

Another Tale from the Same Source

The Dungeon Mistress

I could tell from the loud noises penetrating into the street that things were lively at the Wounded Duck tavern. All I wanted was a quiet place to have a few drinks and try to forget. The Wounded Duck was the only tavern in the small town of Bargecheck, so I didn't have but the one choice. I paused at the door. From the laughter, a shrill female shriek of excitement, and enthusiastic voices, I figured these were happy drunks rather than the more dangerous sort. That was good. When you carry the name "Mallard" into a place called "The Wounded Duck," there's no telling what kind of trouble you could find yourself in for. But with this bunch drawing all the attention, I should be able to melt away into some obscure corner. So I went on in.

The people making all the noise was a group of what you'd call "adventurers." That's what you call a group of brigands that goes out raiding for treasure, but manages to stay on the good side of the authorities. You've no doubt seen parties like this before. I could identify the usual suspects. There was a big brawny fighter in chain mail sifting his hands through a pile of coins that had been emptied from a small chest onto the table. A thief type rogue with somewhat elflike features was trying to make sure none of the coins were falling off the table. The woman fighter in rather skimpy armor had already had a bit too much to drink, and was pushing away someone I'd take as some sort of wizard or such. I thought I recognized in her voice the accent that said she was from Freshkill. Not a surprise; probably most of the female fighters in the Kingdom come from there, a result of the Norse raiders killing any of the men they found. Then there was a cleric speaking to the barmaid, loud enough to be heard over the others, commissioning another round of drinks. Might have been another one or two of them at the back that I didn't see.

All this I could take in at a glance. I didn't want to be noticed looking. That could attract attention. I kind of eased past them discretely toward the shadows of the far corner, past several tables of locals. Most of the eyes in the place were on the partiers. I was able to slip through without drawing attention. At the back I spied a small empty round table. I headed for it. As I went, I met the inquiring eyes of one of the barmaids, and signaled for an ale.

Next to the table I was headed for was another, where a woman was seated by herself, staring at a ring held in the fingers of both hands. “Ranger,” I thought to myself. She had the typical garb and a shortbow. The scabbard of a shortsword was visible under the folds of her cloak. But the colors she wore, a muted dark yellowish green trimmed with black, proclaimed that she was definitely not one of the “Queen’s Own Rangers.” Those rangers, all women, wore green with orange trim. You didn’t usually see them in a tavern, and not here in Bargecheck, either. This woman had a slighter build, a less weathered appearance, and was more attractive than your typical ranger. The dark hair down to just over her shoulders showed an adorning headband; you wouldn’t normally see that on a ranger. So, if not a ranger, what? There were the rejects, women turned away from the Queen’s Rangers. They usually tried to prove themselves, as convoy guards or adventurers, and as often ended up dead or in trouble. Maybe the celebrating Freshkill girl was one of those. But that didn’t seem to fit the woman at the table. An unauthorized ranger of some sort, I figured. A bandit maybe? No, she had to be a ranger.

I made a split-second decision to sit down at the table with the woman, rather than the empty table I’d been headed for. Maybe I figured I’d look more out of place sitting alone. Maybe I was just curious. I didn’t take the time to think “why?” I sat down, waited a moment for her to look up, and asked her her name. “I’m Mallard,” I added. “Hope you don’t mind if I sit here. Not in the partying mood,” I said, with a nod toward the celebration.

When the barmaid came with my ale, I motioned her to bring another for my friend, and slipped her a couple of gold coins. If you think that’s extravagant, remember that the King has adulterated the coinage so much that “gold” coins are hardly yellow. The barmaid wasn’t impressed. She dutifully pushed back toward the bar to fetch one more ale.

“So what’s your problem?” the woman in the ranger garb finally said without looking at me, still staring at her ring.

“Bandits,” I said. I waited a long moment to see if she was interested. She wasn’t, apparently. I continued anyway. “It wasn’t that we were robbed. Not by the bandits. Some merchants asked us to take out a band that had been collecting protection money on the road to Scarp. When we brought in the ones we captured, along with a rescued prisoner, His Honor said we had attacked the wrong bandits. He accused us of assaulting innocents. Took all the loot and half of our possessions as a fine. He let me go because I didn’t have enough left to be worth keeping to try for a further bribe or ransom, I suppose.” That had been pretty

much how it happened. I thought about elaborating a bit more, but she didn't seem to care. So I let the silence grow as the barmaid brought the woman an ale.

“Here's yer gold back, mister,” the barmaid said flatly. “That party's buying for the house.”

“I don't want their drink!” my ranger friend stated with surprising vehemence. She grasped the ale. I thought she was going to fling it to the floor.

I reached out and held her hand and the ale down and told the barmaid, “I paid for it. Here, keep it.” I refused the coin she was trying to return. Pulling my hand back hurriedly from the mug, I reached into my pouch and added another coin. “For your good service. Here.”

Well, that got the woman's attention. When I turned back to look at her, she was looking back with a bemused expression. She took a sip of ale. “Thank you,” she said.

I took this as an opening. “What's the ring?” I asked.

She took a deep sigh, and looked back at the ring. Perhaps the ale was starting to lubricate her tongue. “I'm no quitter,” she finally said. “But, it seems all for naught. Everything I've tried to do. All I've accomplished. Dreamed of. Gone. Pointless. Maybe I need to forget it all. Do something else. Some other kind of life.”

It didn't seem appropriate to point out that she had not answered my question. I've said the wrong thing enough times on occasions like this that I've learned that silence is best. I waited for her to continue, masking my awkwardness by taking a drink myself.

As if reading my mind, she finally said, “It's a magic ring. A ring of language. It lets me speak and understand any of the goblinoid tongues. Orcish too.” She continued staring at the ring. “I can speak them without the ring, but not well enough. The ring helps. When you are negotiating with a hobgoblin chief, you have to be very exact in your understanding and in everything you say.”

I was stunned. I suppose I had been imagining that she was sorrowing over a marriage or some other domestic arrangement gone bad, of which this ring was the last material remains. I groped for a response.

“Hobgoblins? You negotiate with hobgoblins? A hobgoblin chief?”

“Well, not anymore,” she replied with a resigned bitterness. “Seems your friends yonder saw fit to destroy all my careful work of the past several years.”

To that, I absolutely did not know what to say. I supposed she meant the celebrating party, hardly my friends. I had sort of kept half an ear open for what was going on elsewhere in the tavern. The party at the front was still laughing and talking over their exploits, which had apparently culminated in a big fight with hobgoblins. The big burly fighter had managed to thrust his sword through the hobgoblin king, and the thief had tackled the shaman just before he could escape through a secret door. Beyond the secret door, given away by the shaman’s attempted exit, the party had found a treasure vault. All this seemed to be a wholly different world from my corner and my conversation with the ranger woman. Suddenly the picture jarringly came together.

“Your hobgoblins?” I asked, discretely pointing toward the party.

She nodded. There was a long silence, during which we both took refuge in the ale. The celebration in the front, the laughter, and now dancing to someone’s flute, seemed suddenly oppressive.

Finally I blurted out the question that was pounding its way through my mind toward my mouth. “Just what are you?” I instantly realized how awkward that sounded. “I mean, I thought maybe you were a ranger.” That was awkward too. “Of some sort,” I added lamely.

She was still looking at the ring. “I suppose you could call me a ranger, of sorts,” she finally replied. “Not of the Queen’s Rangers, of course.”

“Of course not,” I added, trying to recover from my embarrassing question.

She didn’t seem to notice, and continued, “The Queen’s Own Rangers are really just scouts for the Army and the Royalty. Any real caring for the health of the woods and nature is beyond most of them. There are a few rangers here and there that do look to the well-being of the natural world still. Not allowed to call themselves rangers, of course.”

“You’re one of them?” I asked. “A true ranger, I suppose I could say?”

She smiled a bit. For the first time. Maybe she needed someone to talk to. “Not exactly,” she replied. After a pause, she continued, “I think of myself as a Dungeon Mistress.”

I keep mentioning that I was surprised, or shocked, or frozen into silence. I can't recall so many utterly surprising statements in one conversation ever before or since. In this case, all I could do was croak out, “Dungeon Mistress?”

She sighed again. “Yes. Other rangers see to the preservation of forests, or woodlands, or meadows. Or have since the druids were driven out of the Kingdom. But me, I've been taking care of the dungeons. Trying to keep them vital and alive. Healthy.” Her brow darkened. “And then you get some bunch of fools that bludgeon their way in, no thought for anything but destruction and gold, that can undo a life's work in a few short hours.”

If you had ever asked me before, I'd never have used the words “healthy” or “vitality” together with the word “dungeon” in a sentence, or even a whole story. Except maybe in the negative. I've been in dungeons. Cave complexes, deep mines, and humanoid warrens therein. Deep, forbidding places. It's dark. There are creatures that want to eat you. Sometimes there are malign magics, or evil priests and whatnot, who want to send you to the Void. You hope to find treasure, but even when you do, it's guarded by some fell trap, or giant spiders, or tribes of goblins, orcs, or, yes, hobgoblins. Or worse. A dungeon is a place to think of survival first and foremost. Your own, personal, survival. And that of your comrades. You want to come out alive, and hopefully with something to have made it worth the trouble and danger.

So, you can see how disorienting this woman ranger's reply was. The silence seemed to demand that I say something. All I could manage was, “You take care of dungeons?” Immediately, I realized this was a foolish response. Had she not just said as much?

Maybe she was feeling a bit more relaxed as the ale dwindled in her mug. She smiled indulgently at me. Maybe she understood my confusion.

“You know what a desert is? You've heard of the Wastes of Nil? Or the Rock Coast? Or the Great Sand Desert in the Kingdom of the Sun?”

I'd never been to any of those places. I wouldn't have thought of the Rock Coast a few hundred miles to the South as a desert, but it had in common with the others a scarcity of life. I nodded.

“Well, a dungeon can be the same way. Lifeless, just voids in the rock with no vitality or purpose. Unless someone takes the care and effort. Just like a forest can be turned into a desert if you kill the wildlife, cut down the trees, and leave it to the arid east winds.”

Her explanation brought to mind vivid images of the kinds of the life I had experienced in dungeons.

“There is life in dungeons,” I protested. “Huge spiders. White fish in the streams. Fungus. Nasty stuff like green slime. Monsters like carrion crawlers.” I stopped myself before I mentioned hobgoblins and their kin. That might be a sore point.

“None of that would be there if it wasn't managed,” she replied. “Or, very little, anyway,” she added. I think she needed to talk, or to give some sort of justification for her still very mysterious profession. She smiled. “Just what do you suppose those things eat,” she asked. “Let's take the spiders, for example.”

I was baffled by the question. I had never given a single thought to the issue. “Well, other spiders, I suppose. Maybe rats.” I remembered finding bones and occasional treasures beneath burned webbing. “Goblins and kobolds sometimes, no doubt.” An image came to mind of a skeleton clad in chainmail, still grasping a pouch of coins, lying beneath one slain giant spider. “And the occasional adventurer too, I suppose,” I added.

“Exactly.” She smiled triumphantly. “The spiders eat adventurers. If they just ate each other, pretty soon there would be no more spiders. There's an inefficiency to life, to eating. Some is lost to waste. Each time a spider ate another, it might preserve its life for what, a month? But there would be fewer spiders. The spider population would dwindle eventually to nothing, no matter how many you started with.

“But the remains, the waste, doesn't the fungus, the mold, the other plants consume it? Just like they do on the surface? And then some of the monsters eat the fungus, and the spiders eat them. Just like cattle eat the grass and we eat the cattle. Life sustains itself.”

I think the Dungeon Mistress was starting to enjoy her role as teacher. She was more animated, and seemed to have set aside her sorrow. “Ah, there’s a big difference,” she explained. “On the surface, the Sun, be thankful to the gods, sustains the plants. That’s why even in the desert there is some life, and a forest can usually regenerate itself. But there is no life-giving Sun in the dungeon. Left alone, life dwindles unless food is brought in from the surface.”

“Adventurers.” I said. I had never thought of my role as an adventurer this way, and was not comfortable doing so.

“Well, yes. But not just adventurers. Not even mostly adventurers. Some food reaches dungeons through the earth naturally. Rats dig their holes and tunnel into the dungeons. On the surface they eat whatever rats eat – stored grain, grubs, debris. In the dungeon they are in turn eaten by giant spiders or other creatures. Thus, they bring food from the surface to the dungeon. Giant weasels, bats, and other creatures live in the dungeons and venture out at night, then fall victims to dungeon dwellers. Same kind of thing. So, yes, even in an unmanaged dungeon there will be some life. Mostly near the surface. But less and less the deeper you go. That’s not really a healthy dungeon.”

As she paused to see if this would seep through to my obtuse mind, I ordered a couple more ales. The party at the front was still going strong, with the alcohol having its effect on the loudness and behavior. The big fighter was trying to dance on the table. The thief type was using his flute to spar with the cleric who was wielding a torch, playing out a scene from their adventure. The female fighter was wearing her armor on her head like a crown, to the guffaws of an inebriated crowd. You’d think all this would be distracting. But the thought of adventurers as nurturing food for a sort of animate dungeon kept my attention on my tutor.

“So, where do the hobgoblins come into it?” I asked. I was afraid I was bringing up a sore point, but I was disturbed enough about what she had said that I didn’t stop to consider that.

She darkened a moment. “Well, you need some sort of humanoids.” She relaxed again as she warmed up to the subject. “It doesn’t have to be hobgoblins, of course. Kobolds are the easiest. They multiply fast, and are often being chased out of their home dungeons by the other humanoids. You can usually talk a refugee kobold tribe into taking up residence in an empty dungeon. Goblins aren’t hard to get either, for much the same reason. They both go out of the dungeon by night and bring food back in. That sustains the dungeon. Then, spiders eat the

occasional kobold, and other things eat the spiders, and so on. A tribe of kobolds or goblins brings back in much more food than would ever find its way into a dungeon by rats or giant bats or such. Goblins more than kobolds. Kobolds tend to stay more local, behind their traps and escape routes. Not that much better than giant ants, really. Goblins are more aggressive and go further. And then there are orcs. Don't get me started on orcs."

I could sense that she seemed to be begging me to ask about orcs, despite her words. I bit. "Orcs?"

"A tribe of orcs can do wonders for a dungeon," she said admiringly. I shuddered. "In the short run. But they are too aggressive. They attract attention. They just can't leave villages or anything else in the region alone."

"Seems something they have in common with goblins and hobgoblins," I said.

"No, there's a world of difference," she explained patronizingly. "Goblins will sometimes tunnel under a village. Little Timmy falls down a well. The goblins have dug a tunnel into the well at the bottom of the shaft, and little Timmy is never seen again. But the villagers just don't find him, and nobody is the wiser. Or Trapper John never comes back out of the woods. Such things happen. Goblins are lawful. Well, not chaotic, like orcs are. They have at least some discipline. You can talk to them, and warn them not to push things too far."

"Orcs, on the other hand, are chaotic. They won't listen to reason. They raid and pillage until some lord or another decides they have to be exterminated, and then you have a party of adventurers commissioned to clean them out entirely. That usually turns out bad for the orcs. And for the dungeon."

"What happens then?" I asked.

She stopped to consider. "Well, you have to rebuild. Start over. At first, it's not so bad. The dead orcs and adventurers feed the carrion eaters, and the spiders and such eat them and multiply. The dungeon is a very dangerous place for a while. But like I said before, there's no food coming in from the outside. Or very little. No tribe of any sort is going to move into a dungeon like that. So, eventually the monsters eat each other, and populations crash. It starts to be like a desert. At this point, some sort of help is needed. I use honey to try to lure in giant ants. Trails of grain to lure rats. Anything to get life flowing back into the

dungeon. Giant frogs and toads are good too. Rats can sometimes be encouraged to collect trinkets and bring them to down to their dungeon lair. A wererat might find the dungeon a congenial hideout. Or maybe even bandits. That means treasure. There may even still be some leftover treasure the adventurers didn't find. Eventually, the news of the disaster is forgotten enough that maybe I can find some kobolds or goblins to move in. I tell them what I know about prospects of treasure, villages and other opportunities in the area, and a bit of warning not to be too bold, at least until they establish themselves."

"What about hobgoblins," I asked.

She smiled. "They are the best of all," she replied. "Very disciplined. They understand about limits. They can be reasoned with, and are intelligent enough to know when not to push things. Like the tribe in the woods north of Nextonover. They even have an arrangement with the authorities to protect the road to Gildegulch from other monsters, and collect a toll. You'd never find orcs behaving with such restraint. The problem is, of course, that hobgoblins are very careful and deliberate about where they'll take up residence. You have to have something else, say goblins or kobolds, who are successful first, then talk the hobgoblins into displacing them. It's devilishly difficult to pull off, getting a hobgoblin tribe to take up residence in a given dungeon. There has to be good incentive, and prospects of long term success. If you're really clever, you have some other dungeon ready that the goblins can move into when the hobgoblins push them out."

I could tell that she must have pulled off such a trick herself.

Suddenly she frowned. "Hobgoblin tribes talk to each other. Fight with each other too, of course. But this disaster is going to be bad." She motioned toward the adventurers. "No hobgoblin is going to talk to me ever again," she added morosely.

We were silent a while, nursing the second mug of ale. The party seemed to be winding down a bit. I asked, "So, if you decide not to be a Dungeon Mistress, what will you do? Join the Queen's Rangers? Look after forests?"

"Ugh!" she exclaimed. "The Queen's Rangers?" She gave an uncouth snort. "They wouldn't have me. And I wouldn't have them. A bunch of big athletic losers, the lot of them, who don't know how to get along with other people. Failures at love, and not competent enough for any other trade."

I have known a few rangers, and while her stereotype perhaps had some validity, I could cite several exceptions. It didn't seem appropriate to say so.

“And rangers of the forest are all tree-hugging goody-goodies,” she continued. “And what's in it for them? To be caught and prosecuted whenever the Queen's Rangers catch them, or eaten by something big and bad when they are not careful, all the while taking care of a forest that can ultimately take care of itself if the truth be acknowledged.”

“You ever think about becoming an adventurer?” I asked. “Maybe not in dungeons, but maybe wilderness or the mountains? I bet you'd be very good.”

She sighed, and focused again on her ring, fiddling with it mindlessly. “That would be going against everything I've done. Everything I've been.”

“No, it wouldn't have to be. There are other things than raiding healthy dungeons. Bandits, for instance. Or dragons. Abandoned ruins up in the mountains. Orc strongholds in the Nomad Wastes. There's a lot of exciting and worthwhile things to do.” I found myself becoming overbold with my enthusiasm. “Why, I was going to travel to Guardraw tomorrow and look for a position with an expedition going up towards Circe. Maybe you'd like to go with me.”

All of a sudden I became aware of a quietness that had descended on the tavern. Even the partiers were silent. I turned and looked. There in the door was a huge man, with the look of orcish heritage and greenish skin. He was scanning the room. His eyes locked onto my companion, and with a grunt he started toward us.

The big fighter wobbled to his feet and proclaimed, “The Orc King! I challenge you to mortal combat!” and lunged forward. The Freshkill girl giggled from the corner where she was curled up with the cleric. The thief raised his head from the table momentarily then let it fall again. The bartender hollered, “Hey mister! We don't serve your kind in here!” Chairs scraped as the few remaining locals tried to get out of the way.

None of this fazed the half orc, who shoved the fighter aside brusquely, ignored the bartender, and continued in our direction. As you can imagine, I thought I was going to be dead meat. But he ignored me. He came up and stood over my companion, and said, “So here you are, Luci. I've been looking for you. I saved three of the hobgoblin babies. And one of the young ones. They're all

hungry. There's a crop of giant mushrooms ready that we can get planted below before the spiders get too bad."

"I give up, Jerri," she stated flatly. "After this, I can't go on. I'm done. It's pointless. I've got to find another life. The other life. Jerri, I'm going to be an adventurer. I'm running off to Guarddraw with this fellow. Mallard, that's his name. I'm done, Jerri."

Now I really thought I was a dead duck. But the big fellow never looked at me. "You picked a fine time to quit, Luci. Them four young hobgoblins to feed, and the dungeon to rebuild. You've rebuilt before. It hurts. I know it does. But you can't just quit. The hurt for the dungeon will heal. Your hurt for what we have been about, our mission, it won't."

"No, Jerri. I'm finished. Go back to your frogs and your fungus. I'm not coming with you."

I was starting to feel sad for the big fellow by now. As he turned, he uttered a final "It won't heal, Luci." He shuffled out of the tavern past the fighter, who was still on the floor near the door.

Well, there's not much more to tell. I sort of got cold feet as far as the Dungeon Mistress was concerned. She scared me. The words just kept coming back to mind whenever I thought of her. I set out for Guarddraw the next day. I did see her there later, but she wasn't with the Company when we set off for Sundown. I told all this to a bard named Rogers who made something of a song out of it, but he changed enough that you probably wouldn't recognize the story.

So, adventurers are life sustaining food for the dungeon and its monsters. I never entered a dungeon again without thinking of that, and of the Dungeon Mistress.