

THE ONCE AND FUTURE NERD  
Book II - MYTH MADE FLESH

Chapter 8  
"A Change of Scenery"

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1 TRAVEL MONTAGE

1

We hear the creaks and water sounds of an ocean voyage.

## NARRATOR

We now rejoin the Red Reaver, which, having deposited four of her passengers on the Sugarcane Archipelago, is presently nearing the end of her return journey to the mainland. Given all that had come before, the journey was mercifully uneventful, if understandably a bit melancholy for our party of heroes.

Regan - wounded arms and all - was grateful to be reunited with the vial of medicine that she herself had stolen barely a month ago. And though it did wonders for the pain of her injuries, she continued to consume vast quantities of rum. Several times, Nelson contemplated sharing with Billy and Jen what he'd discussed with Nia and her parents. But he could not fathom how to begin the conversation.

A huge chain unfurls from a winch.

Just under two days after she had dropped anchor on the southwest tip of the archipelago, the Red Reaver dropped anchor yet again. This time, half a mile offshore from the northern coast of Iorden.

A few oars beat the water in two tiny boats.

And an hour so later, two small rowboats came to dock in a busy harbor town, which was loyal to House Mooncrest. These boats of course bore seven admittedly unlikely rebel warriors (with whom you're already very familiar) one very small infant, and one very large Alf Firebeard.

We're in a bustling bazaar in the middle of a desert oasis.

Said Alf made the requisite seedy back-alley introductions, and then departed posthaste.

2 INT. SKETCHY TAVERN - EVENING

2

Buddy, if you don't know what a sketchy tavern sounds like by this point in our story, I don't know what to tell you.

VANDERBERG

So lemme get this straight. Your crew stole the White Lady. The real White Lady.

REGAN

The real fucking deal.

NARRATOR

Regan and Brennen were sat in a corner booth of a tavern, miles away from the tavern where they first met, but no safer or cleaner. Across from them was a wiry man with a sharp face, made to seem even sharper by his thin mustache. Dust and grit seemed to surround him, like flies surround a pig in summer. This man was called Vanderberg, and he--

--Sorry. Brief diversion if I may.

All ambience drops out.

When a Tree Sprite decides what they would like to be called, it is a deeply personal decision, which leads to an entirely unique name. I have one friend who is called The Feeling You Get From An Unexpected Boon After A String Of Poor Luck. And another who is called The Taste Of A Berry Which Is Precisely Ripe Enough But Not A Second More Ripe Than That.

(Sighs)

'Vanderberg,' on the other hand, comes from a sister tongue of the one which became Common throughout Eastern Iorden. And in that tongue, 'Vanderberg' means "from the town." Which tells me, let's see...PRECISELY NOTHING about someone. Why bother even having a name if you're just going to call yourself "from the town"?! Why not just save some breath and be called "man"?

Anyway. Where were we?

Ambience returns.

VANDERBERG

And you don't have it with you.

REGAN

Be a fool if I did.

VANDERBERG

But you'll tell me where it is, if my crew gets your crew over the mountains.

REGAN

That's the offer.

VANDERBERG

Okay, and why should I believe a word of that?

NARRATOR

Regan nodded to Brennen, who carefully held up two empty hands to Vanderberg, and then slowly reached one down below the table and produced a thick, finely-bound tome.

A heavy book hits the table.

VANDERBERG

What's that supposed to be?

BRENNEN

*On the Totemic Traditions of Primitive Iorden.*

NARRATOR

Vanderberg tilted his head, as if prompting Brennen to continue.

BRENNEN

It was in the private collection of Lord Professor Blu'u lo-Ba'al. That's his mark in the margins there.

REGAN

And if you took this meeting with us, then you already checked up on the White Lady getting stolen. If you did that, then you know that collection is where it was hiding all these years.

NARRATOR

Vanderberg paused, flattening his mustache with two fingers and stroking the stubble on his chin.

VANDERBERG

Just walk me through this. How'd you pull off the heist of the century, and why'd you send your spoils away?

REGAN

What's it matter how we did it?

VANDERBERG

It matters so I know you don't think I'm an idiot.

REGAN

Fine. Dumb luck, honestly. We weren't looking for the Lady. Someone wanted a book stolen from the collection, we had no idea it was there.

VANDERBERG

But presumably they did. So how'd you get in?

REGAN

We got a drop-out from the college in our crew, so she knew her way around. We sent in a mage, a heavy, and a lorist.

VANDERBERG

What kinda mage?

NARRATOR

Regan and Brennen briefly exchanged a glance.

REGAN

A storm mage.

NARRATOR

Vanderberg cocked an eyebrow, but did not interrupt.

REGAN

The mage and the heavy took care of the guards, and the lorist went for the collection. That's when they saw the damn thing. Soon as we realized what we had, we sent someone away while the rest stayed behind to finish the original job. But we hit a snag and had to split real quick. So now we're here.

VANDERBERG

So you got busted trying to fence a book after you'd already stolen something worth a thousand times more.  
(takes a deep breath)  
...Yeah, I reckon that's stupid enough to be true.  
Let's giddy-up.

3 EXT. TURNPIKE GARRISON - DAY

3

We're inside a covered wagon as it rolls along a dirt road.

NARRATOR

By steer-pulled wagon, it was a nearly week's bumpy ride to the foot of the Black Mountains. Our heroes' new chauffeurs knew how to maneuver around most of the highway garrisons along the way. But rough terrain in the foothills made the westernmost one unavoidable.

Connor starts to cry.

NELSON  
Dammit.

Vanderberg pokes his head in through the canopy.

VANDERBERG  
There's a turnpike coming up here that we can't get around. If you wanna get through, you better shut that thing up one way or another.

The music box starts playing.

It doesn't do much for Connor. And eventually, it winds down.

NELSON  
That...didn't help.

BRENNEN  
Jen. The...device you carry. Lady Arlene said she captured a lullaby with it.

JEN  
Oh. Okay!

She ruffles through her stuff.

JEN  
Yup, there it is.

*Through Jen's phone speaker, we hear a verse from the "Lullaby" Minisode.*

And Connor settles down.

Vanderberg pops back in.

VANDERBERG  
There's some Elves sniffing around too. Whichever one of you's the storm mage, be just swell if you wanted to send some wind away from us back towards where we came. We'll have to stop at the pike. Then once we start moving again, switch it around so it comes up behind us.

NARRATOR  
Jen did as Vanderberg suggested, and in this way were the Elves avoided.

4 INT. WHITE FOREST INFIRMARY - DAY

4

We hear the mystical woodland ambiance of the White Forest.

## NARRATOR

We return for a moment to a structure in the White Forest, where one might seek medical attention. We've been here before, but at that time we found ourselves in the main wing of the structure, where Elves and their most esteemed guests would go.

At this time though, I must take you to another, smaller wing. You might call it an annex. It was here that the other, less-frequently-spoken-of residents of the White Forest might seek help, should some urgent need arise. That is where we join a rather unpleasant conversation already underway.

## PHYSICIAN

...Some part of the body or another just...grows in a way it shouldn't. We don't know why it happens, unfortunately. But it does seem to afflict a certain number of your kind with some regularity.

## RUBY

*(can already guess the answer)*  
Is there any cure?

## PHYSICIAN

There are treatments that can meaningfully prolong life. But the cost is great, I'm afraid. Typically out of reach for one of your station. Unless your Patrons were to take a particular interest...

## RUBY

Master Ba'at - bless him - is already taking everything he's budgeted for the livery and sending it to my family. Those are the terms of my servitude.

## PHYSICIAN

I'm sure your family would understand if there were a momentary--

## RUBY

--With respect, Doctor, it's not a matter of them understanding. It's a matter of them eating.

## PHYSICIAN

I see. Well perhaps Ba'at lo-Yl might be willing to part with more, given the extenuating circumstances.

RUBY  
*(doubt it)*  
 Perhaps.

PHYSICIAN  
 No harm in asking.  
 A beat.

RUBY  
 There's always harm in asking.

5 EXT. OUTSIDE THE INFIRMARY - A FEW MINUTES LATER

5

We hear Ruby walking down a wooded path.

COUNCIL MEMBER  
 Girl? Girl!

She stops.

COUNCIL MEMBER  
 A moment of your time, if you please.

6 INT. HORSE'S HEAD INN - EARLY EVENING

6

It's the cozy inn we've been in so many times before. The crowd is lively but not too raucous. A good vibe.

NARRATOR  
 The sun had only just gone down over Maeve Bailey's inn, and already the establishment was nearly at capacity. This was good news for its proprietor - for her coffers, yes. But also because it diverted attention from the private conversation she was having with the hooded officer from Freehold who was sat at the bar.

Through this scene, both of them keep their voices on the quiet side. Not quite a whisper, but markedly furtive.

THE PROFESSOR  
 Any news from your sisters?

BAILEY  
 Quite a bit. Molly says Elf patrols have been looking around the orphanages, but she's not sure for what. And Minnie says she's been selling lots of knives and cheap half-swords of all a sudden. Most of them to young  
 (MORE)



BAILEY (cont'd)

women who can't seem to look her in the eyes. Many of them with babes-in-arms, and nearly all have to pay by barter.

THE PROFESSOR

I see.

BAILEY

But here's what gives me pause. Minnie made me promise I'd not say a word to Molly before she gave me any details. Molly's a bit too chummy with the City Guard if you ask her, and she was scared of trouble finding her customers. I think she was scared for herself as well.

THE PROFESSOR

And she feared trouble because she suspected her new customers were fugitives from the Elves somehow?

BAILEY

I think she suspected they were, you know...from the West? I'm reading between the words, but she says she got a good luck at one, and made a point of mentioning her striking eyes.

THE PROFESSOR

She thinks they're living in secret in Armstrungard? Wouldn't someone notice?

BAILEY

You'd know better than I. What did the Chieftain Traft look like?

THE PROFESSOR

...I suppose...not all that different.

A beat.

THE PROFESSOR

But why though? Why are they in Armstrungard?

BAILEY

People who follow battles often flee battles. We always assumed their kind would flee back the way they came. But, I imagine when your side loses you flee whichever way seems safer.

THE PROFESSOR

True enough.

BAILEY

Those two serving girls Bryce brought me. They found an orphaned babe, you know. Human I assumed, because why  
(MORE)

BAILEY (cont'd)

wouldn't it be? But Ry'y lo-Th'yyt seemed awfully curious about the little critter.

THE PROFESSOR

Hmm.

NARRATOR

The officer downed the contents of his mug, uncharacteristically swiftly for a man of his cool temperament.

THE PROFESSOR TAKES A **BIG GULP**.

THE PROFESSOR

Much obliged. You know.... Bryce was rarely in a hurry to make his heart known to you, as I'm sure you know too well.

BAILEY

Aye. He only told you the whole truth if he was singing it.

THE PROFESSOR

*(chuckles)*

Indeed. But I think he was...uneasy sometimes, with the charge of the Civic Guard. More so the older he got. You could see his shoulders slouch just a little, when he was asked to quell a mining rebellion or the like. When he was younger, he'd talk about justice a lot more. As got older he'd talk about oaths and duty, almost like he was...resigned to it. But he never complained out loud to me, probably because he was my superior. I wonder if he ever said anything to you.

BAILEY

Well...he did say something once. Woke up after a nightmare. It was...odd, somehow, so it stuck with me.  
*(beat)*

Not his exact words, but...he said when you're young it's easy to imagine a better world. And then you get your heart broken pushing for it, again and again. At first you get angry, until it feels like you'll explode. So you abandon the better world, little by little piece by piece. Just so you can get through the day without your anger...

*(a grim chuckle)*

...Without your anger poisoning you to death. *Those* were his exact words. And eventually you convince yourself that the younger you was naive. But really, younger you was right, and you just lost the guts to stay angry. And then he looked at me like he was about to cry and said one day a chance really will come for a

(MORE)

BAILEY (cont'd)

better world. If I'm alive to see it, I just hope I'll have the guts to take it.

*(Reflects for a moment)*

I just stared at him, until he said he was overworked and half way to a hangover, and to ignore him. I'd never quite seen him like that.

That just hangs there for a good, long while.

THE PROFESSOR

Right. Think I need a refill.

7 INT. CAVES UNDER BLACK MOUNTAINS - DARK

7

Footsteps trudge through a seemingly endless cave. A few torches burn.

NARRATOR

Our tale now returns to General Traft. As you will recall, Traft found himself in the company of Arden the Annihilator and General Mag Uidhir, as well as a few former members of Traft's own army, lost in the East after the army was routed. The group now sought a route underneath the Black Mountains. We join them as they travel in comfortable, companionable silence.

They walk for a while. Someone chews very loudly.

ARDEN OCCASIONALLY **GRUNTS** AS HE EATS.

NARRATOR

Okay, fine. The silence was fairly awkward. I mean, you can't blame them though, how does one make small talk with a being who died centuries before one was born?

MAG UIDHIR

Er...so, tell me, young man. When you led the people over these mountains to repel the invade--

NARRATOR

--At the beginning of the word 'invaders,' Mag Uidhir glanced back at Arden, who looked up from the large haunch of...something...that he was gnawing at, the beginnings of rage glinting in his eye. Mag Uidhir quickly censored himself.

MAG UIDHIR

That is, the E-L-V-E-S. What was your plan?

TRAFT

Well, things have changed a bit since you were um... among the living I suppose. The elv--er, the folks who you mentioned weren't the initial target.

MAG UIDHIR

They weren't?

TRAFT

No. You see, these days, the people in the East outnumber the, ah, shall we say *hylyet*--

--Sound of meat splattering against the wall  
and the hefting of a war hammer

ARDEN

Invader speech! Must be invaders! To arms!!

MAG UIDHIR

Ack! Don't use *their* language around our friend here. Arden, calm down, our new friend made a mistake. They aren't here. Have some more meat.

ARDEN **GRUNTS** IN DISGUST.

MAG UIDHIR

I must say though Traft, I'm somewhat surprised to hear you use their tongue.

TRAFT

Feels hard to avoid sometimes. But anyway, the folks out east outnumber them ten, maybe fifteen to one. And yet they always fight for them and against us. Hundreds of 'em at a time even volunteer to hold forts where we might enter.

MAG UIDHIR

Mmm. Even in my time there were selfish and cowardly men who collaborated.

TRAFT

But now, it's the only thing they know. They think the only way they're safe is under the thumb of you know who. I thought if I showed them they weren't so safe after all, they'd realize what a raw deal they were getting.

MAG UIDHIR

I see.

Their footsteps come to rest.

NARRATOR

It was then this cohort reached a branching section of the cave. It was in fact the sixth one they had come to today, though admittedly they were struggling to keep track of the time in the utter absence of sunlight.

ARDEN

Uhhhhhhhh...this one.

After a beat, they set off again.

TRAFT

*(quietly, to Mag Uidhir)*

You know, I'm starting to have doubts about this little expedition.

MAG UIDHIR

Doubts? Young one, ye lack faith.

ARDEN

Hmph.

TRAFT

Arden, I know you probably thi--

ARDEN

--Shield here.

TRAFT

I understand the shield is in these caves but clearly it isn't *here*. Perhaps we can take a rest before aimlessly trudging forward, don't you agree friends?

NARRATOR

Their Western-born companions vigorously nodded.

MAG UIDHIR

*(sigh)*

Fine. I suppose your bodies need more rest. Arden, perhaps the young war chief is right. Is there a good place to rest for a bit?

NARRATOR

Their torch light was not bright enough to see Traft's eyes roll.

ARDEN

Hmph.

NARRATOR

Arden didn't add anything else to the conversation, but after another fifty feet of trudging, he held out an arm towards a narrow side passage. The weary Urrkyet rushed forward and collapsed towards the back of the cave.

TRAFT

*(relieved)*  
Thank you, kindly.

MAG UIDHIR

Don't be getting too comfortable here. We should continue the search before too long.

TRAFT

Yeah yeah, just a moment to rest our legs.

8 EXT. FOOT OF THE BLACK MOUNTAINS - DAWN

8

*There's a constant moderate wind around us,  
that occasionally whips up into a gale.*

NARRATOR

Though Traft and his companions had no way of knowing this, it was in fact just before dawn. And just a few miles to the east of Traft and the others, Vanderberg's caravan had reached terrain that was impassable by wagon.

*Vanderberg pulls back the canopy.*

VANDERBERG

All right. It's mules from here on out. I should warn you - the weather doesn't bode well.

NELSON

Meaning...?

VANDERBERG

Looking like the snows came early this year. Which means the way over the mountains may not be passable. There's a way *under* the mountains, but you don't wanna take it if you can avoid it.

NELSON

Great. Cool cool cool. Mines of Moria situation. Very great and cool.

VANDERBERG

Better get a move on.

9 INT. CAVES UNDER BLACK MOUNTAINS - DARK

9

Same ambience as before

NARRATOR

And back beneath the mountains, Mag Uidhir approached Arden, who stood at the entrance, surveying the larger cave network they just stepped out of.

MAG UIDHIR

So.....you have no idea where we - or the shield - are, do you?

ARDEN

Hmph.

MAG UIDHIR

Just how lost have you gotten us, exactly?

ARDEN

*Shield. Here.*

MAG UIDHIR

That bad, eh?

NARRATOR

The two ancient warriors stood in silence for a while, willing the darkness to present any valuable information.

A beat of ambient cave noises.

NARRATOR

But nothing presented itself.

MAG UIDHIR

Listen, Arden, maybe it's time we--

--**EXCITED SHOUTING** COMES FROM NEARBY.

NARRATOR

At the sound of yelling from the back of the cave, Arden and Traft drew their weapons to face the coming danger, but they were met only with their companions hooting and hollering while holding something in their hands.

TRAFT

What is it? What happened?!

NARRATOR

The Westerners came over and slowly opened their hands to reveal four small gold coins.

A couple of coins clink together.

ORC #1

Gul a. Gul a!

TRAF T

What? How--where did these come from?

NARRATOR

The Orcs joyfully pointed toward the back of the cave. As the party waved their torches into the darkness, the promise of more coins glimmered back to them. The orcs rushed forward to find them.

MAG UIDHIR

Lad, lemme see one of them.

NARRATOR

Having recently found another boon of coins, both orcs threw their first coins back towards their compatriots. Arden and Traft caught one each. Arden handed his to Mag Uidhir.

MAG UIDHIR

Lemme see...hold that torch closer...this looks to be...well now, there's a sight for sore eyes. Had figured all of these coin had been collected and melted down.

TRAF T

What are they?

MAG UIDHIR

These coins are older than Arden and I. Come from an old, old kingdom.

NARRATOR

Arden stiffened and strode towards the back of the cave with his torch held high.

TRAF T

Well, gold still spends in our time. No reason to leave it laying here where it isn't being used.

NARRATOR

The torchlight revealed another egress from their cave and the two Westerners rushed forward into the chamber with the promise of more gold.

ARDEN

WAIT!



NARRATOR

Arden grabbed one of them by the collar and stopped him dead in his tracks. But the other evaded his grasp.

TRAFT

Woah, what's the problem there, big fella?

NARRATOR

Arden stalked off after him, far more stealthily than Traft had ever seen him move before.

MAG UIDHIR

No....it couldn't possibly....

TRAFT

Possibly what? Do you know where we are?

MAG UIDHIR

Have an idea, and if Arden and I are thinking the same thing then we need to get our other friend back here now.

NARRATOR

Their second travel companion had by now climbed atop a veritable hill of gold coins in the chamber.

ORC #2

*[Jubliant laughter]*

TRAFT

Old timer, what made these?

NARRATOR

Traft held a torch high at the back of the small cave to reveal long, old, and deep scratch marks in the wall. Mag Uidhir's eyes bulged, his pallor growing even paler.

MAG UIDHIR

We need to leave this place. We need to leave this place now.

NARRATOR

Traft watched Arden finally catch up to their companion. He hefted them over his brauny shoulder and turned to face the darkness, hammer drawn. If Traft didn't know better, he'd say the ancient warrior looked a bit shaken. He peered into the dark chamber for what could possibly cause such a reaction in Arden.

We should start to perceive a pulsating, organic rumble, just *barely* high enough in pitch to be audible on most headphones. It should steadily grow louder through the end of this scene.

NARRATOR

And then Traft became aware of a deep rumble, periodically resonating throughout the cave. His first thought, in fact was "earthquake!" But when he stepped into the chamber where Arden stood he felt the rush of warm, damp air that accompanied each pulse. The hairs on his neck stood up.

And that's when he made out what lay beneath the pile of gold that Arden stood atop - an enormous, scaly claw, wider across than the warrior was tall. Arden stood deathly still, sucking in his breaths, and perspiring in the torchlight. And then one of the talons of the claw twitched.

A few coins skitter loose.

END OF PART ONE.