



## IN THE MAP ROOM

(an excerpt)

R. Scott Kimsey

This was the place all right. The dry, cold smell of decay stung my nose. I'd been in enough places like this to know that we were the first ones to set foot inside for centuries.

Even so, an amber light of unidentifiable source faintly illuminated the room, giving the room the hue of dusk in the Blade Desert. Near the far wall, a statue of a dragon rose from the floor, thin and wiry, twisting its way up a stone pillar. The statue was carved from glossy black stone, a stark contrast to the dull gray of the floor. The pillar looked to be white marble. The dragon's head came to rest abruptly at the top of the pillar, empty eye sockets staring at the floor. Narrow stairs carved into the pillar led to a space behind the head where a bronze brazier stood empty. I could see now that the back of the dragon's head was missing. Someone crouching beside the brazier would be able to see through the dragon's eyes. The rest of the room was cast in shadow.

"Cheerful," said Eleya, moving beside me. "The kind of place where people in songs fight their last battle and die miserably."

I looked at her. Her eyes were bright, alive, her mouth upturned slightly. If there was going to be a battle, she'd enjoy every second of it.

"That's why I like having you around," I said, grinning. "Undying optimism."

She started to respond, then frowned, her eyes hardening. I followed her gaze to the floor of the room and saw the dark shape moving into view. Logosh.

Squinting, I saw a map of Khorvaire carved into the floor, the familiar coastline of Darguun giving way to Zilargo, Breeland, and points beyond. A layer of dust had settled on the map, interrupted only by a set of Logosh's footprints. When the bugbear reached the middle of the room, the amber light brightened, illuminating some of the shadows along the wall.

Suddenly, I wasn't so happy.

It wasn't the smell or even the foul look carved into the face of the dragon that bothered me. Four large, metal creatures, canine in suggestion but nothing like your average wolf or dog, stood motionless along the curved wall of the room. One stood on either side of the dragon, two others further along the perimeter of the room, one on each side.

Logosh saw them. He slowed a bit, turning his head warily side to side, watching the creatures as he moved across the floor. They weren't active yet, but when they lit up he'd be in for one hell of a surprise.

"Nasty looking things," said Eleya, her voice even.

I nodded. Understatement of the year. "Iron defenders. I've run across them a few times in Cyre, though not as big as these." I motioned toward Logosh. "When he gets to a certain point in the room, they'll activate."

I didn't like Logosh's chances. As a bugbear, he's big, but he looked small crossing the map room forty feet below, massive cudgel held easily in his hands. The circular room spread wide around him, walls rising past where I crouched, curving seamlessly upward to form a dome. Flaking paintings of ancient images – both men and beast – decorated the ceiling.

Logosh reached the activation point. The eyes of the defenders sprang to life, pulsing a deep, burning red. They started forward, metal joints scraping like fingernails on slate. I shivered. Whoever was taking care of these things had gone easy on the oil.

"One less bugbear for us to kill," said Eleya. Her blue eyes shone, framed by copper

hair that reflected the light of the room. She almost sounded disappointed. Almost.

Logosh had stopped moving, eyeing the approaching constructs and fingering his weapon. The defenders' feet clanked against stone as they advanced.

"You can't just let him die," said Cory. I turned, surprised, and saw her eyes glistening in the amber light. I clenched my jaw.

"Hell we can't," said Eleya.

I said, "I thought I told you to wait outside." Having led men in the War, I'm used to people obeying my commands. Now I was flanked by two people who would fast merely because I suggested they eat. And if we got into any trouble in this place, I'd be stuck watching over a fourteen year-old while trying to deal with it.

Cory glared at me. "I don't remember you being my father." Eleya grunted. That passes for a laugh from her sometimes. She turned back to the map room. I started to say something incredibly intelligent when all hell broke loose below.

Logosh let out a roar like only a bugbear can. Shook the floor, even from our vantage point. If the constructs had even minimal intelligence, they would have paused to reconsider things. They don't, so they didn't.

A defender sprang forward, leaping across the last few feet to get to Logosh. It couldn't have positioned itself better. Logosh swung his cudgel around and knocked the thing a good twenty feet, his weapon crashing against iron like he was ringing a gong. Unfortunately, that left him open to the other three.

Iron defenders aren't big on tactics. They don't have to be. They've got brute strength and mindless determination. Anyone who comes across them and says they aren't scared is either lying or stupid. What bothers me most is they don't make a sound apart from the scraping of their joints and the pounding of their heavy feet. When you're used to battle cries and the roar of

charging creatures, it's unnerving.

They came at Logosh hard. A defender to his right caught him behind the knees with its shoulder, sharpened maw trying to bite down on the bugbear. Its jaws clacked on open air. Another came at the same time, this one from the front. Logosh couldn't get his cudgel around in time and he went down, claws slashing across his chest as he stumbled over the defender behind him and fell to the floor. Blind luck on the part of the defenders. Could say it was lucky for Logosh too. When he fell, a third defender missed a clean shot at his throat.

Logosh knew he was in it. He scrambled back on his rear, trying to get his cudgel in position. The defender in front of him charged again, and Logosh rammed his weapon down its throat. The defender pulled back, violently jerking its head side to side, the end of the cudgel protruding from its mouth. The hit gave Logosh the time he needed to scramble to his feet, and then he moved as fast as I've ever seen a bugbear move, heading straight for the wall we were sitting on.

The defenders paused for a moment, as if not quite sure what to do with something running away. They figured it out quick, though, and gave chase. The first defender Logosh had hit was back on its feet, joining the pursuit, and the one with the cudgel in its throat was swiftly chomping the weapon to bits.

Logosh hit the wall below us and began scrambling, growling beneath his breath. The wall was a lot easier to go down than climb up, and he only made it a few feet before sliding back to the floor. He didn't get a second chance – the defenders were there, feet crashing on stone, jaws opening then clanking shut in apparent anticipation.

Logosh yanked a dagger from his belt and face them, then sidestepped and backed through a gap between two stones, part of the rubble that littered the edge of the wall. Only a single defender would be able to get to him, and even that one would have to force its head

through the gap to do it.

I saw the fur on Logosh's back glistening with sweat. He smelled like a wet orc.

"Help him!" said Cory. Hysteria crept into her voice.

"Not a chance," said Eleyna. "World's a better place with one less bugbear."

I rubbed between my eyes. Couldn't help but understand Eleyna. She had lost everything in the last war, most of it at the hands of the lawless goblinoids that roamed Darguun.

I looked at Logosh. He slashed at a defender, but his dagger bounced harmlessly off its metal face. The defender bit and Logosh recoiled. Too slow. The bugbear was missing a chunk of his forearm, blood welled in the wound and matted his fur. He let out a yowl of pain.

Tears welled in Cory's eyes.

Eleyna watched the fight. Smug. Satisfied.

Like I said, understandable. Lots of things happen in war. Things that make you want to gather your hatred and keep it burning inside of you. My gut reaction was to leave Logosh to the defenders, and that's what bothered me. I can make a tactical decision to leave someone to his death, but when it becomes instinct I worry about my humanity. The Last War was over. Would we be slaves to it forever? Unless something changed, we would be.

Changes can start with small gestures in forgotten places.

"By the Five Nations," I muttered, loosing the rope at my side. I began lowering it to Logosh.

"What are you doing?" Eleyna grabbed my arm. I shook her off.

"Enough! Either help me or get out of the way."

She leveled her eyes at me, then took a step back, arms folded. I nodded. So that's how things were.

I lowered the rope the rest of the way. Logosh had a few more cuts, but the defenders still

hadn't figured out how to get at him.

"Climb!" I yelled. He needed to take advantage of my good nature while it lasted.

Logosh looked up, then back to the defenders, who were now raking at the rocks, managing to dislodge chunks here and there. When Logosh looked at me again, I saw distrust in his eyes, and pride as well. Funny how human his eyes were. He hesitated, then nodded curtly.

I don't know what they feed young bugbears in the Seawall Mountains, but Logosh was heavy. Almost yanked me over the edge before I could brace my feet against the lip of the wall.

"Some help would be good," I said, through clenched teeth. Small hands grabbed the rope. Cory. Her strength was negligible, but they say it's the thought that counts. People who say that have never been launched off a wall by the weight of a bugbear.

Eleya stayed put about foot from the rope, eyes hard. Logosh was nearly to the top when he saw her. He watched her steadily – a look that held no fear, no challenge, only contemplation. Then he thrust his arm toward Eleya, hand open. Eleya regarded it a moment, spat to one side, and stalked away. I shook my head, then grunted as Logosh resumed his climb.

Old wounds die hard. Anyone who tells you otherwise is a damn liar.

Eleya glowered when I gave Logosh a bit of our healing draught. Tough. She'd get over it. Cory, on the other hand, was mooning over Logosh like he was a kitten. The bugbear didn't seem to mind. She was murmuring to him in some gravelly goblinoid tongue.

"No," I said, pointing a finger at Cory. "You two don't talk unless everyone can understand you." The Last War might be over, but I still didn't trust Logosh. Or Cory, for that matter.

We were in the hallway leading up to the map room, a couple of torches providing

flickering light. I could see the dim glow of the strange amber light, though, and the edge of the crumbling wall a few yards away. The defenders had gone silent. It was clear we were going to have to take them on together, unless we wanted to pack up and go home. That idea didn't sound half bad until I remembered that Cyre was now the Mournland. The pain of that never goes away, but I've managed to keep it pushed to one side, drawing on it whenever I need motivation. Or a reminder. Right now, we were on the trail of a Cyran relic. I'd be damned if I was going to let it fall into the wrong hands. The wrong hands being anyone but me.

“All right,” I said, surveying the group. Not exactly genius, but it got their attention.

“Anyone besides me ever fought these things before?”

No comments.

“Then I'll tell you what I know. These things are stupid. That's bad for us, because they're too stupid to run, too stupid to negotiate with, and too stupid to trick. Hell, they're not even smart enough to realize they're dead until you grind them into powder.”

Logosh grinned. “That do be sounding good to me.” His voice was what I imagined a talking bear would sound like. His breath smelled like rotten meat, even from five feet away.

Eleyna smirked. “That's fairly optimistic for someone who just got his hairy ass handed to him.” She didn't even bother to look at Logosh.

The bugbear growled low and began to rise. Eleyna started up as well, one hand falling to her rapier. I'd just about had enough and decided it was time to say so.

I stood. “Anyone who doesn't want to do this,” I said, “get out. Now. If that anyone is either Logosh or Eleyna, leave your half of the map room key before you go. Otherwise, both of you shut up.”

Cory smiled, then looked down. Eleyna looked like she would eat nails. Logosh looked like he already had, and was ready to spit them at me. I tensed, waiting for one or both to attack.

It would have to be some kind of irony if the only way I could get them to cooperate was to make them mad enough to kill me.

They both sat down.

“Good,” I said, keeping my voice steady and trying to look in charge. “Listen, as good as grinding them to bits sounds, we don’t have the muscle to do it.” Logosh looked like he was going to object, then eyed the partially-healed gouges in his arm and said nothing.

I continued. “Disabling is the key. I don’t care how damn stubborn these things are, if their legs don’t work they’re going to have problems. The legs move on metal joints, weakest at the knees. Hit them hard and they’ll go down.” I looked around at the less than happy faces in front of me.

“Any questions?”

Logosh and Eleya had the same question. No surprise there. Bugbears are born ready to fight, and Eleya is the most battle-eager human I’ve ever met. They wanted to know whether, once we killed off the defenders, we were going to fight it out right there on the map room floor.

I shook my head. “No. Once we beat the defenders, we use both halves of the key to activate the map.” I gave Eleya a look that I hoped said You do know how to do that, right? She nodded, so I assumed she got it. “Then, we each go our separate ways with the information. No one goes after anyone else. We’ll meet again somewhere down the line, and at that point, if you two want to beat each other to bloody piles of meat, fine.”

Eleya and Logosh glared at each other. Cory looked like she might cry again.

I sighed and turned toward the map room. Those four defenders were still down there, and I wasn’t looking forward to messing with them.