

Everything Dies

Part 1

by Lois Spangler

She loomed over him, merciless, as Necromancers are wont to do. The earth was stained black with blood; he could hear it wail in horror, if he held his head just right. Old Grovekeep taught him that, in the early days of sun and rain and worm-turned loam. But now the smell of the carnage was inescapable; it made the air sharp and heavy, hard to breathe.

Kolt would have tried to look around, find his friends, but he knew there wasn't much left of them -- or him, for that matter. There were few things as pitiful as a centaur on his knees, and Kolt knew it. But there was nothing to be done.

This defeat was total. His friends were dead, he was dying. And his distant commanders were defending a keep separated from the refuge of Roanne Valle by unknown numbers of Crusader villains, these murderers who burned heartlands, ancestral villages, trees older than the High Elves whose politics were leaving all the right people dead and all the wrong people profiting.

Kolt shuddered in one final attempt to stand, to die with some dignity. His knees, one of which was shattered, gave fully and he squelched further into the charnel.

"Pathetic," the Necromancer shrugged.

She drew back, wickedly snapping her enormous armblade straight out and up for a final killing blow.

Kolt groaned and raised his splintered weapon as best he could.

As the blade keened through the air, flying straight for his throat in that stretched time that affects all of life's most agonizing moments, the only things that went through his mind were the miserable what-ifs of a hundred choices declined.

#

"I'm telling you they're retreating," Kolt insisted.

Spyradon, the centaur lieutenant in charge of Kolt's unit, stamped impatiently. "So you think you're some kind of scout, now?"

"No, sir," Kolt replied, "but look, I mean, beyond the trees, you can see them marching, hell, you can even smell the air getting cleaner as they leave!"

"I wouldn't trust your nose as far as I could kick a tree. Get in line. We leave when the sun breaks the canopy, and we won't be walking into an ambush."

Spyradon had been bred as a lieutenant from his earliest days. He wore the trappings of leadership well, and it became him, with his pale skin and dark hair and haunches. Fortunately he had a level head on his shoulders. But there were quite a few dents in his well-polished armor; for all his grace, Spyradon was no coward.

Kolt plodded off to pick up his lance. He was much the opposite of Spyradon - no armor polishing for him, no lordly qualities. A vigorous life in the Wylden Plateau was much more in evidence on him, from his tanned skin to his hooves more accustomed to packed earth than forest soil. The only thing that matched was the dark shade of their equine halves.

Leaning on his lance, Kolt looked up at the brightening sky through thick fingers of leaves. Nothing but frustration in this unit, he mused. Nothing but frustration and doubt and this sad insistence on playing things safely -- "giving way like the willow," as Tegen, the crystal sprite of the unit, liked to say.

"You've got that look again," Tegen said, hovering just behind Kolt as he finally tucked his lance under his arm.

"Go away."

"Nope," she said, and fluttered above his nose, her reddish hair getting caught up on the draft of her wings. "I know you want to chase the Dark Crusade. But if we can get just a few miles closer to Lurien's group, our defending line is that much stronger. Sure, they deserve to die - a permanent final death, may their blighted souls be sent as far from the Land as can be - but there's an art to picking fights, Kolt. Promise."

"Don't make ones you can't keep."

There was a rattle of wooden necklaces and the creak of old bones. "Safe doesn't mean coward," Alger said, rising, towering over the young centaur. The largest of the Elemental allies were fierce, but when they appeared before you in the shamanic trappings of a full-blooded medicine troll, it was a completely different matter.

Alger Dun smiled, his ochre-red face folding along lines of battle and wisdom and age. "You remind me of me when I was young," he chuckled. "Come. The lieutenant leads us out the meadow."

Kolt nodded and sighed, taking his place in the line behind Master Grovekeep; he was to act as the Elemental Priest's bodyguard. That the priest was out of the groves said a lot;

that a priest this venerable insisted on joining a warband to defend against the Dark Crusade said even more. But Kolt wasn't exactly sure what was being said, though it made him very uneasy.

"Good day, young outrider," the elf said, his silver hair glinting in the sunlight. "Shall we?"

"Aye, your lordship," Kolt replied, stowing his lance at his side and freeing up his hands for walking, or for carrying Tegen when she got tired.

"Lordship yourself," Grovekeep laughed.

In the distance Kolt could see Farran, the unit's ranger, slipping off into the woods to scout ahead.

#

It was almost noon by the time Farran emerged from the trees to the west. With a whispered call and a gesture he brought the unit to a halt, everyone crouching low to the ground, hiding in what brush they could.

Spyradon advanced slowly, keeping his hooves silent on the rich loam. "What is it?" he asked, his voice low.

Farran leaned closer. "The Crusaders have double-backed, but they expected us to follow them this morning, and are in the

wrong position to cut us off. I recommend we travel north northeast for an hour or so before we return to any trail."

"Is due east better?" Spyradon asked.

"Yes, but I hesitate to make us miss our meeting with Luriel."

"If anyone will understand, it's him. Due east. Follow me. Farran, if you would, please," and as the centaur gestured, the ranger faded back into the trees.

"Hey, Kolt?"

It was Tegen, and he knew what she wanted. "Tuck yourself into a saddlebag," Kolt said, and her opaline wings fluttered out of his sight. "And stay out of my candied apples."

"Aw, you're no fun," she said, her voice muffled by canvas and sleepiness.

#

They traveled for two whole days, the Sturnmonts looming closer and closer, with Farran keeping them apprised of Crusader movements. So far, all seemed clear; many enemy warbands were moving west - perhaps the Guild was pressing some advantage that threatened the necromancers' plans. In the end it merely meant a pleasant and uninterrupted walk north towards those lands that now didn't seem so contested.

Tegen stirred in Kolt's saddlebags.

"Now can I have an apple?"

"Still no."

"Can I have an apple?"

"No."

"Can I have an apple?"

"No."

"Can I have an apple?"

"No."

"Can I -"

"Will you *please* give the girl an apple before I -" but Spyradon was cut off in mid-scold. It was early evening, the end of a long march, and all had been gently quiet, in the way that living forests are quiet, with birdsong and dragonflies and the occasional squirrel-rustled leaf.

But suddenly a burst of birds had scattered from the trees, and everything else had gone dead silent.

"Kolt - you and Master Grovekeep get up against those stones. Tegen, you know what to do. Alger, come with me," Spyradon said, slinging his saddlebags up from the ground and onto his back.

"Where's Farran?" Tegen asked, her voice no more than a horrified squeak.

"Keep your tongue, girl, and get out of sight!" Spyradon hissed, moving at a light trot towards where the birds had fled. Alger followed him, his staff-club over his shoulder, muttering low chants to himself.

"Loose your lance," Grovekeep said, crouching in a fissure in the stones.

Kolt undid his lance from the leather stow on his side, holding the weapon at ready, watching the priest as he tapped the ground with the back of his hand, and then the palm, and then placed his fingers deep within the tributary cracks of the fissure that hid him.

"I'll be busy for a bit. I should have done this sooner, but there's nothing to be done about it now."

And then the priest's head bowed low, and he began to sing.

The sound was soft, almost inaudible, but it was sweet and slow and compelling, full of longing and apology, and hope. Grovekeep's rough, ancient voice made it even more affecting, and Kolt found himself drawing close to the priest, needing to offer him help, or solace, or service.

A sharp yell snapped out of the woods and bounced off the trees and stone. There was a sound of battle - trees disturbed, metal against metal, the pluck of a bow. A wicked wind blew across them, smelling faintly of death.

Kolt tucked his lance under his arm, preparing to charge at whatever might present itself.

Something whistled by his head. Wheeling around, Kolt made out the source of the sound and put himself between it and Grovekeep. And sure enough, another moment later a second arrow hit him squarely in the flank.

Kolt turned, limping slightly, putting his armor towards the sniper, but moments later another arrow grazed his back, leaving a long, angry welt.

He stamped furiously, partly from the pain, partly from the frustration of not being able to see his assailant. Kolt glanced over his shoulder to check on Master Grovekeep, but the priest was unharmed and completely absorbed in his song.

Another arrow flew by him, far too close to his head for comfort, and Kolt hunched down, close to Grovekeep, holding his lance vertically in front of him as the best cover he could muster.

Another cry, another struggle. Closer this time, a little south of where he and the priest stood.

"They close in, boy. Move from me. The stone will defend. Care for yourself," Grovekeep said, waving him off with a brush of his fingers.

"But Master -"

"Do as I say. You are of better use elsewhere."

Kolt fought to keep his heart in check. He stepped away from the priest, advanced towards the sounds of battle. Then, to his right, a flash of color - Tegen!

She yammered something probably offensive in her native faerie tongue, a sheaf of arrows gathered in her arms. A Nightfiend came bounding out after her, cursing the little thief.

The moment he was in full sight, he froze. Not from fear, or from running into a centaur foe. No, the crystal sprite had done her job, hitting him with a rooting spell, leaving the enemy immobile.

She giggled, then glanced over her shoulder.

"Well? Go on!" she cried.

Kolt reared up, throwing his full weight into the charge. As the lance pierced the Nightfiend, in those slow moments that

make seconds of combat feel like days, Kolt was able to measure the outrage and hatred in those frozen eyes. They stayed locked on him even as he slammed his enemy into the trunk of a tree, even as he shook his enemy off his weapon, even as he reared up to trample his enemy under hoof.

It was a look that would haunt him for the rest of his short life, a look that imparted the knowledge that even though the Nightfiend knew he was utterly defeated, it meant nothing. *Because everything dies in the end.*

"Kolt!" Tegen shrilled.

He whirled around, the Crusade warrior in pieces on the ground, and galloped towards Grovekeep, who now had an arrow in his shoulder, but was still singing.

"Where's Alger?" Kolt demanded.

"I don't know - I went back around to keep people from sneaking up on us - by the Groves, you've been hit too - wait here, I'll go get the troll!"

There was an awful roar, like a number of souls crying out all at once, and the heavy crash of a tree. Kolt could see the leaves shake where the tree had fallen, and it was uncomfortably close.

"Move away, boy," the priest said.

"But -" Kolt protested, turning to Grovekeep, but he was already on his feet.

"Make way, I said," the priest insisted, sweeping sweat off his face with his good arm.

And then the stone stood up. It unfurled itself, like a troll who'd been asleep with its knees gathered in its arms. The figure rose to stand taller than a troll, and it stretched out its arms and legs, testing them out. Though it was made of stone, it had the mark of bark and tree on it in many places, and looked like a pillar of earth made living.

Two enormous green eyes lit up in its face, and it regarded Grovekeep briefly.

"I will be but a moment," it said, its voice like the echo of a landslide.

And then it marched off toward the fallen tree.

There was quite a lot of noise after that, and the sound of grinding stone and possibly bone. And then there wasn't much else.

"I knew we were short, this unit," Grovekeep said, leaning heavily on Kolt, who tried to be as comfortable as he could. "I kept thinking I'd do it later, some other time. I hate rushing things."

"Do you want ... do you want to sit -"

The priest slapped the centaur gently on an uninjured part of his back. "That takes a lot for you centaurs to be willing to do, and I truly appreciate it. But I'm fine here, with my feet on the Land. Better that way."

"What is that?" Kolt asked, nodding toward where the living stone had gone, watching warily as the priest worked the arrow out of his arm.

"Angry spirit, a strong one," he said, giving up on the arrow a moment. "I asked if she'd be willing to help. And once enough trees started falling, she was more than willing. I think she's particularly happy with the stone body she's got. Can't burn. I certainly wouldn't want to end up on her bad side. -Mind if I have a bit of candied apple?"

"Please," Kolt said, but his mind was elsewhere. "-Can you just do that? Just call up a spirit?"

"No, you dunce. We'd have armies of them if that were true - though we're trying our best. The Land is all about give and take. I ask for a spirit of the Land to grant us help; in return I've got to give a little of myself in the process. You don't get anything for free. Remember that."

"Part of yourself?"

"Gone forever, some say," Grovekeep sighed, finally working the arrow out. The wound had been mercifully shallow. "Some say it comes back to you when the elemental ceases to have a body again. Maybe it's an agreement, maybe it's a permanent trade. Me, I play like it's a permanent trade. Keeps me from getting too greedy."

When Kolt thought of Master Grovekeep, greedy was one of the furthest words from his mind.

"Greedy?"

"Absolutely. Too much power leads to madness. So does the want of it. Remember that, too."

Suddenly Tegen came flitting through the trees, hovering worriedly and darting around. The stone spirit emerged from the trees, carrying Farran, who hung broken and limp. Spyradon stayed a wary distance from the elemental, but Alger walked right alongside her, staff-club over one shoulder, still chanting under his breath.

"I was afraid of this," Grovekeep said, pushing off of Kolt to reach Farran.

Alger glanced up for a moment, shook his head for the priest not to worry about anything.

The stone spirit gently laid the ranger on the ground, then stepped away to take a long look at the world around her. Kolt couldn't help but stare. If he caught her out of the corner of his eye, she melted into the mountains behind her. If he caught her straight on, she faded into the trees around her. It was only when she looked at him that he knew she was there, with those great green eyes measuring him, judging his offense to the Land. To his relief, she smiled at him and went on observing.

Spyradon leaned down towards Grovekeep, who was now sitting on the ground near Farran.

"He was ambushed on his way to tell us of another ambush. Tegen found him, then told us where he was."

"It was a bone golem that tore him apart," Tegen said, her voice quavering.

The spirit glanced over at the group gathered over the fallen ranger and the medicine troll treating him. "Is that what it's called? I ground it to dust," she rumbled, "but even the dust offends me. I hope your friend will regrow."

Tegen landed on Kolt's shoulder, and he held up his hand for her to take. She hugged a finger to her and tried not to weep.

Suddenly Alger was quiet; then he drew a long breath, held it, and after slapping his hand on his heart three times, blew across Farran's mangled body.

It was as if a wind were pulling away his wounds, as if his injuries were made of sand. Bones slowly drifted back to their normal positions; the wounds stopped bleeding and some even sealed themselves up. Farran's breath didn't rasp so horribly anymore.

By the time Alger's lungs were empty, most of the ranger had been put back together. He was still in rough shape, no doubt about it, but he was no longer at death's door.

Tegen leaned her head against Kolt's. "It's not every day you see a miracle," she said.

#

An entire day was spent there, giving everyone a chance to recover. The elemental wandered around the wood, but never very far from camp. Kolt kept still, mostly to keep the arrow wounds from smarting. Farran didn't wake until late the following evening; it took a lot of convincing, mostly on Tegen's part, that he wasn't dead. But by nightfall, Spyradon was already pacing, nervous about losing so much time.

"We should move, even if we don't intend on traveling through the night," the lieutenant said.

"It really all depends on Farran," Grovekeep shrugged. "I can walk. I'm sure my compatriot here can walk as well."

Alger nodded.

"I'm so sorry -"

"You stay away from all that feeling sorry for yourself," Grovekeep snapped. "Can't stand that sort of thing. No patience for it."

"Farran, think you can move?" Spyradon asked.

"I'll hold you back."

"Kolt, will you take him?"

Kolt began to nod, but Alger shook his head. "I'll take the ranger. He'll be close if he needs more medicine. And strike me down if I ever take Master Grovekeep's bodyguard away from him."

Grovekeep smiled, but turned his head and looked toward the mountain. "Will you come as well?" he asked.

There was a low rumble, and then a pause.

"I have remained here a long time," the elemental said, appearing out of the darkness. "If there are more bone-men to crush, I think I should like to do so."

#

They marched a few hours, back towards the northwest, and made camp when the moon was just a fingernail above the horizon. They were clear of forest and were traveling in tall, grassy plains.

It was the elemental that found a knuckle of stones to hide them and keep them from the wind, which had picked up as they'd moved away from the trees. There was a pool of water nearby, and a sound of trickling water whose source no one could find.

Alger lent his hooded cloak to Farran; Spyradon didn't want to risk a fire.

"How much longer?" Tegen asked, wrapped up in the tails of Grovekeep's robe.

"At most, three days," Spyradon replied, looking up at the stars. "I'm hoping sooner."

"Sooner it is, then," a voice said from the darkness.

Tegen had a spell just moments from leaving her lips; the elemental was on her feet and waiting.

A ranger, dressed similarly to Farran but with brighter hair, stepped into sight, his hands raised.

"No harm, I just came to see who was here," the ranger said. "I'm guessing you're Lieutenant Spyradon?"

The centaur was still suspicious. "...Yes."

"Excellent. I'm Osrin, ranger to Lord Luriel himself. If you choose, you can stay here for the night, or you can come to our camp which is less than an hour's march from here."

#

The march was actually quite a bit shorter than an hour, and fairly pleasant, even for Farran - who was slung to the back of Alger Dun. Osrin chatted with them, asked for news and gave any he had. Luriel had been doing well, holding parts of the plains against the Dark Crusade. There had been reports of new and unfamiliar Crusade troops showing up, but none had been substantiated.

That didn't make Kolt feel any better. He swore he could smell smoke on the wind, and not the kind from a campfire.

But once they reached Lurien's camp, which was bustling far more than any camp should at that hour, it was clear something was wrong.

"Osrin! Where have you - oh. Quick, go talk to Luriel, he's got a message for you to run!" a human mending priestess said, coming up to the ranger and his group.

Spyradon snorted contemptuously, glaring at the girl.

Grovekeep tapped the centaur on the haunch admonishingly. "For now we're allies, remember that," he said, and approached the priestess who was about to run off again. "Lady?"

She paused midstride, long enough to make it clear she was trying to get away from Spyradon more than anything else, and bowed to Grovekeep. "Aye, Master?"

"What's all the bother?"

Chewing her lip, she looked over the warband assembled in front of her. Finally she gave in. "The Circle of Nine has called all Elemental League forces back to Roanne Valle."

Everything Dies

Part 2

by Lois Spangler

Spyradon reared up furiously. "We're being *what*?" he demanded, stamping up to the priestess and glowering over her.

To her credit, she didn't flinch. "We just received word. We're to retreat to the Glades, and make our stand there."

"But that leaves all the woods and plains to burn and die!" Kolt yelled, shifting angrily from hoof to hoof.

"This is terrible news," Grovekeep said. "Terrible."

"I'm not going!" Kolt said, still yelling. He was beyond furious.

"And you're sure this isn't some hoax, some trick by the Dark Crusade to make us give up what little hold we have?" Spyradon said.

The priestess looked him in the eye. "Luriel believes it's true, and if he believes it's true, then that's what I believe, too. Now, I can't make decisions for anyone around here, but I'm certain you'd be welcome to march with us. I'll get you some water while you wait."

And with that she lifted up her skirts and scurried off.

"She couldn't possibly understand," Spyradon spat.

"Things should never have become this dire," Grovekeep said.

"I ... am not ... going," Kolt insisted. "I'm not. Someone's got to stay out here and defend the woods, the grasslands, the villages. Who's going to go and tell all the people who live out there to pack it up to Roanne Valle? Is there even enough room for all of those people? And why are we down on our knees before those Crusader murderers? I'm not going!"

"Kolt, shut up," Spyradon snapped. "Shut up."

"I'm not going either," Tegen said. "I think it's wrong."

Spyradon whirled to face the defiant sprite. "The Council of Nine has made its decision -"

"And the Council of Nine is nowhere near here, and like your human priestess there, doesn't always understand," Grovekeep said. "But I will go. I imagine the end will be the same here as it is there."

"That's no way to talk, old friend," Alger said. "You sound like you've already given up."

Grovekeep shook his head. "Lieutenant. I'm with you, as long as you're on your way to the Keep."

"You can't be serious!" Kolt cried. "You, of all people!"

"No, no, he's not," Farran said weakly from behind Alger. "I'm the one who's going with the lieutenant. I'm no good for running around like I used to be. A bit of clout shooting would suit me fine, for a change."

"Are you going, Spyradon?" Kolt demanded.

The centaur regarded his warband, looking them in the eyes. He dug a hoof in the ground, arms crossed.

"It's treason," he said quietly.

"Staying here is treason?!" Kolt retorted. "Are you kidding me?"

"You never were one for rank," Spyradon said grimly. "But I've had enough of your insubordination."

"Then I quit!"

Spyradon rolled his eyes. "You can't quit," he said simply. "You just come with me."

"No."

"If the Council of Nine says it must be done, then they know something we don't."

"Then why don't they tell us?"

"Because we may not need to know. All we need to know is that we're needed in the Keep. End of story. Now let's go."

"Even Master Grovekeep thinks it's a bad idea!"

"But he's been around long enough to know than an order's an order! You're a part of the League, now act like it! -Begging your pardon, Master."

"No, no, you're doing quite fine," the priest said. "Carry on."

"So let's go then," Spyradon ordered.

"I think the young centaur makes more sense than you," Alger said, leaning on his staff. "But I think Farran makes sense, too. Here, commander. I give you to him. He should travel well, if you can find a cart for him to ride."

"You can't do this to me. You can't do this to the League," Spyradon pleaded. "This isn't a child's game, where you change the rules to suit you! This is life, and this is war! All our lives depend upon this!"

"Mine sure does," Farran said as Alger gently set him on the ground.

The ranger put an arm around Spyradon, but the centaur didn't protest.

"Please," Spyradon added. "Please."

"I can't," Kolt said simply. "And I wish you wouldn't, either. I'm leaving. Whoever wants to can come with me. I'd be glad to have the help. But I'll do this alone if I have to."

"I already said I was coming," Tegen said.

"I know, I know, I'm just making a point."

"Right," she nodded. "So, then, who's coming with us?"

Alger yawned, knocked a little clay off his foot, and somehow ended up standing just this much closer to Kolt than to Spyradon. Grovekeep sighed, shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I didn't leave Roanne Valle just to end up hiding right back there again."

The accusation of cowardice stung. "And you?" Spyradon said wearily, looking to the elemental.

"I did not agree to walk to defend a vale I have never seen, magnificent as it may be. I walk to defend the Land herself, and I walk with the one who called me. I remain with the young centaur and the priest."

There was a moment of silence, punctuated by the sounds of a camp being dismantled.

"I will probably never see you again," Spyradon said quietly. "May the Land grant you Her Grace."

"And you as well," Grovekeep said. "Now go. Tell 'em we ran off without you."

Farran waved, and Tegen flitted over to kiss him goodbye. She made to return to Kolt, but she hesitated and gave Spyradon a kiss, too.

"No hard feelings, okay?" she said, and the lieutenant stood at the edge of camp, watching his warband walk off into the night without him.

#

"So what's our plan?" Kolt said as the light of morning warmed the sky.

"Sleep," Tegen pleaded.

"You've been asleep in my saddlebags," Kolt admonished.

"Nuh-uh. I've been scouting ahead," she yawned. "I wish Farran could have come with us."

"Yeah, well I wish a lot of things, too. But what we have to do is make ourselves really useful. We have to stop the Dark Crusade wherever we can."

"We can conscript," Grovekeep said.

"We should see what is around us right now. That will help us plan. If there are Crusaders trailing Luriel and his men, we will stop the enemy from its chase. If there are villages in the way of the advancing enemy army, we move them out, or help them defend," Alger said.

"I like his idea better," Grovekeep answered.

"The little one has reason," the elemental said. "You are all tired from an endless night of travel. Rest. I will watch."

"You sure?" Kolt asked.

"Of course."

Kolt nodded. He hesitated a moment, then turned back to the elemental. "I mean, not to be rude, but what can we call you?"

"Call me?"

"Yeah."

"You mean a name."

"Yes."

"You could never speak my name. Even your priest has difficulty with it."

"Then how about something else?"

The elemental pondered the idea. "What would you call me?"

"Whatever you'd like," Kolt answered.

"This," she said, pointing at the rockier parts of her arm, "what do you call this stone?"

Kolt looked over to his two experts, the elemental priest and the medicine troll.

"Shale," the troll said.

"Shale," the priest agreed.

The elemental thought on this for a moment. "Then call me that."

"Shale?" Kolt asked.

"Yes."

"Okay. I'm going to go with Shale's plan of letting us sleep while she keeps watch. Are we all agreed?"

The others agreed in their own fashion, and it took no time for them to fall asleep.

#

The next few days were a whirlwind of travel and chase; small warbands of Dark Crusaders were everywhere, from scouting parties to larger forces. Though Kolt wanted to go in immediately and take them out, Alger cautioned that it might be more beneficial to wait and watch, and see if any patterns emerged. Just because they'd refused to go to Roanne Valle as the Council asked didn't mean they had abandoned the cause. Any intelligence was good intelligence, especially when it came to Dark Crusader secrets.

Sure enough, in time, it was clear that Crusader units were gathering into a long marching formation, making its way southeast, presumably to Roanne Valle. Elementalists generally

thought that the Dark Crusade would try to eliminate them first, before trying to take on any other faction.

"So, now, what's the plan?" Tegen asked. She was tired of spying.

"Well, I think what we can do is hit them fast and hard, and then run away," Kolt answered.

"If that's all, we should have been doing that from the start," Grovekeep said.

"And make them more secretive by alerting them to our presence? Hardly," Alger answered.

"They're secretive enough anyway, I doubt we'd see a difference."

"They gouge the Land as they walk. I favor any plan that attempts to stop them," Shale said.

"There's not enough of us to go head-on," Tegen said.

"Then there's nothing else to do but hit and run. Come on, we'll try it once, see how it works. If it doesn't, then we try something else," Kolt replied.

"If it doesn't work, I'm thinking we may not get another chance," Grovekeep warned. "Let's start looking for a good target."

#

Kolt charged out of the forest like a ... well, like a centaur bent on killing something. Alger was already out in the clearing, hewing away at Crusaders with his staff-club, muttering what must have been war chants under his breath. On the opposite side were Tegen and Grovekeep, who made sure the little sprite stayed out of harm's way while firing off rooting spells.

Shale just ... tore things apart.

"They're just zombies!" Tegen called. "Just zombies!"

Well. That explained the stench. Nevertheless, Kolt carried on with his trampling and impaling - *might as well finish a job you start*, he mused.

"This is kind of a waste of effort, isn't it?" Tegen added.

"Nope," Kolt replied. "Taking out a resource is taking out a resource."

Suddenly a Necromancer appeared from the woods, looking irritated, then confused, then terrified. He spun on his heel and ran, crying out, but didn't get far before Alger smashed him into the ground. The Necromancer made a little groan, raised a quivering hand, and Alger answered that with his foot on the Crusader's head.

"They'll notice him gone, before long," Grovekeep warned.

"Are we all done?" Kolt asked, surveying the carnage.

"I am tired of killing dead things," Alger said irritably. "Even this little thing is not enough to make me feel better." The troll twisted his toe into the mash of the Necromancer's head, then shook gore off his foot before he made his way to Kolt.

"Okay, let's go, then," Kolt said, and waved everyone off into the trees again, away from the overwhelming stench of decay.

"I want to find another one of those bone creatures to grind again," Shale said, raising her hands to the sun for a moment.

"Let's argue about this while we walk faster," Kolt said. "Who knows who heard that guy."

The rest silently agreed, and they walked for a while in the woods, catching sight of old Crusader camps, smoldering villages, and burnt trees.

"This is what we should be stopping," Tegen said, as they came out into the open space of what used to be a tiny village. "We need to stop wasting our time on Crusader footsoldiers. Killing zombies and bloodsuckers will only go so far."

She flitted around the smoldering ruins, looking into what used to be kitchens, common rooms, sleeping spaces. It wasn't enough that the Crusade torch everything they found; they also came in and demolished these houses, shattering walls, doors, windows. Even beds were reduced to splinters before being put to flame.

"These people were lucky. They fled before the Crusaders arrived," Alger said.

"Lucky? Where are they now?" Kolt said, turning to the troll.

"Not here. But these are people of the Land. They can survive."

"Not with necromantic armies all over the place!"

"Then let's find them and get them to safety," Tegen said.
"Right, Master Grovekeep?"

The priest looked over to her and nodded. "We should," he said. "We should."

The troll put his hand on the elf's shoulder and the two walked off to converse alone.

"I feel like we're falling apart," Kolt said.

"It is because you think too much," Shale said, arms crossed. "All of you do. The matter is simple: defend the Land. There are no other questions."

There was something terribly soul-crushing about the entire scene, Kolt realized. Tegen was scolding him; Shale had a clarity he could only hope to possess. And the two elders of the party were off talking to one another, and it was clear that Master Grovekeep was nothing if not demoralized.

"He looks terrible," Tegen whispered. She was watching the same thing Kolt was.

"He looks hopeless," Kolt replied.

"I wonder what happened to him."

"I hope it doesn't happen to me."

Tegen shot him a look, but it was clear he regretted his words the moment he said them. But by that time, Alger and Grovekeep were walking back to the rest of the group, the troll laughing heartily, the elf smiling just enough for it to be genuine.

"Master? Are you all right?" Kolt asked. He couldn't help himself.

"I've seen better days," the priest shrugged. "I'll see some more."

"We should track the villagers, see how they have fared," Alger said.

"I think we should, Kolt agreed.

"I wish we had Farran," Tegen sighed. "I hope they made it home okay."

"I'm certain they did," Alger said. "You shouldn't worry."

"Stop—" Shale said. They all turned to look at her. "Do you hear it?"

They all tried listening, but even Grovekeep couldn't pick out what she was hearing.

"Feet. Many of them. Moving ... in the north," she said.

"Villagers?" Tegen asked.

"The fires are much too old," Grovekeep answered. "And they'd be walking the wrong way."

"If she hears feet, chances are they're walking in time," Kolt said.

"Good point, boy. Let's get ourselves hidden," the priest said, and they faded into the trees, hiding from the clearing and from the sound to the south. They waited a long time, and all the while the sound got louder. Because once they sat themselves down in the forest, keeping quiet, sounds suddenly came alive. The flight of a thrush was enough to startle.

Tegen squelched a shriek, but she pointed madly towards the northeast.

It was hard to see at first, through the trees and underbrush. But there was enough black leather, bare flesh, and glinting metal to know the Crusade was around. They moved unnaturally quietly; their metal trappings made little noise, their feet making the only sound. They drifted like ghosts through the forest. Alger had to keep a hand on Shale to prevent her from chasing after the enemy.

The procession lasted a while, but certainly not as long as Kolt thought it did. He knew that for fact, but it was still terrifying. By his count, nearly a hundred warriors had passed by. A hundred!

"That is some serious trouble!" Tegen hissed.

Grovekeep waved at her to be quiet.

Kolt moved slowly, keeping his hooves silent on the loam like he'd seen Spyradon do. Grovekeep waved furiously at him to stop moving.

There was a snap of a twig; Shale twisted around to see what was behind them.

And then the bullets flew.

Tegen shrieked and shot straight up in the air. Shale lurched toward the sound of gunfire; Alger ducked and ran away from the clearing.

"Stay together!" Kolt cried, but it was already too late. The best he could do was catch up with Grovekeep and take up his old position as bodyguard.

"Ah, old friend," Grovekeep said, but the humor was missing from his voice. "We are in very bad trouble."

"I don't know where Tegen is."

"She'll come back to us. She's no coward."

More gunshots. There was a rumble from not very far away, and the crunch of something loud and brittle. Then there were cries of anger and dismay.

"That way, boy! Go!" Grovekeep hissed, urging Kolt toward the sound of fighting.

Kolt charged ahead, towards another smaller clearing they hadn't originally seen. Bullets whined around him, thunking into trees as he ran.

There was another roar as Kolt broke through the trees - it was Alger, uttering his war-cry, calling upon spirits of the Land to aid him in beating the unlife out of the enemy. Some

dark-cloaked figure folded and flew from a well-executed sweep of the troll's staff-club.

More bullets rang out; Alger roared again, but this time in pain.

"He's over here!" Tegen cried, followed by more bullets.

Kolt charged toward her voice, seeing out of the corner of his eye Shale and a bone golem rolling back out of the trees, each in the other's death grip.

The fanged gunslinger - pale and wiry, grinning with confidence from under a low-slung, wide-brimmed hat, cloak billowing behind him as he moved -- let loose with both guns, leaping into the air as Kolt charged; luckily for the centaur, there were only three more rounds left. But those three rounds *hurt*. One bullet tore straight through him, leaving a burning brand of flame inside him; another one hit him in the collarbone -- he felt it shatter, blood spattering his face and arm. The last one hit him in the leg.

Because Kolt stumbled, the gunslinger was caught on the lance. The tip went high as Kolt fell, smacked the vampire, and knocked it into the tree. But the centaur couldn't check his momentum; the lance cut through the vampire and crashed into a branch above it, splintering the tip.

The vampire shrieked and lunged for Kolt's throat. Kolt let it have a fist instead.

"Master Grovekeep!" Tegen cried from somewhere completely different.

Kolt roared in pain and got back up on his hooves, wheeling drunkenly. He kicked the vampire hard before it could recover and hoped that final blow would keep it down.

Kolt staggered out of the trees to see Grovekeep and a Crusader - a corrupted priest - standing face to face.

"Master Grovekeep, please!" Tegen yelled, too afraid to come between the necromancer and the elemental.

"You think you have me," the corrupted priest smirked, pale blue lips in an even paler face. His old Elemental garb hung on him loosely, blackened by decades of unthinkable deeds, torn where his leathery wings had emerged from his back. He wore some armor, though not much, and it was accented in an alarming shade of red.

"Whether I have you or not, you die here today. Permanently," Grovekeep growled. "Ussar of Roanne Valle."

"Formerly of. Never thought I'd see you again. Get bored?"

"He's talking to stall. Go out and look for the people he's gathering," Grovekeep said.

But by the time the words came out of his mouth it was far too late. Nightstalker arrows came raining down, many hitting their mark. Grovekeep defended himself as well as he could with his magic, but instead of sensibly running for cover he attacked the corrupted priest with his crystal-topped staff.

Shale pulverized the bone golem she was fighting, but there were chunks taken out of her as well. She got up to her feet and charged the corrupted priest, which was what Kolt was about to do until a blade cut into his side.

Kolt stumbled backwards and brought his shattered lance to bear, favoring his wounded side; in front of him, smiling with satisfaction, stood a Nightblade, twirling her swords for the hell of it.

"Let's see what you're made of, horse-man," she sneered.

She struck out at him, cutting deep. His collarbone sang with pain, and all Kolt could do was stagger back. His first instinct was to rear, but that would leave his belly open to her swords.

She backed away, sensing his retreat. Instead of pressing her advantage she chose to gloat. Now Kolt reared up, and when she dove to take her shot, he brought the lance down on her head.

Arrows flew by him, some sticking in his side.

She hit the ground hard, but amazingly was up on her feet in no time.

"Not bad," she said, and came at him again, swords flashing.

Kolt held her at bay with his lance, but his arm ached and his side ached and he wasn't sure how long he'd be able to stand --

And then the pain subsided, at least in his shoulder. Everything still felt gritty in there, as if not all the bone had been able to heal, but it certainly hurt a lot less.

"Keep fighting!" Alger yelled, and he heard the throaty whoosh of the troll's staff-club, followed by a much meatier thunk.

Kolt was hoping the Nightblade didn't notice his shoulder. Apparently she didn't. She drew back, preparing for another attack, and he darted out of the way -- his side burning -- and kicked before wheeling around to sideswipe her with his lance.

There was no need. Alger finished her off with a friendly tap from his staff-club.

"Forget fighting -- run!" the troll said, and headed back to Grovekeep, who was fighting the corrupted priest with the assistance of Shale.

Kolt spun slowly, getting his bearings, when out of the corner of his eye he saw something shine in the churned earth.

"Tegen!" he cried, galloping to where she lay.

She moved, barely, knocked out of her senses and bleeding badly.

Grovekeep shouted something in outrage; Alger shouted something else back. The corrupted priest tried to say something but had to deal with an enraged elemental.

Kolt reached down to pick up Tegen, his hand covering her frail form.

Behind him, he heard a noise, and then the sound of shattering stone. By the time he turned to look, Shale was nothing but a pile of slag.

Tegen shuddered underneath his hand; he was about to pick her up when a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

A Crusader, like none he'd ever seen before, looked him right in the eye as she stabbed through his hand, killing the little sprite beneath.

"You're more trouble than you're worth," the Crusader said, withdrawing her enormous armlade from Kolt's hand.

She kicked him hard in the knee, the one already weakened by the third bullet, and he crashed to the ground into mud made of gore. Lights flashed around his head; he could hardly think from the pain. Was all of that his own blood? Had the gash in his side been that bad?

"The only way to remedy the situation is to make you worth the trouble," the Crusader added, "and that'll take just a little work on my part. So let's try to make this interesting, okay?"

She took his chin in her hand and looked him in the eye. She searched for something, but apparently didn't find it, and dropped her hand from him.

Silently she stood for the briefest of moments. Then, with brutal style and precision only accomplished through centuries of training, she extended the blade, then angled it down in just the right position.

"Pathetic," she said.

It wasn't a hundred choices declined, he realized. Hell, it wasn't even a what-if, really. It was a should-have-done. He should have gone to Roanne Valle. If he hadn't said anything

everyone would have followed Spyradon and everything would have been okay. And together they might have had a chance. And now -- now his friends were dead, though he still held hope in his failing heart that at least one of them survived -- and here he was, at the mercy of this vile thing, this agent of death.

He shuddered, trying one last time to get to his feet, raising his lance to protect him as best he could.

And then she thrust the armband deep into his chest, cutting his dying heart in two.

But instead of cold blackness, there was just plain cold. Not that it bothered him much, because nothing bothered him now. There was nothing to bother. The undead centaur rose, its shattered knee no longer a concern. It stood up and opened its eyes, seeing exactly what it expected to see: its new master.

"I trust you remember what your friends look like. Chase them down. Cut them down. I have no time for these trifles. If you survive, find me. It'll be the one thing you'll know how to do."