

From the Ashes
by Steven Dong

Val Halla should have questioned how easily Diablo had gone down. Or at least somebody should have. But none of them had. Oh sure, it hadn't seemed easy at the time, but they'd all escaped with their lives. If nothing else, that should have been suspect.

There were gaps in Val Halla's memory. Considering that she'd been eviscerated, Val Halla considered herself fortunate that her recall was the only thing that had holes in it today.

She remembered Prince Albrecht's dead eyes staring out from beneath the crumbling shell of the Lord of Terror. She remembered how the Soul Stone had pulsed with its malevolent crimson light.

There had been a plan: Take the damned thing and drop it in the lake of molten rock in the caverns above them.

"The Soul Stone evaporates and Diablo dissipates," Bard Solo had said. "Just a fading sour note in the Great Song."

Without a host body, Diablo should have been harmless. It should have been easy. They had killed every single one of Diablo's unholy minions. There should have been nothing to fear, but they were all jumping at shadows before they'd gotten fifty paces. Even the towering Barbarian warrior, Dumptruk, seemed as skittish as a mouse in a dark room full of serpents. She herself had nearly been killed when Sorcerer Mojo thought he heard something and unleashed a blast of Chain Lightning. Val Halla had been in no position to criticize once she'd Healed herself, however. She'd been shooting blind at anything that moved or that she thought had moved the whole time.

"I'm afraid we're not going to make it," Sorcerer Mojo had said.

__I'm afraid.__ That should have been a clue.

Then one of them had done something very stupid and played right into Diablo's talons.

It had been an act of desperation and panic convincingly disguised as courage and self-sacrifice. Val Halla remembered hearing the scream of pain and despair as one of them had driven the Soul Stone into his or her own forehead. She wished she could remember who it had been. Had it been her friend, the Bard Solo? Or had it been the hulking yet thoughtful Barbarian, Dumptruk. It could have been their mysterious and secretive Sorcerer, Mojo. For that matter, there might well have been someone else present whom she'd forgotten about entirely.

In any event, for awhile it looked as if the desperate gambit was going to work. The feelings of Terror they'd all been experiencing subsided. Perhaps a strong-willed host had been the answer to containing Diablo's influence. (But who had it been?) They made it to Tristram without any further incident.

Cain had urged them to journey east to seek the aid of the Horadrim. She remembered the lone cloaked figure (Who?) standing on the hilltop, preparing to contain the essence of Diablo for the long trek.

Val Halla remembered wondering if she would have had the willpower to contain the demon. Then she thought of Albrecht. He hadn't been able to contain Diablo. If the future ruler of Khanduras hadn't been up to the task...

The cloaked figure let out a scream and collapsed in a ball of fire. What had fallen had been human. What stood in its place wasn't.

Diablo tapped into the strengths of his hosts. All Albrecht's strength had been in his kindness and wisdom beyond his tender years. The new host's strengths had been in combat and magic. There was no comparison. This Diablo had to be at least twice the size of the one they'd defeated, and he was free of any of the residual compassion that might have inhibited him when Albrecht was his host.

Angus Griswold had been the closest. For months now, he had been a man who had lost everything. He thought he had nothing to fear from the Lord of Terror as he attacked with the sword he'd forged on the Anvil of Fury. He was mistaken. Val Halla heard his scream as the massive talon closed around his head. The scream seemed to continue even after there was nothing left of the Master Weapon Smith but a pile of blackened bones.

Farnham was the next to die. Terror rendered him sober for the first time in half a year before it too claimed him.

Val Halla remembered the cool weight of her Platinum Bow of the Heavens in her hand as she unleashed a storm of death at the Demon Lord. He covered the distance between them with dizzying speed. The great claws swept up at her from her ankles to her throat, tearing through her Mana Shield like it wasn't even there.

There had been the sensation of being airborne before crashing through the front wall of Pepin's hut. She recalled seeing her innards trailing behind her and thinking that there are some parts of your body that you just never want to see. Then she struck the back wall of the Healer's workshop.

Then darkness claimed her. Darkness and blinding, deafening pain.

"Val?"

She was alive. She was in far too much pain to be dead. Granted, what she was feeling was nothing compared to her last memory. But that didn't make it pleasant.

"Can you hear me? Drink this." The voice was familiar. So was the tart, milky taste of the Healing potion at her lips.

Val Halla groaned as a last splintered rib forced itself back into position and mended itself. There was a taste of her own blood in her mouth mixing with the potion.

"How do you feel?"

Val Halla forced her eyes open. "Terrible," she managed. "Is that you, Nova? Where are we?"

"Yes," answered Nova. "We're in the woods outside of Tristram." Nova was the daughter of Cain the Elder. Val Halla had heard that Cain had sent her away when the troubles began in Tristram. She had met Nova during her first visit to Tristram, six months and a lifetime ago, when Val Halla was just Valeria Desdemona Sapphire Stars-in-the-Heavens over Riparia of the House of Halla.

"Or what's left of it. What happened?" The speaker was a handsome young man in white armor. He looked familiar to Val Halla.

"This is Victor Lachdanan," Nova told her. "He's a Paladin from Westmarch."

"Lachdanan?" asked Val Halla.

"Captain Lachdanan is his cousin."

Val Halla shook her head sadly and mouthed the word, "Was."

"Michael is dead?" asked the Paladin.

"We found his helmet in the crypt," said Val Halla. "He would not have parted with it if there was still breath in his body."

"What of the rest of Tristram?" asked Nova. "What about my father?"

"I don't know," said Val Halla. She told them what she remembered.

Victor nodded when she was through. "We found you in what was left of the Healer's hut," he told her. "You had the good fortune to land in a tub full of Healing potion he was brewing. Even so, it's a miracle you're alive."

"Tristram's been burned to the foundations," Nova told her. "If what you've told us is accurate, I guess we'd be wasting our time looking for survivors." She stood and walked a few paces away. "I can't believe they're all gone. My father, Gillian, the Ogdens, even Toby Wirt."

"I'm sorry," whispered Val Halla suddenly feeling the loss herself.

"Double-damned motherless..." swore Nova. A bolt of cold lanced from her fingertips and slew a scavenger beast sniffing around the edge of the campsite.

Val Halla looked at Nova surprised. When she'd last seen her, Nova had been a barmaid in the Tavern of the Rising Sun. She'd used the cold cantrip to put a frost on the drinks she served.

"Father finally relented and sent me west to the University of Runestaff," explained Nova shaking the cold from her fingers. "I'm a full-fledged Sorceress now."

A hulking young man and a slightly built older man joined them. The younger man was well over six feet tall and seemed to be mostly muscle. He had a battle axe in one hand and another one over his shoulder. By contrast, the other man's age was difficult to gauge, despite his long white hair. He had a pale complexion and dark violet eyes.

Both of them looked familiar to Val Halla as well. Nova made the introductions. "This is Alexander Cabot. He's Adria's twin brother," she said of the white-

haired man. "And this is Mak, he's come to Tristram on the trail of his uncle..."

"Dumptruk," concluded Val Halla.

"You know Uncle?" asked Mak.

"Yes," said Val Halla.

"Uncle dead," said Mak. It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes," said Val Halla, "Probably."

The giant Barbarian nodded. "Maktruk find this." He set the splintered remains of a spiked club on the ground. It had been made from a piece of an old tree.

"Gnarled Root," said Val Halla recognizing her late comrade's weapon.

"Did you find anything else?" asked Nova.

"Everything in Tristram is dead," answered Alexander.

"Just the way you like it, eh?" commented the Paladin.

"Don't start with me, Whitebread," returned Alexander.

"My father and the people of Tristram died in the worst possible way to die," said Nova. "They died afraid. The monster that did it is roaming the countryside, and you two are sitting here in the woods sniping at each other."

Alexander spared one last taunting glance at the Paladin. "That begs the question, where did he go? You'd expect something as big and evil as Diablo to leave a nice convenient trail of death and destruction, but Mak and I didn't see so much as a smoking footprint."

"Based on what Solo and Nova's father told me," said Val Halla, "Diablo will probably try to husband his strength for awhile. Then he'll attempt to free his brothers, Baal and Mephisto."

"I'm not going to let that happen," said Nova firmly.

Val Halla rose to her feet and winced. She doubted there was a single part of her body that wasn't bruised. "I'm in," she said.

"Maktruk go too," announced the Barbarian. "Make Uncle's spirit proud."

"You realize, of course, that you're about to embark on a quest that will lead to nothing but death and destruction," said Alexander. "I'd like to go too."

"I'll not work with this defiler of the dead," said Victor.

"Fine," snapped Nova. "Don't then."

"It wouldn't do for you to get your nice white armor dirty, would it?" taunted the Necromancer.

"What's at stake here," offered Val Halla, "is whether or not humanity itself will live to see another turn of the seasons. With his brothers at his side, Diablo will repeat the massacre at Tristram in every corner of the world."

Victor frowned. The slight smile on the Necromancer's thin lips challenged him to prove himself. "Very well," he said.

"Excellent," beamed Alexander. "We'll get you over your squeamishness. Maybe have a bit of fun along the way."

"Leave him alone," Nova warned Alexander.

"According to Cain and every history I've ever heard of," said Val Halla, "Baal fled east into the desert after his defeat at the Battle for the Temple of Baal. The Horadrim pursued him and were able to entomb him near Lut Gholein. That's probably where Diablo is headed."

"Then let us make haste," said Victor.

Alexander whistled and the skeleton of a horse clopped into the campsite. It paused only to kick away a scavenger trying to gnaw on its hind leg. "This is Cal," he told Val Halla. "Short for Calcium. He's a gift from my teacher. If you have any gear you'd like to load up, feel free." Alexander patted the horse skull fondly.

"You should let the poor beast rest in peace," said Victor.

"Cal's spirit has long-since fled this realm," explained the Necromancer. "We're just borrowing his bones. He's got no further use for them and it saves wear and tear on our own bones."

Val Halla tuned out the ensuing debate as she realized that she had no gear to stow. Diablo had shredded her armor in the process of shredding her. All she had was the old blanket that Nova had wrapped around her. She'd even lost the Platinum Bow of the Heavens. The loss of her teacher's weapon hurt almost as much as that of the people she'd known. Just one more minor item on a long, long list of things Diablo would have to answer for.

The next day's travel was mostly silent and uneventful. Nova's mood was particularly grim as she tried quietly to cope with the loss of her father, her prince and her hometown. Maktruk, like his uncle, tended to speak only rarely and, Victor, like his late cousin, was all business.

Only Alexander seemed to be in high spirits. For someone who worked with dead things for a living, he was positively lively. He took perverse pleasure in needling the Paladin, always stopping just short of the point that would have earned him a sword through the belly. He also talked at great length about his sister, Adria; laughing and telling stories about their childhood together.

In spite of her discomfort with the man's appearance and profession, Val Halla found herself warming to the Necromancer with surprising ease.

It was just after midday when Val Halla was surprised to meet another familiar face, heading toward Tristram.

"Sister Diana!" she greeted the tall woman walking alone down the road. Sister Diana had been one of the senior members of the Sisters of the Sightless Eye during Val Halla's training.

"Sister Val Halla." The Elder Sister returned the greeting, but there was no joy in her voice. Her shoulders were slumped and there were bags under her eyes. "I'm on my way to Tristram to find your teacher."

Val Halla shook her head. "Sister Sylverwraithe is dead and Tristram is no more." Val Halla quickly told Sister Diana all she knew, her companions pitching in whenever they had pertinent information to add.

"I'm afraid your route to the desert is blocked," said Sister Diana after they'd told her of their new mission. "Something has invaded the Sisterhood. We no longer hold the convent."

"What kind of something?" Alexander wanted to know.

Diana shook her head. "I don't know. I only know that only a handful of us survived to flee to the surrounding hills. The convent stands at the pass to the desert. No one has managed to get safely past in either direction."

"What about the squads?" asked Val Halla. "Surely there must have been..." Diana's grief-stricken expression answered her question for her. "What of the Wild Angels then?"

"Your squad?" she glanced at Val Halla's bare arm. When Diablo had torn the flesh from her body, the tattoo that showed her to be a member of the Wild Angels had gone with it. The flesh had healed, but most of the tattoo was gone now. "I don't know. I lost my entire squad. All my students."

Val Halla gasped, the words, "I'm sorry," catching in her throat.

"They were good girls. The best. Technically flawless, but nowhere near ready for real combat. They never knew what hit them."

"Return to the convent with us," Val Halla invited her. "Maybe we can help."

"I can't go with you," said Sister Diana. "I've lost my will to fight."

"I don't understand."

"In battle, my heart aches and my limbs grow heavy," said Diana, ashamed. "I begin weeping uncontrollably. It's like drowning in Anguish. That's why I'm heading to the shores of the Southern Sea. I hope to find my teacher. Perhaps she can make me whole again."

Val Halla nodded. If nothing else, her experiences over the past year had taught her that there were much, much worse things that could happen to you in battle than just getting killed.

"But perhaps there is a way I can help," offered Diana. "I was teaching my squad new fighting techniques I had learned during my travels. I would be happy to share them with you. Combined with your combat experience, they might give you the edge you need to cleanse our home of the evil that's invaded it."

Val Halla quickly conferred with her companions and then accepted Sister Diana's offer while the others began setting up camp. She trained with Sister Diana through the night. At their core, Sister Diana's fighting techniques boiled down to some very basic combat skills. But they were skills that Val Halla would be able to build on for years, assuming she lived that long.

When the dawn came and it was time to part company, Sister Diana asked Val Halla one last favor. "I know of the long-standing traditional rivalry between the squads," she said. "And I know that you will always be a Wild Angel. But it would mean a great deal to me if I could tell others that a member of Amazon Squad still survives."

Val Halla smiled. "I would consider it an honor to be an Amazon."