then made a fire. He ate some rations he brought for the journey and then went to sleep.

A few hours later, Randall was awakened by a strange song. Someone nearby was singing, but not a human. Randall didn’t understand the language. It was a very beautiful melody, but something about it was wrong. It made Randall uneasy. After a few minutes, the song ended. Randall thought that the whole thing was over when a voice spoke.

“What is a human doing out in the Barrens?”

Randall could tell that it was a female who spoke, but what race he could not tell. The voice had a strange lilting quality…

*Maybe an elf?*

He answered the strange voice.

“I am completing a rite.”

The dark elf could not believe her luck.

*A human by himself!*

She had not fed in several days; someone was hunting her. That was her reason for entering the Barrens.

*I thought that I would end up feeding on an orc, but here was a human!*

She continued to creep towards the human.

“How dangerous! You must be a fierce warrior.”

Randall slowly gripped his sword. He was very uncomfortable about this situation. He decided to keep the person talking; he couldn’t figure out where the voice was coming from.

“I know a thing or two.”

The dark elf was very close. She noticed the human grip his sword, but she was unconcerned. That weapon wouldn’t help him very much. She readied to pounce upon the unsuspecting human.

Randall heard a shuffle and a muffled scream behind him. He whirled around to see a female dark elf fall facedown and a robed figure enter his camp.

“You are safe now, human.”

Randall held up his sword.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Solis. I mean you no harm.”

The person walked to the campfire and removed a black veil from his face. Randall saw a pale, angular face with pointed ears and white hair. He recognized him as an elf. As the elf wiped off a wooden dagger, Randall lowered his sword.

“You have my thanks, Solis.”

Solis sheathed his dagger. He noticed Randall staring at the dark elf.

“Don’t worry, she’s dead.” Solis said.

“Is there something we should do?” Randall asked.

“There’s nothing to do. She’s dead.”

“No, I mean, to keep her from coming back.”

“She’s a very young vampire. She won’t be coming back.”

Solis sat down by the fire opposite Randall.

“So you were hunting that dark elf?” Randall asked.

“I was.” Solis answered.

“So, you do this for a living?”

“No, this is my rite.”

“Then we are out here for the same reason.”

“So, what is your rite? I certainly hope it’s not to hunt dark elves.”

Solis chuckled at his own joke.

“No. I’m out here to find… something.” Randall said cautiously.

Randall didn’t want to discuss the cave with someone he barely knew.

“A human with a secret. How strange.” Solis queried.

Randall wanted to change the subject. He noticed the elf’s sheathed saber.

“Why didn’t you use the saber to kill the dark elf?” Randall asked.

“Because it wouldn’t have worked. Steel weapons hurt dark elves, but the wounds heal quickly. If you want to kill a young dark elf, a wooden weapon to the heart is the best way to do it.” Solis answered.

Solis drew out his dagger. Randall looked at it closely.

“That’s a very strange grain. I don’t recognize it.” Randall said.

“That’s because it’s feralt.” Solis countered.

“Feralt?” Randall asked, then said, “Feralt. I’ve heard of that. Isn’t a very special wood? Stronger than steel?”

“Yes.” Solis answered.

“Where is it grown?”

“Nowhere. The secret to growing feralt was lost during the Dark Age.”

“Like obstinite weapons.”

“Exactly.”

“You said that a wooden weapon was the way to kill a young dark elf. How do you kill an old dark elf?”

“Sunlight can kill all but the very old dark elves. As to those elves, no one knows how to kill them. Luckily, there are not a lot of those.”

Solis stood up.

“Well, human…” Solis said.

“Randall.” Randall corrected.

“Randall. It’s been very nice making your acquaintance, but I must be going.”

“Thanks again for the help.”

“You’re welcome, Randall.”

Solis grabbed the dark elf corpse.

“Trust your instincts. I may not be there to help you next time.”

Solis smiled and disappeared into the darkness. Randall returned to his bedroll and slept fitfully until dawn.

*What else could be out here?*

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Randall broke camp at dawn and then headed downstream. He was stiff from his injuries, but he still made progress towards his goal – a set of three hills near the Red River. The middle hill had a cave on its west side, facing the river – the cave of the Creator.

Randall moved cautiously through the forest, remembering his encounters from the previous day. Thankfully, he saw no other orcs – or wildlife.

*I should be seeing something. What’s happened here?*

On the other side of a low hill, Randall saw an orc scouting party – dead. He approached carefully, fearing a trap. There were four orcs in the party. Randall noticed vicious claw marks on the bodies and two of them had been bitten on the neck and fed upon.

*What could have done this? A bear maybe?*

He inspected the area and then found some tracks nearby that he didn’t recognize.

*What kind of tracks are these?*

Randall took another look at the tracks.

*Well, whatever it was, it killed four orcs.*

Randall gripped the hilt of his sword and then moved on.

A few hours later he reached his goal – the set of three hills near the river. He trotted to the middle hill and then saw the cave.

*I can’t believe it! Soon, I will speak directly to the Creator! Dad will be sorry for doubting me. He called it a suicide mission! I can’t wait to hear him apologize to me!*

As Randall walked toward the cave, he saw a pier on the riverbank.

*A pier? Out here in the Barrens? It could be a relic from an old human settlement, or maybe the orcs have a purpose for it.*

The pier didn’t matter to Randall; he focused on the cave.

Randall had an easy time entering the cave. He lit a torch and then looked around. The cave had a low ceiling, but was rather wide – about thirty feet. About fifty yards in, the cave ended. Randall knew what to do. He kneeled down in the center of the cave.

“Creator, I am here to speak to you.”

Silence.

“Creator, this is Randall. I have questions for you.”

Silence.

*What am I doing wrong? Perhaps I have to wait.*

A few minutes later, Randall heard a sound outside – some kind of guttural hiss. He had a sudden urge to duck down towards the cave floor. He followed it and was immediately glad he did. A large creature slammed into his back. Luckily, he had strapped his shield to his backpack. The unknown beast fell back after hitting his shield. Randall dropped his torch, drew his sword and then faced the creature.

He couldn’t believe his eyes. He saw a large, dark green beast with a spiked tail. It had long claws and its face strangely resembled a tiger. It readied itself to pounce at Randall.

Randall recognized this and acted. Knowing that the beast would target his throat, Randall fell back and then kicked into the beast’s belly. He threw his legs back and sent the creature crashing into the cave wall.

Randall used the time that the beast took to recover by standing up and then readying his shield. The creature rushed at Randall. Instead of trying to bite him, the beast stood on its hind legs and then swung its front paws at Randall.

Randall blocked each with his sword and shield and then quickly ducked as the creature swung his tail at his head. The spikes on the end of the beast’s tail glistened.

*Some kind of poison?*

The creature was thrown off balance by the tail swing, so Randall counterattacked. Randall jabbed his sword into the beast’s right hind leg. The creature turned quickly and then threw its head at Randall for a bite – and ran into Randall’s right foot. The impact threw them both back. Randall recovered first and then ran towards the cave’s entrance. The creature soon followed.

Reaching the cave’s entrance, Randall slid down and then swung his shield over his head. The beast hit the shield hard, swinging his tail up. Randall grabbed the creature’s tail and then swung it out of the cave.

The beast fell down the hill and then slammed into a tree. Dazed, it looked up to see a sword descending towards its head.

Randall pried his sword out of the creature’s head and then wiped it off.

“Very impressive.”

Randall turned around to see a man fishing from the small pier he saw earlier. The fisherman was rather plain looking, wearing a brown tunic and pants. He wore a tan, wide-brimmed hat.

“Come and join me, Randall.” The fisherman said.

Randall walked up to the pier and then sat down beside the fisherman.

“How do you know my name?” Randall asked.

“I know many things. Like how you disobeyed your father to go on this quest.”

Randall hung his head.

“At the time I felt that I had to.”

“Did you now?” The fisherman asked.

“I wanted to sacrifice my rite passage, even my life, to speak to the Creator.” Randall answered.

“You know the Writings, ‘obedience is better than sacrifice.’”

Randall nodded.

“I guess that I have earned an, ‘I told you so.’ The cave is just another cave. I just wanted to speak to the Creator, but I guess that I’m not good enough.” Randall said.

The fisherman chuckled.

“Randall, the Creator’s Spirit was with you the whole time! He led the aquian and the elf to help you. He even gave you the strength to fight that creature.”

The fisherman pointed to the beast. Randall was dubious.

“How do you know so much?”

The fisherman smiled at Randall.

“Like I said, I know many things.”

Randall shook his head.

“Why would the Creator help me? Like you said, I disobeyed my father.”

“Let me explain. Let’s suppose that you fell in a hole on the way home and your father was nearby. You call out to your father for help and he says, ‘I’m sorry, son, but you disobeyed earlier, so I won’t help you.’”

The fisherman tussled Randall’s hair.

“No, of course he wouldn’t do that! He would help you because he loves you. It’s the same with the Creator.”

Randall smiled at the story, but kept his head down.

“But I still made a mess of things. How can I face my father?”

“As with the Creator, you go and ask forgiveness.” The fisherman said.

The fisherman put his hand on Randall’s shoulder.

“And, by the way, you didn’t make a mess of things.”

“What do you mean?” Randall asked.

The fisherman pointed at the creature.

“You see that beast over there.”

Randall saw the fisherman’s face tighten and his eyes narrow.

“You must take that thing back to Barrenwatch. Tell them that there are others.”

“How can I do that? I don’t even know how I’m going to get home.” Randall asked.

The fisherman pointed down the riverbank. Randall saw a boat up on the bank.

“Sir, I can’t take your boat. How will you get home?”

The fisherman winked at Randall.

“I’ll manage. You must get going. Your father is worried about you.”

The fisherman stood up and walked towards the boat; Randall followed. The fisherman helped Randall load the boat with his gear and the creature. Randall looked back at the fisherman as he rowed up the river.

*I never asked the fisherman for his name.*

Randall returned to his rowing.

*And why did my heart burn within me as I spoke to him?*