

Vandermine: Children of the Apocalypse

By Murray R. Clay

Chapter 17

Jon laced up and turned to follow Bo back toward the tents. He took long strides at first, and then even began to jog, but Bo calmed him down.

“No reason to run. The horn just means the enemy is on the march again and it’s time for us to assemble. It will take them at least a couple hours to get up the canyon.”

Jon stopped and then fell in next to Bo. Even knowing the enemy wouldn’t be upon them for a while, he still wanted to hurry. As he searched his feelings for the reason he realized he didn’t want the others to leave to take their positions without him having a chance to what—say good luck—or was it goodbye? ‘You’re too damn dramatic,’ Jon scolded himself silently—but the feeling remained.

After making their way back to the tents, then winding their way through a few until they had reached their own, Jon was glad to see the others were all still there—well, the humans, anyway. Though Jon had begun to think of Rodack, Chaldier, Linder, and Silven as part of their group, it was naturally to those with whom he had started this fantastic journey that he felt the deepest kinship.

Cockroach was stretching and yawning as if he had just risen from a nap. Jon could see that he was sporting a shirt of the light elvin mail. Noticing the look Jon gave him Cockroach smiled and held his arms out for inspection.

“Yes, I’m playing the warrior today. What do you think?”

“It suits you.” Jon smiled as if a little boy were playing dress up.

“Yes,” Cockroach said with satisfaction, “they were making a pair of mail trousers for Bo, but they gave me one of the legs and put some sleeves on it!”

“With so much metal clinking away on you, you’ll have almost no chance of putting a knife in anyone’s back.” Bo grinned.

“True,” Cockroach said mournfully, “but I doubt I can sneak up behind--what is it—thirty five to forty thousand of ‘um anyway! Besides, I have to look respectable.”

“Why’s that?” Jon asked.

“Because I’ve been put in command of the rear guard.”

“Whaaat?” Bo said in astonishment.

Cockroach grinned from ear to ear. “Yeah, I tried to tell them I was no warrior, but the men thought that if I were clever enough to get them out of the prison mines I was probably clever enough to keep them alive. I think someone also made the mistake of telling them I was a King’s champion.”

“Nice.” said Jon approvingly. He was going to add a jab about how unusual it would be for so many men to look up to him, but Mentor interrupted.

“We need to depart for our places.” He said firmly but kindly.

“Yes,” Markis agreed, “I want to climb that tower and see if I can spot the enemy from there.”

Jon felt a lump grow in his throat not wanting to leave his friends’ company.

“Guys.” He blurted out.

He realized his voice must have betrayed some of the emotion he felt since everyone turned to look at him a bit strangely. Their looks were of surprise or concern, if anything, not irritation, so Jon went on suddenly feeling green all over again despite all he had been through.

“Guys. Look, I don’t want to sound like a boob or anything, but I really appreciate all each of you has done to—well . . . essentially, to keep me alive, I guess.”

Some of the others made as if to interrupt him, but he went on. “Just like anyone else, I like to think of myself as a pretty tough guy—and I am,” he chuckled as if recalling a fond memory, “but all the strength, speed, and endurance I brought with me from my football training wouldn’t have been enough without you. I mean, hell, what’s a little conditioning against magic, monsters, swords, and axes? If you guys hadn’t been with me along the way to teach, train, and fight with me, I’d almost certainly be dead—magic sword or not.”

“No, no,” Cockroach jumped in before the others could, “not dead—you would still be sitting quite safely in King Nord’s dungeon, and Mentor would still be trying to figure out how to get that fancy toy of yours to work in someone else’s hands!” he winked.

Bo laid a heavy hand on Jon’s shoulder. “Let us not forget, brother, how many of the enemy you yourself have laid low—enemies that might have had us in the back were it not for you.”

Jon looked down and nodded humbly, but Bo wasn’t finished. “I have taught more than a few men swordsmanship and though you often get frustrated with yourself, none have picked it up faster than you.”

Mentor dropped his chin slightly and peered into Jon's eyes intently as if trying to impress something upon him. "Jon, we are all honored to fight with you and call you friend. That sword on your hip was made by Arvallnen himself, and it has chosen you. It will not work in the hands of a great warrior like Bo, nor will it work for me despite my knowledge of magic. It works freely for you—but for you alone. At first I couldn't figure out why such a powerful weapon would choose to be wielded by one who knew nothing about swordplay. However, the longer I know you, the more I understand."

"Wow." Jon said raising his eyebrows. "I really wasn't fishing for a complement, but thank you."

"It wasn't flattery." Mentor assured him. "I will be depending on you to help Alarsari and I take down the Dread Knight. I don't believe either of us has much of a chance alone. You'll know him when you see him. Just remember, if he's closer to your side of our lines I'll come to you, but if closer to mine, come quickly. Pass behind the main battle if our lines should have given at all so you don't get bogged down and delayed."

Jon nodded. Cockroach and Markis clasped Jon's hand silently as if to agree with what Bo and Mentor had said, and they were off.

Even though Bo had said it would be some time before the enemy could march up the canyon, Jon ducked back into his tent and wiggled into his mail. Cockroach and Bo had already had theirs on, but Jon had thought it made sense to stay unencumbered as long as possible. He strapped on his helmet, picked up his round oak shield, and put his left arm through the straps. Then, gripping Vandermine in its scabbard with two fingers

over, and two under the guard he set off feeling much more like a warrior than a few minutes earlier.

Jon picked his way through the hustle and bustle of men and elves making themselves ready, but most of it was lost on him. He was still getting used to the new armor, but he had already decided that he liked it. Though it wasn't as heavy as human mail, it still seemed heavy since he had never worn human mail before, having chosen lighter, less restrictive studded leather armor when he had been outfitted by King Nord. The weight gave Jon confidence as he could feel the protection around him like a steel hug. It actually made him feel almost invulnerable, though he guessed that the dread knight would dispel that delusion if he wasn't careful.

When he got to the corral it didn't take him long to find Linder and Silven since most of the activity was elsewhere. Still, he approached them hesitantly as he had never seen them in armor before and their helmets partially obscured their faces.

“Jon!” one of them called out waving a hand. Hurrying over, Jon saw that it was Linder, sword on each hip, wearing green mail that went to the wrist and to the knee. The helmet that had hidden his face was much like Jon's but with more of a conical curvature on top. Silven was next to him dressed similarly, but he had long leather gloves that went to the elbow where his mail shirt ended in half sleeves. He also wore a thicker more ornate belt than Jon remembered from previous days.

“Nice of you to dress up for the enemy.” Jon quipped even though the butterflies had returned.

“What? Oh—“ Silven looked surprised and then looked down at himself, but before he could answer Linder jumped in. “Yes, these mages love to dress up for battle.

I guess they think their fine jewelry and stunning white horses will convince the enemy that such a fashionable enemy cannot be defeated!”

Silven grinned but still looked a bit like he had been caught playing dress up in his daddy’s clothes.

Jon took a deep breath which wasn’t as satisfying as it had been before smoke and ash tainted the air. “So what now? Should we take our places?”

“Not yet,” Linder replied, “it is not our time yet. Just watch for now.”

Jon looked around wondering what he was supposed to watch for, but soon he understood. While a short while ago there had been a great deal of busyness throughout the camp, the center of camp seemed empty now. However, the sides of their mountainous box were bustling with activity. Jon watched with interest trying to figure out what everyone was doing.

It seemed the elves were forming into two columns along the length of the meadow with several ranks of spearmen on the inside facing camp, and several more ranks of archers behind them. The spears seemed to be too long to Jon. They looked extremely unwieldy.

“Pikes?” Jon muttered.

“Yes.” Linder answered. “Next to the long bow, it is the weapon we are most known for—at least in war. Pikes, as I’m sure you know, aren’t much use in individual, or small group combat.”

“Yes, ok.” Jon nodded remembering reading about the famous Swiss pikemen. The pike was as much as eighteen feet long--though the elves’ seemed a bit shorter--and

could only effectively be used in close formation. “A phalanx.” Jon said to himself recalling the term.

A deep horn resonated throughout the canyon, this time coming from behind them. The three turned to look back at the dwarves’ mountain as the horn blast continued to echo fainter and fainter off the canyon walls. There was a silvery bright cluster by the entrance to the dwarves’ tunnels and it started moving out towards the defensive works.

Dwarves in full armor, Jon realized. As the column moved forward, Jon could hear the rhythmic stomping of their marching feet and the rattling of their polished plate armor against the mail underneath. The sound of marching feet and rattling armor grew as the length of the column grew out of the mountain. Jon couldn’t decide if the armored dwarves looked more like a train coming out of a tunnel or a column of tanks on parade. As Jon listened he felt that the stomping was too loud, too exaggerated.

“Are they stomping their feet on purpose?” he asked.

“Yes,” Silven answered nodding, “they are awaking their Mother Earth so that she might lend them her strength.”

Seemingly in answer to Silven’s explanation, the dwarves started chanting in their own tongue their deep bass voices booming with each footfall. Despite his sword’s ability to translate subconsciously, Jon couldn’t make out what they were saying with the noise of feet and armor in the mix.

“They beseech her to keep her children’s—that’s the dwarves’--feet rooted firmly against her while quaking beneath the feet of their foe, and to make them as great stones in their enemies’ path.”

“Amen.” Jon said seconding their prayer.

The front ranks of the column were closer now passing the three as the thundering procession moved towards the center of the rampart. The dwarves' armored, powerful builds, weathered faces, and determined expressions made them a sight to behold. Jon found himself again glad that they were on his side—even if they were outnumbered four to one.

As they passed, Jon studied their arms and armor. Most of them weren't wearing full plate armor as he had at first thought. It seemed now that perhaps only one in every five of the dwarves was outfitted in full plate. The full plate was, for the most part, the same type of armor that became universal for well-equipped knights in Jon's own late 14th and 15th centuries.

Another one in five of the dwarves had full mail on both upper and lower body and a helmet, but no plate. The balance had full mail reinforced by various pieces of plate such as breastplates, pauldrons for the shoulder, and greaves below the knee. Every dwarf that didn't have full plate carried a large rectangular or oval shield that was almost three-fourths his height. The shields were wooden with metal rims riveted to them.

Many of the dwarves' pieces of plate were embossed or etched, and shields painted, with images of common beasts, ferocious looking monsters, and decorative symbols. Jon could have sat and admired them for hours, but something at the front of the column caught his attention.

When the front ranks of the column got to within a half dozen paces of the rampart, the column split. One half split to the left and the other to the right marching until each side arrived under the towers where the rampart met the steep slope that

became the canyon wall. Without missing a beat the splitting column continued to form a second rank behind the first.

Jon looked down at his round shield which suddenly seemed inadequate. “Gees, maybe I should get one of those dwarven shields.” he said half serious.

“No, I think the shield you have will serve you better.” Linder said.

“I don’t know,” Jon shrugged, “I’m sure I could handle one.”

“Sure but you couldn’t move very well with one. You’re not part of the shield wall. You need to move quickly to any breeches in our defenses and especially to meet the Bloodless when it shows itself.”

“Well, granted, I would be a bit slower with one of those, but the dwarves seem able to move alright.”

“Yes, they marched from the mountainside to the rampart, and if all goes well, they won’t be moving much at all until the battle is over. Dwarves don’t go on campaign and they don’t depend on mobility to win. They set up their defenses either in their tunnels or a short distance from them on the surface if it suits them. Once they’ve set their defenses the only way to defeat them is to completely wipe them out. They don’t break and run even when it would be prudent to do so. They fight like cornered animals all the time—to the last one.”

Linder watched Jon nod seriously taking it all in, then the elf smiled.

“Why do you think nobody wants to fight them—cause they have thick beards and growl a lot when they don’t get their ale?”

Jon laughed enjoying Linder’s sense of humor.

“Oh,” he continued, “and they often plant the bottom edge of their shields in the ground before the fight starts.”

“So that their Mother can help hold aloft their defenses.” Silven chimed in.

Jon continued to chuckle, but soon saw that Silven had spoken with a quiet, almost respectful tone.

Silven saw the look of embarrassment on Jon’s face and quickly raised a hand. “No, please, don’t be distressed by my solemnity. On most days I’m as game as Linder is to poke fun at the dwarves. However, as I watch them form up, it occurs to me that our common enemy will only get to us after cutting them down first.”

Despite Silven’s pardon, Jon still felt like he had been caught laughing at a funeral.

He turned to look back at the dwarves on the field. Every one of the dwarves in the front rank—at least those he could see—had one of the large shields, but only half in the thinner second rank did.

Jon turned to Linder and motioned toward the dwarves. “So, I guess the first rank is the shield wall and the second is—what, backup, guys to fill in where a dwarf in the first rank falls?”

“Yes,” Linder nodded, “you will also notice that of the second rank, the dwarves that do not have shields have full plate—which is actually better. They are the captains and sub-captains of the dwarves. They rush forward to take the place of any that fall so that their best warriors arrive fresh to fight at the points in the line that prove to be the weakest or hardest pressed.”

“A good strategy—at least in my humble opinion.” Jon said realizing he wasn’t really qualified to critique medieval battle tactics, but impressed nonetheless.

Another horn blew. Jon looked to see what would happen next. A ripple seemed to go up and down the columns of elves and pikes. Then, the columns on each side of the canyon started moving beginning with the ends farthest from the ramparts. The two columns seemed to swing in towards the ramparts like doors hinged to the sides of the canyon. The two ends met perfectly in the middle as if they had been precisely measured.

One more short horn blast set the now combined ranks of elves marching forward. The pikemen stopped about the length of their pikes behind the second rank of dwarves, and the elvin archers stopped about a dozen paces behind their pike-wielding brethren.

Once everyone had stopped moving, Jon was able to take a better measure of their order of battle. There was the dwarven shield wall with the thinner second rank behind, then two tightly packed ranks of elvin pikemen, a third, much thinner rank of pikemen, and then four ranks of archers, but with a great deal more space between each archer as compared to those in the shield wall or front pike ranks.

Jon knew without having to be told that normally there would be at least four thick ranks of pikemen—at least in his own world’s history. However, it was clear that the elves felt it more important to extend their lines to the walls of the canyon--thus protecting their flanks from being enveloped by a larger host—than to have the normal deep formations.

“Come, it is time for us to take our positions.” Linder said gesturing to the lines.

“What, no horn for us?” Jon smiled.

“No, the elvin mages and your friends take their positions after the main force is in battle array.” Silven explained.

“Yes, it keeps the mages from getting in the way. Leave it to a mage to find his position while the rest of the troops line up and he’ll disrupt the formation every time!” Linder laughed cheerfully.

Jon smiled when he saw that Silven too laughed at the jest.

As they walked Jon studied Silven with sidelong glances.

“Silven.”

“Yes?”

“Why is it that Mentor can wear no armor and carries no weapons but a staff and a dagger while you, an elvin mage, can wear helmet, mail, and carry a short sword?”

Silven was nodding as Jon finished the question. “Elvin mages and human wizards are quite different. Wizards have a wider variety of spells and magics in their discipline. They are most known for the combative application of their magics. ‘Wizard’ is itself a human word. We elves call them battle mages to distinguish better their spheres of influence and those of the mages of my people.”

“And elvin mages are healers and manipulators of nature, right?” Jon added trying to show what he had learned from Mentor. Jon noted that although Silven had been nodding as he made this statement, a look of surprised injury flashed ever so briefly across his face when he used the word ‘manipulator’.

Before Jon could feel out what he had said wrong, Silven’s face straightened. “Our magic is applied to further the healing, growth, and prosperity of our people, our crops, and the animals under our care.”

“Noble causes.” Jon replied thoughtfully. “So I guess using destructive spells prevents wizards from using armor and most weapons?”

“Partly true, yes, for the armor at least, but it also a matter of the time they must devote to their art. Although wizards do live quite a bit longer than the average human, they don’t live nearly as long as an elf. Mastering their magic takes their entire lives, and they simply don’t have time to train with common weapons.”

“Amongst my people, apprentice mages are first trained as light infantry and cavalry troops—and of course, as archers—before they study magic in earnest.” Linder added. “You see magic to our people is an enhancement to other skills and to life in general. Only the high elves—our oldest and wisest leaders—use magic as the primary tool in fulfilling their callings—both in peace and in war.”

“Very interesting” Jon replied sincerely, though he was equally occupied with gazing around at the troops they passed. Jon felt like a curious child staring wide-eyed at a military parade as he passed through the ranks of archers and then pikemen before taking up a position in the space between the last rank of dwarves and first rank of elvin pikemen.

Jon took a deep breath and sighed. He placed a hand lightly on each elf’s shoulder. “Well, it seems like since coming to this world I’ve been doing only two things: fighting or receiving an education—sometimes both at the same time. You’ve both added to my knowledge. Now hopefully, we’ll stay alive long enough for me to make use of it!”

Though he had only known the elves for a few days, their jovial interactions had made him comfortable enough with them to lay his hands on their shoulders. It came as a

bit of a surprise, then, when he felt them both squirm a bit—though not obviously or rudely so—under his hands. He quickly removed them, a bit hurt by their reaction. Ignoring their own discomfort, the three just smiled awkwardly and looked off toward the smoldering forest—toward something that made them much more uncomfortable by far.