

Six (Phil) Slip of the Tongue

The two adventurers continued west. The clouds began to break while a soft breeze blew from the south. Soon the sun made glimmering shafts of bright sunlight dance through the openings in the clouds. Both of the adventurer's spirits climbed. They rode side by side talking as they went. After riding about a mile, Arat again queried his companion about the mission and was again greeted by a change of topic.

"Tell me more of the political situation in Arnen." Rathcar responded.

"Damnation! But you are stubborn!" Arat exclaimed. "Is it wrong for me to know what I pledged to protect with my life? If the rolls were..."

Arat stopped mid-sentence. He turned his head sharply to the left and stopped his horse. It was as if someone or something were in his head for an instant; not unlike his communication with Nyrin. Human eyes scanned the horizon in front of them. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, He turned silently to his elven companion. One glance and Arat knew the elf had experienced the same thing. Keen golden eyes studied the slight valley in front of them. The path before them descended gradually for fifty or so strides. The course then took a hard right, down a steep embankment of about three legs to a stream that was the origin of the valley. Rathcar could easily see the individual stones in the creek bed; his estimate was that the water would be ankle deep on the horses. The embankment obscured most of the streambed. Neither man nor elf knew what could be hiding behind the wall of firmament. Rathcar looked at Arat, who was studying the stream. Shortly, Arat's eyes shifted to the elf. Both of them drew steel at the same time. Orthinel in the human's hands, Blaydk'tana in elven; both blades glowed with a magical aura. Rathcar inverted his grip on the curved sword, so that he held it not unlike one who was about to throw a spear. Arat took note of this and knew that he would take the gray down the path to the creek. Simultaneously the two spurred their steeds. Arat circled left to get a better angle, charging down the embankment while Rathcar charged straight for the ridge.

Their timing was perfect. Rathcar covered the least distance so he gained his target first. He reined the horse and stopped the animal no more than a dagger's blade from the edge. This was to surprise and get the attention of who or what ever was down by the stream. Arat passed a heart beat later riding fast and low along the water's edge. His mission was to strike at the hidden foe with speed and ferocity. He pulled his horse to stop and reversed the animal's direction.

"Nothing here..." Arat said with a hint of remorse while sheathing his sword. "I would have sworn by my blade that something was here."

Even as he said it, Arat looked at the ground. Bear tracks were pressed into the soft earth. Away from the water, resting at the base of the embankment was a half-eaten fish the color and shine of steel.

"I like this not," Arat said softly. "The beast is pacing us. Ultimately he will strike."

"Be he pacing us or not, the bear is the least of our worries," Rathcar replied. "I believe what we experienced back there was a mind probe of some kind. The source of the spell I know not, nor its intentions. We may have been revealed to someone who seeks what I carry. Great difficulties may now hinder us." The elf guided his horse down the path to join the man, who was dismounting.

"These tracks are very fresh." Arat said as he knelt to examine the depressions. "We should thank the gods we missed the animal, though I do admire the beast's instincts and strength. I would guess this bear to be a very large male, probably of the Northern Isle variety... very far

from home." Arat paused. Suddenly, with vigor, "Great difficulties? Mind probe? What are you speaking of, Rathcar? Do you not think it is time for me to know what you have involved me in?"

"You came voluntarily," Rathcar responded coolly. "I need not remind you of that.

Furthermore, I can not risk revealing to you the circumstances of our journey. Even if we are now exposed to our enemy we may still evade the search."

"Enemy? What enemy? Tell me, friend, so that we may have a unified stance."

"I cannot take that chance."

Rathcar spurred his horse and crossed the stream. Arat watched in disbelief as he rode away.

Arat spurred his horse, quickly catching up to the elf.

"Do you not trust me? Is that it? Speak your mind, elf!" Arat was visibly agitated.

"'Trust' is not at the heart of it," Rathcar said smoothly. "The less you know, the less chance you may let something slip. And in a matter of this import..."

"'Let something slip!?!'" Arat's voice was tense. "I...you..." He began to choke on his anger and chose to be silent. Rathcar looked at the horizon as they rode.

After a short bit, Arat asked, "This is because of Bisby is it not?"

Rathcar looked to his companion and nodded.

"We were young and foolish, surely you cannot believe I would do that type of thing again do you? I mean really."

"You were young, Tars should have known better, and I cannot believe I participated."

The sun had just hidden its face behind the western horizon and the three walked past the "Boundary of Bisby" sign. They had found this road eight or nine leagues back and had followed it to civilization. All three were tired, Tars the most visibly. He had stowed his ax upon his back and carried his shield. The heavy plate armor he wore was crudely altered to fit his small stature; the weight of it had sapped his strength. Arat showed his weariness in his drooped shoulders, watching each step his feet made. Rathcar's stride was rhythmic, almost hypnotic. He kept looking at the horizon. All three were armed and armored for the cave fighting they had just survived. Thirteen revolutions they were underground, routing and fighting drow. They had acquired many things during that time. The plate armor Tars wore was a good example. It was worth too much to be left behind by the dwarvitt. Likewise was the shield, but the more he held it, the more he wanted to keep it. Arat and Rathcar had only the gems and platinum the three of them had split. Just that booty was heavy and bulky enough. The sooner they could sit down, have a drink, some food, maybe even a bath, the better. The road slowly began to go down a gentle hill to an open valley. A river ran through the valley, northwest to southeast. About half a league ahead was a small town, built at the intersection of the road and river. By the number of buildings, Arat guessed that about two hundred, possibly two hundred fifty people lived there. There was light showing from most of the buildings. As they got closer, the three began to encounter people. The first person they came across was a human boy of about thirty-six seasons. His blue eyes were open wide at the sight of the adventurers. He gave them a goodly-distanced berth. He was clad only in britches, obviously enjoying the summer weather. They walked past several small lumbered homes not but a few paces from road's edge. Squat, one roomed, a central stove, Arat had seen this type of building before. He commented to his compatriots, but they were too tired to care. Shortly, they passed businesses: the livery, butcher, and blacksmith... even a jewelry store. They could see that at the center of town was the intersection of the river and the road... and the biggest mill Tars had ever

seen. When he heard the grinding stones turning, his spirits lightened. He knew he would have to examine the mill's workings. Across the street, next to the ferry service, was the House of Bisby, Inn and Tavern. The three, having been silent for the last few leagues, remained so as they approached the door the House of Bisby.

Arat was the first to mount the steps leading in, Tars was next, and Rathcar followed. The large room was moderately busy, occupied by working-class commoners, mainly seated at round tables. A few women were scattered about, either slinging drinks or ass. All three saw the two seated at the back table. One human and a half-orc, both brandished swords and daggers. As far as Arat could tell, they had only leather armor on.

The three were making their way to the bar when someone yelled, "Look at the dwarf!" Two heart beats later, the place erupted in laughter. Everybody was looking at Tars, who did look rather comical in the heavy plate armor. Instantly the dwarf was beet red and reaching for his axe, verbally assaulting no one individual specifically. Rathcar and Arat both grabbed their friend and tried to calm him. Tars was livid... until Rathcar charmed him.

Suddenly Tars looked upon himself and laughed. Not just any laugh, but a deep, sidesplitting laugh that reverberated throughout the room. Soon everyone was relaxed and no longer paying attention to the three.

A large, overweight man with thin black hair greeted them at the bar. The barkeep was smiling, "What canna getcha, mate?"

"A room, dinner, and a bottle!" Tars responded joyfully.

"For the three of us," Rathcar added.

"Jus fer a night?" the barkeep inquired.

"Aye, friend. A small town like this cannot contain the likes of me!" Tars blurted energetically.

"Be two silva apee."

Arat produced a single gold from his belt pouch. "Keep the change."

"Thanka!" the bartender said happily as he turned and grabbed a key from the rows of hooks on which many keys hung. "Numma two. Food be upinslop." He said as he handed Arat the key.

The man then scurried away to prepare the food.

The three turned and headed for the exposed stairway that led to the second level of the inn. As they crossed the room, Rathcar felt the eyes of those two at the back of the room upon him. The elf did not turn to look. He just followed his friends to their room. At the top of the stairs a hallway ran twenty legs with doors lining both sides. Their room was the second door on the right. A solid door opened easy enough, the mechanics sound. The three entered a room three by four legs. Four feather beds were in the room, one in each corner. A small window was between the beds on the far wall. A large green rug covered most of the wooden floor. Tars ran to the window with glee. He surveyed the view from all angles, seeing an alley and gardens beyond. Arat turned right and quickly sat on the bed, undoing his sword belts as he went.

Rathcar closed the door.

"You will need this," Arat said with little energy. He held forth the key and tossed it the elf.

Rathcar locked the door, then turned left, and began to unload.

"Looks quiet out here. Nothing moving." Tars reported. "Hey, let's go back downstairs! We can eat there. What do you think?"

"Do something about that, will you?" Arat pleaded to Rathcar.

"Your wish..." Rathcar stepped over to where Tars stood. The elf mumbled ancient verse and waved his slender hand in front of the dwarf.

"Damn you to the nine hells, elf!" Tars exploded. "If I weren't exhausted I'd show you what you

can do with that magic!" Suddenly his anger dispersed and it was all he could do to get out of the armor. He was in such a hurry that he lost his balance and fell onto the bed. Skilled fingers undid the armor. Tars gladly dropped the suit to the floor. Arat noticed that the dwarvitt placed the shield with his other armaments.

The three had just gotten comfortable when there was a knock at the door. Rathcar crossed the room and opened the portal. A comely lass with flame-red hair held a tray with three large plates of food. Mutton, potatoes, carrots, and coarse grain bread was the bill of fare. Rathcar stepped aside and the lass entered. Without a word she first handed Arat a plate. Tars met her half way to get his. Rathcar exchanged a pearl for his plate. The lass left smiling, admiring the stone. Each ate quietly seated upon his bed. Soon there was another knock at the door. It was the same girl, now she was holding two dark glass bottles. She was still smiling as she offered them to the elf. Rathcar quickly patted his garments looking for something to tip the lass with. The girl shook the bottles, forcing Rathcar to take them. She then turned and skipped to the stairs. Rathcar closed and locked the door.

"Send one of those over here," Tars said.

"With pleasure," responded the elf.

It wasn't long until both bottles were drained. Arat suggested that they get another, Tars strongly agreed. Rathcar was not for the idea. He just wanted to rest. Arat left quickly, forgetting to arm and grab some coin. Tars saw this and called to the man, but it was too late. Arat was on the stairs. The dwarvitt ran after him, coin purse in hand. Rathcar lay back on his bed and relaxed. Arat had a good stride on the stairs. It was partially the food and much to do about the alcohol. He had built momentum and could not quite make the turn. Leaning forward and pushing off from the wall, he was able to avoid a heavy contact, in fact using the contact to build further momentum. This course took him right into the table of the armed man and half-orc. The table collapsed, spilling ale and soaking Arat. Tars was halfway down the stairs when Arat hit the table. He continued to keep an eye on his friend as he closed the distance, expecting a fight. Tars was right. The half-orc grabbed Arat by the back of his shirt and picked him up easily. The ugly creature was about to pommel Arat when Tars shouted.

"Wait, Wait..." Arat yelled. "Let us pay for your drinks to make up for this inconvenience."

"Tell me why I shouldn't kill you now." the creature grunted.

"It was an accident. My apologies." Arat said diplomatically.

"What are you doing here anyway, outlander?"

"Hunting and destroying drow in the caves of Kenerude."

The half-orc punched Arat. Tars was on him then, swinging his coin purse as a flail mace. The man from the destroyed table grabbed the purse in mid swing. Tars kicked the man as hard as he could in the shin. Meanwhile, Arat responded with a combination of punches, all doing a goodly amount of damage. This set off the entire tavern. It was not long before everyone was either punching or kicking or otherwise being involved.

Rathcar heard the commotion and cautiously opened the door and went to the top of the stairs. An all out bar fight was in progress. Scanning the crowd, Rathcar spotted his friends. Seeing that armed men were attacking them both, and being unarmed themselves, needed help. The elf quickly went to the room, strung his bow, and returned to the top of the stairs.

Two arrows: one dead man and one dead half-orc. Rathcar then tried to charm the crowd, but was unsuccessful. He then threw a darkness spell. It worked perfectly. Tars was able to escort Arat to safety using his racial sight ability.

"I cannot take the chance of such a slight slip of the tongue," Rathcar said.

"How was I to know that the half-orc made his home in those caves?" queried Arat.

"My point exactly. Come, we have a lot of ground to cover before we can rest."

"I am with you, brother."

The two rode on.