

The Lament of Besom

By: Douglas Bain

I am Besom, the god of mistakes. I ran the race to the Blackened Nevers and I lost. But don't think my loss was a real loss, an honest loss. How could it have been? For even if I had won the race, what do you think those defeated gods would have called my victory? You know as well as I, they would have called it another of my mistakes.

And so, after much reflection, I must be honest: the biggest mistake to be found in this rotten old race was the thought that I could ever win it. How could a god of blunders, bumbles and gaffes; how could a god of wrong turns, fallacies

and miscalculations; how could a god of backfires, miscounts and mark-missing ever hope to win such a race? What a delusion!

That a god like me ever thought he could run straight and quick was a colossal overestimation on my part. That, and my underestimation of my rivals doomed me to failure. Which brings me to a point I'd like to address before I continue. Why is it you mortuants accuse me of meddling both when you exceed and fall short of your estimation? But I digress.

Back to mistakes. Because this race was all about mistakes. Some big. Some small. Some so significant they build into injustice, and that injustice builds into anger, and that anger boils into rage. Races born of rage are the quickest and the hottest, and this one burned like wildfire.

But don't commit a mistake of your own. I am not as you are. I do not seek reasons for my mistake. There is no more fault in error as there is in victory. Both you do not control. It is pure mortuant artifice to imagine otherwise. But let me explain my mistake. Perhaps through it you will come to see the truth in error. That's right, the *truth* in error.

It happened immediately. I'd hardly a moment to get my bearings. Somehow, in the midst of that cacophony and confusion, I found myself ahead of the pack. I was in the lead! I know you don't believe me, but Mag will confirm it. He should remember, because I had the wherewithal in that swirling

maelstrom of scattered figs, spilled wine, and clattering silverware, to slap his dice from him. And it worked. He lunged for his silly little toys, and I surged to the front of the pack.

It wasn't just Mag I had the step on. I was so quick I won the lead over Aelic and Methulla and Digrir. I even had the step on Bragnal, the prince of gods, no small bundle of mistakes himself. Perhaps he had a few too many misjudgements to untangle before he got to his feet?

When I look back now, I'm astonished at my quickness. In that moment, Besom, the god of mistakes, actually had the jump on the rest of those gods. But even here, even in what appears to be a clear example of success, there lies nothing but mistake. For you see, what I've described was not advantage at all. At least, not in the sense you mortuants would use the term. For what I've failed to relate to you up until this point, is that perhaps I was 'in the lead' as you mortuants call it, but it was lead without a race. Let me explain.

The feast was pure tedium for me. Digrir rambled into my ear about knots, and, in a fit of resentment, I'd sprinkled a mistake into the wine and saddled us with vinegar. But as I'd raised a handful of grapes to my mouth, trying to wash away the taste, I spied something in the distance. I saw the most beautiful of sights through my fingers. Oh, what an alluring temptress she was!

That I am not as you are, I imagine, is obvious. But I think it bears repeating here. Mortuants only see what lies before their eyes. It is a small grace we gods have granted you. But what serves for mortuants would be a damning limitation to a god. We see what must be seen. We observe all that threatens our divine mandate. As mine is to deliver blunder and error, what I saw when I lifted those grapes to my lips tempted me to the very heart of my cause.

I saw a man tiptoeing through a cellar full of powder kegs in some forgotten alley in the Milkwood District of Quardinal's Brawn. I imagine that old fool thought I wouldn't hear him. As if the candle balanced on that tin plate with his biscuits and cheese, held in his shaky fingers, didn't rattle like a snake's tail all the way up to my ears and draw my eyes to his error-abundant glory.

I saw that old drunk, half-catatonic with drink once again, try to tiptoe with all the grace of a whale in a teacup. I saw the candle swaying left and right. I saw the spill of powder at his feet, trickled from between the broken barrel staves. And the temptation—nay the duty!—to leverage such foolishness into a catastrophe was upon me. So much powder. Such shaky hands. I bolted to my feet, knocked away Digrir's whispers, and began to weave my way past those gods and around our feast table.

It is only happenstance that as I drew free, as I fumbled in my bag for a cat to spring from the shadows, or a banana peel to toss across his path, did that

fool god Civiak reach out from nowhere, snatch up Bragnal's crown, and set the race in motion.

The gods sprang to their feet. For a moment I thought those jealous divine all wanted a part to play in the catastrophe I had in mind. Until I saw the crown recede, and the unmistakable consequence of that act dawned on me: the race to the Blackened Nevers was on!

I was quick-witted enough to realize what had just happened, and I acted accordingly. I settled into my gain, and without the slightest hint of shame I seized my advantage. While those other gods were divesting themselves of their mouthfuls of meat, snatching their weapons, tumbling over each other, and squawking like chickens, I was in the lead. The lead! In the race to the Blackened Nevers!

But it was not long before I could hear Rawl closing on my right shoulder. And with him, neck and neck, was Methulla and his accursed birds. The god of truth, is he? I think not. I think that Methulla is a god of all things wicked. For in the wings of his feathered companions is where this story reaches its central mistake. Allow me to explain.

He sent them ahead. And as those birds flew by me, someday, somehow, one of my mistakes must have booked passage. No, not a mistake exactly, more like a gaff, or perhaps a slip. I know you mortuants are fond of the phrase 'slip

of the tongue’, but here what happened was more of a ‘slip of the wing’, for the sound that assaulted me as those birds flew by was not the sound of flapping. There was no swish or rustle in it at all.

I don’t know how, I don’t know why, I don’t even know which one it was—the raven, the dove, the swallow?—whichever bird it was, there was a mistake stowed away in its feathers. And as the bird passed my ears, that stow-away jumped. As it tumbled in the air, bound for my ear, I imagine it fanning away the rustles, swishes, flaps and whistles common to the sound of a bird in flight. For as that little goblin entered my ear, it did so not as a whoosh or a flutter. No, it released a brew of misapprehension, misjudgement and misconception. For the sound that arrived at my ears, at that precise moment, as that bird flew by me, was none other than the angry holler of my wife.

Methulla says it was no foul play on his part. We have spoken. He appears contrite. But that does not mean I believe him when he says he had no notion that the down stroke of his bird could bear a resemblance to the mad shriek of my beloved. And not just any of her many shrieks. What I heard was that particular invocation of wrath and dismay that erupts from her when, invested with the idea of baking a tart, she opens the pantry, lets in the light, and spies the empty bottle of rum trickling its last onto the wooden floor.

Yes, I am a drunk as well as a god of mistakes. Mistakes and liquor go hand in hand. You may ask which came first. You are free to holler your question from the top of the Khallin Cliff if it pleases you. I have no answer. What I do know is that my wife's screech, once heard, can never be forgotten. And it is enough to shatter steel.

How to describe it? It is heavy like some sort of miserable glug escaping a sinking ship. It is crackling like a bundle of dry roof shingles broken over the knee. It is piercing like a tin whistle frying in a pan, as it vaporises the last coagulated phlegm bound in its reed, and that steam screams out the melting end of the instrument.

Too over-the-top? Too unfair? Perhaps. I suppose the parameters of my wife's shriek is hardly important. I don't imagine you'll be on the receiving end of one of them anytime soon. What *is* important is that at that moment, as I raced ahead of my rivals, as the sweat poured down my brow, as the down stroke of Methulla's bird reached my ear, a mistake unfolded, and I was seized by the specter of my wife, having whipped open the pantry door, having glanced down, having seen the empty rum bottle, having stitched the whole crime together, having sucked in a chest full of breath by way of shock, and having lifted her head to the ceiling—hollering for me in blind rage.

It was enough to freeze my blood. Indeed, it did more than that. It froze not only my blood, it froze me tip to toe. Only my dust carried on, shocked no doubt at my abrupt halt, only to be trampled underfoot as Rawl and Mag, Methulla and Civiak, and that bastard Bragnal overtook me.

And do you think those gods cared? Do you think they stopped for one moment to inquire as to my mistake? No, they did not. They carried on. They couldn't have cared less. To them the god of mistakes had fallen in the race, and good riddance to him. And I commend them for it. Keep running, I say. Leave the losers in the dust! That is the divine perspective on the matter, and that ends it.

But with you mortuants, that is never story enough, is it? For you it's all about *reasons*. You just can't help yourself. When you find small ones, you look for bigger ones. When you find big ones, you look for gigantic ones. There must be more, you say. Well, there isn't. A mistake is just a mistake.

But before I leave you, let me give you an additional enlightenment, though it cannot be in the interest of the god of mistakes to lead you *from* error, and not to it. Mistakes are as eternal as the sun above you. They will be, as they have ever been. For like nature, they abhor. But for them their abhorrence is for settled consensus, or a lazy assurance. They see bountiful loam in late nights and pressing deadlines. And bless them for it.

Imagine if you could remove me from the world. Imagine you trapped every error and blunder, hauled them to the edge of the planet, and threw them off. What would your life be then, with its correct estimations, proper assumptions, and faultless actions? It would be a sterile wasteland, that's what.

And horror would follow. In this vapid little world you'd created, scrubbed of Besom and his errors, you and your loved ones would fray like an old dishrag. You would begin to pine for misfortunes, for loose glue in your bannisters, and crumbly mortar in your bridges. You would begin to crave for a malapropism. One of you, at their wit's end, having had enough of this supposedly-perfect world, would finally break. Let's call him a carpenter. Alone in his workshop, staring down at the nail and his thumb beside it, he would let his hammer fall. And it would fall for glorious blunder.



The Lament of Besom is a bonus chapter to *The Woeful Wager*, the first book in the dark fantasy series *The Race to the Blackened Nevers* by Douglas Bain. For more information, please visit www.blackenednevers.com.