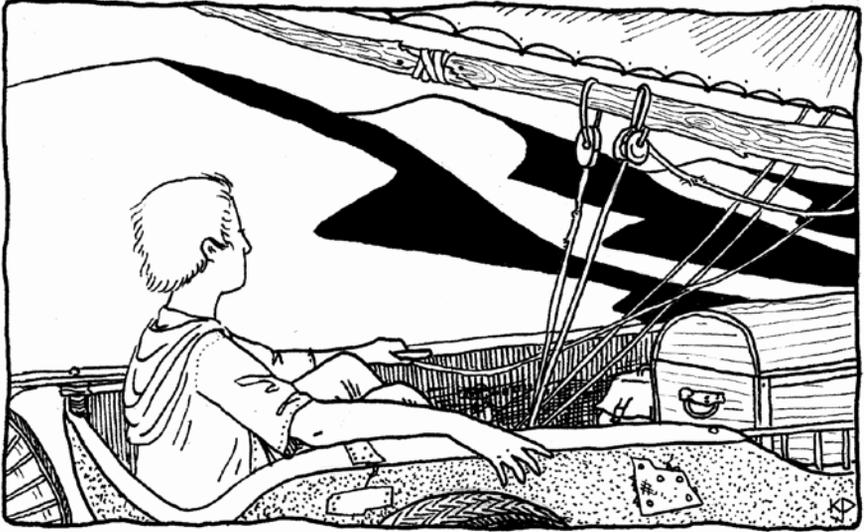


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A WIZARD IN TROUBLE

PAUL COLLINS

Winston and Caramon followed a circuitous route to the Wizards' Guild's sanctum, allowing for the old adage, the shortest route is not always the most direct. When travelling without armed escort, it was best to skirt the edges of the Barrenlands where no law prevailed and life was held cheap.

Great tracts of desert separated the true Barrenlands from the civilized world; these had once been known as Noman's Land, before the time of the dreaded Perdurabo's defeat at Ootbacken.

Despite Caramon's canopy of hessian, his bald head was scorched red by the time they reached Olga's Chasm. A few palms and acacia trees had survived the extremes of the desert, and a small, but quite pleasant oasis, apparently fed by an ancient artesian spring, provided water for the desert's denizens.

As they sailed in amongst the oasis's palm trees, Caramon climbed clumsily from the decrepit sand-car. "You got fleeced on this one,"

he said as he fingered the threadbare canvas sails. He kicked the front wooden wheel and the rickshaw contraption wobbled alarmingly.

“Gods in heaven,” Caramon muttered and made a sign of warding in the air.

“*Gods in heaven,*” Winston mimicked with silent mouth movements.

“Fill the canisters, lad,” Caramon instructed as he settled himself beneath the shade of a palm. Within moments the wizard was sound asleep.

Winston set about replenishing their water supply. Whereas animals had a code of honor regarding waterholes and never attacked one another within their close proximity, Winston was only too well aware that one breed of animal paid little attention to such principles and that places such as these were the bane of unwary travellers.

As he dutifully dipped and filled the canisters, Winston chewed on a date cake his mother had slipped in his pocket as they left. He glanced over at the fat wizard sprawled beneath the tree and wondered, not for the last time, if he himself would ever be so famous or so powerful. He was in the third year of his apprenticeship. Customarily such apprenticeships lasted seven years, after which he would be a full journeyman wizard who could hire out to all and sundry. At that point he could start making a name for himself.

But how was he to wait another four years to show the world what he could do? It was almost more than he could bear. Why, they said the long lost Prince-Adept, Thomas of Yorta, had been an apprentice barely two years when he challenged the Dark Tower and hence made a name for himself. Of course, he was never seen again but that was hardly the point. Fame and renown, and having fabulous adventures that were sung in song and remembered in history books, were far more important than merely living. Winston’s desire was to be the most famous wizard in the world, not the oldest, or — glancing across at Caramon — the fattest.

But here he was daydreaming again. One of the canisters had fallen over and spilled its contents while he’d been woolgathering.

Odd Gods, what was wrong with him? How was he to become a formidable wizard if he couldn't even fill a canister with water?

Besides, this was not the place to let down one's guard. Danger could emerge from the desert in the blink of an eye. And at that moment he blinked, seeing something.

Surely not ... it couldn't be. He'd only ever seen them in old paintings, believing, as most did, that they were merely concoctions to scare children.

They appeared from dark dust devils that swept in across the desert, depositing their load of miniature nightmares, before dissipating. The creatures, chittering like an army of insane dolls, clambered over everything in their path like marauding soldier ants. Only deadlier.

They were tiny, squat machine-like insects whose eyes were composed of thousands of tiny ocelli, bulging out from faces devoid of any vestige of pity. The eyes gave them a powerful field of vision, making them difficult to sneak up on. Their black, segmented bodies were covered by plates of chitin, overlapped to give maximum protection. Their intelligence, Winston had read, was little more than that of a house cat, but just ask a mouse how smart cats are, and how cruel! At two points along the animals' spinal columns — at the upper and lower ends of the thorax — were two knotted swellings that amounted to auxiliary brains, as in some of Gondowan's ancient dinosaurs.

The beasties had been the evil spawn of the Necromancer, Perdurabo, and had not been seen for hundreds of years. Winston didn't know what it meant but he had no time to think. Caramon was still deep asleep, snoring fitfully.

He had to do something, and fast.

The scampering fiends poured over the rocks and sand, snapping their mandibles like bolt-cutters in a grotesque parody of human speech. They emitted a sound like wind-driven sand scouring the desert, the kind of scouring that destroys all in its path.

"Eeeyyyeee!" Winston yelped. He whipped his sword from the sand-car reflexively, then just as quickly discarded it. Against such odds it would be of little use.

The insectile cacophony reached a crescendo.

Winston turned to flee then stopped. And thought of something. He weaved a widespread hand through the air and incanted a

binding spell. It was meant to stop anything in its tracks but against the powerful magic that was embodied in the creatures, it merely toppled those leading the charge. Their fellows stopped hesitantly, then continued ruthlessly over their fallen comrades.

It bought Winston a few moments of respite, no more.

In desperation, he pulled a black vial labelled 'Deadly Nightshade' from Caramon's satchel, unstopped it, and ran amongst the creatures, splashing its contents upon them.

The black drops foamed and boiled as soon as they touched the creatures. Some squealed whilst others shrank back from the rampaging apprentice; others still were lost in a darkness that engulfed them, sending them into frenzied panic.

Winston himself got lost in the billowing darkness and suddenly froze amidst a rising wash of panic.

Backwards! Step back before the cursed stuff blinds you, boy! His mother's distressed voice was weak from distance, but Winston found himself stumbling through the darkness until he fell into the fresh air.

The deadly nightshade spread like some viscous disease. It struck first the fiends, then the foliage, and gradually blanketed the entire oasis.

The beings clawed madly to escape the darkness; they milled about, crashing into each other. Many drowned in the lagoon, for the simple creatures could not swim or even float.

"Master! Master! Techs! They've arisen!" Winston shouted. "Wake up. We're under attack!"

Caramon woke into a dark well of nothingness.

"My Gods," he muttered, making the sign of ward and protect. "I'm blind. Winston! What have you done to me, you cowardly swine?" He jumped when he felt hands grabbing him and pulling him sideways.

"It's me, Master. We must get away from here. Now!"

Caramon could barely make out his apprentice. He was a fine mess though, from what he could see. A disgrace to his profession. He looked as though he had been set upon by a horde of techs.

The mage pulled himself together. He threw up his hands so that his black cowl billowed out, swallowing some of the blackness that had enveloped him. He wove the air in intricate patterns whilst his face contorted with the effort of casting back the deadly nightshade.

“Darkness, begone,” he snapped and as suddenly as the blackness had descended, it dispersed. It took with it every last vestige of the techs.

Caramon slumped a little with the effort and Winston wedged his shoulder beneath the crook of his master’s arm and assisted him to the sand-car.

Caramon looked down. With a horrified gasp, he snatched up the vial of deadly nightshade and stared at it in horror.

“Empty,” he wailed. “A fortune — gone up in smoke, you reckless wretch.” He glared at Winston, accusation in his eyes.

“B-but Master...” Winston spluttered, unable to hide the note of injury in his voice.

“My Gods, lad. Can’t I leave you to your own devices for ten minutes without submitting myself to dire peril?”

“But Master. There were techs! Legions of them. Swarming everywhere...”

Sprawled back in the seat, Caramon’s haggard face slowly regained its composure. “My kingdom for a bar of soap to wash out your mouth,” he said fervently. “Such beings were vanquished centuries ago. Surely you remember the story of the battle of Ootbacken? Every last miserable misbegotten heathen from the Barrenlands was destroyed.” Having said that, Caramon suddenly remembered that *Perdurabo*, translated, meant “I will endure”. He neglected to mention this to Winston. No point feeding the boy’s already overactive imagination.

To emphasize his point, Caramon swept the distant Barrenlands with his hands flung wide. “Out there is nothing. It is forbidden by threat of death to even venture into the Barrenlands. So stop wasting my time. Next thing I know, you’ll be telling me we’re under attack by pirates. Now rig this thing and let’s get a move on. I fear dark will settle in on us before we’re even halfway to the Guild. Dear oh me, this is exhausting work.

“Techs!” Caramon chortled as he lay back into his padded cushions. “Hurumph. Whatever next? I hear they were ferocious creatures, young Winston. Although rather partial to a tummy rub from all accounts. Of course, I wouldn’t have liked to have tried it. I mean, what would the other nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine

techs be doing while you were tickling one of their number? Not quietly queuing up for their turn I'll wager. I mean, really, the rubbish people sprout...!"

Winston muttered quietly to himself as he went about his business, unhooking the sand locks and unfurling the sails. As the wind filled the canvas he clasped the tiller and once again they set off toward the middle distant ranges.