

After the battle, it is the silence that is deafening. Asvard drew several heavy breaths as he surveyed the battlefield. Black eyes scanned hither and fro, while his grey streaked brown beard swayed up and down with his nodding head. The ever-shifting landscape of Limbo usually defied such easy observation, but the blood of so many denizens of the plain upon the ground seemed to satiate its taste for chaos. Hardly an enemy was to be seen, and most of his forces were still on their feet. Another stunning victory for the heroes of Valhalla.

A glimpse of beauty, standing in vivid contrast to the plane of chaos, caught Asvard's eye. A Valkyrie, lovely, deadly, and awesome, stepped lightly around and over the heaps of the dead and crossed the field to appear before him. How do they do it, he wondered? Everything around was filthy, splattered with the blood and effluence that was the hallmark of heavy fighting. Yet the Valkyrie was pristine, not a drop on her lithe form nor a hair out of place. Had he not seen her in the thickest fighting, wielding both sword and spear with devastating efficiency, he would have assumed she arrived after the battle was over.

"Another Victory, my lord." She called to him. "The Skalds will sing of this battle tonight, and you will be honored yet again. How much more magnificent can your hall become?" she said teasingly. "This was a bold plan, some even said foolhardy, but you pressed on and conquered. Where do you get the courage to proceed with such a strategy?"

Asvard smiled at the Valkyrie. "Sometimes Beautiful, you have to look death in the eye and see who blinks first!" Her eyes flashed with rage and anger. Asvard had to suppress a giggle that would have cost him his life. They were truly amazing beings, nothing they did was in half measures. Fighting, Loving, Hating, all too the extreme. They were great and proud warriors who prided themselves on that fact. Calling a Valkyrie pretty had cost many their existence, even Asvard had made that mistake (more than once actually). When the Horn of Tempus called them all back to the Halls of Valhalla, you would arrive with a new scar that did never faded. But on this day, Asvard calculated that he would be safe enough (barely). Such a victory would be marred by the death of its architect after the battle was done.

Through gritted teeth she, and with an icy stare she asked "And when did you FIRST look death in the face?" implying that this was his latest doing of so.

His mind raced back to a single instant, and as he walked back towards Warriors Rest, he began to tell the tale . . .

*We were wading through the swamps of Berez in the demi-plane of Barovia. My companions and I were looking for the wizard, Mordenkainen. He had travelled from Oerth to Barovia, went mad and had become trapped in that plane. It had been prophesied that he would be an ally in our attempt to free the land from the control of the vampire Strahd Von Zarovich. Several of us had been bitten by a worm-like creature known locally as rot-grubs. What we didn't know was that we had been infected with a nasty disease. We crested a hill, and saw Mordenkainen in a pitched magical battle with a witch who went by the name of Baba Lysaga. All around Mordenkainen, and closing in on him were these scarecrow like creatures.*

*I took quick stock of the situation and decided that the wizard needed our help. Oh, he could hold his own against the witch, but if he was overrun by the scarecrows it would go badly for him and us. I suggested we split up and take out the scarecrows. We charged down the hill into the mists, and that is when it happened. The disease, powered by my beating heart and charging body took hold of my in that instant. Beads of sweat poured down my forehead as*

my arms and leads felt as though they had turned to lead. My breath was ragged and my vision blurred so much that couldn't make out anything farther than a daggers toss away. One of my companions, a halfling named Aeson, was riding on my back. He was also suffering also.

But I knew my duty and charged on towards were I thought the scarecrows to be. I soon came upon one of the creatures, and drawing my sword, charged into battle. Though the blood was pounding in my ears, I laid a pair of slashes on the creature, and my Halfling rider shot it with an arrow. Its form was such that the sword and arrows did not have much affect against it. It attacked, and in my weakened and woozy state I must have missed my mark for it hit me a mighty blow that rocked. I was able to get my helmet partly in the way of its strike, but still it hurt mightily. Feeling of dread and terror surged with that strike, but I was able to quell the panic.

Blasts of light would erupt from the murky area beyond my vision. Spells going off in the magical battle between the witch and wizard.

It was about that time that I recall another of my companions, Mordecai the Paladin of Lathander, arrived in my limited field of vision. He tossed a javelin into the creature, which pierced far too deeply with little resistance. After another exchange where I got little of him, and he got the better of me I realized that I needed to change tactics. In the meantime, a third companion a dwarf cleric of Helm named Albreicht had arrived.

I took a deep breath and summoned the power of the War God to create spiritual guardians to protect me and those I could see. Barovia was an evil and magically cursed land, and the guardians had a sickly, emaciated appearance. Mordecai struck the creature down, reached out with his hand, and with the power of his Oath, cured me of the disease that was affecting me.

Instantly I could breathe better, I could see better and I could plan better. I moved forward cautiously as there were not only the scarecrows that we creatures of darkness but also decoys here and there to confuse the battlefield. My spell would flush out the creatures, and I would call the death bell down on onto those who were harassing my friends. I called out to Mordecai and Albreicht, guiding them to help the others. At the edge of my vision I could see my little friend, Horrick the Deep Gnome Wizard get struck by one of the scarecrows. Horrick was a good fellow that had seen a lot of evil in his life, and even from where I stood I could see the magic of the scarecrow's strike threaten to overwhelm him. I shouted to Horrick and though I cannot remember what I said, it was enough for him to regain control.

It was then that I saw the wizard, the witch and the witches hut. She had corrupted a magical stone to give her house a semblance of life. Great tree trunks grew out of the bottom of the hut and it stomped around. The witch looked upon me, as the spirit guardians tore into a scarecrow and said "And who are you?"

"I am the one who did this!" I replied and cast dispel at her hut. The backlash of the spell was terrible, and I could feel it overwhelming me. When, though the darkness, I heard a voice calling to me. It was Gleam, our Aasimar sorcerer. Perhaps it was the purity of her being, or the concern in her voice that reached down to me. I redoubled my effort and with a force of will was able to complete my spell. The hut collapsed to the ground and the witch screamed.

As I completed casting the spell, I saw that the witch was already casting a different spell. Wisps of noxious, acrid, greenish fog began to coalesce around me. I could feel the bile rising in my throat, when a clear voice I did not recognize sang out with a "NOT TODAY!" It was Mordenkainen. While I was dispelling the magic of the hut, Albreicht had gotten to the mad wizard and cured him.

The witch screamed and turned to run, going around the corner of her hut. In hindsight, I can admit now that I was suffering from bloodlust. Baba Lysaga was an old and powerful spell caster, who had just been battling with one of the strongest mages in all the planes. AND I TOOK OFF CHASING HER!

*I ran to the corner of the hut, and cast a Guiding Bolt with all the power I had within me. But my rage and battle fury caused me to throw it wide to the right. I called upon the War God for his blessing and with a force of will, pulled the bolt left and onto target. Baba Lysaga grunted with the impact, and I called for Aeson to fire. He shot an arrow into the old witch, as my Spiritual Guardians tore into her.*

*She turned and gave me a look as cold as death. She lifted her hand and began to point her gnarled finger at me. THIS IS WHERE IS LOOKED DEATH STRAIGHT IN THE FACE FOR THE FIRST TIME! I knew in that instant that if she loosed her magic upon me I would awaken in Valhalla to face judgement. I stared back into the witch's eyes and refused to blink. She turned and jumped into a giant's skull, and flew it like a chariot into the sky.*

Asvard stood before the portal into Warrior's Rest, and turned to look at the Valkyrie. Her eyes were wide, and she was hanging on every word. His eyes met hers and she said "What happened then?" she said barely above a whisper?

Asvard turned and as he stepped through the portal said "Well, that is another story . . ."