

The Glass Desert

By Andrew Thomas Schiller

CHAPTER 1: the Glass Desert

Nor Gan scanned the horizon through squinted eyes. Waves of heat rose from the glittering dust, warping distance. He turned, sighing. The distorted hills surrounded him in all directions, like an endless oven. He slid a long looking glass into its leather case, tugged the drawstring, and hung it from his belt. He must keep tiny grains of sand out of the delicate mechanisms. As useless as the tool seemed at the moment, the last thing he needed was scratched and damaged lenses.

In front of him, the glass desert would loom, no matter which way he decided to go. How was he supposed to find the center of it? The dark elf had assured him; the ruins lie in the middle. Nor Gan didn't know whether to mistrust the man because he was a dark elf, or because he was a wizard.

Only a slight breeze blew, but that was enough to stir up the lightest dust particles from the ground and whip them up into the eyes, nose, and mouth. Nor Gan turned to check on his party. Each hero was bundled in a whasii, the transparent tribal shroud covering the head. All five were accounted for, and trudging along slowly behind him. He was their leader, but this time, he didn't know where he was taking them.

The others had spread out to cover more ground. He waved his arms, a signal to the magic user. The Mage cast a spell, amplifying the sound of his voice. "Regroup! Regroup now!"

The Tiefling stopped at the crest of a hill, and waited for the others to catch up. He looked at the others... tired, in low spirits, but following him nonetheless. "We can't see very far. I don't know how we're going to find this needle in a haystack. It's a fool's errand."

"A wild goose chase, but without the goose," quipped the dwarf, his stomach grumbling loudly in agreement. No one laughed.

"Make camp for tonight", Nor Gan ordered. "We're nearly out of water. We need to re-supply. We are going back to the forest at the first light of day. It's time to cut out losses, return to the village, and rethink our options."

The band of adventurers stared at the ground in silence. Each of them wanted to find the entrance to the legendary Glass City for their own reasons, but none could refute the logic of their leader. With no water, they couldn't hope to continue their search. With a resigned tension, the group

bedded down for the night.

The entire party was restless, anxious. Only the energetic dwarf fell asleep... on guard duty, snoring loudly. No matter, Nor Gan thought to himself. No living thing had been seen for days. Nothing can survive here. There weren't even snakes or scorpions, let alone monsters to fight. Let him sleep. We all need the rest.

The full moon shone brightly. Too much light to sleep. He finally sat up, and noticed nearly everyone was awake. The elf was carefully polishing her flute. "Perhaps you could play us a lullaby?" Nor Gan said with a smile.

The elf drew a breath and put the wooden flute to her lips. She began with a low note, which seemed more like a moan than a song. She closed her eyes, and her melody rose slowly, as her dexterous fingers danced over the holes. The lullaby seemed to be working, as eyelids slowly grew heavy. The soothing tone had even quieted the dwarf's loud snoring. Just as nearly everyone had drifted off, she arrived at the cadence, holding a high note. A rattling sound broke the mood, as everyone shot up from their bedrolls. The noise didn't come from the flute, but instead from somewhere near the fire. The group scrambled for their swords. Nor Gan gave the hand signal for silence, and everyone froze, listening intently. Nothing.

"Can you play the flute again?" Nor Gan asked.

"Well, I don't think we have the mood anymore..." The elf began.

"No matter, play again." Nor Gan insisted. She played a jolly tune, but nothing happened. "No, play that song you were playing before." She played the opening phrase. Still nothing. "No, skip to the high note." She blew the note clearly, and something on the ground near Nor Gan began to shake like a rattlesnake. The group jumped, pointing their swords at the sand. Even the elf held up her flute defensively, as if the delicate bamboo shaft could somehow deflect an incoming attack.

"Play it again. Everyone relax, and listen." She played the note. Nor Gan got on his hands and knees. A shard, a piece of crystal was vibrating. It sang the same note as the elf's flute. It rattled against other more mundane shards. What made this one different? It certainly looked different - the color was a transparent rose shade, as if it were made of different material than everything around it. And, curiously, it seemed whole. Not a broken shard with sharp edges like the millions of scattered pieces around him. This one had smooth and polished edges. It hadn't been shattered, but merely dropped, tossed, or misplaced.

Nor Gan handed the gem off to the elf, who performed a short ritual to detect the presence of magic. This caused the rose crystal to glow brightly for a moment, then the glow faded. The elf looked up from her work. "The rose-colored crystal seems to have magical properties that all these other

mundane crystals lack." She kicked the sand as he spoke the last word, adding more emphasis.

Curious, Nor Gan took out his magnifier. With a whisper, he summoned a false light. He bent down and grasped a handful of sand in a gloved hand. Holding the lens up to the grains, he examined them closely. Sure enough, the pieces showed hints of color... Blue, orange, red, green. But no pink.

Nor Gan took out the magical bag from his knapsack, and untied it. The group of adventurers groaned and rolled their eyes. Nor Gan grimaced and sighed deeply. Then he tugged on the cord holding the knapsack's mouth. "Whew! I thought you were never going to let me out of there!" The bag exclaimed. "Wait till you hear all the things I've been itching to tell you!"

"Cloth" the Tiefling breathed impatiently. He stuck his hand deep in to the sack's mouth, and it gave a muffled 'mmph'. Nor Gan withdrew his hand, and in it was a mundane piece of fabric.

"What do you need that for?" The bag said as soon as it could. "Wouldn't you rather have a lovely piece of chewing gum? I've got grape and watermelon and mmph-" The sack was cut short by a sharp tug of the drawstring, as the group's leader put away the sack.

"Ask it for a cold mug of beer!" Demanded the dwarf.

The Tiefling shook his head, saying "It doesn't work that way. It could produce food and drink, but it wouldn't sustain you. Your thirst will still remain, no matter how much you drink."

"That's how I feel already. What's the difference?" The dwarf said, laughing.

"Annoying, but useful" the elf added.

"Just like an alchemist!" the Dwarf quipped, elbowing Barcurr in the ribs. As usual, no one laughed.

Nor Gan wrapped the rose crystal in the cloth and hastily pocketed the gem. "Everyone get some sleep. That means everyone. No watch. Tomorrow, we're going to look for more of these rose crystals."

CHAPTER 2: the discovery

They wandered, looking for something, anything out of the ordinary. The party came upon shards as big as a house, sharp as razor blades and cracked all the way through like spider webs. Some of these shapes had scroll work along an edge. The dwarf seemed to think that this suggested architecture. But no amount of digging revealed any doors or windows.

After a while, they did find a wall, standing out of place by itself. It leaned to the side, as if it were tossed by some giant hand. The dwarf pointed out

that the scrollwork along its edges was upside down. What could have thrown such a monolith?

The elf walked around playing her flute. Without water, her lips dry, but still she played. Not with her normally beautiful tone, but with a hollow, wispy sound. Still, it must have worked, because she soon shouted:

"Over here! Found something!" The elf motioned frantically with her hands. All the false alarms had the party quite cynical, but Nor Gan came wandering over.

She kicked a small blue crystal out of the sand. "Good find. I've also picked up an orange piece."

"That's not all. Follow me." Intrigued, the Tiefling signaled the rest of the group to converge on his location. Tired beyond function, they turned and shambled in his direction.

The elf guided him to stand on the top of a rise. Totally non-descript, it looked just like every other hill he'd seen this week, except he felt the extreme heat of the desert even more here. Had the elf found another crystal? He turned around, looking at the ground. And that's when he saw it, a blinding light coming from the horizon. He looked up at it, but it was too bright to focus on. He drew the spyglass from his belt, and shifted the smokey lens into position. Raising it to his eye, he peered at the light.

"What do you see?" Asked Barcurr impatiently.

"I hope it's a caravan of ale salesman." The dwarf was already there, along with the others. Maybe they weren't as tired as they seemed.

"A tower. But that's strange. I can see the middle, but not the top or bottom."

"What do you mean?" The view is blocked by something, or is it more heat waves."

"No. It just appears to be... Floating...." He handed the spyglass off to the rest of the party, who, each took turns peering through it, scrunching up their faces, and then saying "humph."

"Let's go." Nor Gan mumbled. Wordlessly, the group moved toward the mysterious tower with renewed energy.

And there it was. The remains of a tower, inside a crater as big as a city. A single column with its top blown off, and a cracked base, lying in rubble.

"What do you make of it, dwarf?" Nor Gan asked.

Everyone turned to Balsake. He had his back to the group, looking out into the dunes. "Either I drank too much ale, or I'm looking at a second light." He turned to Nor Gan with a snap of his boots. He held out his periscope with a salute.

"I'm not your commanding officer. Just a friend you can trust." Nor Gan said. He put a hand on the dwarf's shoulder.

Everyone could see the light shining brightly. The cleric got out his compass, and indeed it was coming directly from the south. In a moment, the light appeared to be fading, and in a mother moment, it was gone.

The Tiefling put the scope to his eyes. Why is it doing that? Is it moving?

"No. The sun is moving across the sky. It's a reflection."

"Great find" Nor Gan said. Everyone turned to the dwarf again, who seemed busy staring off into the horizon. What is it Balzake?

Directly to the east. I thought I saw another reflection, but it's time has passed. We need to be right here tomorrow at exactly the same time, and look in the cardinal directions.

The crew began to descend the crater excitedly. The sheer joy at actually finding something, met with exhausted giddiness caught up with them. The cleric fell, losing his whasii in the sand, and filling his clothes with razor sharp blades. He had to be carried the rest of the way, screaming in agony.

There was no shade. In fact, standing at the feet of the crystalline tower only focused the light more clearly, making the air hotter.

The alchemist pulled out a phial. He held it to the cleric's lips. He was desperate to drink anything, his lips bloody from dozens of small cuts. He gulped the liquid, and almost immediately fell asleep. "That'll keep him out for a few hours, until we can figure out what to do with him" the alchemist sighed.

The group stood around the rubble of the tower. Digging proved futile, as the sharp shards were like digging rocks with a shovel. The Mage used fire to melt sections away, but his magic gave out only after a few feet. Plus, the intense heat from the magical fire was more than anyone could bear. The alchemist turned heads when he picked up a small rock using telekinesis. But after only one rock, he didn't have the strength to move more.

They spent an entire two days searching. Whatever excitement the group experienced when finding the tower had evaporated. They were back to an exhausted and hungry state. They gathered around a campfire and laid down for another sleepless night. The dwarf broke the silence. "Can you spell me to sleep with that magic flute of yours?"

She played a somber lullaby half-heartedly. She hadn't the strength to put magic behind it. She was hoping that the music itself would put them to sleep. The rose crystal laid on a cloth at her feet, singing softly.

Nor Gan sat bolt upright. "That's it!" The group would usually roll their eyes and go back to sleep, but there was an intense excitement to the Tiefling's voice. Everyone gathered, hoping to hear a fresh idea.

"Alchemist, cast that amplification spell."

"Why? Are you going to blast that lullaby, and put us to sleep with deafness?"

Nor Gan smiled. "Something like that. Brelia, stand here, and play the note that activates the stone. Barcurr, direct the spell toward the tower..."

Realization dawned on everyone's faces. Even the dwarf, who had little appreciation for magic, understood the concept. "Blast the tower with the sound that activates the crystal. Hmmm. Let's see what happens" the dwarf grumbled.

The sound vibrated everyone's chest as well as their eardrums. They all put their hands over their ears. The elf cringed. Perhaps she was out of range of the blast, or perhaps she simply bore the pain. Nor Gan stood stoically, having inserted cotton balls into his ear canals beforehand.

At first nothing happened. But, after a few heartbeats, the sand began to shift. A sinkhole formed. The party suddenly realized they were standing right on top of a buried structure that was in the process of opening. They dove, rolled, and ran as quickly as the moving sand would allow them. The cleric, in his long robes and heavy armor, and in his injured state, was slower than the rest. Sand swallowed his feet, then his waist. He opened his mouth to scream, but crystals crushed his chest. Sand poured into his open mouth. He closed his eyes, giving in to the inevitable. Unable to react in time, the party could only watch as he disappeared into the hole. As the sand flowed away, the source was revealed... A door below the surface had opened.

Joy was mixed with terror as they could do nothing but watch as the desert eat their friend. When the dust settled, and the ground stopped shaking, a door could be seen. Aldorf heated up his staff, and pushed it hard into the sand. In a few feet, they heard a resounding thud.

They dug frantically. Already exhausted, they flopped down onto the sand. "It's no use. Our priest is gone." The elf made a gesture, like the one she'd seen him make countless times... Not out of a shared faith, but simply out of respect for the man.

"Goodbye, friend. See you on the other side." The dwarf intoned.

The wizard bent down, sliding his staff through the brass ring on the trap door. "Now lift."

The dwarf looked up at the wizard, his eyebrows in a pinch. "With that spindly staff? Surely, it will break. Are you sure?"

The wizard smiled, shaking his head. "It will not break. Trust me."

The dwarf looked to Nor Gan, their leader, for confirmation. The Tiefling hesitated for a breath, then gave a nod. The dwarf lifted the staff, and the door groaned. The hinges squealed as their oil had dried up a century ago. The door crashed open with a resounding thud, echoing inside the

chamber below.

The dwarf wiped his brow. "From that sound, we can be certain that the chamber below is quite massive." The elf snapped a sun rod, and dropped it into the hole. Her lips moved as she silently counted. A few seconds later, they all heard the sun rod hit something solid. Looking down, they could see it far below, resting on a tiled floor.

"The endless rope would be handy now."

The alchemist pulled a short cord from a pocket, and tied it around his waist. "Who's first?"

Nor Gan stepped forward and grabbed the rope with both hands. Barcurr tapped him on the shoulder, and the Tiefling stepped off the edge. He repelled down, the rope becoming magically longer and longer as he went.

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