

VILNUS SPELLBENDER AND THE MYSTERY OF THE DAY OF DREAD

by

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The rain fell in thick, pelting sheets on the two riders and turned the dirt road into a course of viscous, grasping mud.

“Lord Vilnus, we should escape this downpour,” the dwarf, Yenwick XI of Clan Steelshield, said over the roar of the deluge from atop his stoic, brown-coated pony, Donkey. The rain ran in rivulets down the animal’s white mane.

Yenwick’s human companion, Vilnus Spellbender, rode upon Magus, his fine, smoky black palfrey. After a moment, the man gave a single, rigid nod.

Yenwick was well aware of his charge’s aversion to discomfort, particularly of the stormy kind. Normally, nothing short of a fire to Vilnus’s sleep chamber would have spurred him into such a torrential night, but word had reached him of recently excavated ruins in which the inhabitants had recorded spells in patterns of feathers.

“I recall a hamlet not far from here,” Yenwick said. “I’m sure we can find lodgings.” The rain beat a steady tattoo on his horned, open-faced steel helmet.

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After a short distance, Yenwick turned onto a side trail no less muddy than the one they'd been traveling. The trail led between several separate groves of mixed oaks and, eventually, merged into the main street of a collection of one- and two-story wooden structures.

"There!" Yenwick pointed to a sign with the faded lettering: *Loggers' Lodge*.

The two drew their mounts to the side of the two-level, cabin-like building and hobbled them beneath an awning that served as the only stables.

Magus snorted and shook her body, sending a spray of water over the two travelers.

"There, there, Magus," Vilnus said with the accompaniment of a shushing sound.

"I swear she does that on purpose," Yenwick grouched.

Human and dwarf scraped the water from their mounts' coats, then gave them a quick brushing and fed them melon-sized apples.

With a pat on Magus's flank, Vilnus, followed by Yenwick, headed around the corner to enter the lodge. As soon as the door closed behind them, the howl of the wind and the patter of the heavy rain grew muffled. Their clothes dripped water onto the wooden floor.

The main room was lit and warmed by two blazing fires in a hearth to either side. The many imbibers stared at the newcomers, and Yenwick, glaring back at their many bearded, scowling faces, resisted reaching for the battle-axe strapped to his back. He noticed one man, bearing a sword and wearing a leather cuirass, who looked at them with more curiosity than animosity. On his breast was a badge depicting an upturned sword, topped by a crown and encircled by a laurel wreath.

"Bah, humans don't know wha' a true beard is," Yenwick grumbled under his breath and unconsciously ran a hand over the single plait of his black, pink-striped beard, as thick around as his muscled arm and falling below his waist.

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“Oi, travelers!” the proprietress called, rubbing a hand on her grease-stained apron. “Welcome to the Loggers’ Lodge. You ain’t from around these parts.” The statement almost sounded like an accusation.

“No, good woman,” Vilnus answered easily, if not pleasantly. “We were waylaid by the weather.”

She looked Vilnus up and down, no doubt assessing the once-fine quality of his sodden cloak and boots, caked with mud as they were. “What’ll ya have?”

“Dwarven fire brandy,” Yenwick said with the authority of a connoisseur.

“Don’t have any.”

“How ’bout dwarven mushroom stout?”

“We’re fresh out,” the proprietress said without hint of sarcasm.

“Fine, your strongest drink. And something hearty to eat.”

“Only the finest for you, Master Dwarf.”