Garden of Blood

Roger Zelazny

Earning his passage and pay as a scout, Dilvish rode on ahead of the caravan that day, checking the pass-worthiness of mountain trails and investigating side ways for possible hazards. The sun had reached midday when he descended the far side of the low Kalgani range and moved through the foothills into the widening valley opening into the wood beyond which lay the plains.

“A singularly uneventful passage,” Black commented, as they paused upon a hilltop to regard the twisting of the trail toward the distant trees.

“In my day,” said Dilvish, “things would probably have been different. This area was full of robber bands. They followed the sun. They preyed upon travelers. Occasionally they would even join together to raid one of the small towns hereabout.”

“Towns?” said his great, dark mount whose skin shimmered like metal. “I have seen no towns.”

Dilvish shook his head.

“Who knows what might have happened in two hundred years?” He gestured downward. “I believe there was one right below us. Not large. It was called Tregli. I stayed at its inn on several occasions.”

Black looked in that direction.

“Are we going down there?”

Dilvish glanced at the sun.

“It is lunchtime,” he observed, “and the winds are strong here. Let’s go a little farther. I’ll eat down below.”

Black leaned forward and began descending the slope, picking up speed as the land leveled, making his way back onto the trail. Dilvish looked about him as they went, as if seeking landmarks.

“What are those flashes of color?” Black asked him. “Some distance ahead.”

Dilvish regarded a small area of blue, yellow, white⁠—with an occasional flash of red⁠—that had just come into view around a far-off bend.

“I don’t know,” he said. “We might take a look.”

Several minutes later, they passed the vine-covered remains of a low stone wall. Ahead lay strewn stones in patterns vaguely reminiscent of the outline of a building’s foundation. Here and there, as they advanced, they noted depressions at either hand, disposed in such fashion as to indicate that here might have been cellars, now rubble-filled and overgrown.

“Hold,” Dilvish said, pointing ahead and to his left to a place where a section of wall still stood. “That is the front of the inn I mentioned. I’m sure of it. I think we are on the main street.”

“Really?”

Black began to dig at the turf with one sharp, cloven foot. Moments later a spark flashed as he struck a cobblestone. He widened the hole, to reveal more cobbles adjoining it.

“This does appear to have been a street,” he said.

Dilvish dismounted and walked to the crumbling section of wall, passed it, moved about in the area behind it.

After several minutes he returned.

“The old well is still in sight out back,” he said. “But its canopy’s collapsed and rotted, and it’s covered over with vines now.”

“Might I suggest you save your thirst for that stream we passed in the hills?”

Dilvish held up a spoon.

“...And I found this part-buried where the kitchen used to be. I might have eaten with it myself, years ago. Yes, this is the inn.”

“Was,” Black suggested.

Dilvish’s smile vanished and he nodded.

“True.”

He tossed the spoon back over his shoulder and mounted.

“So much has changed...”

“You liked it here?” Black asked as they moved forward again.

“It was a pleasant stopping place. The people were friendly. I had some good meals.”

“What do you think might have happened? Those robbers you mentioned?”

“Seems a good guess,” Dilvish replied. “Unless it was some disease.”

They moved along the overgrown trail, a rabbit starting before them as they passed toward the far end of the town.

“Where did you want to take your meal?” Black inquired.

“Away from this dead place,” Dilvish said. “Perhaps in that field ahead.” He drew a deep breath. “It seems to have a pleasant smell to it.”

“It’s the flowers,” Black said. “Full of them. It was their colors we saw from above. Weren’t they there⁠—in the old days?”

Dilvish shook his head.

“No. There was something...I don’t quite recall what. Sort of a parklike little area out this way.”

They passed through a grove of trees, came into the clearing. Large, poppylike blossoms, blue, white, yellow⁠—the occasional red⁠—moved almost as high as Black’s shoulder, swaying on hairy, finger-thick stalks. They faced the sun. Their heavy perfumes hung in the air.

“There is a clear, shaded area at the foot of that large tree⁠—to the left,” Black observed. “There even seems to be a table you could use.”

Dilvish looked in that direction.

“Aha!” he said. “Now I remember. That stone slab isn’t a table. Well...In a way, it is. It’s an altar. The people of Tregli worshipped out here in the open⁠—Manata, goddess of growing things. They left her cakes and honey and such on the altar. Danced here. Sang here, of an evening. I even came to one of the services. They had a priestess...I forget her name.”

They came up beneath the tree, where Dilvish dismounted.

“The tree has grown and the altar’s sunk,” he remarked, brushing debris from the stone.

He began to hum as he rummaged in a saddlebag after a meal⁠—a simple, repetitive tune.

“I’ve never before heard you sing, whistle, or hum,” Black commented.

Dilvish yawned.

“I was just trying to recall the tune I heard that evening I was here. I believe that’s how it went.”

He seated himself with his back against the bole of the tree and began to eat.

“Dilvish, there is something strange about this place...”

“It seems strange to me just by virtue of its having changed so,” he replied, breaking off a piece of bread.

The wind shifted. The odors of the flowers came to them more strongly.

“That is not what I mean.”

Dilvish swallowed and smothered another yawn.

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.”

Black lowered his head and ceased all movement.

Dilvish looked about him and listened for a long while. The only sounds, however, were the rustling of the grasses, the flowers, the leaves in the tree above him, stirred by a passing wind.

“There does not seem to be anything unusual about,” he said softly.

Black did not reply.

Dilvish regarded his mount.

“Black?”

Carefully he loosened his blade and gathered his feet beneath him. He moved the balance of his lunch over to the slab.

“Black!”

The creature stood unmoving, unspeaking, like a great, dark statue.

Dilvish rose to his feet, stumbled, leaned back against the tree. His breathing came heavy.

“Is it you, my enemy?” he asked. “Why don’t you show yourself ?”

There came no reply. He looked out across the field again, breathing the heady perfume of the flowers. His vision began to waver as he stared, smearing the colors, distorting the outlines.

“What is happening?”

He took a step forward, and another, staggering in Black’s direction. When he reached him, he threw an arm about his neck and leaned heavily. Suddenly he drew his shirt upward with his left hand and pressed his face into it.

“Is it a narcotic...?” he said, and then he sagged, slipping partway to the ground.

Black still did not move.

\* \* \*

There were cries in the darkness and loud voices shouting orders. Dilvish stood in the shadow of the trees; a giant, heavily built man with a curly beard stood motionless nearby. The two of them peered in the direction of the flickering lights.

“The whole town seems to be burning,” came the deep voice of the larger man.

“Yes, and it sounds as if those who follow the sun are butchering the inhabitants.”

“We can do no good here. There are too many of them. We would only get ourselves hacked to bits, also.”

“True, and I had looked forward to a quiet evening. Let us skirt the place and be on our way.”

They drew back farther into the shadows and made their way past the scene of carnage. The screams were fewer now, as the number of dead increased. Many of the men were stacking loot and drinking from bottles taken from the flaming inn. A few still stood in line where the remaining women lay disheveled, eyes wide, garments rent. Across the way, a roof suddenly collapsed, sending a fountain of sparks into the night air.

“If a few should stagger our way, though,” the curly haired man remarked as they passed, “let’s hang them by their heels and gut them, to square accounts somewhat with the gods.”

“Keep your eyes open. You may get lucky.”

The other chuckled.

“I never know when you’re joking,” he said after a time. “Maybe you never are. That can be funny, too⁠—for others.”

They moved along a rocky, brush-strewn declivity paralleling the town. At their left, the cries grew fainter. An occasional burst of flame still sent shadows dancing about them.

“I wasn’t joking,” Dilvish said a little later. “Maybe I’ve forgotten how.”

The other touched his shoulder.

“Up ahead. The clearing...” he said.

They halted.

“Yes, I remember...”

“There is something there.”

They began to move again, more slowly. A regular flickering of light, as from a number of torches, came from the farther end of the field in the vicinity of a large, heavy-limbed tree.

Drawing nearer, they saw a knot of men at the small stone altar. One of them sat upon it, drinking from a wine bottle. Two others were bringing a blond-haired girl in a green garment across the field, her hands bound behind her back. She spoke, but her words were indistinguishable. She struggled, and they pushed her. She fell, and they drew her to her feet again.

“I recognize that girl,” Dilvish said. “It’s Sanya, their priestess. But⁠—”

He raised his hands to his head, pressed them to his temples.

“But⁠—what happened? How did I come to be here? It seems that I saw Sanya long, long ago...”

He turned and stared into his companion’s face, taking hold of his arm.

“You,” he said, “my friend... It seems I have known you for ages, yet⁠—Forgive me...I cannot recall your name.”

The other’s brow tightened as his eyes narrowed.

“I⁠—You call me Black,” he said suddenly. “Yes⁠—and this is not my customary form! I begin to remember... It was daytime, and this field was full of flowers. I believe that we slept... And the village! It was but a bare remnant⁠—”

He shook his head.

“I do not know what happened⁠—what spell, what power brought us to this place.”

“Yet you have powers of your own,” Dilvish said. “Can they help us? Can you still use them?”

“I⁠—I don’t know. I seem to have forgotten⁠—some things.”

“If we die here⁠—in this dream, or whatever it is⁠—do we truly die? Can you divine that?”

“We⁠—It is coming clearer now... The flowers of field sought our lives. The red ones are those that have slain travelers. They drug you with their perfumes, then twine about you and draw out your life. Yet something has interfered with their attempt on us. This is not a dream. We are witnessing what actually occurred. I do not know whether we can change what has already happened. Yet we must be here for a reason.”

“And can we die here?” Dilvish repeated.

“I am sure of it. Even I, if I fall in this place⁠—though I can foresee all sorts of intriguing theological problems.”

“Bugger them!” Dilvish said, and he began to move forward, making his way through the shadows around the edge of the clearing, heading toward the far end. “I believe they mean to sacrifice the priestess on the altar of her own goddess.”

“Yes,” Black said, moving silently behind him. “I don’t like them, and we are both armed. What do you say? There’s quite a number at the stone and two with the girl... But we should be able to get very close without being seen.”

“I agree. Can you use that blade⁠—this being an unfamiliar form and all?”

Black chuckled.

“It is not totally unfamiliar,” he replied. “The two on the right will never know how they got to Hell. I suggest that you deal with the one on the end while I’m sending them on their way. Then dispatch that one to the left.” He drew a long, double-handed blade soundlessly, holding it with one hand. “They may all be a bit drunk, too,” he added. “That should help.”

Dilvish drew his blade. They moved nearer.

“Say when,” he whispered.

Black raised his weapon.

“Now!”

Black was little more than a blur in the flickering light. Even as Dilvish fell upon his man to slay him, a gory head bounced near his foot, and Black’s second victim was already falling.

A great cry went up from the others as Dilvish tore his blade free from the body of the man he had slain and turned to face another. Black’s blade descended again, hacking off a man’s swordarm at the elbow, and his left foot flew forward, catching the man on the slab in the small of the back. Dilvish thought that he heard his spine snap as the man was hurled to the ground.

But now there were blades in the hands of the remaining men, and from across the field in the direction of the burning town there came a series of cries. From the side of his eye, Dilvish saw a number of figures rushing toward them, weapons in their hands.

He drove his second man several paces backward, beat his guard aside, kicked him in the kneecap, and cut halfway through his neck with a heavy blow.

He turned to cut at another who was coming fast upon him, noting that Black had brained one man against the side of the altar and skewered another with his long blade, raising him up off the ground with the force of his thrust. By now there were cries all around them.

He got inside his opponent’s reach and used the guard of his weapon as a knuckle-duster against the man’s jaw. He kicked him as he fell and ran the point of his blade into another’s guard, severing fingers as he drew it back. The man screamed and dropped his weapon. Ducking a head cut, Dilvish swung low and cut another behind the knee, hamstringing him. He backed away from two more then and circled quickly, getting one into the other’s way, beating and thrusting, being parried, parrying himself, thrusting again, slipping around a parry and slashing a wrist. From somewhere he heard Black bellow⁠—a half-human, half-animal sound⁠—followed moments later by a series of different voices screaming.

Dilvish tripped the injured man and stamped on him, caught the other in the stomach with his blade, felt a stinging in his shoulder, saw his own blood, turned to face a new attacker...

He dispatched this man in an almost dreamlike series of movements. Another, who was rushing toward him, slipped on a patch of freshly spilled blood and Dilvish finished him before he could rise again.

A club struck him on the side. He doubled for a moment and backed away, swinging wide parries. He saw Black nearby, still felling his attackers with almost reckless swordplay. He was about to call out to him, that they might get back to back for a more complete defense⁠—

A sharp cry rang out and the attackers hesitated. Heads turned in the direction of the altar, and motion was frozen for a moment.

The priestess Sanya lay across the stone, bleeding. A tall, fair-haired man had just withdrawn a blade from her breast. Her lips were still moving, either in curse or prayer, but the words were inaudible. The man’s lips were moving, too. Across the field a fresh group of men was advancing from the direction of the town. A red trickle began at the left corner of Sanya’s mouth and her head suddenly slumped to the side, eyes still open, unseeing. The blond man raised his head.

“Now bring me those two!” he cried, raising his blade once more and pointing it toward Dilvish and Black.

As he did this, the man’s sleeve fell back revealing a series of bluish tattoos along his right forearm. Dilvish had seen such markings before. Various hill-tribe shamans scored themselves in this fashion, each marking representing a victory over some neighbor and adding to the wearer’s power. What was such a man doing with this band of ragged cutthroats⁠—obviously their leader? Had his tribe been destroyed? Or⁠—?

Dilvish drew a deep breath.

“Don’t bother!” he shouted. “I’m coming!”

He sprang forward.

His blade engaged the other’s across the altar, was beaten back. He began to circle. So did the shaman.

“Did your own people drive you away?” Dilvish asked. “For what crimes?”

The man glared for but a moment, then smiled and with a sweeping gesture halted the men who were now rushing to his aid.

“This one is mine,” he stated. “You deal with the other.”

He moved his left forearm, which was also covered with tattoos, across his body and touched it to his blade.

“You recognize what I am,” he said, “and still you challenge me. That is rash.”

Flames sprang up along the length of the blade that he held. Dilvish narrowed his eyes against the sudden glare.

The weapon traced confusing lines of fire as the other moved it. Still, Dilvish parried its first thrust, feeling a momentary warmth upon his hand as he did so. From over his shoulder he heard Black’s battle cry and a resumed clashing of arms. A man screamed.

Dilvish swung into an attack that was parried by the blazing blade, feeling the increasing heat of that weapon across his wrist as he parried in turn and sought an opening.

They drew away from the altar and the tree, testing one another’s defenses upon the open field. From the sounds, somewhere behind him now, Dilvish knew that Black was still holding his own. How long could that continue, though? he wondered. Despite his great strength and speed, there were so many moving against him...

His sleeve began to smoulder as they swaggered blades. The shaman, he realized, was a good swordsman. Unlike his men, he was also cold sober⁠—and he was not as winded as Dilvish.

What was the meaning of all this? he wondered, throwing a head cut that he knew would not get through the other’s guard, backing away, and parrying the riposting chest cut that arrived with great force, pretending to stumble and recovering, hopefully to make the other overconfident. Why were they here?

Why had Black been transformed, and the two of them set upon the scene of this ancient massacre?

He continued to back away, giving only half-feigned indications of fatigue, studying the other’s style, blinking against the glare of that blade, his right hand now feeling as if it had been in a furnace. Why had he rushed to the aid of an already doomed girl, and against such odds?

A vision suddenly crossed his mind, of another night, long ago, of another girl about to be sacrificed by another magician, of the consequences of his act... He smiled as he realized that he had done it again and knew that he would do it yet again if the situation recurred⁠—for this was something he had often wondered over through long days of pain. In that fleeting instant, he saw something of himself⁠—the fear that his trials had broken a thing within him, a thing that he now saw to have remained unchanged.

He tried another head cut. There had been something about the shaman’s return on the last one...

Had some kindly disposed deity anticipated his action, seen some incomprehensible use for it in this battle, granted him this small insight into his own character as a death boon? Or⁠—?

Yes! The riposte came too strong again! If he were to back away and flash his blade beneath and around...

He began to plan the maneuver as he gave ground and pretended once again to stumble.

He heard Black shout an oath, from somewhere off to his right, and another man screamed. Even if he slew the shaman, Dilvish wondered, how long would the two of them last against the men remaining on the field and the men still on their way from the burning town?

But then⁠—and Dilvish could not be certain that it might not be an effect of the blazing blade upon his watering eyes⁠—the entire prospect before him seemed to ripple and waver for a moment. Everything appeared frozen in that instant⁠—his own parry, the grimace on the shaman’s sweat-stained face... In that splint of timelessness, he saw his opportunity.

He threw a head cut.

The other parried, and the flaming arc of the riposte came flashing toward his chest.

He moved back, whipping his blade clockwise and around and up. The point of the flaming blade tore through the sleeve of his jacket above his right biceps as it passed.

Twisting, he caught hold of his burnt right wrist with his left hand, blade straight ahead and pointing at the other’s breast. Already off-balance from the movement, he threw himself forward and saw his weapon pierce the shaman as they both fell, feeling for a moment the other’s hot blade upon his right thigh.

Then again the wavering, the timeless pulse, prolonged...

He pulled himself back, withdrawing his blade. Colors⁠—flame, brown, green, bright red⁠—began to smear about him. The burning blade flickered, dimmed, went out, where it lay upon the ground. Then it, too, was but a dark smudge upon a changing canvas. The sounds of conflict grew still in Black’s quarter.

Dilvish got to his feet, his blade at guard, his arm tensed to swing it. But nothing more approached.

From the end of the field, in the direction of the altar where the dead priestess lay, a voice seemed to be speaking⁠—feminine, and a trifle strident. Dilvish looked in that direction and immediately averted his still-watering eyes, for there was only light, brightening from heartbeat to heartbeat.

“I heard my hymn, Deliverer,” came the words, “and when I looked, I saw that within you which I might trust. An old wrong cannot be undone, but long have I awaited this cleansing, of those who follow the sun!”

About him, as through a frosted glass, Dilvish saw the standing forms of many of the men who had come to attack them. They wavered and their outlines blurred even as he looked. Yet one of them seemed to have come up, soundlessly, upon his left...

The voice softened:

“...And to you, who cared for this place⁠—if but for a brief while⁠—my blessing!”

The man seemed so near now, blade upraised, swaying from side to side in slow motion. The other men had all become smears of color in a brightening fight⁠—and this one, too, seemed to be changing even as Dilvish swung his blade⁠—

\* \* \*

The flower fell.

Dilvish put forth his hand for something to lean upon, found nothing, used his blade as a cane.

He heard a single stamping sound, then silence. About him, the place was filled with the sunlight of an afternoon. Amid the long grasses there were cut and trampled flowers, near and far. Those that yet stood still faced the sun, swaying.

“Black?”

“Yes?”

Dilvish turned his head. Black was shaking his.

“Strange visions...” he began.

“But no dream,” Black finished, and Dilvish knew by the throbbing of his reddened hand and the blood that still came from numerous cuts that this was true.

“Manata,” he said, “I will finish the work, for that which you have shown me.”

\* \* \*

As they mounted into the foothills, Black remarked, “It was good to fight beside you that way. I wonder whether I might learn that spell.”

“It was good to have you there,” Dilvish replied, as they headed into their lengthening shadows. “Very good.”

“Now you can tell the caravan chiefs that their way is clear.”

“Yes. Did you hear it, too?”

Black was silent for a time. Then: “Flowers do not scream,” he said.

Below and behind them, the smoke still rose and drifted across the shortening day.

A Word from Zelazny

This was Zelazny’s ninth Dilvish tale, written after “Tower of Ice” but tenth in the sequence in Dilvish, the Damned. “Later, Ken St.-Andre, who was then editing for the games magazine Sorcerer’s Apprentice, which also used some heroic fantasy fiction, visited me. While he was here he asked about a new Dilvish story. I felt like doing one just then, and wrote “Garden of Blood” for his summer 1979 issue.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Notes

Poppies are the source of opium, a strong narcotic. To parry is to ward off a blow; swaggered refers to the side-to-side (left-right-right-left) clashing motion of swordplay.

1. Alternities #6, Vol 2 No 2, Summer 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)