



CHRONICLE 4

FIRE IN THE DARK

TAVERN
TALES

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Chronicle Four

“Fire In The Dark”

“Tell us what happened?” asked the interrogator almost an hour ago before I replied: “Do you really want to know what happened?” After receiving a nod, I proceeded to give my account:

The three strongest candidates had been allowed to build squads with up to five members, including themselves. The first was Elko Pallakk, a distinguished blaze arbalist. The second was Sterkur Hammar, renowned steel konstruktor, and the third was Kuchli Bolger, a fire muse. Whoever’s team emerged victorious from the competition would be selected as the third war chief.

Heat, smoke, and ashes cannot begin to describe the first stage of the competition, known only as The Rapids. The three teams had to navigate the deadly lava River Lohikaar, the “Dragon’s Breath,” a body of flowing lava that reaches speed as fast as a falcon’s flight. All the teams were given a solvar canoe, basic but sturdy enough to withstand the lava and make the required sharp turns.

The canoes are narrow and demand that each of the crew tilt in the same direction when making a turn.

Our canoe had a head start when the signal was given, thanks to Sterkur’s quick reaction. No more than three minutes had passed when we reached the rapids in the river. Splashes of lava fell on the canoe’s hull, a worrying site even though we knew they were made to withstand the lava. However, our armors were not as resilient and could not afford severe lava exposure.

As the speed increased, so did my worry. Any miscalculation could spell doom for all of us. A simple mistake could tip the canoe, and we’d fall into the raging lava and perish in less than two minutes. But I saw none of that in Serkur’s eyes that glittered like a star in an abysmal night.

I dug my fingers into the canoe and tipped to the left when I heard the order. We all did. I felt a tiny shard break off and cut one of my fingers, realizing I had dug them like spears.

Left, right, left, right. It was a death dance as we moved from one side to the other without respite. The raging sound of lava blocked out most of the sounds except our leader’s orders and the hellish pounding of our hearts.

At the last stage of the river, we lost a team member. Our turn had been too sharp, and we had side-rammed one of the walls, knocking off a young molten trekker that fell into the lava. The impact had stopped us; we could have picked her up since our armors gave us enough protection for up to one minute. After that, the rippling molten rock would eat through our special armors.

“Continue!” screamed Sterkur, and that was the end of that. Deaths in the competition always occurred. Howbeit, this did not remove the bitter taste in my mouth as I watched the trekker’s remaining arm sticking out from the lava, her fingers extended and reaching out for the heavens, for life, before sinking to a fiery doom.

We came second in the first stage of the competition, beating Elko’s team, who had lost two members in the rapids.

The next stage was more challenging.

The rapids ended in a monumental circle cave, becoming a lake. The lave would flow out of the lake through a cleft and into a chasm that led to the bowels of the volcano. A place where no dwarf had ever returned from. The only exit from the lake was a cave just beyond the chasm. To reach it, we had to build a bridge from the rock platforms beside the cleft that crossed the chasm’s length up until the cave, just over 300 feet.

The three teams began building their bridges. The first had a three-minute start on us, and we had a four-minute start on the final team, not counting that they had lost two members.

All of the teams carried the necessary equipment for the competition. You could lose teammates but not the equipment.

My first harpoon hit its mark on the left flank of the cave’s entrance. On our side, the team used their mecha pickaxes to soften the platform to drive the mithril stake. Once that was done, we attached the chain from the harpoon to the stake, thus creating one of the main lines from which to add the decking and the suspension cable.

The fastest method for crossing was just by sliding using the chain, but the competition demanded that a bridge be built. For decades we, the Vulcan Dwarves, had built bridges and moving platforms inside the volcano. A good war chief had to be capable of organizing and engineering a battle structure in short instances of time and under duress.

By the time we had finished our bridge, the team led by Bolger (And the first place so far) was crossing the chasm.

Sterkur was the first of us to cross. I was the third. We couldn’t run, we had to tread with care as the rising steam from the chasm created violent bursts of wind that swayed the bridge with the force of a violent storm.

I was one-third across our bridge when a burst lifted the bridge 30 feet. I held on to one of the main chains as I felt my legs above my head and realized that I was in the air upside down, and the only thing between me and death was my hand clenching the chain with the same strength as an eagle’s claws clutching its prey.

The screams of my companions pierced my ears as one of them dived and grabbed one of the stakes that was coming out.

I gasped for breath as I felt the immense pull of the bridge now going back down. I somehow managed to grab the chain with the other hand as well, and I held on to it like a terrified toddler does to his mother.

I must have blanked out for a second, for the next thing I saw was the bridge back in its normal position while I was still holding on to it. Sterkur was on the far end, close to the cavern, while our other two colleagues were getting on the bridge.

As I was about to make my way again. A sharp shriek thundered in the chasm. Everyone stopped. I looked down. On one side, I could see the waterfall of lava falling down the cleft, but the rest was darkness deeper than any in the outside world.

A tiny sparkle. Followed by another. Then another. Then more of them in the dark, getting bigger with each flurry.

Before I could react, dozens of more shrieks exploded around us as the sparkles soon reached us and revealed themselves as fire harpies, dark spirits of the volcano.

The monsters descended on us like a lightning bolt, giving us no chance to defend ourselves during their first strike.

One of the harpies picked up the colleague that had just gotten on the bridge. He struggled to break free as its fiery claws ate through his armor, and carried him over the chasm.

I could see his eyes wide open with terror, and he looked down at the darkness.

The last of our team, still on the platform, fired his crossbow against the harpy holding on to our comrade. His good intentions had the opposite effect as the struck harpy lost her hold and released our comrade into the blackness of the chasm.

The flock of harpies soon attacked all of us. The majority of them concentrated on the leading team, whose members now all stood outside the cave. They were led by Bolger, a formidable fire muse who used the harpies' flames against them. The attack on the team was relentless, possibly because of the presence of a fire muse, a threat the harpies considered had to be taken out first.

Sterkur, Brock, and I from my team had managed to cross the bridge, but the last one had remained behind, shooting arrows and joining up with what little remained of the third team.

A new wave of fire harpies arose from the chasm, the majority concentrating on Bolger's team, who had made a circle and were deflecting the creatures as the fire muse concentrated and disposed of them one by one. If it hadn't been for his team, the fire muse would have been amongst the first to perish.

As I was about to rush towards Bolger's team, one of the harpies flew towards the lava lake and blew a horn made of molten rock.

For an instant, the rest of the harpies stopped their attack and turned their heads towards the lake. The third team of dwarves on the platform, including our other member, also focused their attention on the lake.

The lava bubbled and churned as the heat intensified around the lake and chasm. A low wail ran across the area as a fist of molten rose from the lake, followed by another.

My maul clanged as it hit the ground, my hand having released it as I watched the gargantuan shape forming above the lake. It writhed until it assumed a humanoid shape with piercing dark eyes that devoured all the light around it.

A "Martrud," a tephra nightmare, one of the most feared creatures that still inhabited the deepest tunnels and rivers of the volcano.

In one lightning stroke, the fiend slammed his hand on the dwarves on the platform before they could escape or react.

The screams that followed perforated our ears and skewered our hearts as our fallen comrades burned like torches.

The martrud then lifted his head and lumbered towards us. While most of us remained still like terrified prey, Bolger, the fire muse, rose to the occasion and concentrated on stopping the ponderous threat.

This was the outcome the harpies had striven for. As soon as Bolger turned his attention away from them, the fire harpies swarmed his team to slay him before he could take more of them down.

I came to my senses, picked up my maul, and charged towards Bolger's team to assist them. I mustered all my energy into a single blow pulverizing a harpy's head as she had not expected an attack from behind.



As I lifted my maul to attack another of the creatures, I was tugged away by Sterkur, who threw me, and Brock into the cave.

"What are you doing? They need our help!" I snapped at him. But then stopped. A strange glitter emanated from Sterkur's eyes. The brilliance was not warm but cold. It was as if I was staring into a star, one that did not guide or shine but one that absorbed all energy and life around it. Brock had been wounded and couldn't protest.

"There's nothing we can do." His cold words made my forehead sweaty from fear. Is this what leadership meant? A cold resolution that implied sacrifice. Is that why he had ordered us to continue when the first of us fell into the river?

My legs were irresponsive as I watched Sterkur place vulcan orbs at the cave's mouth and detonate them. The wailing of the other dwarves was silenced by the blast of the orbs, followed by the collapse of rock that now blocked the entrance.

"What happened?" asked Brock.

His words snapped me out of it. I bent down and tended his wound. I summarized what had happened as best I could. I was also in shock.

"Drink."

I raised my head. Sterkur was offering me water from his water-skin, his face staring away from me and into the tunnel.

I took it and gave it to Brock, who took a large sip.

We remained silent for an hour as we made our way through the tunnel. When we finally reached the opening where the last stage of the competition should have taken place, we discovered that parts of the ceiling had collapsed.

"What the hell?" quizzed Bruck. "It couldn't have been the explosion."

I didn't answer, nor did Sterkur, who just peered into the rubble as if he could see through it.

"So we remove the rubble?" added Bruck.

As I was about to answer, a soft breeze swayed my long curly hair and cooled my dry, warm skin. Sterkur, who also felt it, walked in the direction it came from.

On the left side of the tunnel, just in the area where it widened and met the opening area, was a crevice concealed by the darkness.

We wouldn't have noticed it if it had not been for the breeze.

The crevice was wide enough for each of us to pass.

"Let's remove the rubble," I commented but was ignored by Sterkur, who approached the crevice and started to investigate it.

"Come on, Sterkur, if we don't hurry, the harpies will unblock the entrance and find us here like sitting ducks," added Bruck.

Suddenly, a glint of blue light emanated from the crevice, and Sterkur, who took it as a signal, wriggled through it.

Bruck followed suit. Against my better judgment, I followed them.

The crevice led to a cave in the shape of a dome. In the far edge of the cave, sculpted into the wall, was a statue of a great dwarven lord, and driven on the ground beneath it was a blue sword whose glowing had been the light that had lured us inside.

"Who are you?" The three of us raised our weapons.

Kneeling facing the sculpture was a small shape in rags, which we had not noticed until it spoke.

"Who are you?" it asked again.

"My name is Sterkur, one of the candidates for third war chief of the Vulcan Dwarves."

At the reply, the shape rose, and we noticed the nauseating smell that sprang from it for the first time. Whoever it was, it had not bathed in a long time.

"Chieftain! You must be a mighty warrior!" said the shape in a tone that made it difficult to tell if it was sarcasm.

The ragged shape approached us, and we discovered it was a dwarf, one of ours telling from the rocks that rose from its skin. A clear mark.

"Who are you?" I asked.

The dwarf pressed his fingers against his cheek in thought.

"I can't remember. I've been here so long that I've forgotten my name."

"How long?"

"A long time!" And the bizarre dwarf followed his reply with a sinister chuckle.

The dwarf pointed at Sterkur, "So, chieftain, are you worthy of wielding this weapon?" He inquired with a menacing look.

When he finished the sentence, the dome reverberated as if a powerful force had been summoned. Something in the blade had awoken. We all felt it.

"I am worthy..."

"You are not chieftain yet!" Interrupted Bruck with a vigor he had not displayed since being wounded.

Sterkur's lip trembled with ire as he turned to Bruck.

"What did you say?"

"You haven't won the competition."

Sterkur gave a miniscule chuckle.

"I am the last of the candidates."

"Because you abandoned the others!"

"But I live."

After his reply, Sterkur went for the blade. Just as our leader was about to place his hand on the blue weapon, Bruck jumped between them with his hammer in hand, ready to strike.

"What are you doing, Bruck?"

"I don't know. All I know is I can't let you have the weapon."

"Step aside, Bruck."

"No."

I agreed with Bruck. There was something about the weapon that frightened me. Every time I looked at it, voices started whispering in my head. I couldn't understand what they said; all I felt was power. I wasn't schooled in magic, but I had witnessed my fair share. Whatever kind of magic flowed through the weapon was more potent than any I had encountered.

It was dangerous.

"Bruck's right, Sterkur. Let's go back and finish the competition."

"It's already over! I am the last. I am worthy."

And without another word, Sterkur swung his maul at Bruck, who was pushed back by the might of the blow. Bruck returned the blow as Sterkur charged him head-on.

The clash of the weapons sent sparks raining down like a deluge. The two former allies traded blows as if they had been ancient foes with a grudge. However, I noticed one difference. Bruck's face showed no malice, only the strain of great effort.

Sterkur's, however, was utterly deformed. His eyes glittered with want, and his mouth was wide open and salivating like a cannibal's who was about to feast. I turned to the strange dwarf to get them to stop. Nothing. The dwarf was nowhere to be seen.

When I looked back at the fight, I saw Bruck on the ground, his arms spread out and a puddle of blood and flesh where a hand should have been.

"No!"

Before I could interfere, Sterkur pulverized Bruck's head as the sound of splatter reverberated in my head.

After cleaning chunks of brain and blood from his maul, Sterkur lunged at me. With the first blow, he broke one of my ribs, and I collapsed like a falling tower. As with Bruck, he stood on top of me and raised his maul. He grinned like a devil as he prepared to smash my head...

Fortunately for me, Bruck had injured him. Sterkur had only managed to land the first blow because I had been aghast. Before he had a chance to strike, I drove a dragger straight through his groin.

His maul made a grinding sound as it hit the ground. I gazed at his frozen face. The eyes and mouth were motionless, paralyzed in an instant of time. Displaying a single emotion: fevor.

I stood up. Sterkur was dead, still on his feet. The blue light started palpating as I thanked the gods I had escaped death. I pivoted towards the blade.

The blue bursts of light spread through the area like shapes of a shadow play. As I gazed in utter bewilderment, I perceived my heart beating at the same rhythm.

Feeling no pain, I approached the blade. It was calling out to me.

I stopped in front of the weapon. For the first time, I noticed its beauty, the numerous shades of blue, the sharpness of the edges, and the perfection of its body. It was a masterpiece of craftsmanship.

"No mortal could have made this," I thought.

My hand suddenly stretched to grab the blade. I pulled it back. I struggled for breath as I confronted that I had not tried to grab the weapon, but my hand had acted of its own volition.

I saw my hand reach out again. I shoved it back with my other.

Loud cheers of acclamation resonated inside the dome. The faceless voices shouted my name repeatedly, followed by the sound of the clash of weapons and the mutilation of flesh.

The screams of pain and agony mixed with the cheers as the battle deepened.

It was the sound of slaughter.

I covered my ears but to no avail. The sounds were not only in the dome but in my mind.

In the chaos of the commotion, one particular sound stood out: The high-pitched whistling of a blade cutting through the air, succeeded by cut flesh, and behind them, my heavy breathing. "I'm wielding the weapon! I'm leading armies!"

The sounds drilled into my head. Nothing was stopping them. I got on my knees. I didn't hesitate. I pounded my head on the ground like a pickaxe breaking through stone. One, two, three...

The sounds were still there. Four, five, six... black.

Blue. When I opened my eyes, I saw blue. As I was able to focus, I spotted that I was still inside the dome. The moment I stood up, I felt a sharp pain in my head. I placed my hand on it and felt blood.

The dome was quiet. The bodies of my former teammates were still there, and the dreaded weapon still stood on the feet of the sculpture.

I gazed at it once more. Nothing.

I looked away and noticed another shape. Not the dwarf in rags we had seen when entering the chambers. It was tall and wore a blue hood covering all its features.

We stared at each other for a minute, that felt like an hour. My heart pounded with pain, and my ribs, which I had forgotten about, also started to scream for treatment.

The shape pointed behind me. I faced back and noticed an opening that had not been there before. I turned back to the hooded figure, who politely nodded at me.

Part of me was hesitant, but the pain was starting to overwhelm me. I nodded back and made my way to the opening.

As I waddled forward, I found the explanation for something that had disturbed me since the competition's beginning. Sterkur's decisions had troubled me from the start, from leaving comrades behind to the detached sacrifices to achieve victory.

Many Vulcan Dwarves had perished; that was nothing new in the competition to elect a war chief, but the method in which occurred had filled me with doubt.

I had thought that every decision Sterkur made was motivated by leadership, but no, quite the contrary, it was because of ambition.

