

The Man Who Let His Druid Die

by Brandon M. Dennis

~Staghorn ~ Hibernia ~ Percival~

Posh's face was sweating. His big body and large hands were in a flurry of movement as he bustled from place to place, making drinks, restocking, fetching ice and cleaning. His orange hair was brought back into a short ponytail and it bobbed back and forth. His clothing was stretched and his back was bent, but he wore a broad grin.

The evening was winding down, and most of his customers had left. But there were three fellows who stayed every night past closing time to help Posh clean and to keep him company. After a bit of work, wiping down the bars, sweeping up the floor, cleaning bottles and cups and all the other things that barkeepers do, Posh settled down at a table with his friends and they started a relaxing game of cards.

"Whew, it was quite a night, eh?" said one man as he wiped his brow. "I don't think I've ever seen your place this busy."

"Ah, well, I'm not complaining!" said Posh. "My place is always busy in times of peace. A fellow will work at war all his life and when it is over, he won't quite know what to do with himself. Drown yourself in ale, I say, it makes the day go by the faster."

"Aye, it's hard to get the images of death out of your mind without a stiff drink," said another fellow with a long pipe in his mouth. "How did you do it Posh? You seem to be doin' quite fine now."

"Well now, why do you think I opened up this place?" said Posh with a laugh. "I have to keep my mind busy somehow. As long as my attention is elsewhere, it keeps my mind from wanderin'."

"You never tell us anything about your days of fightin'," said a third man. "Wouldn't you tell us a bit about your part in the war?" Posh glared hard at his cards.

"No, I don't want to," he said.

"Come now Posh, surely you have some tales to tell! And what better night to tell some than tonight? Tell us your stories Posh, we want to know why you became a bartender." Posh's face relaxed and his mouth opened. He turned his head and stared at the flames in his hearth. His hand relaxed and his cards leaned against his chest.

“Why I...became a bartender?”

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The sun went into hiding as Hibernia’s forces trudged through the grasses. But the air was still cool and sweet; a breeze from the south had appeared and the scent of fall was in the air. The grass below was soft and springy, and the footsteps of the marching soldiers faded as soon as they lifted their feet. They were climbing up a soft slope that led eastward, towards the castle of Dun Crimthainn, a few leagues away. There were trees to the right of the marching men, big leafy trees whose raiment were changing colors, to dark browns and light browns, yellows and deep shades of red. The line of trees wound eastward until they fell off the ledge of a short hill, and here a dirt road came from the south heading north. The soldiers turned and followed it until it met a crossroads, and then they turned east. The earth was high on either side now as the men marched between great stones set up on end in rows, ferrying the men to a certain destination.

Then suddenly it loomed before them, a great hill crowned with stone and the castle of Dun Crimthainn. The Hibernian flags waved from the walls and pointed roofs. The clouds parted just slightly so that the sun shown down upon the castle. In such a light, it looked not like a common structure that had been made by men, but a palace, a place for kings to dine as lesser men wait upon their footsteps. The mighty stones stood firm, a wall and a taunt to all that opposed them. The gate was thick and strong, daring anyone to break it down. The men marched up the hill and stood at the castle gates.

Here their leader gave them instructions and split the force. The majority of them were sent south, to patrol the borders of nGed and Scathiag, but Posh and his group were sent north to sweep the mile-gates and secure Dun Crauchon.

“Ah, good,” said the leader of their group. “Nothing gets done in such large armies; I was hoping we would be sent north. Come lads! Let’s see what the lands of Emain have in store for us!” They marched north, and soon came to a large hill. The trees grew thick as they climbed, and soon they were in a small forest. The ground below them was soft and had poor footing due to the fallen leaves, but eventually they reached the crest of the hill and the trees faded. They could see for miles around them. To the east

they saw the Albion Mile Wall, and it was clear. Below them in Crimthainn valley, no one could be seen. Below and to the north they saw Dakkon's Tower, and it also seemed to be clear.

"Rest here a bit fellahs," said the leader. "We move down after a breather." Posh leaned against a tree near their druid; Lauren was her name.

"How are you this mornin', milord?" she asked.

"Ah! Quite fine. I have my spear near at hand; what else could I need?"

"Maybe the company of a lonely Druid?" She smiled impishly and Posh grinned.

"Well of course; who could live without that? My armor may block blows and my spear may fell foes, but good company is always in hard demand."

"And while I can mend any wound," she said, "a good protector is hard to come by."

"Then stay near me, Lauren, and we can benefit from each other!" The leader motioned them to their feet, and they headed down the hill. It began to rain, a light drizzle, but soon it began to fall harder. The mist clouded their vision and it was hard to see more than a few paces in any direction. Soon a gray form appeared before them, and as they got closer they recognized it. Dakkon's Tower. It was a short tower, only a few feet taller than a man, but it was a great defensive location. North of the tower was a thick wood, and the tower held a clear view of the Albion Mile Wall and the nearby valleys.

"Argile," said the leader, motioning to one of the company, "you are our Nightshade; go check out the wall for us. We need your eyes out there, before we are attacked from behind." Without a word, Argile slipped into the shadows, vanishing before their eyes.

They looked into the rainy haze expectantly, but nothing ever came. The rain had drenched every part of Posh's body, but he remained still, his spear straight as a pillar, his eyes piercing the gloom. Many minutes went past, but Argile never returned. Suddenly Posh saw something flash nearby.

"To the north!" he cried. "Shadows in the trees." All eyes turned to the forest, but the rain was still too thick. Nothing could be heard but the din of raindrops against their armor. No branches moved, no animals wailed, and the sun began to set.

“I must have imagined it,” said Posh, but the silence cut him short. Tension was in the air, and it was hard to breathe. And then the rain stopped.

“Incoming!” cried their leader, and arrows flew from the trees. “Casters and Naturalists to the tower!” The arrows fell harmlessly to the ground, poorly aimed. The only mark any of them made was the side of the tower. Cries came from the woods in a strange and harsh tongue, and the charge came at Posh and his group. Trolls, Dwarves and Norsemen came from the trees wielding their axes, and Kobolds continued to rain their shower of arrows. Posh and the rest of the men spread apart and intercepted the incoming attacks. Posh parried the axe of a tall Norseman and then thrust his spear deep inside his flesh. Posh’s body trembled with excitement. His hands gripped his spear tightly. He was a machine now. He couldn’t be stopped.

“Fly from the spear of Posh!” he cried, and he charged after a fleeing dwarf. He slashed down the dwarfs back and it spun around and lunged at him with a piercer. Posh leapt into the air, evading the attack, and as he came down he imbedded his spear deep into the dwarf’s neck.

“Ha-ha!” he cried. “Fight me! Flee from me! Fall before me!” A large gray-skinned troll lumbered forward and lifted a great hammer. Down it fell and Posh quickly dodged the blow as it smashed into the tower’s side. Great clumps of stone were shattered by the blow and rock scattered across the ground. The troll roared in rage and swung his hammer sideways, but Posh brought his spear to his side and braced, and the blow was deflected.

“Posh!” cried Lauren from near the tower. “Help me!”

“After I slay this foe, ha-ha!” he said, and he spun around with his spear. Deep into the Troll’s side he thrust, and the troll let out a mighty roar, but it was not yet dead.

“Help! Help!” cried Lauren.

“Fall before me, fiend!” cried Posh with a laugh, and he twirled his spear in his hand. The hammer came at him again, but not before Posh unleashed his spear, driving it deep within the flesh of the giant troll.

“Posh! I’m—” cried Lauren, but her call was cut short. Posh stood over his kill in a maddened glee, and watched the gray-blue blood drain from the troll’s lifeless body. He felt exhilarated, and he needed more. But something caught his glance, over by the tower.

A Celt fell to the ground as a hunched over, blue-skinned creature stabbed at her over and over. Posh looked on bemused, but then cried aloud in horror as he realized what he was seeing.

“Lauren!” he cried and in a fit of rage he roared. With flashing red eyes he lunged at the creature, and it hissed in fear, for he no longer appeared a man, but a giant stag, steam pulsing from his nostrils and blood dripping from his hands. Posh fell upon them like lightning, and indeed a blue bolt came from the sky and smote a Kobold as it ran. He came upon the Kobold and lashed at it repeatedly, hewing off limb and head, skewering the lifeless body in a mad rage. The rains began to pour again, and his ears were deafened. All he could hear was a ringing, and his nostrils were filled with the metallic scent of blood.

He looked around. The Norse were either dead or fleeing, but he could see none of his companions alive. Suddenly he remembered and ran to Lauren. Her armor was pierced, its scales bent and torn. Deep gashes were in her torso, and she had a cut on her face. Her eyes were closed but when she felt Posh’s touch, she strained to open them. She coughed and spat blood, and with all her might she opened her eyes. They were weeping.

“Posh,” she said, and stared through him. “You—you left me... you let me—die...” she said and she burst into new tears.

“Lauren, I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking... I was—” but she shook her head.

“Don’t look at me,” she said, “don’t be near me.” She rolled over onto her side and let out a painful cry, and the blood poured from her wounds. Posh’s face was filled with tears, but there was nothing he could do, he had not the skill. Lauren let out a final sob, a woeful, wretched, betrayed sob, and the life left her body.

Posh wept. He lifted her hand and put it to his face.

“I let her die, I let her die,” he wailed, and he rocked back and forth. The rain poured harder than it had before, and it washed the blood from her lifeless face. It was contorted into an expression, not of pain or torture but of sorrow, loneliness and despair. He didn’t care if he could be seen. He didn’t care if someone was going to kill him. He didn’t want to live, not after this, not with such shame.

After a while he remembered time and sat up. The blood rushed to his head and he felt dizzy. He staggered to his feet and stumbled over towards the tower. Heavily he

leaned against it and slid to the ground. He turned his face upward and let the rain drench his tearstained face. He didn't know where his spear was; he didn't care. He looked and spotted three other of his companions, dead, facedown in the muddy grass. He didn't know where the others were. Why was he alive? Why didn't he die with the others? Because he had been selfish and fought for glory. Because he forsook his group and friends and fought those sent to lure him away from his druid. His mind was not on protecting those near him, no; it was on himself, on glory and only on killing. It was his fault, *his* fault that his group had perished. He had not protected Lauren.

He heard soft footsteps. He didn't run and hide, he didn't challenge the darkness. He waited for death. The sun had fully set and the rain still poured. Very near to him the footfalls stopped, and Posh squinted in the mist. Finally he discerned the shape, the short, thin figure of a Lurikeen. It was Argile, back from his scouting. Argile looked around in horror, then knelt down by his leader and checked for a pulse. In shame for not being there he stood to his feet and clenched his fists. Posh considered calling out, letting Argile know that he was still alive, but he didn't. He wanted to disappear, just like Argile could, and forget all these things. He wanted to leave his shame and agony there, on the battlefield. He wanted to leave the tower in his memory, and let his spear lay there perpetually. Argile turned and vanished into the darkness.

Posh sat motionless, and the rain again dissipated. The clouds overhead thinned and the stars appeared. The moon shone brightly and Posh felt suddenly naked. Fear gripped him, and he stood to his feet. He sprinted, far into the night, away from Lauren, away from the bodies, and away from the tower forever. In one motion he stripped off all his armor and let it fall clattering to the ground, and never did he wear scale or wield a spear again.

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“No,” said Posh standing up from the table. “No, I don't want to tell. I will never tell.” Posh turned his back on his stunned and concerned friends and retreated to his room for the night.