

Pirates in the Morning Mist

Urpo Lankinen

2005-09-20

“**G**NEDRNYGR ADITHEBADOGGR.”

“Excuse me, could you spell it?”

Gnedrnygr sighed. “G-ne-d-r-ny-g-r A-di-the-ba-do-g-g-r. I can’t believe people are still having problems spelling Colemian names. The city is full of us!”

“My apologies, I was just making sure I got it right. So let me verify: Tann, Facyr, a sell-sword, born in Clatterteeth in Grycia, Citizen of Varmhjelm; Ativel, Faira, privateer under the flag of Varmhjelm, born in Altme in Treglin, Citizen of Varmhjelm; Adithebadoggr, Gnedrnygr,” the difficult name rolled off the clerk’s tongue as smoothly as other names, “practicer of magic, born in The High Citadel in Colemia, Citizen of Varmhjelm, and Adatel, Jenyr, Captain of the City Guard, born in and citizen of Anchorfall in Varmhjelm; registered as the new occupants of Wilhelmsroad number 20. Is this correct?”

“Yes”, Jenyr said.

“All right. I shall make note of these changes in the records. This shall be handled with utmost hurry, you should receive confirmation in the post tomorrow.” The clerk turned over to file the paper in the big cabinet behind him. “Oh—and I have an additional request to Captain Adatel.”

“Yes?” Jenyr said.

The clerk produced letter sealed with the royal magistrate’s seal. “Before you return to the garrison, please take this to the seneschal—it has some news that undoubtedly must be brought to the attention of the Regent. I am afraid it may also affect the security of the city, so I am entrusting this to you, personally.”

Jenyr wasn’t particularly thrilled. First of all, it was his day off, and that was the particular reason why he had found time to go and buy a nice two-story house in a quiet region of the city with his dear friends, drag their possessions from their former homes there. . . and then waste twice the amount of time getting the paperwork done. Thus, he was annoyed by suggestions of “returning to the garrison”. Secondly, they had been getting these letters a lot lately—they were in fact reports from spies working in the city, working on counterintelligence operations.

The Regent was very, very worried of spies. And, as Jenyr full well knew, he was justifiably worried. He was happy that his friends had returned safe and sound from temple of Megyntia, with some riches too. But now, he had to bid them goodbye again—the seneschal had a lot of work for him and the city guard every time a letter arrived.

“Well”, Jenyr said as they got out of the royal magistrate’s office, “Looks like I have busy time ahead again, hopefully we get to see each other again soon—and good luck with your next adventure!” he said as he shook hands, waved bye and then went whistling toward the garrison.

The three remaining companions said nothing but “goodbye” and “thank you” in turn, their smiles hopefully telling more to the weary veteran guardsman.

And then they were alone on the street in the late morning fog. They had returned, stashed their loot in a bank vault, slept at their old homes for the last time, bought a house, settled in, fought the law, and now—what?

“What next adventure?” Facyr was the first one to utter aloud their first thought.

“Well, usually adventures tend to crop up at strange times”, Faira said with a smile. “Don’t worry! And besides, it is not a disaster if we have to quiet down for a few days. I would love a nice stroll in the park and a visit to the bathhouse.”

“Help! Somebody help!”

They spun around toward the beach and noticed something that made Faira’s senses tingle.

“Yes! Pirates! Come on, fellows!” Faira drew her daggers and ran toward the beach and docks where two pirate ships had landed, dozens of crimson-shirted tough seamen pouring from them to the docks. “Captain Crefing the Red and her jolly lot, it seems! Looks like the lecture I gave her in Bluebrook didn’t quite have the effect I intended.”

The beach was milling with people. The beach and dock area of the city was frequently used by the merchants and peasants who came to the town to sell their wares, and the pirate attack came just as most of their usual customers had arrived. The merchants surely weren’t too sad to see their customers run away—after all, they themselves also decided to disappear with same determination.

“Ah, the excitement, old enemies getting their act together”, Gnedrnygr said. “Go give her hell then, um... thata-oiloitteh-gaps!” two of the pirates froze in a funny position while Gnedrnygr knocked them both down with a neat, swift stroke of his staff.

“Get them, men!” Jenyr came to the docks with dozen of his men. “Damn, I’ve waited for pirates to come this way to keep my skills sharp.”

“Why do you think they attack now?” Facyr said.

“Oh, I don’t know, perhaps just testing how well our defenses hold, nobody has tried to attack us for a while, maybe they thought we had grown soft and needed a slap on the face.”

“And only two ships?” Faira said as she likewise stabbed two pirates dead, getting only a small scratch from the third, who had no chance as the cat-like rogue turned and hit him with both of the daggers straight in the chest. “Hmm. I think I can see three more ships on the horizon. Why aren’t they attacking?”

“One thing is sure, they’re getting a royal beating here”, Jenyr said. “Good going, boys!” A new wave of guards emerged from the side streets. The alarm bells had been ringing loudly for only moments, and the beach and docks had been almost retaken by the guards. The pirates had been spotted just after they hit the beach in the morning fog. The fog was lifting now, and with that, the pirates clearly had lost their advantage.

“I can’t see Crefing here. I’m pretty sure she’s hiding in one of the ships in the horizon...” Faira’s voice grew softer, then she frowned. “Sheesh, I think she’s getting away! Facyr! Gnedrnygr! This way!”

Faira grinned as she hopped in the smaller of the two pirate ships—eight pirates had come in it, and Faira estimated three might be able to handle it. The warrior leaped in the boat without hesitation, but the mage needed some encouragement.

“Come on, Gnedrnygr!” Facyr said. “They’re getting away!”

Gnedrnygr sighed and leaped in, landing on both feet and standing knees bent, staying perfectly still at the same position as he landed. “All right, I just hate boats.” Faira unfurled the partially rolled sail and took the rudder, steering the ship toward the open sea. Gnedrnygr stood in the middle of the ship, afraid to move at all, until he finally said, “oh, remarkable, I think I can handle this after all. Remarkable indeed. I’m so glad it’s a calm day. So glad indeed.”

The sail caught wind, and with Faira’s steady hand, the ship easily sped toward the three ships that tried to get away from the port of Anchorfall.

Facyr climbed the mast, and tore down the black-and-red flag of Crimson Crefy. “So, how did you get to know this pirate?”

“The last I met her she was trying to take Bluebrook—about three years ago. She wasn’t that bad, really, mostly her men just settled to rob merchant ships and leave the ships afloat and crew alive. I haven’t heard of her doing anything big lately though.”

“And where is her home port?”

“Hah, if I knew, this would be easier. Judging from our direction, probably at one of the islands off to southeast. Rottenrocks, probably.”

“Rottenrocks?”

“The Gerthines. Seamen calls them Rottenrocks—all of it is just big, steep, weather-beaten, fractured cliffs. Lots of cliffs and bays and twisty peninsulas. Good place for pirates to hide, yes? They just don’t seem to nest there too often—the place is very well charted and frequently patrolled by the Varmhjelm sea guard. Well, not anymore, considering we don’t have a sea guard anymore. And look what was in the ship’s cabin. . .” Faira showed them one of the sea charts, showing every nook and cranny of the Gerthine islands.

The winds seemed to be somewhat against them, but as they knew the winds didn’t help their prey, the chase seemed quite easy. The three ships stayed in the horizon until nightfall, when they disappeared to the island maze of the Gerthines.

“Well, I can’t say I have been here often”, Faira said, “but I think they have to be somewhere in the southern end of the island chain. Too bad the pirates didn’t mark their hideout in the chart, that would have been so helpful of them. . .”

“I don’t think this is a pirate ship—it looks like a merchant or a fishing boat.”

“Well, that would be mighty suspicious—I told you, Crefing doesn’t take ships. Unless, of course, she has changed her habits lately. But yes, this whole thing is a bit strange. Completely unprovoked attack just before lunch. An attack, mind you, they know they can’t really win. And why use a big warship that’s good for looting and pillaging, and a smaller trade ship?”

The search was fruitful. By midnight, they had searched three islands, and on the third, they finally found the pirate hideout.

They left the ship in a small crevasse close to the pirate hideout. The bottom of the crevasse was a breathtaking place: A sharp, featureless cliff rose a long way up, but left a narrow bit of sandy beach on the bottom. They ran along the beach, veiled by the night, and noted that they could easily reach the pirate hideout just by following the narrow beach.

“Well, this gets weirder and weirder. Look,” Faira said. “What the heck is going on here?”

Facyr tried to make heads and tails of it. What he saw was quite usual: Pirates sitting around campfire, downing those famous bottles of rum, and generally having jolly good time while listening to the clinking of gold coins, each of them taking turn to play with the contents of the treasure chest. But even for an usual sight, it didn’t really make that much sense if you really thought about it, after all, they surely hadn’t got their money from this little bloodbath at Anchorfall!

Noiselessly, they sneaked behind what seemed like the captain’s cottage, and were quite correct, because as they peered through window, they saw Crefing sitting by a desk and writing a letter in the light of an oil lamp.

Faira estimated her chances, quickly figured out the layout of the house, and told her companions to wait until you-know-what. She entered the adjacent room

through a window, and opened the pirate captain's door silently like a thief. As Gnedrnygr saw her open the door, he quietly muttered the incantation: "oliglah-blub-thg-ila-tsol". The shadows in Crefing's room deepened, very gradually, as if the day was turning in the night or oil in Crefing's lamp growing short.

Crefing's writing was interrupted. She hated that, especially if it was interrupted by a dagger blade on her throat and another right above her heart. She guessed who she was dealing with—the black sleeves and two daggers told a familiar tale.

"Faira the Tiger. Grudges bring you far."

"Well, no particular grudges, really," Faira said as Facyr and Gnedrnygr climbed through the window. "Just insatiable curiosity."

"Oh really? What's so curious this time?"

"As for grudges, I thought I had made myself perfectly clear last time. I told you if I ever caught you again hitting coast towns, you'd find yourself on the gallows pretty soon."

"And who says I hit coast town?"

"Aah", Faira said. "So you wanted to satisfy my curiosity. I warn you, my companion Facyr here is, despite of his quick warrior's wits, a very simple man. He has been thinking of the mysteries of today's attack and journey for hours, and I guess he hasn't figured any of it out yet. His head might explode if you keep telling these riddles."

"Wha? I'm doing fine." Facyr said, more confused than ever.

"Shut up, will you?" Faira hushed to Facyr, then continued intimidating Crefing, without knowing too well how successful she was. Not very, she guessed. "Anyway, if his head explodes, he'll die, and if he dies, it means one of my dear friends is gone, and that, in turn, means I'm very annoyed. Do you catch my point already?"

"All right, all right! Take your pig-pokers off me chest and I'll talk. Never said I wouldn't, what's your problem?"

Faira withdrew. "I knew I could count on you."

"Now, all I was supposed to do was to escort two ships to Anchorfall. They paid me a chest of gold to do that."

"A warship and a merchant ship."

"Right. That's all I know. They probably came from either Treglin or Tachur, joined with us here, and then we set sail to Anchorfall. No questions asked."

"And the sea voyage went undisturbed, you got your gold, and you returned home?"

"That's so. I swear to gods that's the truth."

"While the people on the two ships drew your colors to the mast, Wore your outfits, and proceeded to loot and pillage the city?"

"What?" Crefing looked shocked. "I... I..."

“Craffy, you fool, looks like you’ve been had.”

“I . . . I . . .”

“I believe you, I really do, you’ve always been a quite pleasant pirate, as far as pirates can be.”

“Ah . . . uh . . .”

“But you know what? As we speak, seneschal Threrista has probably thrown the surviving attackers to the castle dungeon, laid them nicely before the torture pit, and they all looked so very threatened and gladly told them who was the pirate captain they worked for, and where they were hiding.”

Crefing had stopped muttering and started to look quite a lot more worried and sick.

“Of course, you know that we are now going right back to Anchorfall, and we could pop into the seneschal’s office and explain everything, which might just save yourself from the wrath of the Regent once his plan to get the sea patrols running again gets ahead . . .”

“You would do that?”

“. . . but we’re always running out of money, you know?” Faira said with a wide grin.

Moments later, Crefing emerged from her cottage, along with her as of yet unpaid allies, and told them the sad news. The pirate moods seemed to go very very down as Facyr took roughly quarter of the large chest’s contents. And they also knew that they might have to build another hideout in any case, which would clearly put another dent to this wonderful pile of gold. Facyr, Faira and Gnedrnygr headed to the ship, while the pirates started collecting things and starting to search a new hideout—as far as possible from these waters.

The following morning, about a day later after they had departed, the small merchant ship landed on the Anchorfall harbor. Jenyr was the first to greet his friends, as he was on the duty and pacing his usual patrol route.

“Well, looks like you were right, Faira, these sure were Crefing the Red’s men, I’ve already . . .”

“You really think so?”

“I, er . . . what?” Jenyr looked confused.

“I’ve got some really serious news. Those people weren’t Crefing’s men. Exactly what did you do with them?”

“Well, Ali hanged the lot.”

“Good. They were probably the front of Tachur’s army.”

“What?” now Jenyr looked really puzzled. “But now that you say it, it makes more sense—they weren’t really fighting like pirates, they fought more military-like.”

“That’s what I thought too. Had they been pirates, I wouldn’t have got a single scratch, now I did. Anyhow, did you count the bodies?”

“Forty-two dead after the assault, five hanged.”

“Crefing swears there were forty-eight men—both ships full, and she counted. Okay, I want all of you think back yesterday morning’s attack. Was there anything suspicious at all going on?”

“I don’t really pay attention while I’m distracted by really big threat”, Jenyr said.

“I think the whole attack was just that, a really big distraction”, Faira said.

“I... think I remember something odd”, Gnedrnygr said. “There was a sea mage among the pirates. I spotted that man, I thought he was being rather incompetent. I tossed a fireball at him but he got his eyebrows burned. And every fool knows how to dodge a fireball, right?”

“The first thing I learned from you”, Faira said. “Okay, we have a suspect.”

“That’s right, no mages among those we arrested”, Jenyr noted. “But, I hope, I really hope...”

“What?” Faira said.

“Well, you see, just moments ago, my men arrested a suspicious mage just outside of the palace. He resembled the description from the report from our spies.”

... And sometimes things just seem to work out just fine. Some moments later, they had explained the situation to Ali Threrista the Seneschal, and headed to the palace dungeons.

“Yeah, that’s the one”, Gnedrnygr said, “Looks the same to me, just has a different robe. And look at his eyebrows! Or the ones he doesn’t have, in either case.” The sea mage, a cranky-looking Tachurian, looked at him with murderous glare.

“This is definitely the Tachur spy then”, Jenyr said. “One magician really doesn’t draw much attention in a city with a very active magical academy. The diversion operation was rather cunning, though. I’m glad we could intercept some of the messages coming from Tachur, and knew to look for a mage.”

“Well,” Threrista said, “Good to see the system works.” he said with a grin. “And good that we have such great people to keep the system running. I’m sure the Regent will be very pleased with these developments. I will keep him updated, I’m sure you will hear about this later.”

The seneschal, joyful as ever, stayed in the dungeons to plan his favorite things—torture and executions—while the four companions didn’t want to burden their minds with such things and they headed out to the street, and found themselves again near the docks.

“Well, that turned out all right”, Facyr said. “Just long boring sea voyages and we weren’t really in any danger at all”, he continued with some clumsily faked

boredom in his voice.

“Yes, but . . .” Faira shook the money bag, “. . . fortunately even easy things bring some bread to the table. I’m hungry, how about you?” she said, and headed toward the noble quarter. “I know a nice fine restaurant somewhere around here, I’ve always wanted to visit it.”

THE END

*With terrible apologies to everybody, especially R.E.F. . . Distributed under Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 2.5 licence.
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.5/>*