

For four years I'd lived in the lands in-between, seeing barely a soul other than the Tribes of Years Passing, who would sometimes come for guidance. It was a lonely time, and for a bard, there is little worse than the absence of company, an empty audience.

Why was I here? Well, I had become "the hand that pushes the wheel": one of the prices paid to see the lands of the 4+1 restored and The Compact reforged. Others had paid a higher price. The light-hearted bard, Pryderi O'Phelan of the White Hart, had paid the Crone's price that day: his head severed from his shoulders. Others had paid the Maiden's price, being ritually strangled and becoming the 'Nameless' who flit twixt night and day. In the face of their great sacrifices, my isolation seemed to be but nothing, but as empty days turned to empty nights it wore heavily on my heart.

One winter morn, I was approached by the Fair Ambassador who offered me a way out of my predicament. He proposed that the Compact would allow me to be released if a suitable replacement was found, and that a suitable soul had indeed been found. However, the other members of the Compact (the Siren, the Ice Hag, the Dan and the Summer King) would also need to grant me permission.

The Summer King agreed for the price that I would return all members of the 4+1 currently in Orin Rakatha back to the 4+1 within 3 years, 3 months and 3 days.

The Fair Ambassador's price was that Hunter Greenshield take my place and that he would be "guided" by one of the Fair.

The Lady of All Tears agreed, for a price of course, to take a message to the three other members of the Compact on my behalf. The Seventh Magpie (one of the Fair Folk) visited me, and said he could lead me to a place where it is possible to summon a messenger of the Dan and aid me in doing so. Together we performed a ritual to summon a messenger of the Dan.

A dark horde of figures appeared over the brow of the hill, with wolves running wild. The Seventh Magpie ran off, but at my feet lay my old friend and another of Phelan's Select, Cynnon McConn, Ovate of the White Hart, who had volunteered to become one of the Nameless in our ritual all those years ago. He was dying. I tried to tend him but my attempts seemed to have little effect. Another old friend crept towards me. Keelty, druid of the lands in-between, another of the Select who had helped with the ritual.

The dark figures seemed more interested in engaging in battle with another group of people, neither of whom I could distinguish in the gloom. The second group prevailed and demanded to know who we were. As fortune would have it, they were of the Kern Valley Alliance, a place which had once been home to the Select as we quested across Orin Rakatha and beyond. The others were the Kalid.

Cynnon miraculously gasped a breath and rejoined the land of the living. It seemed more than a turn of fate that our paths once more crossed with the Alliance, and so we joined with them as they smote another, fearsome group of Kalid and wolves.

The Valley folk were in the area to provide security for their merchants at the Grand Fayre: a once-in-a-lifetime event on Orin Rakatha being hosted by the fair folk, or as some might call them, the fae. Some fae directed us towards residence for the common man in the stable blocks (naturally, the fae had far superior accommodation nearby).

Close to the building in which we were to sleep were some fearsome beasts, that others quickly recognised as uruks. Needless to say, this was not a friendly meeting, and many a sword gleamed in the moonlight, growing thick with dark blood. Victory, again, to the Valley side.

In the comfort of the building and with candlelight illuminating faces better than the dark of the moon, we finally could see our Valley companions. Sasha, Druid of the Mother, as I would call her, or High Priestess of the White Path as she is known within the Valley, led the group with compassion and wisdom as those followers of the Mother tend to have. Leading the charge into every battle were the aspirant knights Roesis and Tarndeth, whose fervent shouts proclaiming

their love for St Michel and the King left no-one in any doubt where their loyalty lay. Others who joined the front ranks of battle were Ardaac Krieg, Obelisk and Tarquin.

A small pack of 'dogs' as they called themselves (Running Dog, Lying Dog and Scorch) provided a lively team of scouts, shooting off into the distance to sniff out the enemy. A number of druids accompanied the party: Alariel of the leafy face, Leitha who called himself a Fae but was not one of the fair folk, and Bill Jingle – a nimble hospitaller who would chase after companions in need of healing.

During our time at the stables a number of people came and went with messages and announcements, but those relate to different stories and so I shall save them for the end.

Visitors of this story included a blacksmith who came on behalf of the Ice Queen of the stark lands of the North. He said that she wanted the head of a particular man... although as it transpired he got the name wrong and I spent much time looking for a person who did not exist!

Another visitor was Trixie Green Willow, a sharp fellow with swirling green patterns across his visage - from the 4+1, of course, and bearing a bow and sheath of arrows. He said that he came on behalf of the Siren, and that her daughter – the Leah - was missing. Trixie said that if we could find the Leah, then it was likely the Siren would look favourably on our cause.

And, more unwelcome visitors included those from the Dreaming Spire, who sat aloof in the corner of the room. Their leader, clad in a glittering robe, said that he had 'met' the Valley before. It's possible his clan name was Ordos. But also that he had foreseen that our group would encounter and defeat some other Melniboneans tomorrow and that these Melniboneans had a magical item of interest to him, for which he was prepared to pay hundreds of gests. Let us not forget that the Melniboneans caused much suffering and woe when they ventured into the lands of the 4+1 many years ago, stealing our Cauldron, and sacrificing unwilling souls into the Cauldron to enhance their own powers: NOT the purpose for which it was intended.

That night, some undead stumbled into our midst: discerning as simply 'flesh'. After these unnatural creatures had been laid to rest, the 'dogs' expressed concern that a necromancer (or group thereof) was out nearby and that we should seek them out. Sensible thoughts, but we did not risk it at that time.

The next morn, one of the fair folk: a redcap, came to guide us into the forests. Without his assistance, travel would have been impossible as those venturing into the woods would succumb to a deep slumber and not awake. The redcap, a silent fellow, demanded payment which Cynnon provided in the form of Gests.

While we were waiting to leave, a strange creature came up to us and sniffed us. We weren't sure how to deal with it, but when someone gave it a cake made of blood, it stuffed it in its mouth and left.

Travelling into the forest, we came across a group of wolves and leafy-faced creatures which didn't seem capable of speaking, but were capable of using the powers of the earth against us in an unnatural way and slowing our movements so that we could not react in time. The group quickly lost its orderly ranks and descended into an ineffective fighting formation known as 'the hedgehog'. I found myself nearly tasting death, coming round to Cynnon's attempts to wake me. Roesis tried to bring order to future fights by assigning one healer per two fighters, so that we would hold a formation.

We followed the upward climb of a green hill, coming across an unusual-looking fae who reminded us of a badger. He told us that he was a "knocker-hunter" and that we had the scent of a "knocker" upon us. It transpired that this was a fae from the underground who had come sniffing around us earlier this morning and would pursue us forever. It would always seek food, and always return for more. When you had no further food, it would then eat you. He mentioned also that there were plenty of "Ben's men" in the area, and that we had just fought some.

Continuing, we found a Melnibonean scout trailing us, keeping his distance. We engaged with

more of “Ben's men” close to an awkward stile atop a cold, bleak hill and the Melnibonean watched. While we healed up, I tried chatting to him to find out what he was up to. Apparently these creatures were led by a man named Ben de Garrion and he looked a bit like a troll. There had been an increase in their presence and activities lately, and they were calling trouble for the Melniboneans.

The dogs picked up the scent of wolves and other creatures in a nearby field and hared off. We beheld Ben de Garrion himself, a mighty green figure with a prominent nose, surrounded by a large group of loyal – if bestial-looking – comrades.

For reasons I'm not sure of, we engaged once more in combat, and found that amongst his number were ovates who showered us with blasts of magical shards of ice. Again, despite our better judgement, we quickly swung round into the dangerous hedgehog formation as the enemy circled us. Although the sun was high and the sky a pure blue, on this green field was a bloody scene with limbs hacked, skulls cracked and bodies falling, falling, fallen. Towards the end, Ben made a mighty stand, surrounded as he was by many Valley members who pressed him on all sides, railing against us in a powerful voice, swinging his mighty weapon to and fro but to little avail in the end.

The black-faced golem warrior Obelisk decided to take Ben's head as a trophy, an act that would later prove fortuitous.

While we rested up and healed, the knocker came back. Despite warnings, eventually someone fed the fae creature some food and it departed. Feeling hungry ourselves, we sat to eat while others were perhaps meditating or casting. During that time, we were visited by a representative of the Siren who chastised us for killing Ben de Garrion. Apparently he was the lover of the Leah, and had been sent by the Siren to rescue her daughter. However, Roesis I think it was pointed out that if we were capable of defeating Ben and his forces, then we would be more likely to defeat whatever force had captured the Leah herself: irrefutable logic. The Siren's representative talked a little more, telling us that Ben was “a lover and a fighter” - although as Keelty pointed out we only saw him fighting and little of the loving – and apparently Ben had an interesting history, in that he had formerly been the lover of the Ice Queen herself. She now sought vengeance against him now that he had left her.

The representative also told us that the only person capable of ridding us of the persistent 'knocker', was in fact a 'knocker-hunter'.

We learned that the Leah might be nearby but that she was being held by the Melniboneans. Those members of the Dreaming Spire were ironically friendly towards us, as we had killed the forces that had been harrasing them during their time here. The leader of one of their groups said that he owed us a favour and was very grateful for our help.

Sasha, bravely - in the face of these unexpected pleasantries concealing evil desires – asked that the Melniboneans release the Leah and leave the lands of the 4+1. The Melnibonean said that would put him in direct conflict with the orders from his master and so he could not oblige. I must confess I found him strangely honourable – as a non-combatant he suggested I stand aside and would not be attacked by his men. The Melniboneans were supported by a creature that healed them all – a hepath of healing? It was bound to help them and said to me that it did not like seeing people injured (in fact it did heal one of the Valley group too). Again, more bodies littered the floor: this time those clothed in torn blood-stained cloth of the Dreaming Spire.

Although our group was running low on resources, we found ourselves under attack relatively soon from a larger group of Melniboneans who were banded together and performing a ritual in a nearby pool. We could see the Leah there, a watery lady who appeared to be captured and unable to move from her position at the edge of the large expanse of water.

This time there was no dallying, and the Valley group marched against our foes, though they unleashed their powers against us: the touch of the Crone almost stealing the life from Obelisk, and others wielding forces of the Maiden. Back and forth the battle went, the Melniboneans pressing attack and then our Valley warriors driving forward. Valley fell, Dreaming Spire fell. But we held the advantage, and our superior force won the day.

Eventually we reached the Leah. She said that the presence of foreign people in the area (the Melniboneans, and now most of the Valley group) meant that she was unable to leave, and that she would only be released from her captivity if we left. We also found a vessel that had collected a large amount of water in it; upon questioning, the Leah said that it was part of her essence that had been stripped from her by those performing the ritual.

Finding that the only way to help her now was to leave, Sasha ordered we depart – although we had to wait a short while first. During that time, the redcap communicated that there were many knockers and only one knocker-hunter. And that, if we wished to rid ourselves of this pestilent fae, we would have to enlist the services of the hunter that we had met earlier in the day.

All of a sudden, Keelty and Cynnon felt a pull of death and call of the Dan upon them, and vanished from our midst.

On the borders of the forest, we encountered some aggressive uruks who appeared leaderless and confused by it. Again, we fought them. Again, we defeated them.

Back in the comfort of the stable blocks, with the amiable chef serving up a tasty warm meal, we had many druids who joined us, awaiting Arbor, Alpha Hierophant of the Valley Druid Sect. Trixie Green Willow arrived once more, and said that there were discussions with Arbor that he was happy for me to be present for. Arbor had custodianship of Hunter Greenshield: the former Valley Druid who had been reborn in the Cauldron due to the sacrifice of the Druid Erf. Hunter Greenshield was now a young child. Arbor was to release the child into the care of Trixie Green Willow, who himself would provide guardianship as the child took my place in the Compact. However, Arbor demanded his own price for this: that he be allowed to access the greens of the forest, to which Trixie agreed. Arbor then wished me well in my endeavours.

The Seventh Magpie came to speak with me, saying that the Dan was displeased that we had not undertaken his task and had recalled his messenger Cynnon. This was a point of confusion, as Cynnon had seemed unaware of any message that he had been sent to pass on. The fae asked me if I wished to proceed with my release from the Compact. After much heart-wrangling and soul-searching – with great assistance from the Valley group who were most supportive in trying to help me make a decision – I said that I did. The Magpie named the price: that Cynnon be permanently resident in the Courts of the Dan: in the lands of the dead. Despite this grievous price, I had already resolved to proceed and with a heart full of sorrow did agree. The Seventh Magpie then informed me that there were some people in the vicinity who were interfering in the works of the Dan and asked that we remove them. I would have agreed to this anyway: none should interfere in the affairs of the dead.

With Leitha expressing much excitement at the prospect of slaying Dymwan, we sallied forth in the darkness. We met perhaps three group of these evil-doers: one of which informed us that we were too late and that their ritual had been completed. Was that intended to turn us away? For it did not, and we hunted them all down to the last man – if they can be called men. I must mention also the valiant deaths of a number of the Valley group: sadly Bill Jingle who was slain in mid-combat with a touch of the Crone, and Alariel, who sustained too many wounds upon his body to live.

The next morn, Keelty and Cynnon were returned to us briefly: permitted to say their final goodbyes. I heard that Keelty had begged the Dan to allow them to return for a small time, and perhaps he was pleased with the removal of the Dymwan menace. I begged Cynnon's forgiveness and, magnanimous and brave as ever, he told me not to weep for him, but to tell a story or sing a song to warm his heart so that he might depart this world with pleasant memories. I regaled him with what I could remember of the Death of Phelan, a song that Cynnon had helped me compose for the Ard Righ Tor, so that his judgement upon the Select would not be severe:

Phelan - he was known through the lands -

The wisest of all hierophants

He looked to the future, he looked to the skies

He saw through the treachery, saw through the lies

Of the 4+1 he did see its demise

So he put forth a call, he called forth a quest

Until it is done he will never find rest

To uncover the source of the treachery...

We were repeatedly assailed at our building unprovoked by multiple groups of Kalid: the Crimson Feast and Stone Panthers. We learned that they had captured a Valley merchant and went to track the merchant down, finding her with hands bound in their camp. Fortune and fate were with us in those battles, and we were able to release her without her being harmed: the quick actions of one of the 'dogs' taking her away from the fight.

With many dead bodies swathed in black and blue around us, Cynnon felt the call of the Dan upon him and made his final goodbyes. There are many tales about Cynnon, but I will tell you that he was a steadfast warrior, who never held back in battle and would take bold actions that others were to afraid or timid to do. He was named a Hero of the Kern Valley Alliance, a Sorcerer of the Grey School, and his last action was to return a magical tabard to the Grey School so that others may benefit from that which he needed no longer. Cynnon ever faced death with courage and should be remembered well. Farewell, my friend.

The prices are now paid and the Compact re-forged. All members of the 4+1 must leave Orin Rakatha to return to our homeland by order of the Summer King.

## **Snippets from other stories**

High Priest Hagan has been having some strange dreams down in Gilden Far. He asks that adventurers join him to provide assistance.

Two cataclysms have taken place on Orin Rakatha in the past. One introduced the Towers, another introduced the mists. There are signs that a third cataclysm may take place: for example the locking of the plane of Orin Rakatha; so that none may leave.

DarkHome, a sector in Fortunes Keep, is headed by Dreadlord Araikas who is forming a council of advisors from amongst the adventurers. People who wish to take a position in the council should publicly declare themselves and will be tested to see if they are worthy. Already two places on the council are claimed (the drow representation and the darkbringer).

As the Halmadonian tower leader is off-plane, Halmadons Heights have put another in charge of the tower for the time being.

The Alpha Hierophant Arbor has declared that the ways and groves will be open for those formerly of the Archers Guild, the Pathfinders, some of the Rangers, the Druid Sect so that they may provide a first defence of Fortunes Keep against hostile forces; and be known as the Forestals. Trixie Green Willow will provide teaching to those who wish to follow the way of the bow.

The Tower Leader of Barad Tirgul said that he wished to conclude his business with Dreadlord Araikas that was interrupted at around the last time Time of Reckoning, and warned us from meddling in the affairs of his uruks (his “children”) who have been roaming in leaderless bands across Orin Rakatha.

Transcribed on behalf of

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