

The Tower of Glass

It was the hour of thieves and witchcraft, but from within the gleaming palace of Galgoney came the sounds of a revel such as had not been heard in years. Prince Treylalia was a reclusive man and much feared even by his retainers, few of whom would ever see him in his chambers at the top of the grand tower. Many brave men and women had doubtless bluffed their way into the festivities in hopes they'd catch a glimpse of their ruler if he deigned to make an appearance.

"Your secrecy worries me, Ashkantir," Gra-Gru growled as the wiry redhead hauled him up the outer wall by rope, "I suspect you're not telling me the plan because I won't like it."

Ashkantir waited for Reyga to secure the bulky pillows to the rope next and hoisted the enormous packages up with his brawny companion's help before answering, "Right as usual. But we're atop the wall on the night of the party. It's now or never, so either you go along with it or we give up." Many men would have come up with a third option when faced with the maned glower his friend gave him, but Ashkantir was not many men. Blue eyes unblinking, he met the cat-pupiled stare as he drily explained the plan. Gra-Gru didn't like it. It was a terrible plan. But he had to admit he had none better.

Ashkantir gave the tawny lion-man just enough time to point out any critical flaws while they hammered on the long steel piton. The spike bit deep into the mortar under Gra-Gru's mighty blows, the noise of which was drowned out by a ferocious howling coming from a distant side of the palace complex. Reyga was in position and the few guards not at the party would be hurrying to see what a wolf was doing in their city. Once the first part of the piton was secure, Ashkantir screwed it together with another long section ending in an eye to complete a pole taller than either of them.

He spoke quickly as he readied and threw his grappling hook, catching it on the battlements of the palace roof, "Don't do something foolish like follow me in, you've got to be here to catch the rope. When you've got that secured, give me a whistle. And make sure that man doesn't wake up," he jerked his head at a motionless soldier sprawled on the battlements nearby, "I poisoned that arrow; he's just unconscious. It was the only way I could get Reyga to agree."

Gra-Gru nodded grimly while he secured the other end of the grappling hook rope to one of the merlons, "Be careful; there'll be much worse than soldiers guarding the tower in a city like Galgoney. And I AM coming in after you if you don't return in half an hour."

Ashkantir was already starting across the improvised tightrope. The grand palace itself was flat-roofed and a little taller than the outer wall. There was a courtyard perhaps thirty feet wide between them and it was over this moat of land that he now crossed. To both his sides stretched gardens of incomparable beauty and grandeur. He knew by experience that such places were dangerous as well, owing all to their creation by the master sorcerer Lucanana. What fell creatures and magical forces might lie in wait there he did not know. If he kept his balance he would probably live to reach the other side.

That proved quite a task. Ashkantir was lithe and agile and had his tall bow to steady himself but the ungainly pack on his back dragged on him and the rope was not very taut, swaying dangerously under his boots. As he edged to the midway point he dared not even turn his head to either side to check the walls behind for approaching sentries; Gra-Gru would have to handle any.

Halfway, three-fifths, three fourths, inch by careful inch. The height was not very great but still Ashkantir had a vertiginous feeling as he glanced down. There was something deeply unsettling about the motions of the plants and he had the sense too of being watched by things he could neither see nor hear. He feared no foe, but one without any flesh at all might be beyond him. Scarcely 6 feet to go.

He fell! Something invisible had seized him by the ankle and dragged him down!

He caught the rope as he plummeted and swung himself forward with uncanny speed, kicking free of whatever had grabbed at him. Gasping as he hit the unforgiving wall, he clawed himself up onto the roof. The creature or bodiless trap did not give chase and there was no sound but the festivities dimly heard from down below. Good. Eager to put space between himself and Lucanana's garden, he ran low and swift across the stone rooftop to press himself up against the great tower.

It speared up more than a hundred feet from the roof of the palace, a spire of white stone striped with windows that stretched nearly its full height. Whether it was wizardry or engineering that let a tower half made of glass stand he knew not, but those windows were his doors.

Although no human could see him in the near pitch darkness, Ashkantir did his best to stay concealed as he peered inside. There were many kinds of men in the world and some might see better than even Gra-Gru's or his own. Whatever his own was.

The tower was round and near completely hollow, save for the prince's chambers at the top. It was guarded by only a pair of soldiers, men clad in mail and breastplates emblazoned with the city's flaming star emblem. They bore halberds and bored expressions.

His string creaked back. As if they sensed doom stealing up upon them, the men in the dark chamber looked about nervously. He aimed carefully. An eye at 20 feet was no target for him, but there was a window to break.

Twang, crash! And crash again! Ashkantir dropped the bow and leaped in just after his shot. It had struck true or close enough, his heavy broadheads had never failed him yet. Sword out in a flash, he disarmed the other soldier with a slash between gauntlet and hauberk-sleeve. Ashkantir's was a cutting blade, wickedly curved and two-handed and he knew better than to even try an edge against mail. Instead he tripped the injured man, snatched his halberd before it could clatter down, and gave him a mighty blow to his coifed head with the butt of it. He'd likely survive, that ought to make Reyga happy.

Tossed aside, the polearm clattered across the trapdoor downstairs. Now that was an idea! He could already hear shouting from down below; his intrusion had been detected. Ashkantir dragged the two fallen men atop the little hatch before retrieving his bow and taking a poniard off one man's belt. Not what he was used to, but better at getting around armor.

He felt something approaching trepidation as he walked across the great mosaic to the fiery star in the center. If his informants had been wrong or lying then his little raid was about to end prematurely. Probably on the points of several men's weapons, though death concerned him far less than failure. And there was Gra-Gru to consider. The man with the lion's mane did not break his word; if Ashkantir fell here then he would likely die too.

His concerns proved groundless. He had been staring at the matching star seal a hundred feet above him and realized that it was getting closer. The ancient spell was lifting him to his destination, just as he'd been told it would. He thought quickly as he watched the long windows crawl by. As expected, the roof was beginning to open to admit him to the tower's crown; anyone up there knew an uninvited guest was about to arrive. He nocked a heavy arrow. It would be a difficult shot, straight up at a concealed target.

There! Twang! A bone-white guard tumbled past. Another arrow was loosed almost before the second such soldier came into view; he too fell wordlessly. Any others would be ready. Ashkantir was too; he sprang into the room above and fired at the first thing he saw moving.

That was Prince Treylalia's manicured hand, still disinterestedly scribbling with a quill. The dread sorcerer was alone in the kingly room. He was of the little people of the western forests, frail folk with weak arms but clever fingers and ears pointed and long as a pair of horns. His fashionably oiled and perfumed hair was as black as his long, richly ornamented robes of state.

Then it was as if a hand passed before Ashkantir's eyes and he saw his enemy for what he truly was: a thing already dead and wrapped in a dark shroud. It was true then. Through the thin cloth glowed the filthy nails that held his spirit in place and in the pools of liquid darkness where eyes had once lain he saw himself slain a thousand ways. To fight was folly; no weapon could harm such a monster.

Well that was not his goal.

In the instant Ashkantir was distracted, Treylalia waved a skeletal hand at him idly, "Begone," came a hiss that no lungs could have produced. Ashkantir threw himself out of the way just before the throne behind him turned to dust. Seeing what he'd thought a decorative suit of armor suddenly brandish an axe and stride toward him, he drew his stolen poniard and pivoted deftly to keep the advancing man between himself and the sorcerer.

"This is MY city! Mine!" Treylalia voice was at once redolent of a petulant child and age beyond the confines of a mortal life. At his words the room's very furnishings lashed out as if they too were imbued with unnatural life. As chairs and hanging portraits hurled themselves at Ashkantir and the great axe bore down, he lunged forward.

He pressed up close to the armored soldier and used the hapless man as a shield. Wood clanged harshly on metal again and again and the guard reeled from the blows. Ashkantir smoothly skipped back a pace and drove his thin sword through the man's visor before the furniture could strike again or some new devilry could be concocted.

A gauntlet backed by inhuman strength crushed the wind from Ashkantir's lungs. Poniard still skewered through what should have been its face, the armored *thing* was unperturbed as it hefted its axe to finish him. Ashkantir barely managed to duck out of the way. He cast an instant's glance at the prince and saw he was seated again. If there had been lips to cover those teeth, they would surely have been smirking in triumph.

Staggering back and narrowly managing to keep his head on his shoulders, Ashkantir thought frantically of ways to turn his foe's arrogance into a victory.

Smash! An errant axe swing broke the window that surrounded the whole opulent chamber. That was it! Ashkantir fled back in the dead prince's direction with nothing but the latter's smugness as a shield between himself and sorcerous death.

Cornered against the glass wall as the battleaxe sped toward him again, he fell supine. The thing in the armor's momentum carried it a few more staggers forward and Ashkantir's boots leaped up from behind to propel it onward out the window.

Before Treylalia could even register he'd lost his toy, Ashkantir was wrestling with him. There it was! A prize beyond price glinted upon a bony finger.

The pair staggered and lurched in a graceless dance of trips and steely grip. As he sought a way to pin the prince against his desk, Ashkantir saw Treylalia give a fiendish grin and sensed a deadly *something* gathering in his other hand. The living arm struck faster than a snake, snatching the dead one at the wrist before the wicked wizard could touch him. The dread prince's strength was unearthly; Ashkantir could barely hold him at bay.

"I am beyond the grasp of death, fool!" the fleshless hand groped toward his heart against Ashkantir's desperate grip, "Fear not: you'll make a better slave than assassin."

Just when he felt he could hold on no longer, Ashkantir managed to throw Treylalia off his feet, sending the skeleton sprawling to the floor. Sword flying out of the scabbard, he clove off the hand with the ring he sought in one stroke! The prince was stronger than he had any right to be but he scarcely weighed anything at all. Before he could pick himself up, Ashkantir hoisted him overhead by his spine and hurled him bodily through another pane to plummet toward his own cursed gardens. Before sending the still moving fingers to rejoin their master, he deftly removed a single one of the magician's rings.

There was a cacophony of hollering and clattering armor down below and the floor was beginning to open again. Ashkantir climbed a gilded ladder to the very highest room of the tower, a dome of pure glass interrupted only by a few stone ribs and a single door to the ballustraded observation ledge that surrounded it.

BANG! BANG! BANG! He pounded another eyed piton into the tower's outer wall while his pursuers' shouts grew ever nearer. Satisfied it would not slip and send him falling to his death, he tied one end of the rope that had filled his whole backpack to it. Gra-Gru was waiting far, far below. It almost

seemed a different world, far from this fey realm of glass walls, invisible foes, and deathless sorcerers. Ashkantir was eager to return home to it. With a whirl he hurled the weighted end of his makeshift zipline down to sprawl across the outer wall. Perfect. While Gra-Gru ran to secure that end safely, Ashkantir retrieved the bent steel bar with which he would slide down and dropped his emptied pack. He'd left his bow behind! Well, no time for that.

He heard a far-off whistle. All was ready. He looked out over the abyss, seeing the vastly long cord sway and sag. Down and down and down he saw to the base of the tower and the perilous gardens between the white walls that separated the palace from the wider world. From behind him came thundering footsteps and the creak of the ladder. It was now or never, death or glory! He slipped the precious ring into his pocket, the steel handle over the rope, and himself over the balustrade.

The ground flew up to meet him! Too fast! It was too fast! The metal slider whizzed too smoothly over the uneven braiding that was meant to slow it down! Ashkantir threw himself from side to side to slow it, nearly losing his grip on the sweat-slicked steel. The rope now swayed nauseatingly and he was still accelerating! His clothes whipped about and his fingers slid closer to losing their hold. With a jarring lurch, the inflection sent him hurtling toward the outer wall. It was all up to Gra-Gru now, that wagonful of thick pillows rushing toward him were not enough. He saw his friend waving frantically and then Gra-Gru's spell gripped and slowed him with all the gradualness of a mace blow to the face.

He still hit the heap of cushions so hard they felt nearly like the wall he crunched into an instant later. Pain exploded from his left shin which had cracked against an uncovered lip of the battlements and he felt as if the rest of him had been crushed to jelly as he lay stunned and immobile.

There was no time to be injured now, not with victory in his very grasp! With Gra-Gru's help he staggered to his feet, leaning on his friend's shoulder. This night he'd gained a ring whose worth he knew would someday prove to dwarf all Treylalia's hoarded wealth and ill-gotten power. By his sword-arm he'd been through worse before and he'd face worse again undaunted. With Gra-Gru and Reyga and a trusty blade at his side he would face anything and everything fool enough to bar their way, wherever it might lead. For now though he hoped it led somewhere he could lie down. Preferably with a good bowyer nearby.