



The Well's End Chronicles
by Robert Beers

ISBN:1-931761-10-8

Available in full at:
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Chapter 1

The warrior knew he was dying. That arrow in his side had borne poison, most likely the blood of a Garloc painted onto the head. The condition of the wound said as much. The skin around it was black and weeping. Besides that, his vision had begun to cloud.

He tried to raise his head but the effort was agonizing, lights swam before his eyes and he fell back gasping.

A pale hand parted the flap to the tent and his aide peered in. "My Lord, are you in pain?" The man held a cup of tisane laced with Opatia juice. It would kill the pain and more. Besides, what was a lethal addiction to a man already dead?

"No... Moulton." The warrior waved the drink away. He wanted to be lucid for his spirit journey, pain notwithstanding. "Bring me some parchment and a quill." A cough racked his body sending pain shooting through his side.

The little man put the cup down and wrung his hands nervously. "But...Sire. We have no quills, and no ink to fill them. We're still on the battlefield."

"Then just bring me the parchment, fool. I'll supply the ink myself. Go!"

As his aide scurried out of the tent, King Labad lay back and closed his eyes. It was still there. He prayed to Bardoc for time enough to put words to what he saw. The future of his world depended on it, as did those who would come. His sword and bow lay on the ground alongside the cot. Per his instructions they would be cared for by the Dwarves until needed.

Moulton reentered the tent, two leaves of parchment clutched in his hand. The hand trembled as he placed them on the King's chest. "I have the parchment Sire, and... and I could find no quill."

"Thank you Moulton. Please leave me now."

"Yes, your majesty." He turned to leave.

"Moulton." Labad's voice was a whisper.

"Sire?"

"I want to thank you for your service to me, but there is one thing more I require from you."

"Of course, my King."

"Let no one enter the tent until the Dwarves come. This will be your last act as my subject. As a reward you may have the lands East of Bern. I trust you'll find them adequate for your needs?"

"Of course your Majesty. Thank you Sire." Moulton ducked his head in a series of obsequious bows.

"Good. Go now." He coughed again as his aide backed from the tent.

Labad was alone. He heard Moulton instructing the guards. A bit of a whittle, that one, but a good man nonetheless. He drew in as deep a breath as his weakened body would allow and forced himself to sit up. The pain nearly drove him under but he held his body upright by using a small shaping, breathing deeply and slowly and waiting for the muzziness to pass. His jeweled dagger, a gift from his wife, lay strapped to his thigh. Its blood grooves would make it a serviceable pen. He pulled it and held the blade poised over the exposed flesh where his wound lay festering. Gritting his teeth, he pushed the point into the wound. Yellow-green pus poured out accompanied by the smell of decay. Working the point in deeper, he twisted it while holding back the scream

that welled up in his throat. When the tears left his eyes he saw the red blood washing the last of the corruption away and he slid the parchment into position. He dipped the tip of the dagger and began to write, dipping it again and again until the prophecy was recorded.

Labad signed his name and title with the crest rudely sketched below and then lay back and sighed, releasing the shaping. It was done. The pain began to diminish and he felt light, as if he were floating. A flavor of oranges lay on his tongue and then the thought came. "So, this is death."

The storyteller finished his tale and reached to pick up his cup. He smiled at the sighs of contentment coming from his audience. You could always count on the village children to give a proper reading of one's skills. They only stayed if you weren't boring. Of course, the story of Labad's prophecy was usually good for a meal or two from their parents. He felt especially proud of the way the different voices came out this time.

"Bravo. Bravo." The applause came from a handsome woman on the backside of the crowd. He noticed her shift showed signs of wear as well as a number of cleverly sewn patches here and there where the material had been salvaged. Poor, he surmised. Poor, but too proud to stoop to begging. Poor, but clean in spite of it. She more than likely bathed in one of the many creeks that ran through the area.

He bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment of her appreciation. "Thank you madam, It is always an honor to have touched the heart of one as beautiful as yourself with my simple words." She smiled and flushed under his praise.

The woman gathered the two children standing next to her to her side as she turned and walked away from the shade of the beech tree. It commanded the center of the town's market square. Sometime in years long past, a bench was built around the old tree. The storyteller leaned back against the trunk and smiled again at the village folk gathered in front of him. "Now, what would you like to hear next?"

Charity looked up at the woman walking next to her. "Thank you for letting us listen Aunt Doreen."

"Yes, thanks a lot. I especially liked the part about the battle."

"You would Adam." Charity interjected. "You spend enough time fighting Darzin and his friends."

"Hush now." Doreen put a hand in front of Adam's mouth before he could answer his sister back. "I'll be hearing no arguments from you two. Especially not after such a fine story."

The twins subsided reluctantly. The truth was, they liked arguing back and forth. Outside of playing in the old forest behind their Aunt and Uncle's cottage it was their favorite pastime.

Doreen began humming an old melody as they walked. The twins recognized it as the one she sang when she was feeling particularly happy. Charity joined in humming a harmony part bringing a pleased look from her Aunt and a raised eyebrow from her brother.

A mud ball splattered against Charity's shift accompanied by howls of jeering laughter.

"Darzin!" Adam whirled to face the direction the mud ball came from. "I know that laugh. He's in for it now." He balled his fists and began walking towards a heavyset youngster with blond hair and pimples who was dancing back and forth on his toes while pointing at them. A number of boys of varying sizes were gathered behind Darzin also enjoying the joke. As the mayor's son he held a certain status among the village youth and used it to his advantage. Adam and Charity, like their Aunt and Uncle, refused to act the way people of their economic station were supposed to and thus making them natural targets to bullies like Darzin.

"Adam! Stop right there. Don't you stoop to their level." His Aunt put a hand on his shoulder, halting his journey toward mayhem.

Charity looked at the ruin the mud ball made of her shift. Even though it was made of flour sacks, the small blue flowers in the field of white made it her favorite. Tears started to flow.

Darzin saw the result of his work and laughed all the harder. “Haaaa. Look at that. I made the little bitch cry I did. Wassa matter hunny bun? Did yer rags git all messy?”

Doreen gripped Adam’s shoulder harder. “Pay no attention to him Adam. It’s only words, they can’t bruise you. Be bigger than they are”

“But...”

“No.”

The next mud ball hit Doreen in the back. “He’s all yours Adam.”

“You let him do what?” The man shouting at Doreen stood over six feet tall, had thinning hair with a touch of gray and deep blue eyes which at the moment looked anything but friendly.

“I already told you Bal. I lost my temper. That little monster ruined my only good shift, not to mention Charity’s as well. You don’t know how sorry I am.”

“I’m sorry too Uncle Bal.” Charity looked up at her Uncle trying to look like she meant it. It had felt so good to finally see that bully get his own back.

“Adam?” Bal looked down at his nephew.

He got a stubborn look in return.

“Adam!”

“All right! I’m sorry too, I guess.”

“You don’t sound it.” His Uncle muttered.

“Please Bal. He, I mean, *we* were provoked.” Doreen brushed at the dried mud on her shift as it lay in her lap. “This is going to take a lot of washing.”

“Don’t try to change the subject Doreen. As much as he’s a disgusting little beast, Darzin is still the Lord Mayor’s son. You letting Adam bloody his nose may have bought us a lot of trouble. We don’t need that and you know it. You also know why.”

“I think I broke it.”

“What?” Bal turned unbelieving eyes on his nephew.

Adam shrugged. “I think I broke it. I heard something crunch on that last punch.”

“Oh that’s just lovely!” Bal threw his hands up into the air. We’re going to have to move, again.”

“That’s ok. I don’t like it here anyway.”

“Charity!”

“Neither do I.” Adam looked up at his uncle, ready for the worst.

Doreen looked at Bal. “I suppose my feelings make it unanimous.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Well, at the very least I’m going to have to talk to the Mayor about this. I don’t want him sending the watch after us and I’d better stop by the butcher’s, he owes me wages for most of this month. I’ve a feeling we’re going to need them.”

Charity stood and walked over to the single window in the cottage. “I am going to miss the forest.”

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“I don’t care if you are sorry. That hooligan nephew of yours broke my boy’s nose!” The Lord Mayor’s normally florid face was beet red as he shouted at Bal. “He could have killed him! That boy should be locked away like the wild animal he is.”

“And Darzin’s hurling mud balls at Charity and Doreen bears no weight in this?” Bal tried to keep his voice level in spite of the Mayor’s rage.

“You leave my boy out of this! He’s the victim here. That slut you’re married to and that little tramp have no bearing in this at all!”

Bal’s voice was deceptively quiet. “What did you just call them?”

The Mayor caught the look in the tall man’s face and knew he’d overstepped dangerously. He backpedaled rapidly. “N...now Bal. You know my temper sometimes gets the best of me. I didn’t mean to be insulting. You may be poor, but I know you’re a man of letters and far too intelligent

to resort to violence where reason can prevail.”

“Then you had better start reasoning with me soon Lord Mayor. I feel my letters slipping a bit.”

“I...see.” The Mayor swallowed and looked at Bal once more. He seemed to loom taller than before and those shoulders did look awfully broad. “Uh...well...boys will be boys I suppose.” He worked at making his voice light and brisk. “Just the results of highjinks getting a little out of hand, shall we say? I mean, no one was really permanently injured, were they?”

“Not as far as I can tell.” Bal concurred, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief. Perhaps they wouldn’t have to leave after all. “Why don’t we just leave it at that?”

“Yes, yes. For the best, really. For the best. Well, I must be moving on to other matters.” The mayor checked his vest watch. “The village won’t wait on my inattention long you know. A Mayor’s work is never done.” The Lord Mayor’s tone became more jovial as he felt himself edging back from the precipice.

Bal smiled dryly. “I’m sure. Good day to you Mayor.”

“Good day. Good day.”

“Blustery sort of fellow, isn’t he?”

“Huh?” Bal looked down from the steps of the Mayor’s office to see the storyteller looking up at him. “What are you talking about old father?”

The old man chuckled lightly as he reached up and scratched at his beard. “Old, I may be. But I’m neither frail nor deaf. Correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t that the Lord Mayor’s voice I heard not too long ago bellowing something about hooligan’s and sluts? Wasn’t it your nephew who was involved in a bit of a dust up with a certain fat man’s son just this afternoon?”

Bal took the last of the steps to the street. “You have me at a disadvantage old father. You seem to know more of me than I know of you.”

The storyteller extended a hand. “A name is a good place to start. I’ve worn a number of them through the years, depending upon the occasion. On this one you may call me Nought. “

“It means *Nothing*. A strange name to go by.” Bal reached out and took the old man’s hand. “Bal.”

“Yes, I know. Husband to Doreen and adoptive parent to twin brother and sister, Adam and Charity, though they call you Uncle.”

Bal felt his stomach tighten. This old man knew too much about he and his family. “Why?” He asked.

“A great deal of meaning in such a small word.” The old man who called himself Nought said thoughtfully. “Do you mean to ask why I’m here, or why do I know you and your family’s names?”

“The answer to both would be good.” Bal answered. “Along with the answer as to why this amount of interest in a man as poor as I.”

“Of course. Of course.” Nought bobbed his head in agreement. “Will you walk with me? It’s a lovely afternoon and I’d rather not spend it parked in front of the Mayor’s steps if you don’t mind.”

The old man turned and began walking down the village street in the direction towards the cottage Bal and his family stayed in. A number of the village folk who’d listened to his stories hailed him as they passed by. Bal noticed the genuine pleasure the greetings gave the old fellow and revised his opinion slightly, though a core of suspicion remained.

They’d walked nearly to the edge of the village before either spoke. It was Nought who broke the silence. First by clearing his throat, then, “You needn’t worry Bal. I’m not the one you’re worrying about, nor am I one of his agents.”

“Then how...?”

The old man hummed in thought for a second. “Umm, maybe it’s best I don’t go into that too deeply as yet. What I *can* tell you though, is the one who placed those two lovely children in your

care once called me friend.”

Bal’s eyes widened. “Then you would be...”

“Not another word!” Nought snapped. “You’ve no idea who, or what may be listening. Those children are far too important and you know it. This meeting is risky enough as it is.”

“I said much the same not too long ago.” Bal replied, half to himself. “Very well storyteller. Nought you wish to be and Nought you’ll remain, as far as I’m concerned, but you’ve answered both my questions.”

The old man nodded. “Good. Now tell me. Why did you teach them to read, knowing what trouble such a skill would bring them? You can barely afford the rent on your cottage, much less buy them books.”

Bal turned and looked the storyteller in the eye. “That’s why we chose Beri. The school here is free to whoever chooses to go, young or old. A man, or woman, can learn to read and write free of tariff. Besides, can you think of a more remote place? The people here don’t even believe in Dwarves.”

“All very noble, I’m sure.” Nought grunted sourly. “So you raise a pair of children who fit their economic status about as well as an Eagle fits a chicken yard.”

“And Doreen and I do?” Bal bristled. “I’m no charlatan and neither is she. What would it look like with them speaking as we do, yet illiterate? Then you’d have no eagle in the yard but a goose.”

“Or a pair of them at least.” Nought clapped Bal on the shoulder. “No, there’s no fault in what you’ve done. In fact it may be for the best.”

Bal’s eyes widened. “A premonition?”

Nought shook his head causing the long white hair under his floppy hat to swing about. “No, merely hope. An educated guess, if you will. Even in this world, a bright mind and a willing heart may grow to accomplish greatness, or, at the very least, a modicum of success. They appear to be good children, by any means.”

“They’re more than that. They stand head and shoulders above the best this village has to offer. I think that has a part in the trouble they’ve had with some of the children here.”

“Envy grows a bitter crop at best, Bal, and if they face the road I think they will...” The old man let his voice trail off but Bal finished the statement in his head and swallowed the lump forming in his throat.

“What do they know of the world outside of their little village?” Nought asked casually as they passed the stable master’s shop.

“Almost nothing, I must confess. We’ve never spoken of our lives outside the village or of the Empire.” Bal shrugged. “We thought it best to concentrate on teaching them how to read and write as well as some mathematics. Well, that and woodcraft as well. Doreen and I won’t live forever.”

“As far as I can tell, no one has yet friend Bal,” The storyteller added sagely.

They walked the rest of the way to the cottage lost in their own thoughts. The place where Bal and Doreen chose to raise their adopted niece and nephew stood at the edge of a small wood on the eastern side of the village of Beri. The cottage was described to them as cozy, which meant it was cramped, but the rent was right. The thatched roof leaked when they first moved in but Bal managed to patch them all with pitch, sweat and a few choice words he learned in his earlier days. Doreen made sure it was kept scrubbed clean and in spite of their poverty, Bal’s skills at woodcraft made sure there was food for the table.

The scent of baking sweetroot met Bal and the storyteller as they turned into the path leading to the cottage. Nought breathed deep of the aroma, pulling the mix of caramel and spice deep into his lungs. “Ahhhhhh but that smells good.”

“You’re welcome to share our table. There’s always room for one more.”

“Even if there really isn’t, hmm?” The storyteller replied.

“The creek behind the cottage usually has fish in it. A nice trout goes well with sweetroot.”

We've never gone hungry, nor have those we've taken in." Bal said with a touch of pride.

Nought sniffed the air once more. "I'm sure you haven't. I'm sure you haven't." He smacked his lips in anticipation.

"The storyteller's here! Aunt Doreen. The storyteller's here!" The twins came running from around the backside of the whitewashed cottage.

Nought noticed they'd changed from their previous outfits to ones of rough woven burlap. The girl would have to be talked to. She was too well advanced in her puberty to be wearing such a loose weave. At least the boy had a decent breechcloth wrapped around him and he was wearing a thong around his neck with a small bag tied to it. Their feet were bare and stained green from the grass around the cottage. To the casual eye they'd look to be simple country folk. Better and better.

Doreen came out of the door centered in the front of the cottage wiping her hands on a piece of sacking. "Storyteller. You honor us."

"We've an extra mouth for supper, Doreen." Ball announced as he stepped inside the cottage. "I'll be down at the creek."

The twins' eyes grew large. "You're staying for supper? Here? With us?"

The old man chuckled. "Don't act so surprised. I'd walk twice the distance to have such an attentive audience. My stories are no fun at if I've no one to share them with."

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Nought pushed himself away from the rough-hewn table. "Ahhh, yes. I don't believe I could eat another bite. That was simply amazing Doreen. Who knew the humble trout could aspire to such gustatory heights?"

Doreen blushed under the compliment. "It wasn't all my doing sire Nought. Bal caught them and the children did the cleaning..."

"Don't be so modest my dear. Accept your due when it's offered. Folk get little enough of it in this world. You prepared a masterpiece and I'm proud to say so."

"Thank you sire Nought." Doreen's blush deepened.

"It was good, Aunt Doreen." Charity affirmed the storyteller's praise.

"Real good." Adam agreed with his mouth full of sweetroot.

Bal stood up taking his empty plate with him. "As my nephew, who insists on talking with his mouth full, said, real good honey. You outdid yourself."

Nought reached across the table and picked up the pitcher of tisane. He poured a measure into the earthenware mug. "And you brew a fine tisane as well. If I didn't know better I'd think I was dining in one of the finer establishments of the bustling city of Beri."

Doreen laughed behind her hands.

"You're a shameless flirt storyteller and you know it. But I thank you for brightening our home." Bal took his plate over to a small sideboard with a shallow wooden basin sitting on it; He placed the plate into the basin. "Adam. Take the bucket to the creek, we've some dishes to wash."

"What?"

"You know the rules. She cooked, we wash."

"Yes Uncle Bal." Adam picked up the bucket and trudged out of the cottage.

"Adam. Wait up." Charity got up from her place at the table and ran out after her brother. She caught up with him at the creek.

"Aren't you excited? We've got the storyteller all to ourselves. The best storyteller in the whole world!"

Adam didn't answer.

"Adam! Did you hear me?" Adam!"

"Shh!"

"Don't you shh me! You're not Uncle Bal, even if you are five minutes older you can't

mmmpphhh!” Adam’s hand over her mouth cut off what else she was going to say.

“Shh.” He whispered, “Listen. Don’t you hear it?” He took his hand away from her mouth

“Hear what?” She whispered back.

Adam pointed across the creek into the deep of the wood. “Out there.” He kept his voice at a barely audible level. “I’ve never heard anything like it. It sends chills right through me and it sounds big.”

Charity listened, trying to catch what her brother was hearing and she wished she hadn’t. On the very edge of her hearing was a snuffling grunting sound. The pitch was bass deep with an edge to it that grated along her nerves. Adam was right in his feeling. Whatever was making that sound was big... and hunting.

“I wonder what it is? Could it be some kind of pig?” Charity breathed her question into Adam’s ear.

“Never heard a pig sound like that.”

Charity saw the eyes first. “Adam!” She shrieked. “Look!”

He looked in the direction she pointed. A pair of glowing red spots was looking at them from out of a hulking black shape just across the creek.

Adam could feel his knees going weak. He grabbed his sister by the arm. “Come on. We’re getting out of here.”

They turned to run back to the cottage and slammed into two more of the things. The last thing Adam could remember thinking was they smelled like one of the stray dogs in the village when they got wet.

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“Ogren. It had to be Ogren.” Nought ran a hand over the trampled soil at the creek’s edge.

“How many?” Bal held Doreen to him. He could feel the moisture of her tears against his shoulder.

“Are they dead?” She choked out the question.

The storyteller looked up and shook his head. “I don’t think so. If the Ogren were going to kill them we’d have found sure signs of it. Blood at least, or a body part or two.”

“Nooo!” Doreen shrieked out.

“Nought!” Bal objected.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I tend to be a little too clinical sometimes. It comes from storytelling, you know. What I was trying to say was, I believe the twins were taken alive, probably captive, and the poor things are probably scared witless. What concerns me is that He used Ogren to do it... strange.” Nought rubbed a bit of the soil between his thumb and forefinger.

“How many?” Bal repeated his question.

“Eh? Oh, yes, you asked that earlier didn’t you. Three... I think. Yes, three for sure. I think the sorcerer’s involved in this. Ogren never cross the spine unless they’re driven.”

“You have to find them. You have to.” Doreen pleaded with the storyteller.

“I’m going with you.” Bal looked grim.

Nought looked over his shoulder at Bal. “No, you won’t. You and Doreen are going to pack up what belongings you have and you are going to move as far away from here as you can. I would suggest Southpointe as an example. Gilgafed sent those Ogren. I’m sure of it now and he never does anything in halfway measures. More will be coming after you, if I don’t miss my guess, and unless you have a company of the watch to call on, you don’t want to be here when they arrive.”

The mention of the sorcerer’s name did not have the desired effect on Doreen. “But the children, Adam and Charity, what about them?”

“They’re out of your hands now!” Nought snapped. “Must I use my power in order to get you to think?”

Bal took his wife by the arm. “Come on Doreen. It’s up to him now.”

Her eyes were huge. “You mean he’s...?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

“But he’s dead!”

“Tell that to him. Let’s go.”

The storyteller went back to his examination of the trampled ground. “*Ogren.*” He thought. “*What is that fool Gilgafed playing at?*” The beasts were temperamental at best, nearly as bad as Garlocs. He began to wonder if Bal and Doreen’s keeping the twins ignorant of the world they were born into was wise after all.

Nought looked over his shoulder, making sure Bal and his wife were well away. He then reached out a hand and held it over the area where the Ogren sign was most prominent. The air under the palm of his hand began to glow. Beneath the hand areas of the soil picked up the glow forming the shapes of clearly defined hoof prints along with the bare footprints of two young humans. From the looks of things, the struggle was brief and only three sets of prints left the area if the creek heading east. They were all hoofed.

He stood and straightened his robe. “If you’ve hurt them Gilgafed, there won’t be enough left of you to keep in a specimen jar.”

Sounds coming from the cottage told him Bal and Doreen were doing as they were told. They would be gone well before morning. Southpointe would do well by them. He made a mental note to make sure their economic status was considerably higher there than it had been in Beri and then he snapped his fingers. A staff appeared in his right hand, ornately carved, with a wolf’s head at the top. Softly whistling an ancient sounding melody in a minor key, he began following the line of glowing prints as they led him eastward into the Dwarflands.

