

Heroes Wanted

Chapter 1:

In the Lair of the Lich

The torch flickered from a mysterious breeze.

The short one with the dark hair led the way. She was dressed in light cotton clothing, covered by a leather vest and leggings. She paused for a moment. In the flickering light, her brown eyes bore down on the assembled company. "Well come on you dorks," she said. "We don't have all day. I didn't pay you money just to baby sit."

The voices of her followers were subdued, but many grumbled that this was not a task for any human being that valued their life. The woman deigned to hear them. They're just unnerved by all the skulls, she thought. The foolish followers had thought it was a bad omen. Didn't they know that this evil wizard was just untidy. She glared at the followers and then pushed on into the darkness.

Behind her, followed a huge man, powerful of build. He was not dressed for hard work like his leader, but as if he had been detoured from a social function of high standing. His red breeches were of the finest silk, and the yellow blouse of the softest cotton. Both of these, to his chagrin, were stained, ripped, and soiled beyond almost all recognition.

He also paused briefly, but not in the flickering light. He put a hand to the rough-hewn wall and not for the first time blurted out his feelings. "I'd rather be dancing."

The woman stopped and looked back at the large man. "We're almost there,"

she hissed.

"This is foolishness," Grover said. "Foolishness. Madness."

"No it isn't," Cilla said. "We get paid to do this. Who told you such things?"

Grover nodded his head in the direction of the baggage carriers and mountain guides that comprised their following.

Cilla looked at the followers. "Is that how you guys feel? That this is madness, foolishness."

A few nodded their heads and there were a couple, "yeahs".

"Didn't you see the skulls?" one of them asked.

"Yeah, I saw them," Cilla said. "So what, losers? I'm your faithful leader. Don't you guys trust me?"

The followers looked at their feet.

Cilla sneered at them and walked forward to the nearest follower, a skinny fellow, who wore little but a burlap robe, and carried a huge pack. She lifted his chin up and looked directly into his face. "Go then, if you're afraid."

The servant blinked his eyes and then said, "Really?"

"Yeah," Cilla said.

The servant immediately turned and ran down the way they had come.

Cilla held up her torch and looked at the rest of the followers. "Anymore of you afraid? Who want to leave?"

"Cilla," Grover cautioned.

Cilla ignored Grover. "There's more servants where they came from." She waved the torch. "Go, go if you want to miss out on a chance to see the Lich destroyed. See if

you get credit in the Scroll version."

"Fine with me," one woman said and threw down her pack. "How about you guys?"

"All right with me," said another.

And soon all their packs had been thrown to the irregular stone floor and Cilla and Grover were left standing alone in the cave.

"Well, come on then." She continued down the path.

Grover watched her small form negotiate the rough path, then heaved a sigh and followed. It was a dirty job but somebody had to be her sidekick.

It wasn't long until they reached the chamber door. It was set in the wall of a rectangular room, carved out of the living stone. The door was hexagonal in shape and didn't appear to have anything mundane as a doorknob. Of course, doors to wizard's lairs never did.

The entrance was firmly sealed shut. On its surface were inscribed various arcane symbols. Cilla pulled out an ancient manuscript that was crumbling at the edges. On it were symbols similar to those on the door, with the translation to them written on the side. Cilla traced the symbols on the door and then checked them against her manuscript.

"Is it an enchantment to get in?" Grover asked.

"Un-huh," Cilla muttered. And she read the message slowly. "Speak Stranger and Bug Off."

"Message seems clear enough to me," Grover said, turning to go back the way he came.

Cilla threw down the manuscript. "There must be another way." And she took her knife and started digging at the seal around the door. Pounding with the pommel side she was working on breaking the seal to the crypt which had hidden and protected the Lich's body for centuries on end, while it's spirit had roamed, inhabiting bodies. Grover and Cilla had been hired to kill the Lich.

They had traveled many leagues, over various terrains, braving all kinds of weather when they stumbled upon the unmistakable signs that they we're on the right track.

"Bones," Grover said, pointing.

"Those are unmistakable signs were on the right track," Cilla said cheerfully.

And now, when they were close to the end of their journey, they had been abandoned to complete the mission alone, just as they had begun it.

Cilla chipped away the last of the seal. "At last," she cried. "Where magic fails, brute force wins over." And she pried open the door, letting it fall to the ground with a loud crash.

There was a sound of rushing air as the room that had been sealed for centuries was finally let open.

The torch, which Grover had been holding while Cilla chipped at the seal, suddenly blew out. And they stood in the dark.

"Should I light a candle or curse the darkness?" Grover asked.

"Just ..." Cilla started to say and then stopped.

They saw a dark glowing, fiery light. It was like a ball of fire, suspended in the air, with sparks shooting out its sides. It illuminated the interior of the sealed chamber

and they could see the Lich's body lying mummified on a slab of stone.

The ball of fire grew brighter, and larger, until it was twice the size it had been before, about the size and volume of a grown man's chest. Like the wheel of a wagon.

Grover glanced at Cilla. "Okay, go ahead, you're the leader. Kill the Lich. I'll wait here and sing your praises afterwards."

Cilla scowled. "I'm not afraid." And then she looked at the bright light. It seemed to have grown larger. Within the blue ball of fire were rings of yellow and black. She wiped her brow and looked at Grover again.

Grover motioned her to go in.

Cilla shrugged and made her first step.

But her foot never entered the interior of the chamber. Before she could put her foot down, there was a crack of thunder behind them, and a flare of blue jagged light. And in the light, they could see three or four men dressed in bright outlandish costumes. One of them, a short pudgy man, dressed all in brown leather, with a black cloak thrown over his shoulders, stepped forward.

"Stop," he said, and pointed at Cilla. "We'll take over from here."

"Who are you?" Cilla asked.

"Skippy," replied the man. He and his crew walked briskly up to crypt and blocked the entrance. "I have come to take the Lich."

"What?" Cilla cried. She tried to work her way to the entrance but failed to get through. "But we were here first."

Skippy shook his head. "Destiny calls. We have all played our parts and now it is time to play mine."

Grover asked, "Did you write that yourself?"

"Note cards," Skippy said and held out a few three by five cards. "But if you kindly step back, I have a job to do."

"But what about us?" Cilla cried. "We have come hundreds of leagues, spent weeks looking for this place."

Cilla raised her blade and the other three withdrew, but Skippy stayed and when Cilla drew close he touched her quickly on the shoulder and she stopped dead, paralyzed.

"Can you teach me that trick?" Grover asked.

Skippy shook his head. "Sorry. Trade secret." He paused for a moment and then added. "The spell shouldn't last long."

"Oh well," Grover lamented.

"We'll take care of the lich," Skippy said.

"But ... but who are you guys?" Grover asked.

"*Wizard Collectors.*" Skippy handed him a card, which simply read *Wizard Collectors.*

And then the other three helpers pulled up the hexagonal seal and pulled it in place behind them, leaving them in the darkness of a sealed chamber.

"I hate wizards," Cilla said when she finally broke out of the spell.

Chapter 2: Enter the Wizard

Ballah sat sprawled in the big stuffed chair behind his desk.

The clients sat across from him on the client couch. The one in charge was a strange, wiry old man who either smoked his pipe, blowing smoke rings to the ceiling, or drank heavily from a wine decanter, which had been brought to him. Beside him was his short pudgy assistant, who just twiddled his thumbs nervously.

There was a knock on the door and Grover and Cilla entered.

“Good you’re here,” Ballah said, and gestured to two chairs.

“I just want to say,” Cilla started.

Ballah raised a hand. “Later.”

Cilla closed her mouth and sat down. Grover took the next chair and the room was silent.

The old wiry man puffed on his pipe some more.

After a moment Ballah said, "All right then, you’ve seen them. Are they what you're looking for?"

The wiry old man scrutinized Grover and Cilla, his eyes resting on each feature. Then he took a drag from his pipe and turned to Ballah. "Is this all you have to offer?"

"They're the only two who fit the description so ..." Ballah began.

“What is this about?” Cilla asked.

Ballah held up his hand again.

The old man puffed from his pipe.

“Of course,” Ballah said, “you don't have to take them.”

The wiry old man raised his hand. “Not so quick.” He stood up and when standing he looked like a long stick. He walked over to Grover and Cilla, bending close to Grover's face and sniffed curiously, while dropping ashes in Grover's lap.

“Hey,” Grover said and turned to Ballah. “What's all this about anyway?”

The old man then moved in front of Cilla. Cilla glared at the old man, and backed away from his touch as he felt her dark hair, which was lying flatly around her head after weeks of travel. “Hmm,” the old man mused.

“Hey,” Cilla said in reply. “Don't touch the hair creepy old man.” Her hand crept to her new *Argh* brand knife. She looked at Ballah. “So what the hell is this about anyway? And who is the creepy guy?”

The old man backed away and sat down on Ballah's desk without looking, papers crunching beneath his buttocks.

“Well, what do you think?” Ballah asked again.

The old rubbed his chin, which had perpetual stubble on it. “They'll have to do.”

Cilla jumped up. “Do for what? I'm not doing any more festivals.” She shook her head violently.

“That goes for me too,” Grover said.

Ballah stood up. “Calm down. It's nothing like that. Besides, you were asked not to do any more festivals after the last incident ...”

The old man cut in, “If I may speak?”

Everyone turned to him. And then he spoke quickly and softly in a language no one understood, making wild hand gestures. When he was done he asked, “Any

questions?"

Grover looked around and then slowly raised his hand.

"Yes?" the old man asked.

"What the hell did you just say?"

The old man looked puzzled and then hit a belt he was carrying. "Damn translation belt is on the blink. I'm sorry. I'll have to repeat myself. I'm here from another country."

"Denland," Ballah interjected.

"Denmark," the old man said.

"You know," the pudgy assistant said from the couch. "I don't even know why you wear that translation belt when these people speak the same language as we do."

"Quiet Beoweasel," the old man said softly. And then addressed Grover and Cilla. "Yes, we're from England."

"Denmark," Ballah said.

"Whatever," the old man said. "It's not important. But what is important is we've had some political turmoil for a few years ..."

"Three hundred years," Beoweasel interjected.

"Yes," the old man said, casting a sharp glance at Beoweasel. "Three hundred years. Anyway, just as the empire was on the brink of being united once again, our leader, the young prince Phillip ..."

"Phillip?" Grover asked.

"Phillip," the man said. "It's a real name."

Grover shrugged.

"Anyway, he was, uhm, killed, in an unfortunate accident."

"Hang-gliding?" Cilla ventured.

"No."

"Auto-erotic asphyxiation?"

"God no. It was multiple stab wounds," the old man said.

"That's an accident?" Grover asked.

"It happens," the old man said. "Anyway, you can see how this might be an inconvenience to unification. All the Lords are loyal to him, and once they discover he's, uh ..."

"Been murdered," Cilla said.

"... had an accident," the old man said. "They'll fight and bicker among themselves."

"So," Cilla said energetically. "You want us to take over the empire ourselves, ousting these petty lords. Setting ourselves up as the new rulers and bringing enlightened despotism to everyone."

"No," the old man said. "Nothing enlightened here."

"Oh," Cilla said with obvious disappointment and sank deeper into her seat.

"No," the old man repeated. "For you see, before Phillip died, he was to wed the daughter of one of the Swedish Lords."

"Swedish?" Grover asked.

"Belgian, whatever," the old man said. "She wasn't local. Anyway, this loathsome wom--"

"Princess," Beowesael cut in.

The old man turned to his assistant. "Do you want to tell the story?"

The assistant cringed.

"Anyway," the old man said. "She was already with child – Phillip's child, but not yet married to him. If Phillip had married her then there would be no problem. The Lords would rally around her and his soon to be born child, and we wouldn't be here asking for your help."

Ballah leaned forward. "What he wants you to do is marry the girl."

"Marry," Grover exclaimed. "I don't even know her."

"Not you," the old man said. "Phillip."

Cilla grimaced. "A dead guy marry Phillip? That's gross."

"No, no, no," the old man said, biting down hard, on his now extinguished pipe.

"You misunderstand me."

Ballah interjected again. "Grover, he wants you to disguise yourself as this Phillip fellow and marry the woman, so you can save the empire. It's a fairly simple hero task if you ask me. You're in, you're out and then it's over."

"Is that the honeymoon or the marriage?" Cilla asked.

Ballah frowned.

"So that's all?" Grover asked.

"Sure," the old man said, nodding his head vigorously. "Yeah. Of course.

Absolutely. No question."

Beowesal coughed and the old man kicked him.

"Hey, just a second here," Cilla said, standing up. "There's something wrong here."

"I'm not lying," the old man said. "Okay, I might be--"

"Where do I fit in all this?" Cilla demanded.

"Oh," the old man said. "Oh, that. Of course, heh, heh, now I see. What is your part?"

"You're to be Phillip's personal servant, his *swordbearer*," Beowesael said.

"Me? A swordbearer! Why, I never!" Then she leaned forward. "What's a swordbearer?"

"A kind of servant," Beowesael explained.

"A servant! Me! Are you telling me I have to sit on my behind while he gets to be hero of the empire?"

"Well, yeah." Ballah added, "But in a good way."

Cilla glared at him.

The old man interjected. "Allow me to explain. You'll be the servant because you match the description. Grover here looks like Phillip. They could have been brothers. And you, you're about the same size and weight as his servant. It's not meant to be taken as a slight, but we need two heroes to replace both of them."

"Oh," Cilla said.

"So what am I supposed to do?" Grover asked. "Marry this girl and then ... what? What happens after the wedding?"

"You go home," the old man said quickly, before Beowesael could interrupt and ruin everything.

"I don't know," Cilla said. "Why us? Why couldn't you just pick anybody?"

"Because they need heroes," Ballah said. "Professionals. Someone who can play

the part of a hero without acting. Someone who doesn't have to act the part. Someone who is the part."

"Okay," Grover said. "So all I have to do is get married? No talking to anybody or killing anyone?"

"On my honor," the old man said. "All you have to do is get married."

Grover relaxed in his chair. "And this girl is pretty?"

"Well ..." Beoweasal said.

The old man kicked Beoweasel.

"Stunning," the old man added.

"I don't like this," Cilla said. "Not one bit. Servant, huh?"

Ballah grunted. "It's only for a couple of days."

Cilla still looked unhappy.

"You promised us a more upscale adventure. A dragon slaying."

Ballah made an innocent face. "What's more upscale than working as nobility?"

And besides, you know the dragon market has been weak of late."

Cilla said nothing, kicking the leg of her chair with a booted toe.

Grover nudged her. "Come on, it'll be fun."

Cilla brooded. "For you."

Grover shrugged helplessly at Ballah.

"Okay," Ballah said, "But just now if you get in the habit of refusing ..."

"Okay, fine." Cilla looked hard at Grover. "But just remember, I'm still in charge."