

A
STONEHEARTH

Fan Fiction

By CrazyCandy

Todd

Year 309 of Sevenforge – Summer

It was a warm summer night in the tiny village of Sevenforge; peaceful and silent as it usually was, hidden among the mountains in the valley. That night was not much different at first than most nights; peaceful and lull, the clouds slowly traveled the dark midnight sky in silence. Todd was on his post of night watch, gazing down into the darkness of the forest down below from atop of the watch tower that was the highest building in the settlement, standing tall and proud upon the hill at the border of Sevenforge.

At sundown, the shadow of the tower spanned halfway across the village, and the sight from the top was simply beautiful. The small lakes to the West, the thick forests to the East, the stony peaks of the mountains to the North and to the South, one could see the entire valley.

Only the endless sea of trees and their thick green canopies shrouded the evil plans and deeds that the goblins weaved in their hidden realm of darkness, hidden from the watcher's ever vigilant eyes.

Despite the greatest efforts of those pesky goblins, they failed every attempt to wreak havoc in the village. However, it wasn't

always that way...

Before the tower was built, goblin raids in Sevenforge were a common sight, as they were happening on a regular basis and many had lost their lives when the goblins appeared unexpectedly in the darkness of the night. Some spoke tales that sometimes they even dared to strike in broad daylight. They charged into the settlement and as fast as they could, they took the people's much needed resources, robbing the village of food, fuel, and even the children's toys. Ofttimes, the village could barely make through the harsh winter, because the raids stripped short the village of food and firewood.

The townsfolk tried to reduce the goblins' ability to attack by surprise by cutting down the nearby forests entirely, stripping the earth naked, leaving behind only large open spaces around the settlement and they planned to use the wood from the trees to build walls and barriers around the village. However, the goblins adapted to the new situation quickly, and changed their tactics...

The goblins tamed wolves and rode them fiercely into battle. Their wolf riders were able to quickly fill the gap between the trees and the buildings, and were easily able to overcome the barriers by leaping over them.

Year by year the population decreased; people either could not

make through the long winter or were killed in a raid. The few who tried to leave the valley in hopes of a better life were ambushed among the trees. The fall of Sevenforge appeared to be inevitable.

One day, however, a traveler arrived who said of himself that he arrived from a very distant place, from far beyond the known land. Along him came a young boy, the age of ten. It was the afternoon of the last day of autumn, the year 241, and he asked to stay for a few days, and the townsfolk agreed to give them shelter, despite the lack of supplies even for only themselves. He carried three strange items, and as a sign of gratitude, he handed them to the villagers.

The first item was a polished horn of an unknown animal with a shining copper mouthpiece. The villagers had never seen anything alike. He took it to his mouth and blew... the sound it made echoed across the valley and the people of Sevenforge just stood and gazed with awe. The traveler told that it can be used to alarm the entire town in times of danger.

The second item was also not familiar to any of the townsfolk. The stranger said its name was *bow* and that it was a powerful weapon. It was a curved stick of wood with a string tied between the ends. He said it can be used to shoot what he called *arrows* at enemies from a distance, then after he had said that, he demonstrated the usage of this weapon, aiming at a distant tree. As he released it, the arrow flew across the field within a blink of an eye and pierced

deep into the trunk of the tree. Later he taught the carpenter how to make this powerful weapon, and trained some of the warriors for the secrets of their usage.

The third item he gifted was only a piece of paper, nothing unusual at first, but as he rolled down the paper, a blueprint was unveiled, which then he gave to the builders and told them to build it on top of the nearby hill. It was the blueprint of the watch tower.

Four days later he left the village without anyone noticing and nobody ever heard about him ever since. But even during his short stay, he had done Sevenforge the greatest service that anyone had ever done in its history. The people ever since remember him as the *Savior of Sevenforge*. People were so busy at the time that they barely took notice of the young boy who had arrived along with the strange traveler, yet he remained left behind by him. The boy told them that the man could no longer take care of him and that he wanted the villagers to take care of him from that time, and so that is how they did, and the boy grew up to be a strong member of the village...

After the man had left everything changed as *hope* finally returned to the people's hearts in Sevenforge. That winter, the people did not hide in their shelters, shivering in cold and starving; instead, they faced the cold harsh weather and worked together to save the future.

The carpenter worked hard to craft the new weapon; the brave warriors, the defenders of the town trained hard to master the use of it. The builders, along with everyone else worked as hard as they could with the construction of the new watch tower, defying the freezing cold winds and the snow, and with every day that passed, it reached higher and higher.

Four months had passed and the winter was finally over – the goblins' raid season was about to begin. The defenders of Sevenforge were confident about their skills with the arrow and the bow, and three sentries gazed down from the mighty tower; ready to blow the horn before the incoming attack.

It was the eleventh night of the spring of year 242, when the goblin wolf riders finally appeared in the distance, and the horns were blown for the first time since autumn to alarm Sevenforge. Moments after the alarm was sounded, everyone was prepared to fight back – every villager; every single man and woman, armed with tools and other things thirsting for vengeance.

The watchers on the tower prepared their bows to rain arrows to the enemy, while the rest of the archers were hiding behind rooftops, waiting for the perfect moment to appear and surprise the enemy.

The goblins came from the west; the fierce wolf riders storming out of the forest in a single scattered group. The archers in the tower started shooting, hitting some of the riders. Some fell from the

saddle while their mount continued to charge towards the village, some others' mounts fell forward, and both them and their riders stumbled several yards ahead before they finally laid flat on the ground.

The exact number of attackers were unclear, though... as after the battle, each watcher reported immensely different numbers – one said it was thirty, the other said it was only fifteen, while the third said it was hundred bloodthirsty goblins. Todd's grandfather, who was the age of sixteen at the time, was one of the sentries that day, and he was confident that it was only about thirty goblins down there, but he admitted he did not really have the time to count them, but he was certain they were nowhere near a hundred.

As the raiders approached the buildings, the archers on the roofs also began raining their arrows at the enemy, then as the goblins arrived and were between the buildings, they grabbed their swords and spears and axes and stormed down at them from behind, effectively surrounding them. By that time, victory was certain, and there was a huge slaughter. Most of the raiders fell in battle, and only a handful of them managed to flee.

The following day there was a grandiose celebration; every villager gathered to celebrate the first victory they ever had over the goblins since they first appeared.

Ever since, the goblins failed every single time they returned, but

they did not surrender. Every few months the goblins returned again, most likely hoping to catch the town off guard, but each time they fight more desperate. It was the responsibility of the sentries of the watch tower to keep the town safe and warn the other guards in time...

Their last attempt to strike was a few nights earlier, and because of that, Todd was sure they wouldn't return that night, as they normally prepared for at least a full month before the next attack.

His fellow sentry in the tower, Letty thought the same way, – most likely – as she was snorting silently, leaning against the wall of their tiny cabin high in the sky, cuddling her bow. Todd thought she was rather cute, sleeping like that, and he had not the heart to disturb her dream, for the night was silent, and the goblins were still licking their wounds somewhere far among the trees.

Todd gazed into the distance, but occasionally he took a short glimpse at Letty and sighed, thinking how beautiful she was. They were good friends and had a lot of fun together, but he was afraid to confess his love to her, fearing they would not be as good friends anymore in the case she would refuse.

Eventually, his gaze was stuck upon her, completely forgetting about the outside world. He stared at her for about ten minutes, then he looked back into the distance, suddenly remembering his

responsibility. He looked around over the thick forest down below, then he saw something strange far away...

The flames of a campfire illuminated the ancient castle's ruins at the northern foothills. *Suspicious*, he thought to himself. He quickly found himself in a dilemma whether to go out and check it out, or stay and ignore it. *Perhaps it's just some traveler*, he thought, *or perhaps goblins?*

He decided it was best to go and see it from closer; he reached for his bow and arrows, as well as the horn in case the town was in danger. It was one of the many horns that were carved out of wood since the village's first victory over the goblins.

He began descending down the ladder, then paused for a moment when only his head was still inside the cabin...

He looked at Letty and wondered if he should awaken her, as he thought leaving her like that would get her into trouble, and potentially endanger the village. *What should I do?* he wondered. He hesitated for a while, but finally decided not to disturb her dream, as he was certain it was only some traveler. *The goblins wouldn't reveal themselves like that*, he thought.

He descended down the ladder all the way to the ground, then in complete silence, he rushed into the forest, towards the northern ruins.

He walked a few steps into the darkness of the forest, then he realized that he had forgotten something important: to bring a torch. Todd turned back, and walked all the way back to the base of the tower, frustrated by the stupid mistake he just committed. *How could I forget to take a torch?*

As he arrived, he stepped to the bucket of oil, in which the torches were waiting upside down. He took one, then for a few moments he waited for the excess oil to drip down back into the bucket. Just a few steps away there was a lantern that filled the base of the tower with light, attached to a pole; he held the torch into the fire, and within a blink of an eye, the oil-soaked rag at the torch's end was in flames.

He was ready to head back towards the forest, and when he arrived to the base of the hill, a distant voice that echoed in the darkness called his name.

“Todd!” the familiar voice said.

Todd gazed around to find the source, but could not see anyone.

“Up here!” she said.

Todd looked up in the direction of the tower, and saw Letty climbing down the ladder. She carefully walked down the hill to meet up with him... To face him...

“Why aren't you up there?” Letty asked him with a slight, but

nervous smile on her lips, glancing at the torch for a short glimpse.

“I... I just...” Todd muttered nervously.

She bobbed her head to the left with her smile still on her lips. “You had to obey nature's call, right?” she said, but her face was full of the doubts she could not hide.

Todd blushed. “Y-y-yes...” he replied. He realized she was upset for leaving her alone, and that she probably saw the light at the ruins, too. “Why did you come down?” Todd asked her, but he knew it well what the answer was.

“I saw fire at the old ruins, and you were nowhere when I woke up, so I was worried you've done something stupid.” she explained. She leaned slightly closer and raised her eyebrows, “You weren't about to do something stupid, right? Right?”

“Right,” he replied with a faked smile on his face.

She was not impressed by this response, judging by the look on her face. After a few short moments had passed, she crossed her arms and turned around, facing away from him without saying a word.

“Letty...” said Todd, hoping to reconcile with her, “Sorry, I just...”

Letty turned back to him, “You just what?” she said with a slightly impatient tone in her voice, gazing directly into Todd's eyes, giving him a certain feeling of discomfort.

Todd struggled to find the right words; he just stood there, gazing back into Letty's beautiful green eyes.

Quite some time had passed in silence as they stared each-other like that... Eventually Letty started to smile, easing Todd's discomfort – he smiled back at her.

“Oh, come here, you...” she said as she reached out to hug him. “You just didn't think this through, and I'm too sleepy and grumpy to realize that.”

“So you forgive me?” Todd asked her.

“Of course I do!” she replied. “I actually shouldn't have been angry in the first place... After all, I was the one who fell asleep on her watch... it is you who should be upset and not me.”

Todd's smile widened as he heard her words. “So... should we inspect it?”

“Inspect what?” said Letty.

“The fire,” he said.

“Oh, yes... that!” she giggled. “Yes, we should, but first we need to wake Vince to watch while we're out. He's gonna love it!”

After they had awakened Vince, he reluctantly replaced them in the tower, then both Todd and Letty headed into the forest towards the ruins...

There was an old path leading there, though it was mostly overgrown by plants, but that was the easiest way to reach the ruins.

They walked side by side among the trees in awkward silence. Todd thought it would be time to break the silence and chat...

“So... did you sleep well?” he whispered.

“Not really,” Letty replied. “I had a bad dream.”

“Oh,” said Todd. “That's not good. What did you dream about?”

Letty glanced at him for a few short moments, her still face was illuminated by torchlight. “I don't want to talk about it; it was just a dream.” she said.

“What would you like to talk about?” Todd asked her.

Letty stopped walking, and so Todd did the same. “Todd...” she said as she sighed. “What do you think we'll find at the ruins?”

“I don't know,” Todd replied, wondering what has come to Letty's mind. “We don't have to go if you don't want to,” he added after a short pause.

Letty hugged herself, and Todd could read her concerns on her face. He reached out to take her right hand, hoping to comfort her, he gently stroked her soft skin with his thumb. As he touched her hand, he could feel that Letty shivered, and was clearly anxious. He gazed deep into her eyes and said: “We can turn back!”

Letty lowered her eyes; her lips moved to speak, but no words were there to leave her mouth. She pulled her hand away from the grasp of Todd's hand; she faced away from him, turning towards some old tree, taking a couple of short steps.

“Letty?” said Todd, gently touching her shoulder. “What's wrong with you?”

Todd stood behind her, unable to comprehend Letty's behavior. He blamed himself and wondered what wrong he could have done. "Letty..." he said.

She turned back to him with tears in her eyes. "I'm afraid," she said; her voice weak and filled with doubts.

"Of what?" Todd asked her.

"... of losing you," she said as a response, then she started weeping.

Todd pulled her closer, embracing her with one arm while holding the torch away from her with the other. She placed her head on his shoulder and hugged him, holding him tight.

Her weeping eventually came to an end. "In my dream..." she muttered. "I saw you..."

"Really?" said Todd startled.

"Yes," she replied. "You were alone, standing in the middle of a dark place inside something –, something like a cave or a building, I can't remember. You were surrounded by goblins... I was watching from above... I couldn't move, I couldn't do anything... and then they... they..." she said, but her words faded as she began weeping again.

They stood there for a couple of minutes while Todd held her close. "It was just a dream," he told her. "You need not worry about it."

His words seemed to have calmed the girl, as her weeping stopped. Letty looked at his face, and watched silently. Many moments had passed, and the silence only was broken by the owls of the night. Suddenly, Letty kissed Todd on his cheek. Todd looked at her – he was startled and mesmerized at the same time.

Letty smiled as she carefully left his embrace, and removed the last of teardrops from her face. Suddenly, she leaned forward, going in for a second kiss, but this time it was aimed for Todd's mouth, and so their lips touched for a glimpse of a moment. Then there was a sound coming from behind the countless centuries old trees...

They were suddenly aware that they were surrounded by a company of armed goblins. “No sudden moves,” said the goblin leader who wore a bronze breastplate and carried a heavy stone maul, atop his head was an ornate cap that seemed not to serve to protect him, but to make him look silly. Todd and Letty were stripped of their swords and horns, and their leader tossed Todd's torch to the ground and put the fire out. They were escorted towards the ancient ruins where they saw the fire...

They marched in the shroud of darkness, climbing the slope that led to the ruins, and both of them had trouble finding where to place their feet without falling.

A hundred or less yards laid before them until they reached the

once proud walls of the castle of old times when Letty took a wrong step and stumbled and rolled twenty yards down the slope until she was stopped by a tree in the way.

Todd immediately rushed to help her. “Stop!” shouted the goblin leader, but Todd ignored him. He arrived to Letty, and he saw she did not move. “Letty!” said Todd, afraid that he might have lost her forever. “Please, wake up!”

He could barely see a thing, as the moonlight was blocked by the clouds. He gently tried to awaken her. From behind him, he heard the footsteps of his captors. “You carry her,” commanded their leader. Todd had carefully taken her into his arms, and lifted her from the ground.

As he turned, he saw one of the goblins pointing a pointy spear towards him. “Go!” the nasty creature commanded. With careful slow but sure strides, Todd climbed the slope to the castle.

Among the ruins they arrived to the campfire, beside which a bald goblin with dark gray beard was laying alone. He wore a dark and simple mantle that covered most of his body, save for his ugly head and his hands. Beside him laid a staff carved with strange runes. Todd looked at him with dismay.

“Greetings,” the bald goblin said. “You’re probably wondering who I am.”

Todd said nothing, and the goblin went on, “My name is

Zambarn. I am a wizard, as you may have guessed.” he said – though, Todd would have never guessed he was a wizard. “You may put her down by the fire.”

Todd carefully laid her down on the ground close by the fire, and noticed her head was bleeding. “She's bleeding, her wound needs to be tended,” he said.

“You need not worry, I can clearly see from here that the wound is not serious,” said Zambarn. However, these words did not manage to reassure Todd. “You can sit down, you are my guest for the night. She'll be fine soon.”

Todd looked at the wizard; “What do you want from us?” he said.

“Oh, yes. I almost forgot,” said Zambarn. “I actually lured you here with a purpose. What would that be, you might want to ask. So I shall tell you that:

“There is an ancient artifact away from here, far to the North. It is hidden beneath a temple that once belonged to a powerful empire known as *The Phoenix Empire*. Unfortunately, the door which guards the artifact is shielded by a powerful and very ancient spell – “

“And what does it have with us?” Todd interrupted him.

“Now, now... if only you could let me finish,” said the wizard calmly. He held a short break before he went on; “Through extensive research, I have found that in order for the seal to be opened, one needs be of the blood a certain person who once during the time of

the *Empire*.”

“But isn't that person dead by now?” said Todd.

“Wow, you are smart, aren't you?” the wizard mocked him. “Apparently, the blood of that person passed down to the descendants, and in theory, someone who descended from the that person can let us pass into the temple.”

Todd was rather puzzled by the goblin wizard's tellings. “Well,” said he. “We'll wish you good luck finding those descendants. Now if you don't mind, I and my friend would like to leave.”

“You are free to leave,” said Zambarn. Todd looked at him startled. “But the girl stays,” the wizard added.

“What? No way!” Todd demanded. “We are both leaving.”

Zambarn looked at him with amazement, both his eyebrows raised high and his eyes were wide open. “I think you don't quite understand the situation. We are leaving you here, and we take the girl with us. You may choose if you wish to stay here dead or alive,” he said, then he pointed to some of the armed goblins further away from them, sitting together by a second, smaller campfire, chewing on raw meat. Beside them laid Todd's and Letty's swords in their scabbards as well as their horns. “As you can see, we severely outnumber you, and you are armless. It is only your fortune that I am your captor, and not some of the forest tribes that reside in the valley, as I am much more civilized than most of my kin. But I advise you

not to test my patience.”

“What do you want from her?” said Todd in a demanding tone.

“Oh, dear,” said Zambarn, placing his palm upon his forehead. “She has the blood, genius. Why would you think I told you all that about the artifact?”

Todd was startled and could barely comprehend what was happening, as it was late in the night and he was tired. “How would you know?” he asked.

“Your kin has a strange obsession when it comes to remembering the past, and we quickly found, you folks have tremendous amounts of notes about what you call *family trees*.” he said. “We found many of them among the ancient ruins of the *Empire*, and we went through great trouble trying to find one of the descendants, but to our regret, we found that each one of the family lines abruptly ended, and we were about to give up the search, until we came across this tiny village of yours, and we stole some documents from your village a few weeks back. I compared them with the family trees that we have found earlier, and came across a specific family with a name similar to that of a family I found in the ancient notes. It started with the girl's grandfather, who happened to come to live in your village some sixty years ago.”

Todd glanced at Letty; she was slumbering peacefully by the fire. “She's the descendant you are looking for?” he asked.

Zambarn chuckled. “You are starting to get it,” he said. “Oh, gods, I can't believe someone can have such a slow mind.”

Todd looked at Zambarn, and gazed deep into his black eyes. He realized that for whatever reason the wizard was seeking to get the artifact was not with good intent. “I'm not letting you take her from me,” he said.

Zambarn was speechless and amazed. Before his mouth could open to say, Todd sprang up, and rushed towards the second campfire where his sword and horn laid. He ran with the speed of lightning, grasped the hilt of the closer of the two swords and without lifting the scabbard, he unsheathed it; with his other hand he took the wooden horn, and blew it, and its furious thundering sound echoed in the valley.

The goblin warriors were confused at first, but then they reached for their weapons, clumsy and slow, aiming to take Todd down. One of the goblins had a spear, and he was the first to attack, thrusting his spear forth; Todd dodged, and dropped his horn as he grabbed the shaft of the spear, pushing it with tremendous force, and the goblin had fallen to his back, letting go of the spear. Todd turned the tip towards the goblin lying on the ground with a quick movement, and proceeded to finish the defeated enemy. However, the goblin evaded with a barrel roll, and the spear was stuck deep in the earth.

The second to attack was the goblin leader with the funny cap. His fearsome stone maul flung towards Todd with an arcing movement from above, but he moved to the side with incredible speed, and as the goblin tried to regain balance after the strike that missed, Todd's blade clashed against the heavy bronze plate on his back with such force that even though the goblin was unharmed from the strike, he was pushed to lay flat face first in the dirt.

Startled by their leader's fall, the other goblins backed away as Todd looked towards them. He had braced himself for the next attack, but then there was a thundering sound coming from close by...

It was coming from the wizard who held an ornate gold plated horn to his mouth, making a sound much different and much more terrifying that made the villagers' wooden horns sound shoddy in comparison. A distant shrieking sound answered to the horn's call that seemed to come closer and closer. The goblins, save for the wizard, fled the scene at the hear of the sound.

Above them a shadow appeared in the darkness; a shadow of a large flying creature, and it flied in circles for a while, descending lower and lower.

Todd saw as the wizard was preparing to lift the still unconscious Letty from the ground, and he prepared to escape the scene. Without giving it a second thought, Todd charged at Zambarn, leaping high in

the air from just a couple of strides away, holding his blade high above his head. This would have sliced the wizard in two, but it did not...

An invisible shield was protecting Zambarn, and as the sword struck it, the blade shattered into a thousand tiny fragments, and Todd was pushed many yards back, landing beside the other sword that was stolen from them.

“Did you really think that would work?” said Zambarn as he laughed.

The ferocious flying fiend finally landed on a clear area among the ruined castle walls. Its imposing wings stretched to at least forty feet. Its four feet outfitted with sharp fangs, that each were at least five inch long. The vicious head of the creature was protected by a dull, heavy steel armor that was formed to fit from one single piece of plate. Below the plate lined two rows of monstrous teeth, each reflecting the light of fires as the monster's mouth opened to unleash a fierce shriek that filled the otherwise calm and peaceful valley. The long body of the outlandish beast spanned at least twenty feet from its head to the end of its sinuous tail. Its skin was covered with thick scales from top to bottom, each of the color of midnight. Before Todd's eyes towered a creature of ancient legends and tales – a mighty dragon. Upon its back was a saddle, fitting perfectly for a

goblin to ride.

Zambarn approached the dragon with Letty in his arms, and climbed the saddle. The beast prepared to lift off, slowly flapping its terrifying wings, rousing the dust into the air and upsetting the fires. Todd grasped the hilt of the sword lying on the ground, then he began to run towards the creature without fear, and when the dragon was already in the air, he leaped high in the sky and managed to get a hold of its robust tail.

Within moments, Todd found himself high in the sky, clinging to the dragon's tail, fighting not to lose his grip as the dragon flailed its tail, trying to lose him, but he was determined to save his love. Below them the landscape quickly changed as they flew forward with great speed; they traveled two leagues within a couple of minutes.

After they had traveled countless of more leagues, the dragon began to do several barrel rolls as another attempt to be rid of him, and then as it saw that Todd was still holding tight, the beast suddenly stopped mid flight, and as they rapidly fell towards the ground, it flailed its tail towards the head as it snapped and Todd heard the clicking sound of those terrible teeth, but luckily for him, he managed to climb higher to a spot which the dragon could not reach with its mouth.

There may have been just a hundred yards left under them when the beast stretched its wings once more, and they began to glide. Below them lied an endless desert, and ahead of them the rising sun beyond the horizon. Todd saw as the ground was getting closer with each passing moment, until finally the dragon tilted its entire body, sliding into the sand, and Todd could no longer hold as the burning friction of sand that assailed him became overwhelming, he finally lost grip, and he rolled down a dune of sand until he landed face first at the bottom.

He looked up and saw the dragon and its rider glancing back at him from atop a tall dune of sand, the beasts wing stretched high. “I admire your determination,” said Zambarn. “But you are a fool.”

The beast emerged once more into the sky, and then they headed back towards the rising sun. Todd was left alone, kneeling in the gloom, broken and exhausted, without any supplies. An overwhelming rage filled his mind as he blamed himself for the failure, and his eyes filled with tears...

“No! This cannot end like this!” his pain filled voice echoed in the endless desert. He arose from the sand, his stubborn mind still determined to save Letty, although all hope seemed to be in vain.

The dawn was passing slowly as the sun before him arose higher and higher in the clear blue sky. The heat became greater and greater

with every passing moment, and every further step became more of a challenge to him.

Above him was not a single cloud, and the heat was now unbearable, and the sun was not even high in the sky yet. The wind was calm, and in the sky above him wheeled a couple of birds of prey. The endless sea of sand before his eyes was dotted with cacti of various shapes and height; some standing proud and tall, some not even reaching a feet high, stacked together in tiny green and yellow and brown piles.

Todd marched many miles, until he could no longer bear with the heat and the thirst. He approached one of the taller cacti, and prepared to lay down in its shadow, and tried to lean against it, not realizing the sharp needles that covered the entirety of the trunk. The thorns pierced the skin on the back of his head, and he leaped to his feet stunned by the surprise, and without realizing what has happened, he unsheathed his blade, and slashed into the trunk of the giant cactus, cutting a deep wound, from which water started to leak. A sudden relief filled Todd's heart as he consumed the *blood* of the desert plant.

After a short rest, Todd continued his march towards the East. Long, long miles passed by. He could barely perceive the passing of time, as it seemed to him that time was still in the endless desert; only the barely noticeable movement of the sun gave out some hints

that time was in fact still running...

Many hours later, the sun was sinking far behind him, and the sky was slowly turning red. A full day had passed since he had last slept, but he refused to rest, even though, he had no idea how many more miles he had to travel. He began to think his pursue is hopeless, but he rejected the thought of giving up; he knew Letty was counting on him, and that he must not let her down...

Soon, darkness shrouded the endless sands, and the sky was black, dotted with stars and the bright moon high in the sky. The oppressive heat of daytime was replaced by the cold of the desert night. The cold chill of the air bit deep into his skin, and he shivered...

Far ahead in the distance, Todd finally saw something; a light of fire crawled upwards from behind the horizon, and his heart was once again filled with hope. He forced himself to march on with greater pace. He was deeply curious and concerned of what might he find at the source of light...

As he arrived closer, beyond a dune Todd saw a campfire. Two men surrounded the flames and they chattered in a language unknown to him. From the distance, it appeared to him that they possessed no weapons, and saw that close by them an outlandish animal with long neck and a strange hump upon its back was resting,

packed with tools and other things. Todd had never even heard of anything even remotely similar, though, he did hear about tales of strange animals that lived in the desert to the South and to the East of Sevenforge.

Todd concluded that the strangers were traders. Reluctantly, Todd decided to slowly descend the slope of the dune and greet the travelers.

“Hello!” said Todd in a bit awkward way. “My name is Todd, I don't mean to disturb.”

The travelers looked upon him, and inspected him, their eyes carefully measured him from top to bottom. Finally, one of them introduced themselves in Todd's language; “Greetings, Todd who means not to disturb,” he said. “My name is Ikkili, and this, my friend is Bagka. What might one strange fellow like yourself do alone in the dark in the middle of nowhere?”

“My friend was kidnapped,” Todd replied, and the expression of his face suddenly turned concerned. “By any chance, did you see a goblin riding a dragon?”

The two travelers turned their heads to one-another, amazed they were; they shared a quick glance as if the news somehow made them anxious. They both turned back to Todd; “Dragon?” said Ikkili doubtfully. “Where did they head to?” he asked.

“To the East,” Todd replied. “The goblin wizard said there's a

temple with some artifact.”

Bagka's eyes opened wide, while Ikkili's face appeared to be full of concerns. “Grievous news that is,” said Ikkili.

“Why did wizard steal your friend?” said Bagka.

“I don't –,” said Todd, choking on his words; “It was all very confusing. He spoke of some temple, and of some ancient empire and their blood and –“

“Blood?” Ikkili screamed, breaking into Todd's words. “We must go now, at once!” he commanded.

Todd was speechless and startled, and really could not comprehend once again what was happening. Ikkili and Bagka were on foot, and within a couple of moments they packed their things, and prepared their beast of burden for the journey. Ikkili looked at him and said, “Come! We'll tell you more on the way to the temple.”

Todd did as he said, and followed them, although by then he was exhausted, he somehow felt this could be his chance to save Letty...

The three travelers marched towards the East with hurrying strides, and Todd could barely keep up with the pace, but he was determined to march with them.

“Will you tell me now what's happening?” said Todd.

“Bad things,” Bagka replied. Todd was not impressed by the answer.

“If the goblin's right, your friend will open the barrier to the artifact that lies beneath the temple,” Ikkili explained. “And that, my friend, is bad news for us all.”

“What is this artifact?” said Todd. “And why would she open it?”

“Well, not by free will, I tell you this. As for what is the artifact? Well, one might expect that the artifact is some tiny thing that lies on a sacred altar, collecting dust in some obscure chamber of old times. That is exactly what it is not,” he explained.

Todd looked at Ikkili; “Then what it is?” he asked.

The strange traveler looked back at him, and said, “Well... to simply put... it's something much bigger, and I tell you this; you don't want it to get out of the temple!”

“This all only happening,” said Bagka. “Because dumb wizard long ago made stupid things.”

“What?” said Todd. “What wizard? What did he do?”

“What my friend was trying to say,” said Ikkili. “That long ago, the wizard who made the spell to seal the door made a mistake.”

“What did he do?” said Todd, repeating himself.

“Long time ago, during the era of the *Phoenix Empire*, the wizards of the time battled and defeated a powerful creature, but they failed to destroy it, and instead, they locked him into a prison under the temple we are heading to.

“So together the wizards forced the creature into the prison where

it was supposed to remain until the end of times. Their leader, his name was Aurn, created a powerful unbreakable barrier around the cell, and sealed it, using his own blood, and as such, only his own blood could only ever remove the barrier. However, he made a mistake...”

“Stupid mistake,” Bagka put in. “He made children.”

“A really unfortunate mistake,” Ikkili added, looking at Todd. “Aurn eventually passed away, but many centuries later, the order realized that there were now multiple people that could potentially open the barrier and endanger the world, so it was decided that the descendants of Aurn had to be purged, and so wizards of the order began to hunt and remove his descendants one by one.” Ikkili looked deep into Todd's eyes; “I'm sorry, young boy, but if the goblin is correct, your friend shouldn't exist.”

Todd looked back at him shocked, then back forward, and they had no more words to share for the rest of the road...

Finally, they arrived to the temple that stood tall above a crystal blue oasis, surrounded by beautiful green plants and blooming flowers of many kinds and colors. The sun was now almost at the top of the sky, and the heat was once again unbearable.

The temple was built upon a cliff that towered above the waters below, and there was a sandstone stairway leading up to the entrance,

though it was severely ravaged by the touch of time, but it seemed stable enough to be walked upon.

They left their beast of burden behind at the base of the stairs, and as they climbed the ancient steps, Todd wondered how were these strangers planning to face the wizard and his dragon, but they seemed to him that they knew exactly what they were doing.

At the top of the stairway, there was a stoned pavement leading to the gate. Halfway there, Ikkili made them stop, and he glanced at Todd. "You look to be in very bad shape," he said. With his hand, he reached under his sand-soaked white robe, and took out a potion that contained a bright red liquid. He removed the cap, and handed it to Todd. "Drink," he said.

The tasteless drink was cold and soothing, and it seemed to fill Todd with strength; his weariness faded, and he felt ready to face any challenge that awaited them inside the temple.

Just before the entrance a rack of torches was standing, beside it a flaming torch placed in a stand. Ikkili took one of the torches and lit it by the flaming one. Then they entered through the enormous archway that was crafted to perfection by stonemasons of old time.

Inside was dark, but the light of torch lightened the hallways that was slightly curved towards the left. They arrived to an immense hall; the ceiling which was supported by twenty colossal columns

was three-hundred feet above them. On the left and the right, four pairs of gigantic windows faced each-other, and the sunlight that entered through them illuminated the sandstone walls and floor and columns.

Directly facing the doorway through which they entered, about half a thousand feet away, towered the massive gate, sealed by blood and magic. By its base a tiny figure standing by an altar, his hands in the air, the goblin wizard, Zambarn, gazing up towards a second figure, levitating high in the air, facing the massive and plain wall; a young girl, and her name was Letty.

Todd unsheathed his sword, and began to charge, Ikkili tried to stop him, reaching after him, but he was too slow, and he was already halfway there, his footsteps echoed in the hollow hall. Zambarn glanced behind him, and saw the young boy fiercely approach him. “So we meet again, young boy,” his voice was calm and chill. With a wave of his hand, he casted some magic, and suddenly before him stood four robust goblin warriors, well-armed and ready to battle.

“Todd!” the sweet voice of Letty came from above as she screamed to warn him. “Watch out! They are everywhere!”

Todd halted and inspected his surroundings; three-three goblins from both the left and the right, and two goblins behind him whom appeared from nowhere and they carefully approached.

“I beg you, Zambarn, please!” Letty cried from above, her voice

filled the hall with echoes of pain and sorrow. “Don't hurt him!”

But the goblins did not stop, and Zambarn ignored her cries. Todd was surrounded, but neither him, nor they dared to strike first. He circled in place, measuring each one of them, trying to catch them off guard. Suddenly, he slashed towards one of the goblin who had a slightly more yellow complexion than the others, but he dodged, and his blade sliced the air in two. However, they still did not strike, and Todd was confused.

“They are just illusions!” the voice of Ikkili was heard, and indeed, they were in fact just mere illusions as Todd's next strike hit the yellow goblin, and instead of falling down, he turned into air, and so did the others. Todd was so startled and in awe of what he had just seen that for a moment, he had completely forgotten the menacing presence of Zambarn.

“The wizard!” Letty screamed. “Todd! Watch out!”

The boy turned his gaze to the wizard who held in his hand his horn of gold. He held it to his mouth, and unleashed its thundering voice that shook the ancient sandstone walls. Within a couple of moments, the roar of the dragon was heard.

The stained glass window was shattered into a million miniature fragments that clicked upon the ancient sandstone tiles below.

And there he was – the beast; tremendously violent and mean.

Flying across the room, among the ancient columns that held the ceiling up high through many ages; he made a full circle above them, then he dived in to strike:

He was heading towards Todd with incredible speed – such speed, that his eyes could barely follow the creature's movements. It opened his mouth as if it prepared to feast upon him, but no – a bright beam of fire headed fast towards him, and almost roasted him, if only Ikkili did not dive in to push him out of reach of the flames.

As the beast wheeled around the mighty great hall, the wind made by its menacing wings roused the thousand years old dust all over the place, Todd had a hard time following the monster's movements.

But there he came! Diving in for a second attack, and just like last time, he unleashed his mighty beam of fire, and Todd was convinced this would be his undoing...

The next moment, he was behind Ikkili who held ahead of him a shield of magic that blocked the fiery blast of the dragon who now flied in place, flapping his almighty wings and rousing more dust into the air, spewing fire towards them, but the shield of Ikkili blocked all of it.

From the edge of his eyes, Todd saw as Bagka slowly approached them, and as he stopped in place, he held his arms up high, and Todd could see as the air around him changed colors, and it waved; waved

from the bottom of his feet towards the top of his head, as if he was engulfed in water. He held his arms like that for a few long moments, and then suddenly, as if he was hurling something heavy, he moved his arms forward. At the same moment there was a loud crash, followed by rumble of heavy stones. A thunder from high heavens struck upon the dragon through the ceiling that then collapsed around a small area, opening a great hole, and the light of sun flowed in.

As the dust settled, Ikkili and Bagka approached the goblin wizard; Todd followed them tightly, his grip was firm upon the hilt of his sword. “I hereby command you to cease what you are doing, goblin,” Ikkili commanded.

Zambarn laughed. “You are fools to believe that you can stop me,” he said in midst of his hysteric laughter.

Bagka held his hands together wheeling them around, as if there was something round in his hands, then with a sudden move, his arms reached forward, and a fireball flied towards Zambarn. The goblin wizard blocked it with a shield of magic, similar to that of Illiki's, and then stumbled a few steps back.

Suddenly there came a scream from above: Letty was falling down. Todd ran towards the altar with great strides and leaped forward at the end to arrive just in time to catch the girl before she fell upon the stone altar. The two of them hit the ground behind the

altar, with Todd landing first, and Letty landed upon him, but the boy just ignored the pain, as he was glad to be able to hold her in his arms once again. “Are you hurt?” he asked of the frightened girl who quivered, and he embraced her. Letty shook her head to say no; in her eyes Todd saw the hints of tears.

“You are too late,” said Zambarn, his laughter was replaced by a terrible groan at the end of his sentence. “The seal was already broken, and I will rule this world!”

A tremendous rumble came from behind the altar, and the air was filled with dust. The ancient sandstone wall began to sink, unveiling an endless abyss, black as midnight, and it seemed to have no end.

“Great and mighty Titan Lord!” Zambarn called with great voice. “Heed my call, Calloxus, I hereby summon you to obey my command!”

Suddenly, an outlandish claw appeared to clamber onto the ledge, above which once stood ageless stone walls of a long lost empire. The sight of the hand, as large as the dragon that not long ago was to kill them, filled Todd's heart with agonizing terror. He helped Letty onto her feet, and dragged her further away from the ledge, the two of them shared not a single word. They met up with Ikkili and Bagka, and both of their faces were filled with fear; Todd was certain something horrible was about to happen.

“What is that thing?” said Letty.

“That is Calloxxus, the Corrupted Titan,” Ikkili replied.

Shortly, a second hand appeared, and the Titan's head slowly emerged from behind the ledge, hidden by an imposing helmet of indestructible metal, forged by the ancient gods, only his bright crimson red eyes were to be seen; then followed his colossal chest, chiseled with dazzling delicacy, the marvelous body of the Titan slowly appeared before them.

The Titan looked down upon Zambarn who seemed to have lost confidence, and slowly backed away. “I command you to destroy these fools who tried who tried to keep you locked in your prison!” said Zambarn, pointing at the others.

“Command me?” the Titan's deep and dark voice filled the scene, filling all hearts with despair. Gradually, the eyes of Calloxxus grew brighter and brighter, and then suddenly, within a blink of an eye, a red beam of energy smote down upon the goblin wizard, and Zambarn was no more.

The Titan slowly glanced upon Letty, who clanged to Todd's arm, and she slowly backed away, dragging the boy alongside, and he could feel her tremble. Calloxxus' eyes slowly turned upon Todd, and he could feel the mighty Titan's gaze pierce his soul, and he wanted to flee, but he was frozen – his heart was cold and time seemed to still while he laid his fierce eyes upon him.

Silence filled the air for many moments to come, but it was ultimately broken by Bagka, who unleashed a wave of magic upon the Titan. However, the power of his spell seemed not to harm Calloxus who completely ignored the man who was so tiny in comparison to him. The titan laid his eyes upon Bagka, who seemed exhausted after casting his spell. “I am invincible,” said Calloxus, his voice filling the air with a certain chill. “And now, you will watch as I make this world undone.”

The Titan rose further out from the depths of the endless abyss, crushing the ceiling with his helmet, and the heavy sandstone blocks fell into the darkness. Under his heavy feet the land trembled as he walked to the North with long strides, seeking to bring anguish upon the living land.

As Calloxus' shape grew smaller in the distance, Todd felt relieved, and thought it was finally over. “Where does he go?” he asked of Ikkili.

“He goes to destroy the world, which we've failed to protect,” he replied, and he had slowly fallen to his knees.

“Is there no way to stop him?” said Todd.

Ikkili looked at him and slightly and slowly shook his head as the weight of his failure weighed upon his heart. “All is lost,” he said.

“There is way,” said Bagka in the strange way of his, and he

glanced at Letty. “But you not gonna like it.”

Ikkili looked at him with anguished face, then slowly glanced towards Todd and Letty. “If the girl touches the altar, the seal can be restored and Calloxus would be dragged back into his prison. But –,” he paused.

“But what?” said Letty with a demanding tone; her face was full of concerns. Ikkili remained silent. Letty walked close, and knelt down, facing him, and looked deep into the man's eyes with the green eyes of hers; “Tell me, please!” she said with a much more calm tone this time.

Ikkili's mouth finally moved to speak; “The spell will cause you to fade away,” he said with voice weak and silent.

“What does that mean?” said Letty. “I'm going to die?”

“I'm not exactly sure how it works,” Ikkili replied. “This is a very ancient spell, and the maker took much of its secrets along with him to the grave. All I know is that you'll likely never be seen walking this world again if you choose to do it. But I tell you this, at this point, only you can save the world, because by the ancient laws, I can not force you to do it.”

“Go on, girl. Time's running,” Bagka insisted. “If you not do now, it be too late.”

Todd stepped in; “Why should she suffer for the mistakes you've done?” he exclaimed. “It was all your fault that you two did not guard

the temple! It all could have been avoided if you remained here to oversee for intruders!” Todd's heavy heart raced, his mind was filled with anger, and his eyes slowly filled with tears.

“Yes, I have failed,” said Ikkili. “As my task was to hunt down the last remaining descendants of the wizard, Aurn,” he slowly glanced upon Letty. “As you can see, before me kneels the last living descendant, alive and well, and her blood shattered the seal that protected the world for so many years. You are correct, boy. I have failed.”

Letty's face turned pale; “You wanted to kill me?” she said with low voice, and a hint of a tear was to be seen at the corner of her eyes.

Ikkili looked deep into her green eyes; “Yes,” he said. “That was the only way to ensure the seal would never be opened. You —, your grandfather actually, slipped out of our hands many years ago, and you came to life only to let loose the terrible menace of the titan.”

“This is so unfair,” said Letty, her low voice was fading.

“It is,” said Ikkili.

Bagka made a grunting voice; “If you no do it, I will make girl do it,” he exclaimed.

Todd reached for his sword, and stepped up to him, holding the tip of his blade against his throat. “If you dare move further, I will kill you!” he commanded with fury.

Bagka looked at him, moving only his eyes, and he was about to raise his hand to cast his magic...

“STOP!” Letty cried in anguish, leaping up to her feet, and then she burst into tears. “I will do it,” she said amid her uncontrollable weep. Bagka lowered his hand.

Todd dropped his blade, not believing his ears, looking at the girl he loved – the girl who was now committed to leave the world and him behind. He looked into her eyes, but she could not bear to look into his eyes, and she cried and cried, her tears watered the dry sandstone tiles. Finally, she looked at Ikkili; “What must I do?” she asked.

He looked at her, his face pitied the young girl; “There are two circles upon the altar; your left hand goes to the left, and your right hand goes to the right. You must place your palms upon the circles, and stay like that for some moments.”

“What will happen to me?” she asked.

Ikkili shook his head. “I don't know,” he said. “You'll just disappear, or... I –, I can't tell.”

With slow, unsure steps, Letty began to walk towards the altar. Todd stepped after her; “Letty!” he cried, then he grabbed her arm from behind, and the girl glanced back.

“I'm sorry,” she said, her eyes still avoided the look of his eyes.

“You don't have to!” said Todd.

“If I don't... then that thing will kill many people,” she said. “Could you bear with the thought that you've let so many people die?”

“I don't –,” Todd muttered. “I don't know what to say.”

Letty finally looked into his eyes, her tears seemed to fade away; “We had so much fun together,” she said. “I'm glad I could spend what little time I was given to have with you.”

Todd looked at her, and he did not speak for a couple of moments; “There is something I always wanted to tell you,” he said.

“I know,” said Letty before Todd could finish what he tried to speak. “I love you, too!” and her eyes once again filled with tears.

The boy reached out to wipe her tears, and then gently touched her cheek, she placed her hand upon his hand, and with her thumb she stroked his skin a couple of times, after which she had let go of his hand, and placed both her hands upon his shoulders, and gently pulled him closer. Their lips touched, and they embraced each-other with passion. Bagka and Ikkili silently observed them from the distance...

Then the moment was finally over; “I must go now,” said Letty, and turned her back to her lover, then with steady slow steps walked to the altar. She laid her eyes upon the stone surface and she

shivered. She raised her arms, and held her hands up above the circles, hesitating. She glanced back one last time to Todd, and amid the tears, her mouth curved to a bright and beautiful smile, and Todd smiled back, but he could no longer bear to hold back his tears.

The girl carefully placed her hands in the circles, and a few moments later, there was a bright flash of light that blinded everyone and not a single thing was to be seen until it faded away...

Suddenly they saw before them the Titan, and he was roaring with thundering rage and anguish as magical chains all over his colossal body slowly dragged him down back into the abyss. The wall behind the altar raised once again above the ledge, and the many blocks of stone that collapsed into the darkness arose from the depths and slowly aligned to where they have been, and the temple was slowly being rebuilt by invisible hands of an ancient magic.

Eventually, all blocks and pieces returned to where they belonged, and the Titan was once more in his eternal prison.

Letty was still standing by altar, and Todd's heart for a moment filled with joy as he saw her turn towards them. He saw her face, and in her face he saw fear and doubt. Todd was to step forward, but Ikkili held him back, placing his hand to his shoulder. "Where did you all go?" said Letty in despair. "What's happening?"

Todd ignored Ikkili's urge to stop him, and ran to the girl, and he

reached to her face, but his hand could not touch it, and only could feel the air, despite his eyes could clearly see her beautiful image. He waved his hand that reached through the image of Letty, and saw as the image gradually faded, and eventually, no longer was to be seen. The last of what he saw of her before the image faded was her face how she blindly gazed into the distance, but for Todd it seemed that her gorgeous green eyes gazed into his eyes.

He had fallen to his knees and wept for hours. Alone and cold, as he had told Bagka and Ikkili to leave him alone, and so they did, waiting for him by the entrance. In solitude he grieved for the girl he loved, and the memory of Letty's beautiful green eyes burned deep into his memory and haunted him for many years to come.