

The Carnival Wolves

Urpo Lankinen

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In the lands of Nothross, near the Ghavron'thy-Traynan mountain, 14th of Rainbringer, 632 AR

IT WAS NOT OFTEN THAT TRAVELLERS WERE SEEN wandering on the forest-covered hills of northern reaches of Duchy of Nothross, under the great and mighty mountains.

Many distant mountains were home to dwarves, and where they did not claim them as their homes, many monsters did. In these days, even humans settled a mountain here and there. However, in these distant, cold, impassable forests, no stubborn dwarf, no desperate monster, and no profit-seeking human was seen. This was the domain of the elves; for them, the fact the land was worth caring for and the beauty of these woods was the reason enough for them to take care of it. But even so, the elves wanted to rule this land from their distant valleys.

No one had surveyed these mountains properly; not the forests covering them, nor the caves under them. The greatest of the mountains was called Ghavron'thy-Traynan, Bear's Tooth. For some reason, the two elves who climbed toward a high pass near the foot of the mountain found it comforting that the mountain only had a name in Elvish. Yet, while this thought had occurred to them while they still had a long way to go to this mountain, right now, they had better things to think of. The first challenging part of the journey was ahead of them.

Thelivna Athelevathan felt slightly tired and smiled to herself as she calmly sat on a rock and ate a roll. She followed her companion, Frevelthan, as he ardourously made his way uphill. The light breeze carried Frevelthan's quiet curses to her. She closed her eyes and bowed her head in sorrow for a while; Frevelthan was still in bad mood. She wondered how such a good hunter could make such a slow progress in this terrain. She cheered up as she thought how basically funny this slight contradiction was. She looked about and enjoyed the familiar view; she hadn't seen the view from here for quite a while.

The home village Lethlei-Yssrai-Carghven was far behind in the valley toward west, and the evening sun glittered on the surface of the great lake in the valley.

The autumn day was bright and a prickly chilly, and Thelivna was happy that the autumn rains had not bothered them this year yet.

Thelivna winced as Frevelthan surprised her. “This is a surprisingly troublesome journey”, Frevelthan said. Thelivna had thought she had been looking around for only a while and had not even noticed how Frevelthan had quickly climbed the rest of the way. Judging from the curses, she had guessed the last stretch of the climb would take a little bit longer.

Thelivna handed Frevelthan the other of her rolls and quickly ate the last bits of her own. She smiled. “Trust me, your climbing skills seem to be just fine.”

“Thank you.” Frevelthan quickly ate the roll, and it took a while before he could reply. “Well, you forest folk must think this is your second nature”, he said after devouring a huge bit. “My family is plains folk, all the way to our first forefather.”

“It should not matter.” Thelivna laughed. “We’re doing fine so far, don’t we?”

“Well”, Frevelthan said, “I have to admit that while I haven’t been working this hard before, the journey has been just fine so far. If only I can eat this roll, I may even survive.”

Sometimes, Thelivna felt her husband, with whom she had only recently wed, was from another world altogether. But they were still only properly getting acquainted with each other and each other’s work. Frevelthan wanted to see the wilderness surrounding his new home, and Thelivna wanted to see places she had not been to for a while.

“You really haven’t been to the mountains before?” Thelivna wondered.

“No! Around the coast, there’s only small hills. But don’t worry, I suppose I will get used to this... eventually.” Frevelthan wolfed down the last bits of the roll. “Good rolls, thank you very much.”

“My mother’s recipe.” Thelivna smiled. “This is a good point to continue from. You’re climbing like a master already.”

“Really?” Frevelthan smiled a little bit, but not much. “Maybe we will survive. Is it a long way to the camp site?”

“If we go a little bit that way”, Thelivna said and pointed forward, “there’s a narrow valley, and we will need to climb down its edge to get to the valley proper. Maybe ten more moments? I think we will get there before it gets dark.”

Frevelthan looked forward, and seemed to grow even more depressed when he saw the ridges ahead. “Looks even more steep”, he said with noticeable grudge.

“Don’t worry, it will get easier. On the way here, there were no good paths, but from here, we have a wide and easy path to follow.” Thelivna sighed. “Well, at least it was there when I was here last time, and it was at least twenty turns of seasons back.” She looked at Frevelthan, whose face could not hide the depression very well. “But don’t worry! It will be all right. I have never been to the valley itself, so this will be very interesting.”

“Well, let’s hope for the best, even when it doesn’t always look like that.” Frevelthan sighed and tried to smile happily to Thelivna, and cheered up a little bit. His mood fell again when he lifted his backpack, and remembered how heavy it was. He wished there had been a little bit less to carry. To his mistake, he had thought that there had not been enough time to pack when they left, so he had taken all of his usual hunting gear. Now they started to weigh on his back. “Well, let’s go then, shall we...”

FREVELTHAN STRETCHED AND YAWNED A BIT, and was happy that the hard part of the journey was, judging from all of the signs, over. The night had fallen and it was time to rest.

The cliff face at the end of the route had been difficult to scale, even with the best gear. Frevelthan was horrified to think of how hard it would be to get back up. He didn’t even dare to ask Thelivna if they would return the same route, because even the thought that it might indeed be ahead would be very tiring in itself. But under the high cliffs, in a slight indentation, the camp fire was warming them and the soup Thelivna had made had restored his strength. He looked at his wife, who was fussing around with their gear. Life seemed to be good, at least for a while.

“Mind if I ask you one thing?” Frevelthan asked.

“Not at all”, Thelivna said.

“Why did we *really* get here? You wanted me to show what kind of forestlands we have here, but I wonder if there’s something strange going on?” Frevelthan took a well-weighed break. “Something to do with Sethithven’s stories?”

Thelivna sighed. “No whisper of wind nor rustle of leaf will be unnoticed by you.”

“Sethithven came to your care last week, and after that, you mostly sat in the reading room in the Tower, browsing old books.”

Thelivna smiled. “It was Sethithven’s idea. His leg is broken and he will have to go to the south for the rest of the year, so he wanted me to investigate this before the winter. He thought we would both be inspired by this.”

Frevelthan prepared for the worst, closed his eyes and whimpered. “I hope we will not join Sethithven in his ward – I believe that if we, the owners of the hall of healing, would need to use its services ourselves, our establishment would fall in ill light. Please tell what we will really be up against.”

Thelivna smiled. “In the other end of the valley, there’s a distant corner with some old magic.”

Frevelthan took a deep breath through his teeth, holding his eyes closed even tighter. “Nel’thlyin, protect us. Something bad is afoot.” He sat up. “My cousin disappeared while investigating one eruption of magic. You do understand if I am a little bit... anxious.”

“I understand, but don’t worry. My great-grandfather investigated this very place, and he was unharmed. This is just a small magic leak, and it has become stable thousands of years ago – perhaps even in the ancient times. We should not even notice that we’re in its area of effect. We may run into problems very close by, but we should be able to tell when we are too close anyway.”

“Very well. Tell me more.” Frelvelthan relaxed a bit – Thelivna did, after all, know more about magic than he did.

“Old Varrevel, may he rest in peace, saw and told of this valley in his diary. He never explained what really happened in the valley. He just said it was very beautiful. And, if we’re to believe Sethithven, other visitors say it’s beautiful there. But no one can give a description more accurate than that, not even Varrevel, who otherwise does a good job at it.”

Frelvelthan lied down again and relaxed. “The valley of Bear’s Tooth. I heard about this a long time ago, maybe when I was still living in Westholt. I thought it was just an old children’s tale.”

“It is true, nevertheless. Even if Varrevel never really explained what happened there, he *did* go there.”

Frelvelthan cheered up a little bit. “Well, at least I think that if you *and* Sethithven think this is a good idea, it can’t be too bad. But if we’d be here just because Sethithven asked, I’d turn back.”

“**D**O YOU FEEL WHAT THE MAGIC FORCE feels like here?” Thelivna said as they strode uphill.

The morning was as fresh and clear as the night that preceded it. They had travelled deeper in the valley. In the valley between the mountains, there were some smaller hills. They had expected that forest they could see from the end of the ravine would be difficult and nasty to traverse, but upon closer look, it seemed rather easy to pass. The valley was quite long, but they could easily cover its distance over the morning.

“Yes”, Frelvelthan said. He walked a little bit behind Thelivna. “It’s very likely the valley ahead has something magical in it.”

“This is the right place, no question about it. It’s odd that few have been here so far.”

“I guess it’s just that we hunters don’t want to go near the magic leaks”, Frelvelthan said. “Even humans, dwarves and the ever-cursed monsters tend to be wary of them...”

Frelvelthan ended his explanation as Thelivna waved her hand. She had stopped abruptly. Frelvelthan smiled a little bit and ran to Thelivna without making a single rustle.

“Listen!” Thelivna whispered.

The rising path along hillside reached its peak ahead, and they could hear music from ahead. There was nothing unusual in the music itself – they just had not expected to hear anything like this here.

“It’s...” Frevelthan said, and he did not believe himself what he was about to say. “...a music machine?”

Thelivna listened carefully. It did sound like a mechanical flute. They were expensive, heavy machines, and building them took weeks, even if they were built by Westholt’s most gifted smiths. Thelivna had seen one last time two years ago, in the first party since reclaiming Nothross, celebrating autumn’s coming. But this music was different. “I have never heard music machines playing something like this”, Thelivna said.

“It sounds almost like celebration music composed by humans – so light, so cheerful”, Frevelthan said. “But humans don’t have music machines, do they?”

“And I didn’t know there’s one of those in the middle of the woods”, Thelivna said. “Who could have taken so big machine here? Let’s get closer.”

As they came to the top of the hill they could see that a small valley surrounded by forest was ahead. They didn’t see what was in the valley, but wind carried the music from that direction.

They left their belongings on top of the hill and sneaked closer. The last stone’s throw was thick bushes. They crawled through them silently. The festive music came from some place really close.

“Ooh! Look!” Thelivna said, as she peeked through the grass into the valley.

Frevelthan looked carefully, and could not believe his eyes.

He looked at his wife, who nodded. Together, they got up slowly. The animals in the valley noticed them, and luckily did not flee. They scaled down the steep, rocky edges of the valley, and walked among the animals toward the source of the music.

The ground of the clearing was sandy, and had spots of grass. In the middle of the clearing was a small, shallow pond. On the edge of the pond was a strange structure, consisting of great slabs of stone.

But the strangest sight on the clearing were the animals.

Several wolves had gathered on the clearing. Frevelthan quickly counted at least fifty of them. Thelivna and Frevelthan had never seen wolves behave like this.

“They’re being... jubilant...” Frevelthan said with disbelief.

“Jubilant...” Thelivna said. “Yes, jubilant.”

They went forward, and the festive wolves greeted them, looking at them happily and wagging tail as they walked by. They must have seen they were not a threat: Frevelthan was a fellow hunter and Thelivna was a friendly healer and wizard. The elves smiled back and tried to be as calm as possible in middle of this strangeness.

They walked along the path on the clearing, toward the stones by the pond. A big, light grey wolf, likely a respected old leader of some pack, sat on the path and looked at them. The elves stopped by. Thelivna crouched before the wolf and examined it. She smiled. The wolf lolled out its tongue and seemed happy. And why wouldn't have Thelivna been amused, when the wolf looked quite funny with a small conical paper hat on its head?

Thelivna took a small silver-lined copper pendant, shaped like a fox head, from under her clothes. She closed it in her other hand, took Frevelthan's hand in another, closed her eyes, and focused. She could feel the power surge through her and she hear noise like that of roaring ocean waves. She did not open her eyes yet, but after the noise died down, she felt that she had, in her mind, been moved to some draughty and cold banquet hall in distant Grycia, with dozens of humans babbling close by. The wolf-talk had become understandable in her mind. She opened her eyes.

"Good morning", Thelivna said to the wolf.

"Good morning! Welcome to our carnival, elves", the wolf said.

"Who are you?" Thelivna asked.

The wolf tilted his head and did not seem to understand. "Why! We are wolves."

Thelivna thought for a while. "Who are you?"

"I am a wolf. Other wolves know me."

Thelivna pondered. Apparently, no elf had given the pack leader a name. These wolves clearly did not wander close to their lands.

"What is going on in here?" Frevelthan asked in turn.

"We are celebrating", the wolf said.

"Why?" Frevelthan asked.

"We do not know why. But we celebrate." The wolf wagged its tail and tilted its head another way. "We are having fun."

Thelivna thought for a while, wondering how to say this. "How could we understand?"

"There is no need to understand", the wolf said. "We are having fun."

Frevelthan smiled. Suddenly he laughed, perhaps more loudly and genuinely joyfully than Thelivna had ever heard her husband to laugh. Thelivna smiled at his joy, and was content with that.

"Exactly!" the wolf said. "We wolves are having fun. It is a time to party. I hope you are having fun too. We wolves are having fun!"

THE ELVISH PAIR TRIED TO GET to the party mood. It was easy, but both were troubled by a lot of questions.

Thelivna understood why no one could explain how the animals of the valley behaved. Foremost, she could write the words down, but could not really

think that anyone could believe them. What this might look like when she'd write them down to her diary? "*We went to the forest, where we found the carnival of wolves?*"

"I'm happy, and I don't know why", Frevelthan said.

"And I'm happy that you are happy", Thelivna said. "Sethithven said that everyone who had visited the valley had found their happiness in their own way. I hoped that you'd find your happiness here, since you've been in such a bad mood lately."

"Is that so? Have I been in bad moon? Forgive me, I did not really think..."

Thelivna smiled. "I told you a hundred and six times that you should relax. Nothing seemed to work..."

"Forgive me, dear friend." Frevelthan hugged Thelivna. "I may have been a little bit... sad lately, and I have not given beautiful thoughts their due time. My life has been so busy lately."

They sat on a stone and observed the celebrating wolves. Some of the wolves were dancing a queue dance to the tune of the music, holding each other's tail gently in their mouths. One wolf juggled, skilfully yet surprisingly relaxedly, with three balls, bouncing them with its nose.

"And did you find your own happy feeling?" Frevelthan asked.

"Of course. This is a unique moment, and a unique place", Thelivna said.

We do not know why, Frevelthan thought of the wolf's words. *But they are having fun. I wanted to know why. But for some reason I don't need to know. The solution seems quite simple...*

"This carnival of wolves is a curious thing", Frevelthan said at last. Farther away, some wolves appeared to form a ten-wolf pyramid, and succeeded well. The wolf on the top of the pyramid bounced two balls with its nose. The wolves watching the show howled in joy.

"If you ask me, the magic leak here makes people behave intelligently. But wolves are basically simple animals. They also know that they are here safe due to the magic", Thelivna said.

One of the wolves ran lightly past, with a string of a balloon made of hard paper tied to its paw. It stopped briefly in front of them, lolled out its tongue. "Have a nice carnival", it said happily.

Frevelthan smiled at the wolf, and turned again to Thelivna. "This magic flow seems like a good flow to me. I do not think that anyone could do any bad magic in here. Perhaps no one can even do anything bad here."

"It may be so. And the structure of rocks on the side of the pond seems to be the source of the magic. Thelivna looked toward the stones and saw them glow gently in her mind. They seemed naturally formed, and it seemed that it was, in fact, a balanced, positively polarised tear, through which the forces of the Infinite

manifested here. She even felt gentle tingling when she looked that way, and felt no need to examine the place closer; it was clear the leak was quite powerful.

“But where did these wolves come from? And why carnival? And where does that music come from?”

Thelivna smiled. “Do you even want to know? And if you wanted to know, could you tell anyone... tell them the right things the right way?”

No, Frevelthan thought. Why tell anyone else, when they don't understand its simplicity? They hear of odd animals, they hear of odd behaviour, so they do exactly what we did – they want to find out. But if they come here, they will come to the same conclusion. No one understands, initially, that basically all research into this is futile and the solution is quite simple.

Frevelthan looked at the wolf, with whom they had talked with previously. The wolf howled a happy tune with the others, and danced along with them. The wolves close by competed a bit, and tried to find out who could throw a ball most accurately.

Wolves were having fun. The carnival of the wolves was at its height. That was the only thing the wolves knew at the time. That was the only thing that meant anything.

“**W**HAT ARE WE GOING TO TELL the other people?” Thelivna asked.

They walked on the lawn of the healing house toward the main building. Sethithven was sitting in his chair under the canvas shade that had been erected on the front of the building; his leg seemed to have healed well and he was doing what he knew best – telling thrilling stories to other patients.

Frevelthan said nothing for a while. “I don't know. I suppose we can discuss the magic leak and tell a thing or two about that, but as for anything else, it's a little bit harder.” Frevelthan smiled at Thelivna. “I don't think we were very useful here, but at least we know why no one can solve this mystery...”

Thelivna smiled. They both clearly understood.

THE END

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