

The background of the magazine cover is a digital illustration of a fantastical landscape. A tall, grey stone tower with a small window and a balcony stands on a grassy hill. The landscape is filled with numerous trees in full bloom, displaying a variety of colors including pink, purple, and white. The scene is set against a backdrop of misty, rolling hills and a soft, hazy sky. The entire cover is framed by a thick black border.

October, 2023

Peasant Magazine

Stories By

Charles Moffat

Alistair Grant

Carl F. Northwood

Sean Mooney

Len Berry

C. M. Neary

Brigham Magnusson

Jeffrey J. Hoy

D. G. Ironside

Liam Porter

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Issue #1

Peasant Magazine

Issue One

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All cover art & any illustrations are created using photoshop.

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Tricia Humphrey, Nikki Bollman, Jonathan Deprey, and various others who also promoted *Peasant Magazine*. Our apologies to anyone we may have missed.

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From the Publisher: The First Issue of Peasant Magazine!

I've been thinking about starting a fantasy literary magazine for two decades. The problem with every magazine is the issue of finances. I want to be able to pay the authors, and I appreciate that many authors want to get paid, but I also understand that there is a fundamental Catch-22 for both the magazine and the writers.

The Catch-22 is as follows: In order for writers to become successful they need to attract fans of their work who then write positive reviews, but how are they to attract fans if nobody reads their work in the first place? Literary Magazines provide a very useful and highly effective method of reaching readers who can become potential fans, but the popular *for-profit* literary magazines are usually only interested in publishing stories by writers who are already successful, because they don't want to take a financial risk on a writer who isn't already well-known.

Smaller and less profit driven literary magazines can take risks on less well known writers because there's a lower financial risk for them, but the financing of the magazine is still a concern. A non-profit + free literary magazine like *Peasant Magazine* meanwhile can afford to take lots of risks on unknown authors. Having no budget to pay the writers means we can afford to take whatever risks we want, as our chief commodity is the time of the publisher (me) and any volunteers who help with proofreading, editing and marketing.

The Catch-22 is doubly problematic for self-published authors because they don't have the benefit of being able to get their books into bookstores easily.

So what is my background in publishing? I first started publishing my work when I was 12 years old back in the early 1990s, in a local town newspaper. During the 2000s and 2010s I contributed to various ezines and blogs, and I continue to do so. One of my favourite contributions was various non-fiction articles I wrote for *Archery Focus Magazine*, drawing upon my experience as an archery instructor. I have also self-published various novels, novellas, novelettes and short stories. Over 40 books in total, including 3 poetry books.

I also work as an editor and illustrator for various authors. I produce all of the cover art and illustrations for my self-published work, because having a BFA in painting should be useful for something. Although I admit that these days I usually use photoshop instead of painting. The older I get the more my BFA in painting feels rather obsolete, but unless society collapses back to the stone age I don't have much choice in the matter.

With a background in publishing, editing and art I feel that I am rather well-suited to running a literary magazine. Even if it is just a non-profit one that I started as a way of helping out my fellow writers.

Hopefully readers now understand why I felt compelled to create *Peasant Magazine*. I felt it was needed and that I am providing a service to both writers and readers, and hopefully connecting the writers with new fans who will buy their books.

We welcome submissions from writers of all creeds, all ages, and we invite readers to browse and read what these writers have to offer.

Sincerely,
Charles Moffat
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ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Charles Moffat is a fantasy author, artist and archery instructor. He primarily writes heroic fantasy, epic fantasy, dark fantasy, and sword & sorcery. He lives in Toronto with his wife and two sons. He enjoys fishing, woodworking and bow making. Learn more at amazon.com/author/moffat

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The Pale Lady in White

By Charles Moffat

I

The sudden screech of an owl awoke many a patron at the Dragon's Breath Inn and Hot Springs, but perhaps none were more alarmed than Ilya who rolled from his bed and reached for his arming sword. The tall and broad shouldered man calmed himself when he looked out the window and determined that it was just a grey and white screech owl frolicking in the hot springs behind the inn.

The pools of hot water bubbled merrily and the owl continued to splash in the hot liquid, making a merry racket and a series of joyous screeches.

The sun wasn't even up yet, but judging by the lightening in the east it would be up soon. The hot springs were empty except for the nocturnal avian. Last night the hot springs had been busy with various travellers cleansing themselves of the dirt and grime of the road. Ilya had arrived late in the evening, on foot, but at least he had known where he was going. This morning... Not so much.

Ilya sat down on the creaky wooden bed, his thoughts in a whirl.

The Dragon's Breath Inn and Hot Springs was old. Ancient. It had been built, destroyed, repaired and restored many times. The architecture was both rustic yet decorative, but offered many amenities unheard of at other establishments, the least of which was the hot mineral baths for the patrons. The owner, Zarya, was kindly but stern, and her niece Elena was tempestuous as Ilya had quickly learned late last night when he checked in.

One particular feature of the inn had driven the young knight to visit however. The inn also doubled as the retirement home of Sir Dobrynya the Dragonslayer, the famed Bogatyr knight, and Ilya's former master. The old Bogatyr was a master swordsman and had taught Ilya the ways of sword, shield, axe and horses... And the basics of magic, for Bogatyrs dabbled in magic and the supernatural. Minor spells that aided them in combat and made the knights ideal for monster hunting.

Catching up with Sir Dobrynya last night had been pleasant, but it had also become evident that the old knight felt that this visit was unnecessary and unwarranted.

"Come visit me when I'm dead in my grave," Dobrynya had said last night and the comment had stuck in Ilya's mind whilst trying to sleep in the too soft bed that creaked loudly whenever he moved. The young knight had tossed and turned repeatedly before finally drinking some vodka to help himself sleep.

The old knight was bitter, and Ilya knew the history of why he was this way. *Ilya being here just reminded Dobrynya of her...* And such thoughts were best avoided. Ilya's own thoughts on the matter were decidedly dark and he preferred not to dwell upon them.

Leaving early, as soon as breakfast was over, was probably for the best. He stood and began packing his meagre belongings. It didn't take long before he had his chainmail hauberk, his bow and other things sorted. He was travelling light. Not having a horse made it a necessity that he save on weight so he could travel faster on foot.

He had hoped Dobrynya still had a horse he could sell to Ilya or perhaps lend to the young knight, but no luck. In retirement the old Bogatyr had sold his

horse, barely keeping his weapons and armour. Dobrynya's former squire knew better than to ask to borrow those. Might as well be asking to borrow his Milito board and figurine pieces.

A crescent-sized portion of the sun was rising in the east when Ilya descended the stairs and turned right at the foot of the steps to find the elderly knight in the parlour, where he was smoking from his pipe and seated in front of the black and white Milito board. The young knight glanced at the board. "Is that the game from last night? You didn't put the pieces away?"

Dobrynya gave a nearly imperceptible nod and puffed on his pipe, blowing out a smoke ring.

"Archer to E five," said Ilya, setting his backpack down next to an overstuffed chair and sitting down opposite the knight. He moved one of the black wooden figurines into its new position on the board.

"So nice to have someone who actually knows how to play," grunted Dobrynya. "Biggest challenge I have had since coming here is Earwine."

"The retired wizard I met last night?"

"The same. A decent challenge, but he lacks patience." Dobrynya took his time and blew an extra large smoke ring. "When you're going to do something it is often worth it to wait and do it properly... I see you're in a hurry to leave?"

Ilya looked at his backpack leaning against the chair and then back at his former master. "I will need to get an early start if I want to walk to Millkrest on foot. Two days journey-"

Dobrynya coughed loudly and moved his white pyromancer, a rare figurine, taking Ilya's unprotected soldier. "Or you can wait and take the carriage. I have already spoken to the driver.

Nemirov is his name. His dog is Margus. Friendly fellow. Anyway, if you agree to help drive the carriage and protect it from bandits then he will give you a ride all the way to the Holy City of Kost. You will have no problems finding a suitable horse there, although it will be a bit more expensive. Lots of knights in Kost so horseflesh is more pricey there... Especially with Belnarkians buying up all the cheap horseflesh."

Ilya moved his black pyromancer to G three, threatening both the older knight's archer and his unprotected pyromancer. In response Dobrynya sat back in his overstuffed armchair and surveyed the Milito board. But he couldn't just take Ilya's pyromancer either... It was protected by a soldier. If he took it then Ilya would take the pyromancer in retaliation and neither would gain anything.

Elena passed by the door to the parlour and Dobrynya waved her down with his pipe. "Do be a dear and bring Ilya some food. Bread, bacon, apples, mushrooms, that sort of thing."

"Can't you at least say please?" She glared at the retired Bogatyr, and then at Ilya as if it was also his fault.

"I said dear. Is that not enough? Can you *please* be a dear and fetch your aunt so I can commend her on the service here?"

Elena scowled at him and walked away towards the kitchen.

"What did you do to earn her ire?" asked Ilya.

Dobrynya puffed on his pipe before answering. "We rescued her, Costache and myself. Not everyone wants to be rescued. It's a long story. I don't blame her either. She's young. Young people do stupid things." The old knight looked away, eyes wistful.

Ilya coughed and looked away. When he looked back his black pyromancer had been removed from the board and Dobrynya's white pyromancer was now standing there looking doomed.

"I wasn't actually expecting you to take that," mumbled Ilya, taking the white pyromancer with his soldier.

"When you live long enough then you will eventually determine that there's sometimes the need to do a fair trade. I am beginning to think this game may end in a draw. I trained you too well."

Elena returned with Ilya's breakfast and made a huffing noise as she left the room. The two knights continued to play the board game until Dobrynya managed to squeeze out a narrow victory. By then they had attracted an audience, including the dwarf Costache, who was a wandering merchant and barber, and the retired wizard Earwine, who had a more academic perspective on the game and had pulled Ilya aside at one point to whisper his advice on a move. Advice that had later turned out to be flawed and had led to his defeat by Dobrynya's archers.

This defeat turned out to be timely, as Ilya was able to leave just in time to catch the carriage going south with Nemirov, the grey bearded and grizzled driver, and no other passengers except for his white and grey wolfhound named Margus. Instead the carriage was carrying letters from the city of Oraknev to Kost, which allowed the driver to frequently make the trip between the two cities, earning a decent living between the combination of passengers and deliveries.

Outside the wolfhound Margus was barking impatiently for the journey to begin, prancing around the team of four roan grey horses that stamped their feet

in earnest. The dog wasn't young, but he was still spry and excited to get going.

II

"Why'd you listen to Earwine? I told you that he isn't much of a challenge," asked Dobrynya, passing the young knight his pointed Bogatyr helmet. The old man smiled like a cat who knew what had happened to the missing duckling.

"I thought he was onto something with that idea to take your healer," muttered Ilya, donning his helmet. "Get rid of the Healer and the archers will falter. Seemed logical enough."

"Yes, but if that was your plan then you should have whispered more quietly. I am old, not deaf. I was wise to that plan the moment he said it."

The young knight grumbled quietly.

"Pardon? What was that?"

"It's been good to see you." Ilya smiled sheepishly.

"Yeah, well... You know how I hate partings," muttered Dobrynya, stepping away from his former squire and crossing his arms. "You should go before Nemirov leaves without you."

The young knight boarded the carriage and joined the grizzled old timer and his dog on the driver's seat. The wooden carriage wasn't too fancy, but it wasn't rickety either. Rather it looked sturdy, built to take harsh punishments on Korovia's often rough roads. It looked like a stagecoach, but it had an overhanging tarp above the driver's seat similar to a Lavordian cabriolet so that the driver didn't get wet or cold when it rained or snowed.

Nemirov clicked his tongue, the dog Margus barked and the four roan grey geldings began to move, the carriage lurching into motion. They exited the

inn's courtyard and the driver jerked the reins to turn left and head southward.

Ilya looked in time to see Dobrynya shout. "You shouldn't have listened to Earwine, especially considering that he was betting on me and Costache was gambling on you!"

Aghast and red-faced, Ilya looked back to the road, contemplating how easily the old wizard had duped him. He had whispered the advice to him when the dwarf Costache had visited the taproom to get another drink. It hadn't even occurred to him that the two might be gambling on who would win the game of Milito.

The road was wet from recent rainfall, but this section of the highway was well maintained and free of potholes. The Dragon's Breath Inn quickly became a memory and the miles began to disappear just as easily.

"What do you know about the place we're going to?" asked Nemirov, breaking the silence.

"Millkrest? Only what Dobrynya taught me when I was his squire. The River Krest was the site of a famous battle during the First Demon War. After the war was over the tribes returned to Krest during the Winter Solstice each year to share gifts with one another, a tradition of gift giving that holds to this day. Later someone built a Mill there, hence the name Millkrest. Did I miss anything?"

"Aye, you did. Did Sir Dobrynya ever tell you about the Curse of the Miller's Daughter?"

"Nope. Haven't heard that story."

"The story goes that during the Dark Ages..." Nemirov's voice lowered, becoming almost a whisper that could barely be heard over the trotting of the horses and the rattle of the carriage. "Wulfric the Wanderer visited the village

of Millkrest, but he found the place abandoned except for the mill. The inn and most of the buildings had been burnt down by marauders, but the mill still stood."

"Wait, wait, wait. That can't be right. Wulfric was alive during the Stone Age, not the Dark Ages. He fought alongside Ko Margus, Bogdan the Battle Behemoth and the Heroes of Olde. He couldn't have been around during the Dark Ages!"

Nemirov looked sharply at the young knight, but quickly returned his eyes to the road. "Tis just a story. Do you want to hear this story or not?"

Ilya was silent for a moment, resisting the urge to sigh in exasperation. "Sure, let's hear it."

"So the miller offers Wulfric to let him stay with himself and his daughter, but he warns Wulfric to stay away from his daughter, although he doesn't explain why." Nemirov glanced at the knight as if checking to see if he was truly listening.

Ilya smiled and nodded, imagining a pretty young woman akin to those in other similar tales like the Farmer's Three Daughters, which ended with a punchline about how all three were pregnant, or the Merfolk King's Daughter, which ended with her running off to become a human after falling in love with a sailor she had rescued, only to later tragically learn that her beloved sailor would 'visit any port in a storm', and he had no interest in marriage or settling down. The story ended with the former mermaid drowning during her efforts to return to the sea.

"The miller's daughter, it turned out, was very beautiful and she liked to lure men into the basement where the miller kept a huge millstone. She would then push the men in and grind their bones

into flour, all whilst chanting a prayer to the blood god Xarsius." Nemirov spat over the side of the carriage, dispelling Ilya's illusions about how this story was meant to go.

"But Wulfric heeded the miller's warning and brought his sword with him. When the daughter tried to push him in to crush his bones he caught hold of her, and they fought. He with his sword and she with a Xarsian dagger, but in the end she fell and was crushed by the millstone."

The young knight nodded. "Typical ending to a Wulfric the Wanderer story. Where's the curse bit though?"

"Ah, that's the interesting part... After Wulfric left Millkrest the miller's daughter was said to become a ghost or a banshee, cursed to roam the area in search of men to kill. In some versions of the story they say she became a Rusalka... But what I know is that there's been lots of sightings just north of Millkrest. The Lady in White, that's what the locals call her. Always dressed in white gossamer like she's going to her funeral. Now whether she is the daughter from the Wulfric story, well, who can say? There's lots of other ghost stories like that which could explain the sightings. Whether it is really Wulfric in the story, well, that part doesn't really matter, does it? What matters is that people keep seeing the Lady in White wandering in the woods near this here road."

"Have you seen her?" asked Ilya, genuinely interested. As a Bogatyr knight it was his duty to seek out undead spirits and vanquish them. Usually for payment, but also because their oaths as Bogatyrs demanded it.

Nemirov glanced at the knight, but said nothing. His throat tightened and his mouth remained firmly closed. Ilya

decided not to press the issue, taking the older man's silence as a yes.

III

When they stopped at a watering hole to feed and water the horses the two men ate bread and cheese whilst waiting for the horses to finish eating and drinking. Between bites the knight pressed the driver for more ghost stories and was soon richly rewarded, for Nemirov was a font of knowledge on the subject and there were plenty of ghost stories to choose from just from the region around Millkrest.

"There once was a farmer who had two daughters. One of his daughters married young, but the other became an old maid because she believed in chastity before marriage. Finally when she met a man that she agreed to marry she relented the night before the wedding and made love to him in the stables. But when the morrow came and she went to the altar to get married he never showed. He disappeared and she never saw him again. Grief stricken and ashamed, she hung herself in the stables, whilst wearing her wedding dress no less. The village buried her in the graveyard, but face down and with no gravestone. Eventually when her sister died of old age, and she was given a gravestone, people began to see her ghost wandering in the graveyard at night... And if you touched her sister's gravestone the villagers say that you would break the bone that you used to touch it."

"Does this graveyard exist?"

"Aye, tis at the south end of Millkrest, atop the hill."

"And you've seen this gravestone?"

Nemirov smiled broadly. "I've sat on it. Still waiting to break my tailbone, if

you know what I mean." He winked at Ilya and guffawed.

After lunch they continued southwards with Ilya taking a turn at the reins, showing off his skill with horses, and himself impressed at how well trained the four geldings were. Especially one of the lead horses on the right. "No bandits in these parts?"

The old driver spat over the side at the mention. "Nope, not in these woods. They prefer to be closer to the cities. Tis the way with highwaymen. If you ask me, they don't like to be too far away from their favourite brothel."

They rode on in silence, the horses continuing to make the miles disappear. Birds chirped in the trees. Squirrels and rabbits were plentiful and Margus would sometimes leap down from the carriage and give them chase before eventually returning to the stagecoach with nothing to show for his efforts.

"I've seen her," Nemirov admitted, his voice low and raspy.

"Who?"

"The Lady in White. I dunno if she's the miller's daughter or the sister who killed herself, but I've seen her. All shrouded in white and glowing like a will-o'-the-wisp. She's real, I can tell you that much. As real as you and me. When you look into her eyes..." Nemirov shuddered. "You can feel it in your spine when you see her. It feels like your heart has stopped, your breath claws at your chest and you have to remind yourself to breathe."

"Is she malevolent?"

"Huh? Male what?"

"Malevolent. Is she evil? Is she dangerous?"

The grizzled old man didn't answer immediately, but when he did he merely nodded his head.

"How can you tell?"

"You can tell, trust me. The look in her eyes and she starts moving towards you. I would say she chases you, but she doesn't run. It is more like she glides across the ground. The good news is that the horses are just as frightened of her as I am, so we just hightail it out of here as fast as they can gallop whenever we see her."

Ilya blinked. "Wait... You've seen her more than once?"

"All the time. Several times per month, I reckon. Always in the evening. If we time it right later this evening then you'll see her too, I'd wager."

"Or time it wrong, I suppose," muttered the old driver. "That sounds more accurate."

IV

Having seen that Ilya knew how to handle the horses, Nemirov dozed off upright in his seat, his feet braced against the buckboard. As it stood the knight barely had to use the reins as the geldings were intelligent enough and had made the journey many times so that they knew where they were going. The young man's snapping of the reins on rare occasions to keep the carriage on the road seemed more like a formality than anything else.

Margus too dozed off, the white and grey dog rolled up between the two men and his head on Nemirov's lap. Once in a while the dog would kick out violently against Ilya's leg, as if he was chasing rabbits again in his sleep.

Dark clouds shrouded the horizon to the west, moving to cover the sun as it dipped westward. The trees grew darker and gloomier as the horses trotted southward, pine and cedar trees giving way to old maple trees and ancient oaks

that had changed colour as the autumn nights grew colder.

Ilya spotted a hut in the woods, the kind a woodsman might build while they were harvesting trees to be hauled back to the nearest village. There were no inhabitants, but the thought occurred to him that they could stop at a place like that for the night, if they needed to.

But Nemirov had seemed confident that they would make it to Millkrest tonight, by evening fall judging from the way he spoke of it. Not wanting to wake the old man, Ilya chose to snap the reins lightly, urging the horses to a slightly faster trot.

These woods were starting to bother him. They seemed too dark, too forbidden. Nobody lived here, not even woodsmen, and those only dared to do so briefly in their small huts. The ghost stories Nemirov had told him had admittedly spooked the knight, although he half suspected the old man had been pranking him with such stories.

It reminded Ilya of a different story, a fable about a handsome and charming wandering merchant. The merchant had visited the town of Starovia... Or was it Festani? The Bogatyr couldn't remember which, and it didn't really matter to the story. One of the local merchants in the town became upset at this outsider stealing all of his customers and later that night in the tavern he told everyone, including the wandering merchant, about the vampires who lurked in the woods around Starovia, and how they couldn't enter homes without being invited and couldn't cross rivers, not even on a bridge.

When at last the wandering merchant decided to leave Starovia he was very frightened of the woods and the stories of vampires, but he was even more scared when a vampire riding a black

horse appeared and chased him on the road heading west out of the valley. The merchant had made it as far as a bridge that crossed a river, where the locals later found him dead. Died of fright, so the story went.

In the tale it was implied that the local merchant had dressed up like a vampire and chased down his competition on a horse. After the man died of fright the local robbed him of his profits, but the moral of the fable was that fear was more dangerous than the thing itself.

That lesson lent to Ilya steeling his nerves now. Nemirov had merely been pranking him in order to test his courage. There was no need to wake the old man just because the woods were getting darker. He would probably just laugh at the young knight's cowardice.

The wagon lurched and tilted backwards to the right. Ilya pulled on the reins to halt the horses and looked back to see that one of the rear wheels had come off the axle.

"What was that?" muttered Nemirov, still half-asleep.

"Wheel fell off. Don't worry, I can fix it." Ilya groaned as he climbed down from the driver's seat. He walked back to the rear of the carriage to inspect it.

One of the wooden pegs that held the wheel in place had broken, snapped clean in half. The knight picked up the fallen wheel, lifted the axle slightly and pushed the wheel onto the end of it. But how to keep it in place and still make good time? The wooden pegs were cut and carved to size so that they fit perfectly in the peg hole.

Fetching a length of rope from his backpack he had stowed in the space under the driver's seat, Ilya returned and slid the rope into the peg hole, knotted it on both sides of the hole and cut the remaining length of rope.

“That should hold for now, as long we don’t go too fast,” he said to himself, mentally congratulating himself on his problem solving. He returned to the driver’s seat, grabbed the reins and snapped them to get the horses back to a trot.

But the horses didn’t move forward, indeed, they were shying away from something in front of them.

“Are we getting closer to Millkrest?” mumbled Nemirov. “Wake me when we get close to the village.”

“I dunno,” answered the knight, snapping the reins again and still the horses refused to go forward. “Something’s wrong with the horses. You’d better get up.”

The old driver blinked and rubbed his eyes, looking about as he took in his surroundings. “Oh bloody hell! We’re already near Millkrest. We’re in her domain!”

V

“She’s here already, I can feel it! We need to go now!” insisted Nemirov, grabbing a whip from beneath the driver’s seat and snapping the air above the horses, the sudden noise jolting them into action.

“I thought you were joking about those ghost stories!” protested Ilya, snapping the reins as the horses went from a standstill to a gallop, the carriage bumping up and down as it went over a pothole. It didn’t feel like a joke any more. The air here was colder, unnaturally so, and cold sweat was trickling down his spine. “You know, pulling a prank on me?!”

Nemirov snorted loudly and snapped the whip again, coaxing the geldings to an even faster gallop. “Ha! Joking? I was dead serious! I don’t joke about that

bitch. She’s the closest thing to a demon I have yet to see, and I have seen a few scary things on these roads. Bandits? Just shoot their leader with a crossbow and run like hell. Trolls? Ha! They’re nothing compared to her. They chase after the horses because they crave the taste of horseflesh. You leave one of the horses and make a run for it. But her? No, that bitch will suck your soul right from your bones!”

Margus whimpered and the dog hid in the space beneath the driver’s seat.

Ilya scanned the trees and the road ahead for her ghostly form, but he saw nothing matching the description of the Lady in White. Not even a hint of a will-o’-the-wisp. Still, the unearthly chill in the air didn’t go away. If anything it seemed to be getting closer, but he felt it from behind them.

The young knight looked behind them, seeing nothing trailing behind the carriage, but from the corner of his eye he saw something much closer: A glimmer of ghostly white light coming from within the carriage. He turned around to his left and pulled open a small wooden shutter that allowed the driver to speak to and see the passengers within. What he saw inside shook him to his very soul.

The Lady in White, such as she was, was indeed a ghostly white, radiating a cold light from her gossamer-like form. She was shrouded and hooded with spiritual energy which obscured most of her face and form, but her eyes were a clear icy blue, like the winter sky, and she was moving forward, one arm outstretched for the two mortal men.

The carriage around her seemed to be rotting, falling to pieces, from her presence. A gaping hole in the back of the carriage showed where she had entered.

Margus was barking harshly, but Ilya scarcely noticed. He stood, bracing one foot against the buckboard and drawing his arming sword. "Illumina!" he intoned and a different sort of white light, silvery and multihued like a metallic rainbow, shone from his sword.

The Lady reached out one hand, grasping the window. The wood beneath her grasp rotted and fell apart into dust at her touch.

Seeing the light, Nemirov turned and saw her hand less than a foot's length from him. He screamed and stood, dropping the whip, scrambling to abandon the carriage. He jumped, heedless of injury or death, to the ground that rushed by, striking his head on a tree branch in the process. Margus yelped and followed behind his master.

Ilya stabbed at the ghost, his enchanted sword piercing the spirit's intangible form easily and eliciting an unearthly wail from her. The Lady in White was undeterred however, grasping the window between the interior of the carriage and the driver's seat with both hands and pulling herself forward, her incorporeal form seeming to glide between spaces as it passed through the wood, her merest touch causing the wood to rot, wither and turn to dust.

The knight backed away the only direction he considered to be remotely safe, towards the horses. Leaping off the carriage at this speed was reckless and he hadn't seen what had become of Nemirov, but he didn't relish hitting a tree at this breakneck speed. Still holding the reins to give him some extra balance, he stepped over the buckboard and onto the sturdy wooden tongue that hitched the horses to the carriage. It was a precarious position, but felt a lot safer than jumping off the vehicle at this speed.

The Lady in White, her face pale and luminous, floated above the driver's seat, her gossamer form seeming to blow and flow in an unseen wind. Her icy blue eyes met the Bogatyr's and for a moment he felt mesmerized as she reached out a hand to try and touch him.

The carriage went over a pothole and gave a sudden jolt when the right rear wheel went rolling off, the vehicle tilting backwards and to the side as the tip of the axle began dragging on the ground... The sudden motion saved the knight from the ghost's touch and shook him out of her enchantment.

Ilya hacked with his sword at the tongue in front of his feet once, twice, and it snapped with the next bump, the carriage dragging on the road until it hit a pothole and rolled to a stop. Balanced on the tongue between the two rear geldings, the knight found himself going faster than before now that they had shed some weight.

Dust choked the air in their wake, but the knight could still make out the light coming from the ghost in the cloud of dust. Twilight had fallen and he could see little else due to the clouds above blocking out the stars. Still gripping the reins, Ilya turned and tried to bring the horses to a halt, but only one of the horses even tried to obey the command, but was forced to keep galloping as its brethren did so.

Having little choice in the matter, Ilya sheathed his sword and crept forward along the tongue and steadied himself with one hand on the yoke of a galloping horse. When he reached the front two geldings, including the one which had tried to obey his attempt to stop them earlier, he moved up closer to their heads and gripped both of their bridles, jerking them downwards so that both of the lead horses couldn't see the road in front of

them and could only see that which passed directly in front of their feet.

Understanding clicked in the minds of the well-trained beasts and the two lead horses slowed, forcing those behind to slow as well, and Ilya was finally able to bring them to a complete stop. The horses noses were flaring and their mouths were frothing.

Yet the knight had another task before him. He unhitched one of the lead geldings, the better trained one from what he could tell. He mounted the horse bareback, using the reins and bridle to steer it back towards Nemirov. He drew his sword so the Ilumina spell could light their way.

The light of the ghost had vanished. The carriage was a rotting pile of shambles. It looked like it had only crashed recently, but the state of rot and decay suggested that it had been there a lot longer.

The dog Margus was nowhere to be seen. He had to be around here somewhere, but Ilya saw and heard nothing of the canine. If it was remotely intelligent the dog had run off into the woods, away from the dreaded ghost.

He found Nemirov however, or what was left of him. The Lady in White had been here, judging by his face and skin. His hair had turned white, the flesh had withered, his skin wrinkled and dried out to a husk. Even his teeth were falling out. He was little more than old bones, skin and hair. His vest and tunic had rotted away, as had the tree nearby.

A trail of rotted plants and dust showed a trail leading into the woods. She could be tracked, mused the Bogatyr, holding his sword aloft so he could see where the trail led towards the east. The woods there seemed to be darker still, more so now that night was

almost here. The last vestiges of twilight were fast disappearing.

Ilya dismounted, tucked his sword into his belt so that he still had the light from the Ilumina enchantment and hefted Nemirov's withered corpse onto the back of the horse before remounting.

The road south to the village of Millkrest was pitch black and he had naught but his enchanted sword to light his way, but darker still were the knight's thoughts of what must come tomorrow.

VI

The sun was high and bright. The geese were heading south, the large grey and white birds sensing the coming of winter. Autumn leaves of yellow, orange and brilliant red still flourished in the oaks, elms and maples, but had released a carpet of leaves across the forest floor. Still the trail of rotted and decayed leaves marked the passage of something much fouler than the changing of seasons.

Ilya followed the trail, riding upon a grey gelding with no name. No point giving the horse a name, he decided. Might not live that long. The horse had proved his worth thus far, being of sterner stuff than the other three horses and better trained. Small wonder that it had been one of the lead horses pulling the carriage.

The trail of rotted vegetation intersected with other trails of rotted plants like streams joining together to form rivers, including many older trails showing signs of regrowth, mostly mushrooms feeding upon the dead plant material.

To the south through the trees Ilya spotted a glade of purple and pink foxglove flowers and strange pink quartz

bones, dragon-like in size, but the Lady in White's trail didn't go in that direction. No, it kept going further to the north-east.

The villagers of Millkrest had told him of this place, but had also said that they never came here when it was close to twilight. Not for decades. Maybe longer. He had been told that youths would sometimes dare to journey this way, but they were treated to a smart whipping by angry parents who told stories of the Lady in White to frighten them into obedience. These woods were forbidden, wild, primordial.

Well, not completely. Beneath the trees and on animal trails Ilya would sometimes spot the stone ruins of older structures, long gone and collapsed under the weight of trees, dirt and moss. People had built homes here once, very long ago. So long ago it wasn't even a memory. The villagers had told him nothing of these ruins. Perhaps they didn't even know they existed.

The trail widened, becoming a rutted wagon trail dotted with gravel and rocks. Weeds and wildflowers grew on the sides of the trail, but any plants on the trail itself had long ago rotted and turned to dust.

Up ahead the trees thinned and Ilya found himself in a wildflower meadow surrounded by tall pine trees. A stream ran through the middle of a valley towards the east, meandering past a stone cabin with a collapsed roof. No plants grew near the cabin, the earth there was lifeless dirt and sand.

The trail of rot and dirt led there.

Ilya reined his horse to a stop fifty yards from the cabin, dismounted and walked the rest of the way. As he neared the structure he drew his sword. "Illumina," he intoned, and the sword flared to life with silvery white light.

The Bogatyr knight circled the cabin on all sides, but there was nothing there. Nothing alive, nor dead for that matter. The door had long ago turned to dust, as had much of the roof and anything else made of wood. Spying inside the structure, he saw even the floorboards were gone, leaving nothing but lifeless dirt on the ground.

He approached the doorway, sword in hand, and peered inside. A stone well in the corner nearest the door allowed the owner to fetch water easily, but there was no bucket nor pump. Smashed pottery littered the dirt floor, along with rusty utensils and tools, including a rusted wood rasp and an old axehead, but it was the bones on the ground that drew the Bogatyr's attention.

Smaller and slight, they belonged to a woman. They weren't rotting however, instead they were the hue of pink quartz and translucent. What strange magic is this, wondered Ilya.

A larger piece of pink quartz lay amongst the bones, completely unlike the others. This piece wasn't human. It looked more like a dragon's tooth or a mammoth's tusk. A single huge tooth made of pink quartz, bringing to mind the dragon bones he had seen earlier south of the trail he had followed. The tooth was flawless except for a missing piece from the tip of the tooth. Pink quartz dragon bones. This was hardly a coincidence.

He stepped within the cabin, took several steps and picked up the dragon tooth before retreating back outside with it. It felt strange. Lighter than he had been expecting for something as large as a mammoth tusk. It wasn't quartz either. Something different, much tougher. With the exception of the missing tip the tooth was flawless and without a scratch.

Perhaps investigating the glade of foxglove and strange bones was worth the visit after all. There was a mystery to be unravelled here.

Returning to the horse, he mounted the gelding and turned about, making a trail through the tall wildflowers which had gone to seed with the coming of winter. But as he did so he noticed something strange. The flowers he passed by rotted before his eyes and turned to dust. Seized by a sudden fear, Ilya flung the dragon tooth away from him and watched as the wildflowers near the tooth began to wither and rot.

It was similar to the Lady in White's power, but nowhere near as quickly or as powerful. It was also, he noticed, rather selective. Not all the wildflowers withered and rotted. The foxglove flowers here were immune to its effects. Indeed, they seemed to do the opposite. They began to bloom again.

Strange magic indeed, thought Ilya.

He looked down at his left hand which he had used to carry the tooth, but saw that there was nothing amiss with it. He flexed his fingers. Everything looked perfectly normal. He dismounted and inspected the gelding and his leather saddle. The horse and everything else looked to be fine, but when he checked inside his new saddlebags he discovered that the carrots that he had purchased this morning which were part of his provisions had all rotted away, as had his hardtack biscuits. But the dried wolfsbane flowers he had picked earlier this morning were fine and were blossoming once more. He had been planning to use them to make a poison for aiding him in hunting a monster. Very selective.

Foxglove and wolfsbane are both poisonous, mused the Bogatyr. The other plants are not.

Something very strange was up here.

Still, he couldn't just leave the dragon's tooth there. It was killing the flowers around it. He strode over and picked it up, choosing this time to lead the gelding by the reins. He began the trek back towards the glade with the foxglove. Maybe he would find more answers there.

VII

The glade wasn't just home to foxglove, but purple wolfsbane and tiny yellow aconite too. Nothing but poisonous flowers grew within the glade.

Ilya tied his horse to a tree branch at the edge of the glade, fearful of whatever magic was at play within the area. He made his way towards the dragon bones, bearing the tooth in one hand and his sword in the other.

The dragon was massive, and much of it had sunk into the dirt over the centuries it had been here. Yet the dragon's skeleton was intact. No one had taken the bones, which would certainly be valuable... Were they not cursed and killed all the vegetable matter nearby, with the glaring exception of poisonous plants.

This whole place is cursed, Ilya reasoned. The exact nature and reason for the curse remained a mystery, but he suspected that the dragon had died in some spectacular manner involving powerful magic.

Walking to the skull of the dragon, he found a gap from where the dragon's tooth had been ripped from the bottom of its jaw and placed the tooth within it. It was a perfect fit. He was half expecting something miraculous to happen, but nothing of import did. The missing piece from the tip of the tooth

struck him as perhaps the reason why nothing had happened. Or perhaps nothing was meant to happen.

Shrugging, the Bogatyr knight returned to his grey gelding, mounted it and rode back towards the meadow to the north-east. He saw nothing that might help him against the Lady in White.

When the knight and steed arrived at the meadow it was afternoon already and he lingered at the edge of the forest, throwing out the rotten hardtack biscuits and carrots he had hoped to share with the horse. At the bottom of the saddlebags were some beef jerky he had purchased just the morning from the butcher in Millkrest. He took a bite and determined it still tasted normal.

Nemirov had said the Lady in White only appeared in the evening. He had some time to wait then. Walking the horse into the woods, he settled down next to an old elm tree. Perhaps he should have a nap, but instead he found himself pondering how and why the Lady in White had come to be.

She must have taken the dragon's tooth, or someone had given it to her. It was unlikely that someone had sold it to her due to the cabin's relative closeness to the dragon bones.

The cabin was old, the stonework from at least a few centuries ago. Few people even made stone cabins anymore, at least to Ilya's knowledge. Most stone quarries sell their product to the big cities and towns these days. Villagers and farmers usually used wood now since it was inexpensive and easier to build with. But just because the building was old that didn't mean that her death wasn't more recent.

The exact time she had died probably didn't matter, Ilya decided. The how and why seemed more pertinent to the task at

hand. Most ghosts, at least judging from the stories Sir Dobrynya had told him during his squireship, were the result of a curse and that meant magic, whether it be divine, demonic, arcane, or some other form of magic.

The magic he had witnessed didn't feel necromantic. The plants weren't dying because of some foul necromancy, it was quite the opposite for the foxglove and other poisonous flowers. It felt more like chronomancy: Time magic. But chronomancy was illegal and had been since the age of King Margus the Conqueror.

Thinking of Margus reminded Ilya of the missing dog, no doubt named for the famed king of olde. Where was he, the knight wondered. Off chasing rabbits no doubt. With luck perhaps the Korovian wolfhound will join a wolf pack and survive the coming winter.

Back to the matter at hand, the knight decided.

Eldar magic was even a possibility.

According to the legends this was the most ancient of all magicks, for the Eldar Noramir had created the universe, the gods, dragons and everything else. But Eldar magic was extremely powerful and unpredictable to mortals, as it was able to bend reality, space and time. Such magic was beyond mere wizards, druids or priests serving the gods. As such it was also rare. Certainly powerful enough to curse a dragon, a glade, and perhaps even curse a fool who stole a dragon tooth.

A lot of this feels like speculation, Ilya decided. He needed something more concrete. One could defeat a ghost in combat, using magic, but if the Lady in White was cursed in some manner then she might return a day later having reconstituted herself.

Feeling discontented, the Bogatyr decided to return to the cabin to look for more clues. He needed to know more about the woman she had been.

VIII

He brought the horse along with him, deciding that the gelding might serve as an early detection for the ghost's presence. If the panicking horses from yesterday had been any indicator then the gelding wasn't fearless, just better trained, and perhaps more willing to follow human instructions. Merely clicking his tongue led to the horse moving, or moving faster, which was perhaps an indication of Nemirov's skill at training horses. What else could this nameless horse be taught if given the chance?

The other three horses were still in Millkrest, under the care of the locals who would see them return to Nemirov's family in Oraknev. Along with a sum of gold and silver that Ilya had paid to acquire the fourth horse. The nameless gelding had already proven to Ilya that he was worth it. If the gelding also detected the presence of the ghost then he would prove it again.

Arriving at the cabin once more, Ilya noted that the horse wasn't remotely skittish about the structure or the lifeless dirt. This was a good sign that the ghost was either not here, or dormant at this time. The concept that the ghost had a dormancy period was just a theory on the knight's part, he conceded, but until he had a better theory it would have to do.

For now the cabin felt safe.

What was left of it. The timbers in the sagging roof ended in rotted stumps that hung low over the ceiling. Broken pottery littered the corners and it was

these that Ilya crouched down to examine first.

Whatever had once been inside the broken jars was now dirt, indicating that they had once been plants. One of the jars, half buried in dirt on its side, was still intact. Lifting it gingerly, he cracked open the waxed lid and peered inside to see small greyish seeds with white lines on them. They had a strong musty smell. Hemlock seeds. Very poisonous. The dragon's tooth wouldn't affect them.

But what of the woman's bones?

Following a hunch, Ilya stood up and went to the woman's bones. He picked up her crystalized skull and took it outside, past the bored horse, and to the wildflowers that circled the cabin.

As he neared the flowers he expected them to start wilting and rotting, like they had with the dragon's tooth, but no such magic happened. He even tried setting the skull down amongst the wildflowers. Nothing.

Only the dragon bones and the Lady in White seemed to have the ability to age and kill plants, with the exception of poisonous plants. Except the ghost could also age people, withering them away into husks.

This thought troubled Ilya, for he didn't relish the idea of death or early retirement if the ghost managed to touch him. Retirement might suit Sir Dobrynya, but the young Bogatyr reasoned that he had decades of potential left in him before he would even consider retiring.

Picking up the pink quartz skull of the woman, Ilya returned to the cabin and replaced it where he had found it amongst her bones. As he bent low to do so he noticed something near the bones of her spinal column. Tiny flecks of pink quartz, like little shavings off of something bigger.

The missing tip of the dragon's tooth.

He turned around, having already seen something that could have made such shavings. A rusted wood rasp. He found it amongst the dirt and examined it, finding tiny flecks of pink quartz stuck in the rusted teeth of the rasp. She had used it to file off the tip of the tooth.

But why?

And for what purpose?

Poison, Ilya decided.

She had collected hemlock seeds, and perhaps other poisons as well, but the dragon's tooth was perhaps the most deadly of all the poisons. It would rot the food that people ate, causing them to slowly die of starvation unless they managed to subsist on a diet of meat alone. Worse, Ilya thought, the rotted food would turn to dust in the victim's belly. Might even make them sick. Might...

Might turn their bones into quartz.

He stared down at the woman's cursed bones. She must've eaten the tooth shavings. How quickly had it killed her? How slowly?

Why? Why kill herself?

The thought of suicide bothered Ilya. In moments of deep depression he had catered to such thoughts, as he suspected so too had Sir Dobrynya. Certain events from their shared pasts brought nightmares that never seemed to end. There was no reprieve from such thoughts and the knight had, at times, admittedly thought about throwing his life away.

In time he had adjusted to life as a wandering knight and monster slayer. He was too busy trying to survive to think about such things, too tired to dream. The trauma from his past was still there, but he was certain it was worse for Sir Dobrynya than it was for himself. He had to force himself to keep going.

The act of trying to survive, the struggle, had given him a new reason to live. Perhaps someday he would run into a monster, perhaps even a dragon, that he couldn't defeat. On that day he hoped that he didn't give in willingly to the beast. No, better to go down fighting. Fighting to his last breath.

He continued his search amongst the ruined cabin, finding more examples of poisonous plants amongst the pottery. Dried amanita death cap mushrooms. Roots of something he suspected to be wolfsbane. A jar of a purplish-black substance that smelled of belladonna flowers. She had quite the collection.

Buried amongst the broken pottery in the north-east corner he found something else of interest. A stone icon of Privica carved from pumice, complete with a carved bag of gold in one hand and flowers in the other. Ilya knew Privica to be a goddess favoured by evildoers, the goddess of pride and vanity, but also the patron goddess of poisons and assassins.

A hermit woman living in the woods who worships the goddess of poisons. Things were starting to make a lot more sense.

But had she killed herself? Or had something else happened?

He continued to search for more clues, but only turned up another jar of hemlock seeds, and a stone mortar and pestle that would be useful to a herbalist.

The thought that she might have been a wizard did occur to him, but he found no evidence of that. It was more likely that she had been a priestess of Privica, or at very least a common worshipper who had chosen to live in the woods. Perhaps she had grown weary of her existence or...

Or perhaps she had wanted to die and become a ghost, in order to further serve

her goddess? Not suicide. Sacrifice. The ultimate devotion to one's goddess.

More speculation on his part, Ilya thought. He had clues, but nothing confirmed. Perhaps in the end he didn't need to know. The task before him didn't necessarily require him to determine the how and the why. His primary duty was to put an end to the ghost so that she might pass on to the afterlife, or whatever passed for an afterlife for a devotee of Privica.

He had to hope that if he did defeat her then perhaps she would stay dead.

IX

Life. She could feel the presence of something. Living flesh. No, two lives, she decided. One animal... Very large, too big to be a deer, but too small to be a woolly mammoth. A horse, she suspected. The other was smaller, but felt like a beacon of vitality. This one felt familiar and she was reminded of her recent foray towards the highway that lay between Oraknev and the Holy City of Kost.

The merchants that travelled the road seemed to call out to her across vast miles, their souls screaming with vitality. The animals in these woods were scarce. They knew that a nocturnal predator lurked here, and even the animal predators stayed away.

A mammoth or a woolly rhinoceros would sometimes wander into this region, for they were less afraid of such predators, and at long last Viktoria would feast upon their vitality, causing the huge beasts to wither and die within moments.

But as the megafauna in the area dwindled these woods became thicker, the trees and underbrush serving like walls to keep out the animals too

unwitting to know the place was now cursed.

Viktoria's task was unending however, so every night she went looking for more sustenance. More vitality. She hungered for it. Some nights she might even get lucky when a troll from the Troll Lands in the east wandered this way, for they were bursting with magic and vitality and it took a long time to drain the life from a troll.

Tonight however she sensed two creatures. Here, already. Right on her doorstep.

The larger of the two life forces began to stomp its hooves and tried to rip its reins free from where it was tied.

But the other... The other life force was the bigger problem, Viktoria knew so instinctively.

"Illumina!" intoned the mortal man.

A light flared into life, illuminating a knight holding a sword that emanated a silvery white light. A Bogatyr. The one from yester evening?

'Twas too good to be true. He had come looking for her. She would feast tonight on two life forces. Yesterday she had only managed to get the merchant, the old one who had previously always fled with his fast horses, but tonight was going to be different.

Tonight her spirit would feast!

She took a measure of enjoyment as she would also avenge herself for the injury the Bogatyr had dealt yestereve with his accursed sword. She had healed the injury after draining the old man of his vitality, but he had been old and closer to death anyway. This knight was young. Vibrant. His life force would be so much sweeter, as would her vengeance.

She rose from her bones, glowing white and cold.

The horse ripped free and tried to flee, but the knight caught the reins and hauled himself upwards onto the saddle. Horse and rider circled the cabin, riding fast as the steed galloped and the knight had to struggle to keep it under control.

Viktoria hissed in frustration. She could only glide across the ground, propelled not by feet but by her will power. She could move quickly, when she really wanted to, but it was nowhere near as fast as a horse. That much she had learned in her dealings with the travellers on the highway. If a horse sensed her coming they made a run for it and by then it was often too late for her to feast.

The stragglers and the slow witted, people walking on foot. Those were her true prey, but once in a long while she got lucky and caught a horse unawares, managing to drain its life force and age it to death before it could escape. When that happened the travellers were hers to kill as she pleased.

But this knight? He was tantalizingly out of reach. He was no fool, Viktoria decided. He must've seen what she had done to the old merchant. He knew her touch meant death to him, and so he kept his distance, brandishing that accursed sword!

Abruptly the knight switched direction, his horse firmly under his control. Viktoria reached out to try and grasp him as he went by, but she was rewarded only with the keen edge of the silvery sword.

Pain wracked her spirit and she hissed, drawing away from him. She felt weaker, slower... But more determined than ever.

For countless years she had hunted and feasted, but never before had she encountered this. Fear crept into her as the realization dawned on her like the

red moon rising in the east. She wasn't hunting him. He was hunting her...

She fled, willing herself to glide towards the cabin. He wouldn't be able to use the horse inside the structure, and her power was strengthened when she was closer to the dragon's tooth. He stabbed her in the back as she fled, but soon afterwards she reached the safety of the cabin.

He would have to dismount to follow her in here... Plus the tooth would give her strength and speed. She looked to her bones, but found something missing.

Where was the tooth?

She let loose a dreadful moan, cursing the knight for figuring out the source of her power. But where was it? Where was the tooth? Was he carrying it? Had he hidden it in the forest?

No! The fool must've taken it back to the Crystal Glade. Of course! So predictable, but also ignorant. Her powers would be close to invincible within the glade.

But how to get there? She was trapped here, like a rat in a cage. If she took a step outside the knight would attack her, him with his cursed sword and his fast horse.

She looked outside in time to see the knight dismount from his horse. The steed whickered loudly and stamped its feet. Normally a horse would have fled, but somehow it did not go. Perhaps it sensed that the knight was hunting the creature that it so feared? Was it intelligent enough to recognize who was being hunted?

Soon the Bogatyr would be in the doorway and she would be unable to flee. She had to go. Now!

Willing herself to glide as quickly as she could, she outpaced the knight and was soon halfway to the forest. She knew the fastest way to get to the

Crystal Glade, but if she followed the trail then she wouldn't have the trees to help protect her from the knight's sword. No, she would have to go through the trees, the thickest parts of the forest where the roots would trip his horse, lest he follow her and slash her again and again.

She heard the knight click his tongue behind her, but she thought nothing of it.

Viktoria moved frantically through the trees, leaving a path of rot and dust in her wake. She could sense the knight behind her and to her right, following the trail on horseback. He was making good time and the horse and rider soon passed her, probably knowing that she was heading to the Crystal Glade.

Still she kept going. He couldn't possibly know that she would be stronger and faster when she reached the glade. He wouldn't stand a chance with his puny sword once she got there.

"Ilumina!"

Her head turned in wonderment, her pale face seeking his aura of vitality through the trees. He was ahead of her now. Still mounted on his horse, but now he was holding a set of silvery glowing arrows in his bow hand and nocking one of the arrows to the bowstring of a horsebow.

She moaned and shrieked as the first arrow struck her, ripping a hole through her spirit. Such pain!

Viktoria slowed, but did not falter or stumble. Her desperation to reach the glade was paramount now. She had no time to waste.

The knight clicked his tongue and the horse began to move as if unbidden. He fell alongside the ghost as she flitted between the trees, trying to use them for cover.

The next arrow missed, as did the one after that. Viktoria smiled. The trees were protecting her.

The next arrow nicked her shawl, the pale aura that surrounded her spirit, but she still felt her power wane and she slowed ever so much. Another arrow flew past her head just before she reached the safety of a large knotted oak tree.

She rested here for a moment, trying to gather her energy. She was drawing some of the vitality from the tree, but plant-life could only sustain her but a tiny amount.

She turned and peeked out from behind the rotting tree, spying the Bogatyr knight on his horse less than two dozen yards away. He had another arrow nocked and drawn. He was just waiting for her to show herself.

Viktoria waited, hesitating. She needed a plan. She needed a way to outsmart him. The oak tree was wasting away beside her, faster by the moment. She needed to think. She needed a good plan, a solid plan that wouldn't fail. She was trapped here. He could see the pale light coming from her. Any direction she went the knight would follow.

She moaned and shrieked as the rotting wood blew outwards and a silvery arrow shone amongst her pale spirit. She looked down and saw the arrow still lodged within her. He had shot right through the rotting tree! One of the knots in the tree had rotted away completely. She was safe no longer!

She looked up in time to see his final arrow speed towards her.

X

The white and grey wolfhound with matted fur lay on his side next to the freshly dug grave. Margus could smell

his master, but he also smelled the decay of death, the wet earth, and the distant musk of a male rabbit. His hunger ached in his belly and he was urged by instincts to run and chase the buck rabbit, but he was resistant to leaving his dead master.

He had followed the scent here. The scent of his master, his one true companion. He wasn't about to leave it for a rabbit. Not yet.

The cemetery south of Millkrest was pleasant, the gravestones surrounded by a grove of oak trees that had turned red and orange with the coming of autumn and blanketed the area with fallen leaves. The thick roots of the oak trees prevented the graves from being dug too deep and they were at best shallow graves.

The steady thudding of a horse's hooves heralded the arrival of one of the geldings that Margus recognized by scent alone. He sat up and watched as the horse and rider reached the top of the hill.

The Bogatyr reined the horse to a halt when he met the dog's eyes and for a moment Margus and the knight stared at each other. The wolfhound and knight's destinies had become intertwined, and somehow each of them sensed this.

A moment later the dog bounded off towards the woods to the east, at last following his instincts to chase after the musky scent of the buck rabbit. With luck he would catch him and satisfy his hunger.

Ilya watched the wolfhound disappear into the woods, keeping a tight rein on the gelding as it stamped the ground to indicate his impatience to go. A sense of guilt washed over him as he stared at the shallow grave of Nemirov. If he had woken the old driver earlier perhaps much of this could have been avoided.

But then the ghost would have remained to haunt the woods near the stone cabin, killing an untold number of travellers. Destiny, it seemed, had a different plan for the Bogatyr.

Loosening the reins he clicked his tongue and the gelding trotted southward. The road south of Millkrest looked to be well maintained, but such things were deceptive the knight knew. The road was better maintained closer to the village. Further to the south there would doubtlessly be potholes and further dangers.

The villagers had told Ilya that there were sightings of brown hermit spitting spiders, each of the giant arachnids as large as a wolf, that would sometimes attack merchants on the road. Mostly the spiders kept to the woods, attacking deer and other prey with their venomous spittle.

There were no warrants for the spiders, but the innkeeper had told the knight that the venom sacs were still valued by apothecaries in the Holy City of Kost. The venom was paralytic, hence the value. If a brown hermit managed to spit on a foe they could end up paralyzed and facing death, unable to move.

Still, if Ilya used the same tactic he had employed against the ghost, keeping his distance on horseback and shooting arrows at the arachnids, then hermit spiders shouldn't be too difficult. The spiders were said to be solitary, mating only once in their life. So long as he didn't run into a mated pair or a clutch of recently hatched spiderlings then it should be relatively easy. Certainly easier than a ghost that can age a man to death with her touch.

Bereft of a better plan, Ilya rode south with a plan and a destination on a horse with no name.

The End.

Author's Note

This story takes place prior to the events of “The Bogatyr & the Cursed Inn” and “The Coven’s Wolves”, and features characters from both stories. It also features Margus, the dog who later reappears in “The Demon’s Sacrifice”.

For the sake of interest I have included rules on how to play the board game *Milito*.

How to Play Milito

By Charles Moffat

What you need to play:

One 8 x 8 Chess board or *Milito* Board.

Dungeons and Dragons miniatures or Wooden Figurines painted white or black. Could also be played using coins or wooden tokens as stand-ins for various pieces.

If playing with Druids or Necromancers then the players should have a supply of grey or black pebbles or Quartz pebbles.

Alternatively: Using a website like Roll20 players can also play *Milito* virtually.

Objective:

To take/kill all of your opponent's pieces, without losing all of your own. The player who still has pieces remaining is the winner. A player can also be declared the winner if the other player concedes. It is also possible for the game to end in a stalemate, but players should endeavour to avoid this

as it is considered dishonourable and cowardly.

Optional: Under “Hab Rules” there is also a secondary objective for players to make their moves quickly, in order to encourage a faster game. Each player has to make their move before their opponent slowly counts to twenty. How slowly is really up to the opponent. If they fail to make their move quickly enough they lose their turn.

Starting:

One player holds two Soldiers in their hands, hidden from sight, one black and one white. The other player chooses one of the hands holding the hidden pieces, indicating which piece they will start the game with.

Black chooses first. The black player chooses their first two special figurines, which must be a paired set, and places them on their side of the board on the row closest to them. The white player repeats this step, choosing two pieces of their own. In this way each player can analyze the opponents strategy and possibly counter it. They continue to place their pieces until each player has selected and places eight special pieces. Each player then places their eight soldiers on the second row in front of them.

White moves first.

Each player gets the following:

8 Soldiers / Pawns / Pikemen

8 Special Figurines / Heroes

Soldiers (also known as Pawns or Pikemen) can move in any direction 1 or 2 squares, but cannot go over obstacles. They are the most utilitarian pieces on the board and are usually used to guard more valuable pieces.

Special Figurines / Heroes:

Four pairs of figurines chosen from what is available. In this manner players can choose their "army" according to their play style or preferences, or in order to counteract their opponent's choices. In order for a set of figurines to be eligible there must be two black and two white figurines, so that both players have the option to play with them.

Part of the challenge at the beginning of the game is each player choosing a play style that they think can defeat their opponents play style. However patience and careful planning is often the true deciding factor.

Archers can move one square in any direction or may "shoot" up to four squares in any direction, but only if they have line of sight and it has to be a straight line across the squares. If there is another piece or an obstacle in the way they cannot "shoot". Shooting doesn't require moving and is done instead of a move. They cannot move and shoot at the same time.

Assassins can move one or two squares in any direction, but when doing so they can "poison" any opponent pieces that end up being adjacent horizontally or vertically to the Assassin (diagonally doesn't count) when they finish moving. Note that this means Assassins can take/kill multiple pieces at once. Assassins cannot move through obstacles. Assassins ignore the special abilities of Healers and Paladins.

Blizzards can move up to four squares horizontally/vertically or up to two squares diagonally. They can not go over obstacles.

Cavaliers can move up to five squares away in a straight line, vertically or horizontally, but not diagonally. They cannot go over obstacles.

Druids can move one square in any direction or they can "summon" a Monolith token anywhere within two squares, which acts as an invulnerable obstacle. Once a Monolith has been placed it cannot be destroyed or moved. Monoliths can only be placed in empty squares. A common strategy when playing with Druids is to fortify an area, but this frequently leads to pieces becoming trapped or stalemated. A better strategy is to use the Monoliths to block threats from other pieces.

Healers can move one square in any direction. Any ally within two squares of a Healer (in any direction) cannot be taken/killed, including other Healers. Exception: Assassins can still take/kill a figurine, even if a Healer is within range. If the player chooses Healers at the beginning of the game they cannot also use Paladins.

Minstrels can move up to two squares horizontally or vertically. They cannot move diagonally or over obstacles. Any allied pieces within two squares of a Minstrel, including other Minstrels, can move two extra squares when performing a move. This ability does not affect the range of other abilities outside of moving.

Monoliths are invulnerable and unmovable rocks that act as obstacles. See Druids for more details. Players often use quartz pebbles as Monolith tokens. Monoliths cannot be chosen at the beginning of a game and do not count as pieces for determining who wins the game. Once placed Monoliths simply count as obstacles and no player technically "owns" them.

Necromancers can move one square in any direction. Whenever an ally or enemy is taken/killed within three squares of a Necromancer, place that piece in the Graveyard and place a

Zombie token on the board within one square of the Necromancer. The square must be unoccupied otherwise the ability doesn't work. This ability doesn't work on Zombie Tokens.

Paladins can move up to four squares in a straight line, but only diagonally. They cannot move over obstacles. Any ally within one square of a Paladin (in any direction) cannot be taken/killed, including other Paladins. Exception: Assassins can still take/kill a figurine, even if a Paladin is within range. If the player chooses Paladins at the beginning of the game they cannot also use Healers.

Pyromancers can move up to two squares horizontally/vertically or up to four squares diagonally. They can not go over obstacles.

Rangers can move one square in any direction or they may "shoot" up to three squares in any direction, but they can shoot around obstacles and they don't need to shoot in a straight line. Shooting doesn't require moving and is done instead of a move. They cannot move and shoot at the same time.

Wizards can choose to "teleport" to any location between four and five squares away, ignoring obstacles, but it must be in a straight line. Otherwise they can only move one square in any direction. They can also teleport to be "on top" of a Monolith token. If a wizard is on top of a Monolith token they can only be killed by Archers, Assassins or Rangers. This move is sometimes used to force a stalemate and is considered cowardly.

Zombie Tokens are only used in combination with Necromancers (see the description for Necromancers). Zombies can move in any direction up to three squares, but cannot go over obstacles. Healers and Paladins cannot protect

Zombie Tokens. Necromancers cannot use their special ability when a Zombie token is taken/killed. One popular strategy when playing with Necromancers is to create what is called a "Zombie Horde". Zombie Tokens cannot be chosen at the beginning of a game and do not count as pieces for determining who wins the game. Black or grey pebbles are frequently used as Zombie tokens (black pebbles for the player with black pieces and grey pebbles for the player with white pieces).

Have fun!

The Selkie's Silver Comb

By Alistair Grant

Once upon a time in the remote fishing village of Crail, situated on the rugged coast of Scotland, there lived a man named Callum. He was a fisherman, like most of the villagers, and spent his days out on the choppy waters of the North Sea. Callum was a tall, broad-shouldered man with piercing blue eyes and a thick beard that covered most of his face. He was known throughout the village for his bravery and his unwavering determination to bring home a good catch every day.

One day, as Callum was hauling in his fishing nets, he heard a strange and haunting melody coming from the rocks nearby. He looked up and saw a beautiful woman sitting on the shore, combing her long, flowing hair with a silver comb. She was a Selkie, a creature of Scottish folklore that was said to be a seal in the water and a woman on land.

Callum was entranced by the Selkie's beauty and approached her cautiously. She spoke to him in a soft, melodic

voice, and before long, they were sharing stories and laughing together. Callum had never felt such a connection with anyone before, and he knew that he was falling in love with the Selkie.

As the days went by, Callum became more and more enamoured with the Selkie. He found himself spending all his time with her, listening to her enchanting songs and gazing into her deep, soulful eyes. However, he could not help but notice the silver comb that she always carried with her.

The comb was intricately carved, with delicate patterns etched into its surface. Callum could not take his eyes off it, and he felt an overwhelming urge to possess it. He knew that it would be wrong to steal from the Selkie, but the temptation was too great.

One day, while the Selkie was sleeping, Callum could resist no longer. He slowly crept up to her and gently reached out to take the silver comb from her hand. As he touched it, however, the Selkie stirred and woke up.

At first, she looked at Callum with confusion, but as she saw the comb in his hand, her eyes filled with anger and sadness. "You would steal from me?" she asked, her voice trembling with emotion.

Callum felt a wave of shame wash over him as he realised the magnitude of his mistake. He had betrayed the trust of the one he loved most in the world, all for the sake of a shiny object.

The Selkie's expression softened as she spoke again, "Remember, Callum, that thievery is never justified, no matter how great the temptation may be. It is a breach of trust and a violation of the bonds of friendship and love."

With those words, she took the silver comb back and disappeared into the sea, leaving Callum alone with his remorse

and regret.

Days went by without any sight of the Selkie. Callum was consumed with guilt and regret for his foolish attempt to steal from her. He spent his days on the shore, gazing out to sea, hoping for a glimpse of her once again.

One day, as he was sitting on the shore, he saw the Selkie's head peeking out of the water. She swam towards him, her eyes fixed on him. Callum felt a mixture of fear and excitement as she approached him.

"Callum," she said, her voice soft and gentle. "I forgive you for your mistake. I understand that the temptation of the silver comb was too great for a mortal like you to resist."

Callum was surprised and relieved at the same time. He had not expected the Selkie to forgive him so easily. He felt a weight lifted from his shoulders as he accepted her forgiveness.

The Selkie continued, "My name is Eira. It means 'snow' in our language. I have come to understand that you have a good heart, Callum. You have shown me kindness and generosity, and for that, I am grateful."

Callum felt a warmth spread through his body at the sound of her name. He realised that he had never asked her for her name before. He felt a deep connection with her, and he knew that he would never forget her.

From that day forward, Callum and Eira became the best of friends. They spent many happy days together. Days turned into weeks, and Callum and the Selkie spent all their time together. He would bring her fish from his daily catch, and she would sing to him and tell him stories of the sea. But one day, as Callum was walking along the shore, he saw something that made his blood run cold. The Selkie was surrounded by a

group of her kind, and they were tearing into the carcass of a large fish.

Callum tried to run, but it was too late. Eira caught hold of him and was surprisingly strong, and there was no escape. She dragged him down into the water, and as he struggled, he saw her true form for the first time. Her body was sleek and silver, with long, powerful flippers and sharp teeth.

The Selkie began to devour Callum, tearing chunks of flesh from his body with her powerful jaws. As he gasped for breath, he saw that she was not alone. There were other Selkies there, all feeding on his body.

Callum's screams echoed across the sea, but there was no one there to hear them. During the feeding frenzy she dropped her silver comb, lost on the seashore where it would later be found by local fishermen. But their friend Callum's body was never found, and the Selkies went back to their lives in the ocean, leaving behind only the memory of the man they had killed and eaten.

Learning that she had lost her comb, Eira returned to the rocks on the seashore where she began to search for it. As the Selkie continued her search for her lost silver comb, something strange began to happen on the shore where Callum had been killed. People passing by would hear eerie whispers and feel a chilling presence near the rocks where Callum had met his end. Some claimed to see a ghostly figure walking along the shoreline, searching for something.

It was Callum's ghost, unable to rest in peace after his greed and foolishness had led to his untimely demise. He was now doomed to haunt the shore for eternity, a reminder to all of the dangers of greed and the consequences of one's actions.

The Selkie had never intended to kill

Callum, but her insatiable hunger had driven her to desperation. She had not eaten in days, and the smell of fish had been too much for her to resist. She had taken a life, and the guilt weighed heavily on her heart.

As Eira searched for her silver comb, she often thought of Callum and the lesson that his tragic end had taught her. She knew that her hunger could never justify taking a life, and she promised herself that she would always remember his sacrifice.

The haunting of Callum's ghost served as a warning to all who passed by the shore. It reminded them that greed and temptation could lead to tragic ends, and that the consequences of one's actions could linger long after they were gone.

Beware of the sea, my dear young ones. There are many dangers there that can kill you. Drowning is the least of your worries.

The End.

The Glamouring of Brond Col

By Carl F. Northwood

He stared. If truth were to be told, until then Brond Col had not seen anything as beautiful as the view he saw now. The soft rocking of the ship did little to hide the rhythmic rise and fall of the young woman's bosom as she slept. She was the epitome of beauty, with fair skin and a face of innocence framed by the golden hair, so common in the Rabic Isles. The young woman, she was less than his seventeen summers, slept on. And he carried on staring, afraid that if he turned away, she would disappear, or at the very

least, that when he placed eyes on her again, her beauty may have diminished.

“Don’t even think of it, lad.” The voice cut into his reverie. He finally tore his gaze from beauty and turned them to the beast. Krodar was a brute of a man. Both ugly and immense. He stood on the other side of her bed, his back to the hull like Brond’s, guarding and facing the door to the cabin.

“She’s the Bride of Rhaygan. And the Bride is meant to be a virgin on her wedding night. If she isn’t,” the old mercenary shrugged, “if she isn’t, then we are all up to our necks in shit.” He took his eyes off the door for a second to stare at his younger companion.

“The last swords for hire that interfered with Rhaygan’s girl are still wallowing at the bottom of the king’s dungeon. Every now and again, he wheels them out for a bit of torture. That was before ye were born, lad. And they are still alive, if ye call it that. They brought ruin and bad luck down on the islands for a few years”.

Brond felt himself blanch. Krodar’s voice had dampened his ardour somewhat and he was relieved to be thinking of something else.

“Does she know what’s going to happen to her?” the young mercenary asked. He had been the last to add his name to the list next to the job offer at the docks in Amat. That had been a month ago, and since then, the small company had travelled by sea, through the Gold Archipelago and then to the Rabic Isles. They were several hundred leagues past the Archipelago that consisted of two inhabited islands and a smaller, third island.

“Of course, she does. She’s known it since she was born.”

“Everything?” Brond’s voice crept an octave higher.

“Aye, lad. Everything.” Krodar looked at the younger man. They were like chalk and cheese. Brond would certainly be described by most as handsome. Krodar was taller than Brond’s height of six feet, broader over the shoulders but most of his muscle lay beneath a layer of excess. There weren’t many that would call Krodar handsome, maybe only his mother. His nose had been broken not once or twice, but numerous times. What teeth he had left were crooked and the scars on his face seemed to etch out paths through his stubble.

“Is she really going to be his bride?” The youth spoke up and instantly regretted his question.

“Ye can’t really be that dumb, lad. Rhaygan is a fucking dragon. There is only one thing that he wants with sweet, tender meat like that; and that ain’t the same thing that ye want.”

“But look at her, she isn’t scared at all.”

“Her people see it as an honour. Well, that’s the story anyway.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Krodar was about to give his response when a knock at the door indicated that the guards due to relieve them had arrived. As their replacements took their positions, Krodar turned to Brond, claspng him on the shoulder.

“Let’s get an ale up on the deck, my lad. Young and full of beans you may be, but the world ain’t all black and white.”

* * *

The sea was calm, just a gentle lapping of small waves against the copper plated hull. The moon light reflected from the crests of the ripples. The crew of the small ship busied

themselves with their work, adjusting sails where needed. Off to each side of the bow, Brond could make out the silhouettes of the guard ships that accompanied them. Four pike men stood on guard at the wheel to the ship, their uniform of quilted gambesons in the royal burgundy of the King of Rabic gave them some protection against the dropping temperature. They were among a number of regular soldiers on board, no doubt to keep the mercenaries in check.

“What did you mean back there?”

Krodar looked out to sea before answering. The ale he sipped was weak and tasteless, but it was the only drink on board except for water and, of course, the fine wines reserved for the officials of the Throne.

“In the past, Rhaygan claimed these islands as his own, then he did what all dragons do. Slept for centuries, no doubt on a horde of gold and treasure. When it was time for him to wake, he found men now living on his islands. He tried to drive them out like ye would rats from your house. Then he made a deal with them. He would let them live on two of the islands, that’s North and South Rabic. The third island is his. No-one from Rabic is allowed to set foot on it, not that they would want to. Except for his Bride.”

“That’s her, below.”

“Yes, every five years the Rabics deliver up a young girl, pure of heart and body, to be his bride. Along with a shit load of coin as well. In return, he doesn’t burn them to buggery.” He raised the drinking horn to his mouth and took another swig of his ale before continuing.

“The Rabics work it on a cycle. In their calendar, this is their Bridal Moon. Every girl born in this month is

delivered without fail to their temple on South Rabic. There they live in isolation, being schooled and instructed about what lays ahead of them. About how they are keeping their islands and loved ones safe. The beauty of their sacrifice. As they reach fifteen summers, they decide on the worthiest, the most beautiful. Then she gets put on a ship with the likes of us and we go and put her on a plate for her ‘husband’.”

“Now, nature as it is, some of the girls get scared. Between you and me, I’m not afraid to tell ye, I would soil my breeches if I got up close and personal to a dragon. Ye would as well, I know. Now some of the girls end up being sold abroad, they are the ones that aren’t going to make muster, if you know what I mean. Not like that one down below decks. They are a bit rough, not the natural beauty. Don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t mind if they wanted to keep me warm at night, but Rhaygan is a bit fussy.”

“The ones that do get to those final years, if they try to cause any trouble, then their families are dragged in for a bit of persuasion. Funny how a mind can turn when a loved one is threatened. As well as the stick, there is also the carrot. The girl chosen, now their family gets a big chest of gold. Enough to settle their debts, buy some nice land somewhere on the island, whatever. Not sure it’s enough to replace a daughter though.”

He downed his ale and wiped the froth off his stubble.

“So ye see, me lad. She knows. She has known that this would be her last night alive since she was born. You and me, we don’t know what tomorrow brings. She does and she is facing it braver than most men I know.”

Brond sipped at his ale, now finding even less taste in its bitterness. “Why do we have to be here? There are enough guards here to take her to the temple on the island. Why us and not them?”

“Weren’t ye listening, lad. No one from Rabic is allowed to set foot on his island, apart from his Bride. I don’t know why, but that’s the word they spat upon.”

Krodar belched loudly.

“I’m going to get some sleep. Tomorrow’s the day we earn our coin.”

He left the younger mercenary alone on the deck, hands resting on the railings looking out to the calmness of the world, wondering what the morn would bring.

* * *

The foaming spume shone brightly in the sun, and the sound of the waves charging at the beach could be heard by those in the two small rowing boats that rose and fell in rhythm with Brond’s stomach. The small company of mercenaries were split evenly between the two boats, Brond finding himself in Krodar’s group. The girl sat facing the island as they approached it. The swell was too much for one of the mercenaries who, green-faced, vomited overboard. The mercenaries were lending their arms to the sailors in each boat on the oars.

Brond was relieved to jump overboard and wade the last few metres, dragging the boat in as far as the draught would allow. The sand felt good under his feet even though it gave way under his weight as he heaved. The skirt of his brigandine jack bounced against his leather clad thighs as he ran up the beach. From the centre of the island rose a rocky mountain that was topped

by a smoking crater. The wisp of grey smoke rose vertically, the absence of wind taunting the party as they sweated in the morning heat. About three-quarters of the way up the mountain they could make out a small plateau that jutted from the mountainside. Upon it were what appeared to be the ruins of an ancient temple, columns pointing to the sky like arms calling out to the gods.

The golden sands of the beach swung round in an arc and were edged by ferns and palms. The foliage neither swayed nor emitted any sounds of life. Close to where they had landed, a small pavilion had been set up, with gaudy red and yellow silks draped over it. It covered a table upon which sat a small chest.

The King’s Official that had sat in the other rowing boat rose and gingerly stepped into the lapping surf. He pulled the edge of his robes up to keep them dry, his sandaled feet making slight depressions as he displaced the water from the sodden sand. He strode to the pavilion and opened the chest, nodding as he checked the contents and then shut it, locking it with a key that he produced from his purse. He picked it up and carried it reverently to the rowing boat.

“Unload the dowry!” He called to the sailors in the boat. They laboured as they picked up the chest within and handed it over to the four waiting mercenaries, who in turn raised it to their shoulders and carried it to the pavilion. They placed it down on the sand and returned to the boat to pick their equipment and swords up. The official addressed Krodar.

“Rhaygan will appear for his bride just before dusk. You will need to escort her to the altar there,” he pointed up to the ruins, “and secure her to it. Place the

chest on the smaller altar. Then I would suggest that you return here. We will be anchored out to sea to await your return. Your payment is in the rowing boat.”

Krodar nodded, his thumbs hooked into his belt as he listened.

“What happens if he wakes early?” one of the mercenaries called out.

“Although Rhaygan waits in trepidation to meet his new Bride, he knows the word of the contract. He will only approach at dusk. I would suggest though, that you aren’t on the island at that time.”

“Okay, old man. But what’s to stop anyone of us taking everything now, even that dowry.” Brond looked at Krodar as the old warrior spoke. He knew he wasn’t that stupid, and the question was for the benefit of the other mercenaries.

“How fast can you row?” the official asked, looking around at the soldiers, barely flinching in his reply. “Is it faster than a dragon can fly?” He turned and carefully climbed into his boat. The sailors pushed it back out before climbing over the side, leaving the beach to the eight men and the young girl.

“Let’s make a move then. Brond, you’re a mountain lad. Take the lead and scout us an easy path.” Krodar beckoned them to order. At the pavilion were two stout poles that were designed to fit through the iron loops on the chest, making it easier to carry. Four of the men carried the chest, slung between the two poles. Krodar walked next to the girl, whilst Brond took up his role.

“I’m going to miss the rain most of all,” the girl spoke to Krodar, although her soft, lilting voice seemed to carry to all of them. “Apparently it doesn’t rain here.” These were the first words that

any of them had heard her speak. The mercenary veteran stared ahead, trying to ignore her.

The path leading through the jungle was obvious to follow and soon started to incline. The foliage on each side started to thin out to small clumps of grasses and ferns and the path slowly turned into a treacherous mix of dry sand and loose shale. The four carrying the chest swore and cursed as each lost their footing several times. The path began to wind up the side of the mountain, leaving a drop on one side that fell vertically in places and gently sloping in others.

“What do you think Rhaygan will think of me? Do you think he will be pleased?” The girl continued, her face starting to show more than a hint of nervousness.

“Shut up, girl!” Krodar exploded, grabbing her wrist and spinning her round. “Keep that little mouth of yours shut! Don’t make this any harder than it is for us.”

Brond skipped back along the path, placing his arm between the two, careful not to touch the old soldier. The others had stopped, unsure what to do as the girl looked terrified.

“Come now, Krodar. Maybe it’s my turn to walk here. It’s a bit quieter on point.” He could see that Krodar was troubled and not just angry. The older man nodded and released his grip on her, turned and wiped his eye as he moved forward.

“Are you okay?” he asked the girl. She nodded and they walked on, with the others following. She stayed quiet for a while and then addressed Brond.

“I hope I please him. How does a girl please her husband? It will be my first time.”

“I am sure he will be understanding. Everyone is nervous during their first time, even me!” He smiled at her for the first time since he had seen her. She smiled back.

“Take care on this path,” he changed the subject. “It looks very dangerous.”

Suddenly his foot stumbled against something that wasn't there a minute ago and he staggered forward. He very nearly regained his balance when he felt a push on his side, though not a push exactly, more of a gust of wind. It caught him and he sprawled headfirst down the slope. It wasn't a steep fall, but neither was it a gentle rolling slope. He crashed and clattered down the shale, bouncing off rocks on his way down. He finally came to a halt laying on his front, staring over the edge of a steep drop and his feet pointing back up the slope.

“Shoem's balls!” he exclaimed, invoking the patron god of the mountain land that he had been raised in. His whole body ached like he had been caught in a stampede. He could hear the others calling, way back up the slope and he started to get up.

“Keep still!” whispered a shrill voice below his face.

“What?” His eyes struggled to focus on who or what had spoken to him.

“I said, keep still!” He blinked again and went to stand up when something hit him hard over the head, sending everything black.

* * *

He awoke to find himself staring at a small girl who sat upon the ledge beneath the drop. Except it wasn't a girl but an adult woman who was no higher than the length of his forearm. Two pairs of small, gossamer wings sprouted

from her back, similar to a dragonfly's. She had bright red hair and was perfectly proportioned, wearing a skin-tight tunic of leather that accentuated her figure. If anything, he thought, she was as beautiful as the Bride of Rhaygan was. Except for her size.

He blinked again but she was still there. Was he actually dead or just mad? Maybe his head had hit something really hard on the way down.

“Are you going to stay still?” The voice was soft but high pitched.

He nodded, slowly.

“Now listen, you aren't mad, or dead. I am really here, and I caused you to stumble and fall. I can easily cause you to fall forward again, and that wouldn't be a good idea, would it?” She pointed over the edge of her ledge. Here the slope changed to a vertical drop some thirty metres high. His armour wouldn't offer any protection for that and he ached all over, so he just shook his head to acknowledge it.

“Your friends aren't waiting. They think you are dead.”

“Am I?”

“Are you stupid or deaf? I already told you that you aren't mad or dead.”

“Who or what are you?”

“I am Andellin. I suppose I am what you men would call a fae or faerie.”

“Faerie? I am mad.” He felt his head, but she ignored his comment, peering over the edge of the cliff and back up the slope to see where Krodar and his men had been.

“They have gone, we need to move. Then I need to show you something and then we need to talk.” She fluttered her wings and hovered above the crown of the cliff, starting to flutter in a series of swoops up to where Bronnd had fallen from. He clambered up and stared

through the undergrowth. There was no sight nor sound of his companions. Shaking his head and sighing, he followed her. Once they had returned to the path, she retraced his steps back along the path towards the jungle. The mountainside on the other side of the path was more of a gentle slope upwards here and she indicated that Brond should climb up the incline. He clambered on all fours, desperately trying to catch up.

His chest pounded as they ascended further. It felt good for him to be back on a mountain. It was almost as if he was a child again, chasing his sheep and goats. A feeling of sadness washed over him though as he remembered the reasons he left.

“Hurry, we are almost there.” Andellin called, and he redoubled his efforts to finally catch her. He crept forward to where she crouched beneath a scrubby tree on a ledge. He gasped. Where they had climbed to was above the plateau where the altars were. He could see them clearly, two great rectangular stones in the centre of the circular clearing. One was much larger than the other. He could see that the area had once been a great temple. The ground was paved with stone blocks that once fitted neatly together, but now were haphazard, pushed up by the roots of bushes and trees nearby. Five great columns had once held a roof up, but only two stood fully, parts of the others laid strewn about like a toddler’s discarding building blocks.

He could see Krodar and the others with the girl on the path leading to it. The Bride was in more distress now. Either Krodar had lost patience with her again or she had been upset after seeing Brond fall. Not that he pretended that she had any feelings for him, he just

remembered how he felt when he had seen someone die for the first time.

“So, what is this all about? What did you want to show me?”

“First, look out to sea.”

He looked, not knowing what she was referring to at first, and then it clicked. The ships were on the distant horizon. They had been tricked and deserted.

“Those filthy bastards! I have to warn Krodar!”

“No! It is far too late for that. Wait now and watch!”

He gave a sigh and lay down next to her. He looked down as the mercenaries entered the temple. The four carrying the chest settled it on the smaller of the altars and withdrew the poles, casting them aside. Krodar circled the temple with his sword drawn. The other mercenaries dragged the girl to the larger altar. She was now screaming and trying in vain to kick herself free. One held her arms, stretching them out over her head, whilst the other two held a leg each. Attached to the altar were chains that they strapped her down with, placing the links over spikes driven into the stone.

The earth shook and Brond could see small stones slip and slide down the mountainside. There came a sound of strong wings flapping and a shape flew overhead leaving a shadow flittering over the temple below. The mercenaries started shouting, with some of them fanning out to shelter by the columns. The Bride screamed as her husband-to-be hovered overhead, his big leathery wings flapping in the midday sun. His black scales shone with an iridescent green and the grey of his underbelly and chest swelled as he gulped in air. Long white horns stuck backwards from his head and a wisp of

smoke was expelled from his nostrils with every exhale.

The dragon came to a rest on one of the half columns, his claws gouging out great streaks in the marble. The ground shook as Rhaygan roared, moving his head from side to side and letting out a huge blast of flame. Brond could feel the heat from where he was and could see the haze created.

“He came early! The official lied!”

“Of course, he did, he had to. Your friends aren’t meant to get out of this.”

He turned to Andellin.

“What do you mean?”

“The contract isn’t just for the Bride, it’s for eight mercenaries as well.”

Andellin rummaged through her belt pouch and drew out a small piece of fabric. She held it out to Brond who took it. As he held it, the fabric tripled in size.

“What is it?”

“A Faerie veil. If you hold it to your eyes, it will uncover any glamour.”

“Glamour?”

“A powerful enchantment that affects the senses of those who watch. It makes things appear different to those that are subject to it. You might call it an illusion but it’s far more than that.”

Brond raised it to his eyes, the soft pink material didn’t completely obscure the view but what he saw through the material made him gasp. The dragon wasn’t there, instead half a dozen faeries flitted about. The faeries were bigger than Andellin, perhaps twice or three times bigger. They were also male and wore chainmail. As they danced about, they waved short wands dispatching bursts of energy towards the soldiers. One by one the mercenaries started to fall. He slipped the veil away and Rhaygan re-appeared. One of his old companions was aflame, whilst four

more lay dead. He was pleased to see Krodar standing in front of the altar the Bride was chained to, holding his sword ready and challenging the great beast to attack him.

He carried on watching, alternating between the veil and without. The mercenaries soon all lay dead and the Bride writhed in terror on the altar. The dragon alighted on the floor with a heavy thump. As Brond watched transfixed it leaned in with its snout towards the girl and it sniffed her. Rhaygan glowed, the scales turning to bright blue and the dragon disappeared, a human figure taking its place. He was dressed in an ornate black gown and his long black hair was tied back in a ponytail. Even from the distance away that Brond was, he could see the figure was extremely well groomed. He strode forward, releasing his Bride from the chains and taking her up in his arms.

Brond flipped the veil over his eyes and saw one of the faerie men holding the girl under her armpits as he flew up into the air. The others picked the stricken swords-for-hire up and followed the first one. Brond rolled onto his back, handing the veil back to Andellin.

“What in Shoem’s name was all that?”

“Rhaygan the dragon does not exist, as you can see. The true Rhaygan is the King of the Faeries and it was he that made the contract with the old King of the Islanders all those years ago. The legend of Rhaygan the dragon was born to make sure that no one trespassed here. This subterfuge was arranged to make sure the Fae folk had access to what they wanted.”

“Which is what? I’m not sure what, if any of that, was real, or... What did you call it? A glamour?”

“What you saw through the veil was real. Those Fae men were real. They are the warriors of our race.” Andellin spoke, but there was something about her tone that made Brond question her.

“They are much bigger than you. Why is that?”

The faerie girl sat down and sobbed, holding her head in her hands.

“It is because they are crossbreeds. A warrior born of a human mother and faerie man. It helps to give them strength and ferocity in war.”

“A human mother,” Brond repeated her words and then the realisation dawned on him. “So, the Bride is really a bride for Rhaygan? She isn’t eaten?”

“Eww, of course not!” Andellin answered indignantly. “She will breed with Rhaygan and be a mother to many warriors. They will help to defend the island from the Fomors, the demons from the sea.”

“Why does the contract call for the mercenaries? Why kill them and what do they have to offer you?” Brond asked.

“Oh, they are not dead, just stunned. They are needed in a different way. They are milked for their blood and their essence. Their very vitality is taken as an important ingredient in our magics. It imbues our weapons, and our runes that we defend our land with. We also manufacture it into a vitality draught that we give back to the King of the Islanders as part of the contract. I have to say, it is not a very pleasant process. You were lucky that I saved you from it.” She added in a matter-of-fact way.

“Thank you, I think. That was another glamour at the end, the man in black?” The faerie nodded at his words. “Will that glamour carry on? I mean,

will she feel loved and adored for the rest of her life?”

“Yes,” Andellin replied. She stared intently at the young warrior. “You humans are a very complex race. You only knew her for a short while, yet you are concerned about how she will live. I was right to choose you.”

“Choose me?”

“I noted how you went back to reason with your companion who was frustrated with the Bride. I realised that you had compassion as well as strength. That is why I made you stumble, just a very simple cantrip.”

The little faerie woman stood and dusted herself off, storing away the Faerie veil in her pouch.

“Now, I have to ask a favour from you.”

Brond blushed.

“We don’t have to... Er... You know, do we?”

“Eww, absolutely not! No, I want your help and silence as repayment for my help and continued silence. I saved your life, but I could call for help any second. You’ll then face the same fate as your one-time companions. No, I want you to help me escape from these islands. I want to see the world. I want to feel alive rather than be imprisoned here unfulfilled. There, I have said it. We are in each other’s debt now. To leave this island is a sin, punishable by death. As soon as I set foot in that boat, there will be no going back for me.”

The enormity of what Andellin had said sunk in to Brond. This was now a matter of life and death for both of them. If they were caught before leaving, then they would face the same penalty. To Andellin though, a weight seemed to have lifted from her tiny shoulders.

“I have heard a little of the outside and want to see the beauty of it. I can show you where a boat is. I have it stocked with water and food already.”

“To me, it seems like this is the perfect end to this day.” He said bluntly, rising slowly to his feet.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because all day long things have happened to me that I had no choice in. What’s one more? I can’t stay here, can I?”

“Good, you can thank me some more for saving your life.” Andellin giggled and rose into the air.

He chuckled to himself as he started to make his way back down the mountainside.

“What do you find amusing?” she asked.

Brond smiled. “Because it’s not only Faeries that can cast a Glamour. Whichever God made the world managed to cast a pretty good one as well. I’ll show you it, but I think you might be disappointed. I just hope you are half as satisfied with it as you think you will be.”

As dusk fell, they made their way to the coast.

The End.

The Tone of Truth

By Sean Mooney

Over the hills west of Kettlefish comes a warm spring breeze promising the sweet scents of fresh blossoms and morning dew. It did not deliver on that promise. The air stinks of death and decay with hints of sulfur. It is impossible to miss the breach in the wall, or the charred stonework that awaited either repairs or elemental

forces to wipe clean the horrible reminder of failure.

As I pass by the remains of the village gate, I stop at a large crater – the lingering static of magic tingles the hairs on my arm. As I continue onward I pass a crew of eight people pushing wheelbarrows, their faces hidden by fabric, their clothes smudged and dirty with gore and grime as they work to remove the dead from the battlefield. One of them spots me staring and we share a look. Nothing is said - nothing can be said. We go about our business. Of course, there is no way for that worker to know that my business is directly related to his.

I’m surprised by how clear the streets are given that the raiders attacked only two days ago. But I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Making my way through the streets, I’m reminded of my childhood and how, even then, I was aware of how industrious the villagers were when it came to collective efforts. However, those were my father’s days, and a lot has changed – though apparently not everything. Perhaps there would be more to gain here than I originally thought.

I follow the familiar streets. Gone are the dirt roads, replaced by stone paving and cobbles. Carts and people pass me by, some with a smile, others with a “Hello!” but none know my face. The familiar – yet – unfamiliar feel of the surroundings extends to the buildings too. Several new homes and shops exist, including a tinsmith and a cooper. The wood of their buildings and work yards are just starting to show the weather worn features of the frequent rainstorms that wash over Kettlefish. None of the new structures have the vaulted arches or the columns and pillars with the

ornamental knotwork of the older buildings.

The road I'm on leads me to an open area that used to be the center of the village. I don't know if the harvest festival is still held here, but it remains a busy crossroads and general meeting place for news. The notice board is still here, though a few of the planks that make up its surface have been replaced; upon it several pages flutter in the breeze. I notice new roads leading away from the open area - new for me, at least. But I've arrived at my destination and I turn to face the inn.

All four front windows are shattered, and part of a hastily built barricade remains to be cleared. There's also the tingle of magic like I felt at the gate. It's not something anyone but a practitioner would pick up. Usually, the ripple in reality fades quickly. In this case, a lot of magic had been used quickly in a short amount of time near or on this location. I can feel the lingering effects like passing through a room where strips of scratchy cloth have been hung.

I glance up looking for the inn sign but don't find it. It is instead leaning against the outside post. "The Gilded Frog," I mutter and smile. Over the name, two golden frogs play leapfrog beside a river - for the keen-eyed, there are leaping kettles jumping in that river. My smile is for nostalgia but also for what is undoubtedly a joke among the locals... The leaping frogs do not look like they are leaping. But, as the owner's great-grandmother painted the sign and as it has survived storms and raids, no one has ever pushed for it to be changed. "Still funny," I say as I step into the establishment.

A sitting room with four oversized cushioned chairs and an empty fireplace greets me. The only person in the sitting

area is a teen girl, lean, but broad in the shoulders with short red hair. She's currently sweeping up some glass and doesn't see me enter. I knock on the counter after about a minute.

"Sorry. Not used to handling all this on my own. Looking for a room?" she immediately apologizes.

She notices my travel-worn clothes, the holes, the repairs, and the sap-stained cloak but doesn't say anything. I had legitimately forgotten how polite these people were to strangers. It feels right, like a warm bath, but something is missing, and it's an awkward few seconds before I realize what it is. Dorn isn't behind the counter. I'm missing the barrel-chested physique and baritone voice of Dorn. I hesitate before asking my next question. "Dorn?" The kid shakes her head. She looks even younger at that moment, and it occurs to me who I'm talking to. Dorn's daughter - Maribeth, as I recall. The last time I saw her, she was about ten years old, with red hair to the middle of her back and a permanent smudge of dirt on her forehead.

"You knew him?" she asks.

"Been a few years, but yes."

"Sorry, I don't recognize you. I thought I knew all of my father's friends. Haven't been by in a while?"

I grunt as I no longer want to be talking about this. The kid reads my intent and gestures down the hallway.

"The upstairs rooms are better, but they're still damaged. The ground-floor rooms are very nice - just not as big. Third down on the left is open."

As I reach into my coin pouch, I'm reminded that I've got just enough coins for a meal and a bed for one night - *should be all the time I need*. I slide a few coins her way and ask: "Anything I need to be worried about?"

“No,” she says definitively – probably afraid of losing a customer. She clears her throat and tussles the back of her cropped haircut. “Should be a bit before the raiders come again. There’s talk of getting a standing garrison.”

That surprises me. When I was a kid, the village would be hit by raiders – sometimes goblins, sometimes humans, sometimes worse, but I don’t recall it happening more than two or three times in all those years. “Happening often, these raids?”

“More so these last few years.”

That tracks with the information I’ve gathered. It breaks my heart to get confirmation. This time it’s my turn to read the room – she doesn’t want to talk about this anymore. I nod. “Thanks for the room.”

A few candle sconces give plenty of light and make the narrow hallway seem less claustrophobic. I pull the draft-curtain on the third door, pausing to listen before pushing the door open – a paranoid trick I picked up after years on the move. The room is indeed small. No window, a bed, a small table, no chair, a candle, a bowl, and that’s it. Thankfully there isn’t a lot of me, so the space isn’t an issue. I quickly scan the hallway before sliding the draft-curtain back into place and shutting the door. I pull the bolt for the door and feel I can relax when I hear it fall into place. There’s nothing to be done but wait at this point.

I set my satchel on the table and lay down on the bed. What the room lacks in size, the bed makes up for in absolute comfort. I allow myself to enjoy the luxury for several minutes before I start to prepare. First, I pull the tin flute from the tight leather loop on my belt. I check it for any damage, clean some

mud from the metal, and play a few test notes. I lay the flute on my chest when I’m sure it’s in perfect condition. *I have time*, I tell myself in the hopes of calming my racing mind and heart. *Remain focused*. I take a deep breath.

I’d learned to read the passage of time during my years in exile. Finding work wasn’t usually difficult, but being paid enough to eat and sleep comfortably was a luxury. Any half-decent dark hole became my bed. Time and sound are different in the dark. You learn to understand both when you’re alone and have nothing. There are all types of creaks, thumps, and shuffling – and some of them will kill you. And time... time in the dark is a single moment, and if you need to report to a job at a specific time during that moment, you’d better be able to distinguish one segment from the rest of the moment.

If your heart beats too loudly in those moments, it’s actually easy to lose track of time. Reminding myself of this has a positive effect. I take another deep breath. Next, I begin to mentally list the names and information I’d uncovered and stolen over the last few weeks. I glance at my satchel. I don’t need to check; I know it’s still there. My eyes drift shut – *I have time*.

In a fleeting instant, I’m awake. My gut tells me the sun has gone down. I wipe the sleep out of my eyes, grab my satchel, and leave the room. There’s some noise coming from the sitting room, and bits of conversation find me as I make my way through the hallway – mainly concerning the recent attack. Maribeth is at the counter.

“I hope things weren’t too noisy for you,” she says as I step by. “We had some new arrivals after you settled in.”

“No,” I mutter and take in the room. Two well-dressed women and a local, by the clothing they're wearing; I recognize the face of Mayor Jonna and quickly turn away. “Looks like business will pick back up.”

“I hope so.”

Her expression is uncertain, so I lift an eyebrow, and she leans in.

“They’re from Upriver. Came in about an hour ago. Nothing unusual about that, but they weren’t happy about their rooms and then I told them about the raids. I overheard them talking about altering their routes from now on. So, I got a message to Jonna, and she ‘bumped’ into them on their way to the tavern across the way. She’s trying to convince them that things are safe around here.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Te’na seems happy – that’s the one on the right – but Lucil isn’t convinced yet.”

I nod. “Keep those ears open.” I smile and leave the inn.

The night is cool and welcoming. There’s a serenity making me long for days I never had. I take a deep breath as a breeze blows by – the hint of decay tingles my nostrils and reminds me of why I’m here. I cross the street to the Open Net. I don’t recall the place being so busy, though Kettlefish was more of a village than a small town in those days. I wonder absently about the distinction between the two as I step inside. There’s a crowd, but finding a table isn’t hard to do.

I indulge my paranoia before the rumble in my stomach and scan the room. It’s comforting to see Victor behind the bar. He’s taken on at least one server since last I was here. Nothing else piques my interest other than the number of people in expensive

clothing – well, more expensive than what I remember the farmers and tradespeople wearing when I was growing up. Still, nothing in the room raises any warning signs, and more importantly, I don’t think my target has been here yet. I’m about to wave over the serving girl when a voice catches my attention.

“New in town?”

A woman in a red and green bodice and a matching quilted skirt approaches my table. Her voice is sweet and lyrical, and I get the impression it’s for show. “No.”

“Oh,” she says quizzically. “Looking for someone then?” She presses in closer.

“No.” I see her face scrunch as she takes my ‘no’ as a rejection.

“Oh. Alright. Perhaps another time.”

As she moves off, I feel that same guilt in my gut I felt as a child whenever I thought I had hurt someone’s feelings. “Wait,” I say. “On second thought, I would like your company.”

She turns, hands on her hips. “Excellent,” a playful smile caresses her face.

Perhaps some friendly conversation before the end. “Licensed?” I ask, hoping my assumption about her profession isn’t wrong.

“Of course,” she says and takes a seat at my table. “I’m Maevil.” Her smile is genuine, and the graze of her fingertip down my forearm is welcoming.

I shake her hand, which she chuckles at, but takes it up.

She waits for me to speak and then laughs as she says: “Not going to tell me your name?”

“Not yet,” I fish around in my purse, find my last two coins, and place them

on the table in front of her. “How long of a conversation will that get me?”

She glances at the coins momentarily before looking into my eyes. I think an understanding passes between us. When you are a practitioner of the Coital Arts, you develop instincts on how to read a person. I gather from her face that playful interest has changed to concern – not of me, but for me. “I’ll tell you when to stop talking.” She tries to cover her worry with a smile and a relaxed posture.

I stare at my hands for a few seconds. Rough and worn, like the rest of me. Angry. Tired. Alone. That ends tonight. But all of that seems a bit much as an opening line. So, instead I say: “To better answer your questions. I am from Kettlefish, in a long-way-’round sort of way. Left when I was young. First time back in years. And I’m waiting for someone, not looking for them.”

“If I may, you appear as if you’ve been waiting for that someone for a long time.” She cups my cheek and then tugs on the shoulder of my shirt as her eyes reflect the state of myself – maybe my soul.

I nod, not sure how to respond to that. I comfort myself by running my fingers along my tin flute. “This was a village the last time I was here,” I mention as a means of trying to change the direction of the conversation.

“Village, town,” she shrugs. “We’re no Upriver.”

“No, but I bet there are people on the other side of town who didn’t even know that Kettlefish had been raided.”

“Probably - that side of town tends to keep to themselves.” She leans in and whispers, even though there is no need. “We only see them when the sun goes down.”

My eyebrow goes up quizzically, and her eyes open widely as she covers her mouth to stifle a laugh. “No, not in a vampire sort of way. More like -”

“Too good to be seen with tradespeople and farmers sort of way.”

“You know the type.”

“I’m familiar.”

“You’re full of mystery, aren’t you.” Her lips curl into a half-smirk. “Won’t tell me your name. From the village but haven’t been back in a while. Waiting for someone – old girlfriend?”

“No.” I laugh.

“A guy owes you money.”

“Not exactly.”

“An old friend.”

“I thought so, once.”

She pauses and then says: “Brother?”

Hearing the word has the unintentional effect of making me grind my teeth.

“A family feud.” She clicks her tongue and looks around the room before returning her eyes to me. “So, who is it?”

As she says this, a lean man, bald and seemingly making up for that fact with a thick fur-collared cloak, walks through the open door. Having taken only a few steps, he pauses, allowing everyone in the room to register his arrival. His smirk becomes a broad smile as he lays eyes on Victor. “Victor,” he calls out happily and approaches the bar.

“Excuse me,” I say as I get up from my chair. I feel the tug at my shirt sleeve.

“Do I need to send for a healer?” she asks earnestly.

I can hear the concern in her voice but don’t look back. I pat her hand and gently push it away. Navigating the crowd is easy enough, a slight part had

formed where this new arrival had found space at the bar.

“Victor,” the stranger calls out. “Pour me your finest beer.”

Victor moves with the begrudging manner of someone appeasing a petulant child.

This does not go unnoticed by the man in the fur-collared cloak. As Victor is about to slam the mug down in front of him, the man raises a hand. “Careful, Victor. I wouldn’t want any of that to spill.” He tugs his cloak to cover more of his shirt.

The mug is carefully set on the countertop.

“Such a face,” the man laughs and looks around to see if anyone has laughed with him. “No one likes their local tax collector, do they?” He takes a sip and then clumsily sets it down, causing it to spill onto the floor. “Oh well. I’ll guess you’ll have to get someone to clean that up. Where is that pretty little thing?”

The serving girl tries to press forward, but several stern-faced members of the crowd block her from approaching the taxman.

This also doesn’t go unnoticed by the taxman. He drums his fingers on the bar and turns back to Victor. “Well, I’ve had my drink and some... conversation. To business then.”

Victor and the taxman stare at each other for several seconds – the liveliness of the tavern has been reduced to hardly a murmur. However, Victor takes a step back, pulls a lockbox from under the counter, and sets it on top. He opens it and pulls out a small leather pouch. He starts to open it when the taxman snatches it from his hand.

“Eli -”

“That’s *Collector*, thank you.”

“Collector,” Victor corrects himself, “With the raid – I’m just asking for a break... maybe a week.”

“That’s not up to me, citizen.” He plants a hand on the counter and leans in toward Victor. “But, on behalf of the town, we thank you for your duty.” The coins in the purse jingle as Eli shakes the bag in front of Victor’s face.

“Excuse me,” I say as I come up to the bar. Eli doesn’t acknowledge me, but Victor turns his head – and is the first person to recognize me. I smile. And then I grab the Collector’s wrist and slam my dagger down through the back of his hand.

At first, the look on his face is surprise and anger, followed by pain that I’m sure he’s never faced before. He grabs at my hands, slapping at one and then trying to punch the other. I see him reaching for his own dagger and I grab it before he can, and hold it to his throat. There’s stunned silence, broken only by Eli’s stammering and sputtering. “I am an official tax collector. I work for the mayor, and she will -” He sputters some more and then cries out: “Call the constable!”

I press the dagger point into the flesh of his neck. A tiny trickle of blood appears. “You may work *with* the mayor, but everyone knows you actually work *for* Voosh.” I hold his gaze for a few seconds and then pull the dagger away from his throat. It’s a good dagger. Thin blade and light with several small jewels in the handle. I drop it on the countertop. “The thing is, though - and I’m sure it will surprise everyone to hear this - Voosh doesn’t exist. It’s a nonsense word I made up as a child. It’s something I would say when playing or running really fast. Despite my interest in remaining unnoticed, I admit it sparked curiosity

when I first heard it mentioned nearly half a kingdom away. You see, there was this drunken gravedigger... Well, drunk when I met him, lamenting the fact that he had accepted payment to dig a few extra graves for some guys who mentioned they worked for someone by the name of Voosh.” I pull my dagger from his hand at the same time I punch Eli in the face. He stumbles back with a yelp and crashes to the wooden planks. I step up beside him, the blood from my dagger dripping onto his expensive-looking silk shirt. “Take a message to Voosh. Let him know his sister would like a word.”

Eli scrambles to his feet and is away before another word can be said.

I pick up the dropped coin purse from the floor and set it down in front of Victor. He’s silent - as is everyone in the tavern, and before their shocked silence can be broken, I calmly leave the establishment. By the light of the street torches, I can see that several onlookers had seen or maybe heard what had happened. Small groups are beginning to form in the doorways of the shops and homes that line this street. The crowd from the Open Net begins to seep outside. However, it isn’t until I pull a table and chair from the makeshift barricade that remains outside the Gilded Frog that I gain the attention of the Mayor, Maribeth, and the two traders. I place the table in the middle of the street and sit with my feet up. I casually pull my flute from its leather loop and play a few test notes.

What follows is a soft lullaby that was first played for me by Remi years ago. The Gnome’s thin face and big eyes rest in my mind as I play the tune he once played for a terrified and angry young woman. A blue mist sparkles into existence around me. It dances on

the evening breeze, drifting and swirling around anyone and everyone who happens to be admiring the music. A collective sigh of relief is exhaled, and some even take a seat where they can to make themselves more comfortable. I can see the open area, and even there, people stop to listen, and like a siren luring sailors, some of them even indulge their curiosity and come to investigate the source of the music.

My concert continues until I catch sight of two individuals who seem to draw more attention than my music. The periodic street torches that line the road flicker orange and yellow, adding some drama to the slow approach of two figures. The slightly taller of the two has a magnificent beard and wears light leather armor with a short spear strapped to his back, and the other wears a heavy cloak of blue and silver with the hood pulled up. The two figures stop just at the edge of the cone of light being cast from the open door of the tavern behind me. The figure in leather armor glances at the other, then at me, and then back to the other before speaking to me. “Are you Calla Vidar?” His tone is even and non-threatening.

I get the feeling I’m not what he was expecting. My eyes drift over to the cloak-wrapped figure. Instinctively my fingers grip the flute tightly. I try to keep the memories away, but they flood my mind like a rain-swollen river. The teasing. The threats. The broken flutes. My father was a great man, and my brother his greatest failure. “Avon,” I say, my posture unchanged, the tip of the mouthpiece tapping at my lips, “Or should I call you Voosh?”

The hood is pulled back, revealing a smirk. “Calla. I thought you were dead. Better for all if that had been true.”

“Better for you, you mean.”

His chuckle sets my blood to boil.

“Constable Merrick, I would like to verify that, yes, this is my sister.” Avon opens his cloak and folds his arms as he takes a few steps closer to me while Constable Merrick circles left.

“Voosh, brother? Couldn’t you find your own word? You had to poison yet something else that was mine?” His cloak makes it difficult to judge, but I don’t see any weapons. However, his arms are thick – he’s a fighter.

“Voosh, what’s that?”

I can see the furrowed brow of Constable Merrick as Avon says this. “Odd, brother, you seem to be the only person who doesn’t know that name.”

“Seven years, Calla - I don’t think you have any idea what people here know or don’t know!”

I know that quiver in his voice. He’s not angry – yet – but he is scared. He’s miscalculated, and he’s trying to figure out where. He’s hanging over the ravine from that broken bridge he swore to father he could rebuild himself. He opens his mouth to speak, but I’m faster – I’ve always been faster. “Gambling, Avon? Gambling?! All of this to cover up your gambling debts.” Both Constable Merrick and Avon become still. “Devin Gale at the Deep Water tavern in Upriver had a lot to say about you. I’m sure he’ll be even more open to a conversation with the Constable.”

“Lies,” he tries to laugh it off. “Lies from a murderer. No one believes you -”

I cut him off. “How much do sales at the lumber and clay yards and your construction services go up after each raid? Do you - I mean, does Voosh at least give a discount on the protection money you collect? I hope so.” A mirthless chuckle escapes my lips, and I

find I can’t look at him. I’m suddenly filled with guilt and disgust at the both of us – *how did I allow this to happen? Why didn’t I fight back? Some of this blame must fall on me as well.*

“I should have stopped you,” I say softly. “I should have seen it. And what’s worse, I believed you. Run away,” I mock him – I mock myself – as I impersonate his gruff voice. “Run away. The village thinks you’ve murdered father. I’ll keep them busy, but you must leave.” This time I laughed at myself. “I believed you. There was no reason to. What had you ever done to deserve me believing in you, but you’ve always been a gifted talker.” I find my strength to look at him once again. “You think your hands are clean, though, because it’s Voosh. Voosh probably killed father. Voosh makes deals with other criminals. Voosh makes people disappear. Voosh keeps this town needing the types of resources you supply. But how many are dead, Avon? How many?”

“There’s only one accused murderer standing in this street, and that is you. Constable, arrest this woman!”

Constable Merrick doesn’t move. I take the opportunity to reach into my satchel and toss something in the direction of the Constable. It lands in the street between us with a clink of glass on stone. Merrick takes a hesitant step back, but nothing happens. “That is a memory orb.” I look from the Constable to Avon. He’s fuming but unimpressed. “I stole that from a goblin camp up in the mountains. The same mountain clan you’ve been contracting with to carry out your raids. I don’t think they’re as dumb as you assumed. Their High Cleric has been recording your every meeting and was just

waiting for the right moment to double-cross you.”

“This is nothing more than a thieving, murderous peasant trying to worm their way out of a hangman’s noose. If you won’t do your job, Constable -”

Merrick points his finger at my brother, but Avon flings back his cloak before he can say anything and levels a crossbow at me.

I leap from the chair and push over the table as I do, taking cover behind it. I hear three *thunks* – I feel Avon’s shot hit the table and see two more strike the chair from above from unknown shooters.

I press the mouthpiece of my flute to my lips. I picture the Constable and play a single constant somber chord that harmonizes with the night noises. A purple lash of magic spirals above the mouthpiece fipple and then flashes away. I hear the *oof* of Merrick being restrained.

Another two bolts land near me; one strikes the table edge and the other the stone floor near my boot. I can see the assassins on the rooftops to either side of me, no longer hiding. I release a chifty tremble of keys B and C but have to move to target the shooter on my left better. The air at the open end of the tube swirls into a misty fog that coalesces into a luminescent fist which flies through the air and clobbers the shooter. They stumble back and crash out of sight.

Before I can turn, I’m struck in the shoulder, and the blow spins me around. I grit my teeth against the piercing pain and raise my flute to my lips. A shrieking F-sharp cuts through the air, leaving a wake like an eel skimming the surface of a lake. The shooter on the right drops their crossbow – which

crashes to the street below – as they cover both ears and cry out in anguish.

I turn to face Avon, but he’s already charging. I have just enough time to produce a few airy chords of a lamenting ballad before his fist and forehead check me to the ground. He kicks the flute away but doesn’t realize it’s already too late. He doesn’t notice the soft yellow aura around his head and shoulders. “How, Avon?” I manage to ask.

“How what?” he sneers.

The words choke my throat, but I push them out. “How did father die?”

He laughs and steps closer. “Horses can be such skittish creatures. And well, a rock to the back of the head can certainly turn a bad fall into a fatal one.” Avon has the expression of someone who has just said the quiet part out loud. But now he is spewing, and there’s no stopping the spell as it does its work. “Father was an idiot, a fool.” Spittle flies from his mouth. “He was going to split the empire. My empire. I earned it! I earned it with every ink-stained finger, every calloused hand, every sore throat from shouting orders at those mindless workers. He was going to give you the woodcutters, the lumber yard, the crafters, even one of the trade wagons and leave me with the clay pits and construction yard. Half, more than half, to you. You! You who earned none of it!”

The urge to defend myself is compelling. I want to shout back at him. I want to throw it all back in his face. To remind him of all the conversations I had with father on hiring, conservation, safety measures, and which towns to send our goods to – but I don’t. Perhaps it’s the pain and loss of blood from the bolt that pushed further into my

shoulder when I was knocked onto my back, but I simply don't have the energy to argue with him. I just ask another question. "And the town, Avon? Our home. *Your* home. You take your failures out on the town. Why?"

"I built this town. Made it with my two hands. I had the roads paved. I brought in the types of people that turned this backwater fishing village into a place on a map. Me! I did that. They'd be nothing without me -"

That is all the narcissistic aggrandizing I can take. I swing my left foot out and catch it behind his ankle as I bring my right foot up and crack it into his leg. He comes down hard and rolls onto his side, cradling his dislocated knee.

"Constable! Constable, arrest her!" Avon shouts.

I know the Constable is there. Probably freed from his bondage as soon as I had been shot in the back. Sure enough, I hear the scuff of boot on stone as Constable Merrick comes to stand above the both of us. He's holding the memory orb and my tin flute. I sigh and close my eyes. "You could've had it all, Avon. I wanted to go to the Bardic College. I just hadn't gotten up the courage to ask father." Avon's response is to groan in pain.

"Bard?" I hear Constable Merrick ask.

I open my eyes. "In a way."

"Registered with the council at least?"

"Not as such, no."

Merrick sucks in air through his teeth as he rubs the back of his head. "You're putting me in a difficult position." He leans in a little and whispers, "The mayor is right over there." He indicates with his eyes.

Avon rolls from one side to the other, now facing the Constable and me. "Arrest her, Merrick. Arrest'er now. Fraud. Murder. Assault. Theft."

I look over at my brother. The spell had faded, nothing was compelling him to speak – he's just seething at this point.

"Yeah. Might have to." Merrick points twice into the crowd. Two sets of hands reach down and scoop me up off the ground.

"Yes. Yes. That's right. Throw her in a cell." Avon cackles.

"Until I've sorted through this, she'll be put under house arrest and her wound seen to." Merrick points to two others in the crowd and then to Avon. "And, given the nature of the accusations, I'm placing you under arrest until such time as the evidence can be verified or refuted. And when I find your two shooters, they'll be joining you."

Avon is momentarily speechless and led away.

Merrick nods in the direction of the inn.

I nod back. I can hear Avon's angry threats and cries of profanity vanishing into the distance as I'm helped into the Gilded Frog – the sign giving me another chuckle as I pass by.

The End

The Choosing

By Len Berry

Food did not deserve a blanket, no matter how much the cold bit into his skin.

Shivering in the first light of the day, Rakkan clamped both arms around his torso. He sniffed, blowing the chilly autumn dew from his nose. The fine hair of Rakkan's bare arms rose against the futile protection of a cotton shirt dotted by small tears.

As bread wore crust, Rakkan and those around him wore the tattered clothes of their meager lives. The beast waiting for him could tear through cloth easier than it could rip through muscle or tendon. He wasn't a fried duck and had no desire to have his muscles ripped from his bones.

Six apprehensive bodies walked ahead of Rakkan. Behind him, ragged robes rustled through fallen leaves and wet sludge. Old fools and young beggars alike marched toward the angry mouth of a cave rising from the weathered mountain. Mossy vines hung from the top of the cave, reminding Rakkan of bits of meat lodged between his teeth.

A savage black banner with eight crimson glyphs representing the Divine Children rose above Rakkan and his compatriots. One of the robed men surrounding the Temple of Birth chanted in a gravelly voice, praising one of the gods. The sound thrust through Rakkan's neck, stabbing the spot between his ear and jaw. The banner whipped at a violet sky starved of sunlight.

If a cosmic figure would have stepped from the heavens, Rakkan would have asked for the courage to push through the people ahead of him.

The first person to meet a newborn Idai Heishi was always devoured. Short of any spiritual guidance, the best Rakkan could hope for was to be swallowed when his turn came. The worst outcome would be to watch his mother slowly freeze with winter's arrival.

Without any spontaneous mental fortitude, Rakkan cowered in the middle of the line. His knees sank lower every time he spotted two stone depictions of human hands rising from the ground. Robed monks groomed the statues, snapping nearby twigs and thrashing tall grasses. Somewhere around the Temple, a massive copy of Senkensha's head watched the stars in search of wisdom and wonder.

A wise man would not stand in the cold, wet mud waiting for the sun to rise. Only a fool's heart would race before a titan crafted from flesh and rock.

A nameless roar echoed from the darkest pit of the Temple of Birth. A sound capable of screaming the color from a man's face, could only belong to an Idai Heishi. The bestial cry boiled away the acid in Rakkan's stomach as his entire body cringed. Thunderous steps echoed beyond the open passage, a realm of darkness where Rakkan was not welcome. Cerulean mist crept out of the tunnel, hovering around his bare ankles.

Two searing blue dots blazed out of the shadows, scorching the nerves behind Rakkan's eyes. Each of the lights stood atop a wooden pole carried by bald monks in thick robes. Another monstrous roar cracked through the air, shaking the swaying lights and Rakkan's elbows.

If Rakkan wanted to run, there would have been nowhere to go. Armed monks circled the assembly of human

dinner plates while the Idai Heishi's footsteps crashed closer to the mouth of the Temple.

A scar-faced monk marched out of the growling tunnel. Bizen the Recruiter, a man whose stocky build matched the monsters he fed. He paced in front of the twelve course meal, glaring at each face for half a second. Rakkan forced himself to meet the man's dark brown stare when it came.

"This is your last hour," Bizen said. "Our great nation of Sayoku needs warriors. May Senkensha welcome you among the stars."

The lanterns hanging from the poles drew closer, revealing the luminous blue liquid sloshing inside. The deepest hue echoed the shade of an unblemished sky, a sight Rakkan might never see again. If he wasn't the man he imagined himself to be, if his spirit didn't soothe the approaching beast, there would be no sky for him to marvel at even a few hours away.

A deeper chill struck the back of Rakkan's head before drifting down his neck. One monk passed behind the twelve, dousing each with a ladle dripping with the same liquid glowing from the lanterns before the Temple of Birth. A heavy bead of moisture rolled under Rakkan's shirt, touching his shoulder blade, his ribs, the skin protecting his kidneys. He breathed in. His lips and lungs shook as he watched the darkness behind Bizen.

Those who praised Mighty Senkensha in city streets spoke of a darkness that could look back. Rakkan saw a slight gleam in the cavernous void, two polished dots of onyx set within disks of pearly marble. A throaty purr echoed out of the shadows, drawing whimpers and pleas from those around him. Even the monks quaked

with the same fear that rattled Rakkan's fingers.

An outline of annihilating muscles lumbered closer, chilled puddles shook under the thin mist. The rocky clatter of stone scraping against flesh pulled Rakkan's inner ears away from his skull. A trunk-like foot slammed onto the ancient pathway leading into the cavernous Temple. Three wide toes bore the same compacted texture as the glossy armor rising from the dark. The nameless Idai Heishi stood higher than a mature tree and wider than a pair of rhinos. A wedge of polished rock sealed the gap between the newborn warrior's shoulders. The pristine angles meshed with the piercing dark pearls, forming a stoic, primal face. Even as the beast growled in starvation, its expression did not shift.

A pale monk panted in front of Rakkan before offering him an aged bowl full of gleaming mineral water. The liquid wasn't as luminous as the lights hanging on top of the wooden poles, but it was still shaded with the same blue. The sky's luster swayed in a trembling cup, waiting for Rakkan to take it.

Somehow, Bizen ignored the rock encased monster standing behind the elevated lights. "Drink, all of you. This will be the last taste of life for some of you. For one or two, it'll be the finest drink you'll ever get before we send you back to the infantry where you belong." Bizen stomped his foot at a slight woman with bloodshot eyes. Drops of spittle landed on the woman's face. "One of you may be lucky enough to drink this for the rest of your life."

Rakkan turned his eyes down to the pure blue water in front of him. Even when he didn't look up, he could feel the pearl eyes of the Idai Heishi glaring

into his scalp. His lips touched the liquid, stabbing an ache into his front teeth. The soothing taste of fresh snow tapped Rakkan's tongue. A stream of cold coasted through Rakkan's throat and lined his stomach.

Two crashes snapped Rakkan from the drained bowl in his hands. The poles had smashed into the side of the Temple, leaving the liquid glow to spill into the shadows. Every monk scurried away except for Bizen. He strolled in front of Rakkan, letting his voice echo against the faint promise of sunrise. "Die well."

A cloud of icy fear shook free of Rakkan's mouth. He stretched with a frigid tightness.

The Idai Heishi softened its stance, hunching low as it spread its arms. A trio of sinewy fingers flexed on each gargantuan hand. Bladed thumbs shunted toward callused, leathery palms. Low purring dispersed the mist around Rakkan and the others.

A warm wetness glazed the inside of Rakkan's thigh.

An unnatural gust of wind erupted from the cave as the stone-armored creature raced far to Rakkan's right. A monstrous fingertip pressed against a man's shoulder. He trembled into a whimper, then a sharp yelp.

The Idai Heishi's faceplate snapped upward, exposing a ringed toothy pit. A handful of tapered fingers snatched the yelping man up, leaving his feet dangling like an aimless child's.

Panicked shouts erupted behind Rakkan, though he refused to look away from the giant warrior. This was the moment Rakkan had come for. To satisfy the hunger of a newborn so it might fight for Sayoku with strength and pride.

The creature regarded the limbs hanging from its grasp, tapping at a knee with a curious finger. The yelping man kicked out of reflex. A grunt burst out of the gaping maw. The giant pulled the kicking leg, tearing the yelping man like rotten cloth.

Splashes of crimson painted the ground and stone plates alike. Shripping screamed erupted from the yelping man who was crammed head first into the fleshy tube of flexing teeth. Clumps of loose meat dribbled between fingers before slapping into the mud. An aggressive gurgle echoed from one fresh body to the next, daring Rakkan to cower before the great beast.

A boy of fifteen or sixteen broke out of line, dashing for the nearby forest and freedom. A torn leg collided with the boy's flailing arms, knocking him to the ground. Rakkan's stomach sank with guilt as the Idai Heishi smashed the boy's lean body into a voracious web of bloodied teeth.

Rakkan stood firm, ignoring the impulse to flee and the vise of cold around him. His eyes stayed on the giant warrior as it snatched up the next body.

Rakkan hadn't been eaten the first time he encountered an Idai Heishi. No matter if the locale was a burning house or a sacred patch of mud, Rakkan's gaze locked onto a towering creature without breaking. The warrior that Rakkan had first met had burned while pulling him and his family away from the flaming ruins of their home.

This nameless newborn thrashed with no purpose but that of a wild animal.

Rakkan shifted, keeping his eyes locked onto the armored giant. The Idai Heishi shifted its pearl and onyx beads, staring over the sinew holding the faceplate away from its true mouth.

Dark and light, the giant looked past Rakkan's eyes, searching for a purpose. This was the judgment Rakkan wanted, taking his place as an offered meal or contributing something more.

He stepped out of line, opening his arms. He moved forward, never breaking his gaze even to blink. "I am Rakkan. I am here for you."

The giant clattered toward Rakkan. Its armor ground together like rocks moistened by birth. Pink-stained drool spilled over the Idai Heishi's chest plate. Drops of blood and mucus burst over Rakkan's hair and face.

Rakkan stood firm, keeping his arms wide. "These people do not need to die. No monk should make you kill." This was Rakkan's offering, one he carried deeper than any prayer for Senkensha or any divine children. Rakkan knew an Idai Heishi could protect. One had protected him.

The nameless newborn flung its arms wide, spraying moist remains from its fingers. The spraying blood and bile still didn't break Rakkan's resolve. He stared on, aware of the hungry tube soaked by liquefied bodies.

The giant's shoulders pulled back. The ravenous pit rumbled with a purr. Muscles tensed and teeth retracted the moment before the Idai Heishi swallowed Rakkan whole.

* * *

Cradled in dark warmth, the moment of confrontation had come and gone. Peacefully, the Idai Heishi carried him from a dank world of struggle and tucked him into the bosom of eternity.

Gravity squeezed Rakkan through a curtain of mucus. His face and hands

dripped with sticky threads that refused to abandon his skin. Slippery muscles pushed him downward, constricting him into an abyss of numbness. Rakkan crashed with a loud splat into the bottom of a bulbous sac. Titanic ribs prodded out of the walls. A leathery mat wrinkled under Rakkan's knees.

He expected the acids would tear him apart. His skin should boil and dissolve. He could have been torn apart by all the teeth in the giant's throat. Instead, Rakkan was intact, whole.

Alive.

A long pair of bitter breaths flowed through Rakkan's mouth. He didn't mind sitting within a purring sauna. Sweat rolled over the bridge of his nose and down his forearms. Natural musk glued his armpits shut.

Moisture rippled between the ribs, coating each wall with a dull red-orange glow. The wet membranes shook, bending the light into a wedge. An impression of a nose and the echo of a mouth pushed away from the surface. A glint dotted the shadows beneath each brow, recalling the onyx and pearl beads that stared so deeply into Rakkan.

Even inside the Idai Heishi, the giant still watched Rakkan.

"You can see me." Rakkan's eyes widened as his thought circled around him.

The nameless face nodded once, never breaking its chiseled expression.

"Why show me your face? I know Idai Heishi can talk. I've heard others." Rakkan once listened to his little sister Takkara cry as a baby. Despite the hunger, the blood, the sense of dread, the giant was still a newborn.

Rakkan sighed, releasing the oven of vapor in his own lungs. He shoved a blanket of sweat away from his forehead. "I wish you could tell me

what you want.” More sweat pooled under his eyes. His lips turned to grit within the bladder of heat. The stream of pure mineral water from a few minutes earlier had already cooked away.

The entire sac shook. Growling smothered Rakkan from every direction. The face vanished as the surrounding ribs squeezed together. A wave of snot blasted Rakkan’s face before the floor hurled him up into the shadows that swaddled him away from the Temple of Birth.

* * *

Dawn sunlight blinded Rakkan just like the flames that devoured his home in Mura. Rakkan coughed, even though the smoke had abandoned his lungs years earlier.

A burst of steam pushed Rakkan off the rounded stone platform. He tumbled down an armlike ramp before adding mud to the streaks of mucus smothering his face. As he sat up, his ribcage burned from the strain of taking a thousand frantic breaths in less than a minute.

The Idai Heishi lowered its face plate just as the giant dropped to one knee. Its broad stone chest rose and fell in silence. All the beast’s hunger had been traded for calm.

Anyone who’d been outside the Temple of Birth rested on their knees. Every forehead pressed against blades of grass or damp puddles of earthy brown. Those offered in sacrifice mumbled the same tones as the assembly of monks. All kneeled, just as Rakkan would have if someone else was chosen.

Rakkan hadn’t been chosen. The Idai Heishi had swallowed him whole instead of drinking his muscles and fat. He’d sat in a giant’s stomach only to be spit out.

The ground smeared over Bizen’s face as he stood. The scarred monk grabbed Rakkan’s collar and pulled him up. A meaty hand shoved Rakkan’s chin left and right, offering no restraint.

Rakkan pulled himself free of the monk’s grasp. “What happened?”

“I was about to ask you.” Bizen reached out, but Rakkan stepped back. “Why did the Idai Heishi spit you out?”

“It’s a baby. How could I know what it wants?”

“You stopped its rampage.” Bizen pointed at the giant. “The Idai Heishi is quiet and waiting. Does it wait for you?”

Rather than answer, Rakkan looked up. The polished stones tilted down, watching for Rakkan’s answer.

Too many expected the Idai Heishi to be beasts of burden. Something more was going on behind those stoic faces. The giants hoped for more from the humans they trusted, or at least the newborn did.

“You’ll have to ask the Idai Heishi.”

Bizen slapped Rakkan’s face. “Don’t be smart with me.”

The giant leaned toward the scarred monk, unleashing a roar to shake the nearby trees. Bizen tumbled away from Rakkan and the Idai Heishi, scampering backward through the mud.

Rakkan lifted a hand, hoping the giant would understand. If lives were worth sparing, that meant protecting roughened monks and defenseless families. Rakkan locked his jaw shut as he breathed. Stinging lingered within his lungs as the giant presented its answer by halting. Still, Rakkan wanted

Bizen to understand the might laying dormant within an Idai Heishi. “I said you should ask him.”

A scowl tore at Bizen’s face before he pressed his forehead into the mud. “Honored Idai Heishi, do you accept this human offering?”

The nameless newborn grunted as it braced both hands onto the ground. A red-tinted trail of drool leaked from the giant’s chin. A wad of digested flesh flopped away from its shoulders.

Rakkan scraped dirt and snot out of his hair. The bits of those who died ahead of Rakkan reeked of the waste trapped within their digesting bowels. He breathed in his resolve, glancing at Bizen and the Idai Heishi alike. “Death is not the way.”

Monks peeked up from their prostrated positions. Their eyes and mouths hung open as they stared at Rakkan. He sighed, wanting to rise above the violent role the monks had written for poor and desperate souls. Rakkan’s home had burned because of the war wealthy men wanted. With the Idai Heishi, Rakkan would defend others instead of igniting more bloodshed.

Rakkan’s lips tightened. If his resolve cracked for a moment, the Idai Heishi might still kill him. The colossus would always overpower any man. The newborn giant tilted closer, staring deeper into Rakkan.

“Anyone else would promise you murder and glory.” Rakkan lay a hand on the smooth boulder that acted as a shoulder pauldron. “I promise you pride.”

With a nod, the Idai Heishi tilted forward, its faceplate lifting. The muscular pit tensed and stretched wide. All the teeth curved inward, allowing

Rakkan to enter without the threat of serration or digestion.

Bizen’s voice broke into a timid whisper. “Senkensha be praised. A new pilot is chosen.”

The path was slick from flowing mucus. Rakkan climbed into the tunnel, pushing through dense layers of muscle and steaming glands. The Idai Heishi constricted its throat, allowing Rakkan to pass through the obscured layer of shadows once more.

In the dark, Rakkan smiled.

The End

The Selkie

By C. M. Neary

The ship rocks back and forth. Struggling to stay afloat as the waves crash against it. The wind picks up, blowing through the sails and ripping them apart. They are shredded to pieces. Scattered into the sea, forever lost. The sea is angry. This ship has done something unforgivable. Something worth punishing these Lurcher men for as they drown. No longer is there any way home. No longer can they return to solid land. The sea will never let him go. It will end like it always does, at the bottom of the Raging Sea.

The gentle waves brush against me. My gaze fixated on a Lurcher man, trying to save himself from the viciousness of the waves. The one crashing into him with such force that he struggles to catch a breath. Screaming in horror as he loses the fight to survive.

“Help!”

His words are lost. Unheard. Twilight surrounds the Lurcher. Floating away into the ocean on a wooden board.

Do they see me? The lost Selkie of the Sea, one that has wandered out of her own territory. The place in which she is safe. Never to be touched. Nor to be found.

Do they know I come to this part of the ocean in the hopes of finding them? Hoping they will share their tender feelings with such a creature like me. I envy these men and their emotions. That feeling of everlasting life that they so boldly believe they have. The desire and courage they seem to seek.

The rage of the sea is unpredictable. Violent as it always is to intruders. Those that believe they own this sea. That they can take from it. Command it

to do as they wish. I have always obeyed the rules of the ocean. Never to interfere with those that are to suffer its punishment. Its own revenge for their disobedience. To suffer the consequences of what it is they have done.

I have witnessed it all from the perspective of the sea. The drowning of many Lurchers that try to conquer the ocean. Change the rules to fit their own. They don't realise before it is too late that the sea always wins. It never loses. Respect the rules of the ocean, and the ocean may respect you.

“Help!”

His body is tired. Strained from the struggle to stay alive. I swim closer to him. The white light he sees is me, and only me. I have found another to take to the sea with me. The lonely sea, that I cannot bear to wander alone.

“Who's there? What are you?”

“Come with me, my love,” I call out to him. Reaching out my hand to his own. “Come with me.”

“What are you?” He asks as he shivers. His own body succumbing to the frozen waters I'm used to.

I feel his terror. His wonder, as if it is all just inside his head. That this is just a vision. A mad man lost at sea, unable to control the thoughts in his mind. Maybe he has already succumbed to death. That the light he sees is the afterlife calling. The place they believe they go after this one. None of it is true, nor is the emotion he feels now. The emotion he calls love.

“Come with me, and I will save you, my love.”

“Where will we go?”

“I will take you to shore. Bring you back home.”

“I do not want to leave you.”

“You want to stay with me?”

“Yes, I long to.”

“Do you feel it? Love?”

I’ve always been loyal to the sea that owns me. As the sea has been to me. But it cannot conquer love. Give me what it is I’m desperate for. I’ve seen those that have had it shattered the hearts into pieces. Unable to be put back together again. My love is like that. Obsessive. Consuming. Ruthless. Destructive. It’s a feeling I want to own. An experience I’ve longed for. Gone in search of. Many have sought and never found. Could it be possible for a Selkie to feel the touch of Lurcher skin upon her own? To feel their tender lips touch mine? To feel more than the crashing waves against us.

“Yes. I feel it. Our love.” he says as he floats closer towards me. The waves and I becoming one for the Lurcher lost in my gaze. “I love you. I’m devoted to you, forever,” he says.

“Forever?”

“Yes, forever.”

I’m close to him. My webbed fingers caressing his cheek. He is cold, as I am. But, he is soft to touch. A gentle boy who is too young to die.

“Come with me, my love.”

He touches my face. His soft fingers caressing me. He smiles. His obsession and my own consuming us. Entwining us together with the raging sea.

“I will come. Wherever it is you want to go.”

He lets go of his saviour. The wooden board floats away as he follows me through the waves. The glowing light shines like his compass. Could it be that I could save them? Bring him to dry land? Save the lost men of the sea from drowning? Save my true love from everlasting death below the bottom of the ocean. I know true love, genuine love, can never really die. Nor can the

sea truly destroy such an unbreakable bond between us. But the sea is in command. In charge of who dies and does not. I have pity for these young men. Their whole lives ahead of them. Their hopes and dreams are still dangling in their eyes. So close to being lost, forgotten. Until we meet, and I save them from a death of misery.

“No,” cries the man.

My expression has changed as my webbed hands grip his face. I’m no longer gentle. No longer the shining light he had once followed.

“My love?” he calls out, as the ocean becomes violent. No longer calm and silent around us.

“Do you love me?” I ask him, as fear rises inside him. A feeling of doubt between us.

“Yes,” says the man. “I love you more than life itself.”

“That is all I needed you to say.”

I push him underneath the water. He struggles, as they always do. My lovers each wanting a breath of life. One I do not allow him to take. The Lurcher man lost to the sea. Sinking them into the sea of forgotten secrets never to be told. How many have died for my love? To forever be entwined in the ocean with me. To be formed as a statue made of golden sand.

“You belong to me, and the sea,”

I wait until there is silence. A quiet moment for the sea and I to enjoy. I wait until there is no longer a struggle between him and I. Their life is no longer theirs. Their souls forever belong to the ocean. They belong to the sea and I.

“Help!” cries another.

Another Lurcher struggles against the waves. Another lover of mine is waiting. Hoping to be saved from the raging sea. I will take care of him. Just

like the ocean has always taken care of me. Taking care of those it feels worthy. Destroying those that aren't. It decides who should stay and who should leave. Who is deserving of love and who isn't? The story of the ocean has no beginning or end. It just is. As it has always been. A vastness of secrets and lies sinking to the bottom of the Raging Sea.

The End

Drifting

By Brigham Magnusson

The icy wind howled across the twilight mountainside, clawing across my face—but I ignored it, focusing instead on my father's instructions.

"First, clear your mind," he said. "Let your mind float away like a leaf upon the river water." He crouched before me, his light blue eyes piercing through me. I could feel their intensity and age, his years marking his dark beard with sharp grays. "Focus your mind on your breathing. In. Out." His old cowl, lined with the gray fur of a mighty wolf, framed his time-hardened face. Flecks of snow began to fall around us, dancing in the wind.

"Let all of your thoughts wash away," he said. My father's voice was soft and low, as if to keep a secret between us.

I sat there on the large rock my father had brought me to, some distance away from our village. Someone had carved and painted runes across both its surface and the surrounding standing stones in stark whites and reds. Bone chimes danced in the trees, the frigid breeze blowing through their rustling leaves. My fur-lined coat kept the cold at bay as snow collected along my collar.

His instructions were easier said than done.

My father began tapping his bearded axe on the ground in a steady rhythm. With each beat, the axe rang, its metal singing against the stone. Small plumes of smoke billowed out of a wrought iron lantern at my father's side. At its center, a lump of coal pulsed in time to his rhythm with angry flares.

It was my time to see the spirits. My father was my guide into their realm, continuing the tradition for first-time weavers. He let out a deep, mournful note that filled the clearing, blending into the bone chimes and the sharp tapping of his axe.

"Drift," he said.

I did as he'd trained me to. I imagined a stream, placing all my thoughts into a small leaf boat. Outside of my mindscape, I could hear a stream trickling somewhere in the distance.

I took a deep breath. Cold air, mixed with the scent of burnt incense, bit into my lungs. I put my leaf boat into the stream and watched it float away, the currents carrying it out of sight.

I heard my father's voice a final time before everything changed.

"Survive."

* * *

My eyes shot open. I stood in an endless expanse of water in a black void. I turned around to see where I was but saw nothing but an endless dark. My heartbeat filled that emptiness, pulsing in my ears.

I reached out to grab at something, anything; my hands touched nothing, not even air. Instead, I could feel something building within me:

Something deep and primal, filling my body with a power I had only heard about in stories. It flowed into me with an intoxicating rush.

I felt alive—yet not.

Now I understood why so many weavers kept returning here, despite the risks. I felt like I could do anything. I could create mountains and dig ravines, harness volcanoes, still the mightiest storms.

But now comes the hard part.

I stilled my mind, imagining the real world lingering outside this void. I had to bring myself into both planes at the same time. The effort would form a sort of half-life, where I would bridge the two worlds together—weaving them together with a mental stitch.

I closed my eyes and visualized the world outside. I could see shapes taking form: My father, hunched over in his ritual; The curve of his axe, tapping against the stone platform; My body, buffeted by the wind.

I poured my mind back into my body, and my vision tinted as if covered by a slick of oil. Threads of energy danced around me, snaking out of every visible surface. I had seen such threads before, when the elders found I had a talent for weaving, but this time was different. I had never seen so many threads before; It was as if all of reality were a tapestry, bound together by some unseen weaver. My body felt unresponsive, almost numb.

I reached out with my mind and felt at the threads of the earth writhing beneath me. They felt almost alive, like tangible cords of potential, waiting for someone—or something—to manipulate them.

Then I clenched my fist around them and pulled up.

And a spire of stone erupted from the ground in front of me.

My father beamed in triumph. He looked like he was shouting for joy, but he sounded as if he were underwater.

I could only tell that he was happy. That he celebrated my success.

His son had become a man.

No. Today, I had become a weaver.

But as the initial rush faded, one thing kept returning to me: My father's final instruction.

Survive.

I've never heard of anyone dying after tapping into the power. But that word still rang in my mind. What was there to survive?

A roar surged from behind.

“Me.”

I turned around. A giant boar stood there. The beast was monstrosously large, with jagged, rocky protrusions jutting from its skin.

The Boar stood over me, mountainous. Its tusks breached from its mouth as cascading spires of bone. Its muscles rippled, flexing in anticipation, its eyes burning with anger at my intrusion into its territory.

A stone sank into my stomach. I tried to swallow, but couldn't.

How could I survive this?

The energy that had flowed through me earlier now drained, leaving me weak and exposed. My vision darkened as my mind left my body entirely. The boar stood there as if nothing had changed.

“What... What are you?” I managed, my voice trembling at the hulking monstrosity.

“You know what I am,” said the Boar. It glared at me with an intensity that tore into my soul.

“The Guardian,” I said.

My father had told me about these spirits. Guardians, he'd called them. They appeared to us as hulking beasts, in the forms of our most revered animals. Their appearance was fitting. We revered these spirits, but they could snatch our sanity away as easily as an eagle cleaving through water for fish.

They were to be respected. Feared, even.

My father hadn't told me much. Every time he tried to say more, his eyes clenched shut, as if reliving a nightmare.

As if his memories haunted his very existence.

I could only stand there, staring at the Guardian, searching for any possible solution. I had no weapons—not that an axe would do much against its rocky bulk, or those massive tusks. I thought harder, but there was nothing. I could only try to escape. Flee.

But could I live with that cowardice? Would I earn my place in the mighty halls of the fallen if I turned my back on this challenge?

No. I shifted my feet into a fighter's stance, planting them in the water. The only thing I had was my bare hands and the power that flowed in this plane. So I held up my hands, clenched my fists, and looked that Boar in the eye.

Then the world dropped out from under me.

My mind exploded with agony as mental daggers pierced my skull. The Boar stood back, as if nothing were happening. Yet its white-hot anger blasted my entire being.

I attempted to fight back, to do anything, but the pain consumed me. My body collapsed, writhing, my hands clenching at my skull, trying to stop the pain. Black spots consumed my vision. I tried to fight back with my mind, to no

avail. The pain only increased, crashing into me like an unrelenting torrent, my mind a mere boat of leaves in its middle, tossed around like a god's plaything and threatening to sink.

Then—everything stopped.

* * *

I woke up to find my father staring down at me, his tears twin rivers down his face.

"Oh Threads, thank the mighty Weave," he said. "You are alive."

Too weak to respond, I just laid there. My father grabbed me and held me in his arms, pressing me against his chest. Snowflakes still fell around us.

I felt the cold wind against my face as I slipped into sleep, drifting like the snow, back into the darkness.

The End

The Tale of the Key of Darkness

By Jeffrey J. Hoy

For five cloudless nights, the Banishment caravan wound its way south, far out into the vastness of the Burned Lands. Uncountable stars shone down from a pitch-black sky, giving more than enough light for the solemn procession to negotiate the dry, cracked, tortured landscape after sunset. Sure-footed aurochs carried just enough supplies for those who would be returning when the unsavory deed was done. The party trudged along in somber silence, including the prisoner, who was tied to the back of one of the smelly, rough-haired pack animals.

During the oppressive heat of the day,

the caravan would seek out a mound and pitch silken canopies, hoping against hope for the slightest of breezes, for anything that might bring even a modicum of relief from the relentless, fiery sun. All would sit motionless and drift off into meditations, waiting for what little relief darkness afforded; all except for the prisoner, who was staked out and gagged to keep his shouts and curses to little more than weak grunts.

The taking of a human life, even a murderer's, had long ago been strictly prohibited by the tribes, so those few convicted of the most despicable of crimes were taken well out into the vast desolation of the Burned Lands before being loosed. In this way, no human had a direct hand in their deaths and so could be absolved of the killing of another.

At dusk of the fifth day, they staked the prisoner to the ground with thick, stout cords and left a dull knife and a water skin just barely within reach so their consciences would be clean. They hoped that in this weakened condition, the prisoner could not free himself before dawn, and by then, the Banishment caravan would be long gone, and the tribes could thus rid themselves of one of the wicked without breaking their laws.

It was on the morning of the sixth day that Balkor found himself striding purposefully southward as the dawn sky brightened, scuffing up puffs of dust as his cracked and blistered feet slapped painfully on the hard earth. In one hand, he held the rough wooden stakes that had been pounded into the dirt, and in the other, trailed lengths of cord and twine that had bound him to them. He had stuck the dull knife into the waist of the only clothing allowed him, a filthy rag that barely covered his shriveled

manhood.

Even knowing he would soon be dead, Balkor felt at peace with the world. With only the sighing of the wind and the soft hissing of sand and grit moving across the tortured ground, he was totally alone in the world, with only the sun's blazing countenance as an unwelcome guest. Strange as it might seem, he preferred this dead silence to the crying and shouting and yammering he had endured during his many days of confinement before being sentenced.

As the sun climbed into the bright bowl of the sky, its searing sunlight became even more excruciating than the harsh heat. He had known his punishment would be terrible, but the hottest day during the hottest season in his memory had been nothing more than springtime compared to the full force of the Burned Lands. His Banishment was not just punishment for a dreadful crime—it was torture! Would not a spear point through the heart or a push off a cliff have been more humane? Did his people need to be so cruel to him? He looked up at the achingly beautiful blue sky and cursed them!

Not that his predicament was anything but his own fault. He had become a dead man the moment he killed the shaman. How could he have thought to keep such a vile crime undiscovered? His skill as a warrior had been useless in trying to conceal a murder. And what had he thought to gain from the death of the elder? Strength? Power? Magick?

Indeed, at the very moment of the old man's death, he thought he had felt some malevolent presence enter his soul, but of what help was that now? If he truly had gained some magickal energy or extraordinary skill, it had

done him no good then and certainly not now in his present predicament. What little magick he had gained, if any, would not help him when he soon joined the spirit world.

At least he would not be subject to the hatred and ridicule lesser criminals had to endure. Lawbreakers were considered without a tribe, without rights, and even lower in status than a mongrel or a pet *groppa* bird. Any wrongs done to them were not crimes in the eyes of their clan. At least here, he would die standing tall and proud. He was still a warrior!

Thus, slowly became the extent of Balkor's punishment before death—tongue swollen thick and gagging; mouth as dry as the dust of his tortured passage; unable to speak to the people his demented mind conjured behind blinded eyes; ebony skin cracked and burned and blistered; every pore gritty with dust and crud; stumbling on wobbly legs and throbbing feet, split and encrusted with blood and dirt.

Balkor quickly became reduced to little more than the skeleton of a once proud man, foundering on the edge of insanity amid the Burned Lands, trudging determinedly to nowhere without knowing or caring why. Not thinking or feeling, just pushing relentlessly onward, always southwards, driven by emotions he could no longer recognize and driven by some nameless feeling buried deep in his muddled mind.

Nights were a reversal of the daytime tortures; cold winds blasted him, sucking every bit of heat from his flesh. Shivering, he plunged on in a stupor, blindly groping his way toward death, unable to just lie down and give up, his mind crying over and over and over—

I must die trying! I must die trying! I must die trying!

He cannot remember how the chant began or what it means anymore, but at least it is something to focus on. He cannot remember how he came to be here in this bitter cold, dark, and bright hot hell, only that there is no other imaginable reality, no past or future, only now. His whole world, his whole being, exists only in each excruciating moment as he stumbles on.

Many nights later, after he had drunk his last precious drops of liquid from the waterskin, a dim shape loomed in the darkness before him, blocking a portion of the twinkling lights that domed the cold, black world. He stopped, stupefied at the sudden thoughts that impressed themselves upon the chaos of his mind.

What is this? Change? Difference? How can this be?

Without conscious thought, Balkor headed toward the dark colossus, and though it seemed almost within reach, it was a day and a night before he finally leaned against its vast, smooth, glass-like coolness. After an eternity in the Burned Lands, Balkor had found something different from the relentless, blazing sun or mind-numbing cold of darkness.

Cracks and fissures, great and small, marred the surface of the otherwise abnormally smooth mass, some of which seemed to descend deep into the immense edifice. Without conscious thought, Balkor plunged into the cool, dark depths of the largest one as another blazing dawn tried to burn away the last vestiges of his sanity. He stumbled farther and farther into the obsidian mound, leaving the heat and light and torment behind.

How long he continued inwards and

downwards, he could not remember, but he eventually came upon a pool of stagnant water. It momentarily revived him, but he quickly vomited the vile liquid all over himself. Consciousness came and went again and again. Several more times, he licked at the fetid, filthy water until his body had no more strength for retching. He lay stricken for an eternity, his mind not knowing if he was alive or dreaming or finally cast down into the land of the dead.

The smell of death wakened his mind before his body could complete the act. Hands groped even as aching eyes strained to see in the dimness of the fissure. He recoiled at the touch of something limp and sticky, but hunger finally took over. He gnawed frantically at whatever poor, unfortunate creature it had once been and forced himself to swallow putrid pieces of flesh.

What magick had brought food to him? Or was this just the imaginings of a demented mind? In his delirium, was he, in fact, forcing stones into his mouth? His mind did not dwell on the mystery for long; he was delusional and would likely die anyway. Eventually, saliva once again flowed, aromas assailed his dust-packed nostrils, and slight sounds reached his ears—although it was nothing more than ragged breathing and the pounding of his heart.

But through it all, one thought pervaded his mind—*I am alive!*

Had it been hours or days or eons that he lay in a stupor? And what was this? The once stagnant water near at hand was now clean and clear. And a fresh—*fresh!*—carcass of a small, furry creature and a small pile of dried, wrinkled fruit lay within reach. Where had the fruit come from? How did the little animal get there? He did not dare

question why or how, or when. His shrunken, atrophied belly became quickly sated, and he was content, for now, to lie still and feel the pain wracking his emaciated body—for pain meant life!

A few more times, Balkor ate and rested and drifted off to hellish dreams. But he was a warrior, and the nightmares quickly receded upon waking. The dark landscape of his mind held no terrors for him; life was more important than the depraved carnage in his head. Strength—of a sort—returned. His mind began to examine, to ponder, to remember. It was not long before he fully recalled who and what he was and how he came to be in this god-forsaken place. Still, what this place was, he did not know.

As strength returned, so did resolve. He forced himself to descend farther and farther into the twisting chasms, following trickling water, leaving the sky and sun and winds and lonely stars behind, sometimes stumbling, sometimes crawling, but ever downwards into the cold embrace of the monolith.

Should not the darkness be total? Balkor asked himself. How is it that I can see? Is it the stone itself that glows? Or is the strange greenish slime giving off the dim, sickly light?

It was just another riddle to be pushed into the back of his mind—like the clear water or finding offerings of flesh and fruit when he awoke. Their mystery did not matter as much as the strange feelings pervading his whole being—his destiny lay somewhere nearby, somewhere below.

Eventually, Balkor realized that his fate was not to be the death of Banishment. He had not endured the agony and cruelty of the world above

just to perish beneath this behemoth of fractured stone. No. Something else was waiting for him; something had led him to this wretched place for the purpose of which he was still unsure.

Balkor eventually stumbled out of a narrow fissure and into a vast cavern...and found that he was not alone! He staggered back against a rough stone wall, arms raised over his face, trying to ward off the terrifying sight. He gagged, and his last meal spewed from his gaping mouth.

What disgust! What torment! What agony!

Many hundreds of creatures—perhaps a thousand! —filled a vast, flat cavern floor that stretched off into eventual darkness. And each of the horrific monsters was committing violent and unspeakable acts upon human victims. His legs collapsed before he could flee, and he knew that a horrible death was just a few heartbeats away. He slapped his palms against his eyes and resigned himself to death, but as the eerie silence went on and on and nothing happened, he slowly lowered his hands for another look.

It took a while for Balkor to calm down enough to realize he was in no danger from these grotesque, petrified stone carvings. For statues, they were. Some monstrosities he recognized from his recent nightmares and others from descriptions of dreadful things that were rumored to hunt humans in the dead of night. Some had been feared for generations, but there were others whose vile visage could never have been born of mankind's imagination. Their heinous forms defied his ability to recognize them as any kind of actual organism. These...these...*things* certainly could never have been real! But then, what *were* these improbable

beasts? He had never heard of such horrific creatures in even the most dreadful tales of his people. These could not possibly have once been living. But if they were not real, then from what depraved mind could they have sprung? What despicable, twisted being could have created such monstrous likenesses in stone? And, more importantly—why?

His mind reeling, Balkor tried to retreat from the ghastly scene. He turned to flee, but his legs would no longer obey him. Collapsing to the cool, dusty stone underfoot, he welcomed the blessed peace of oblivion. Anything to get away from such hideous scenes of depravity!

But he could not get away, even in unconsciousness. He dreamed as he thrashed about on the filthy floor, stirring up the dust of centuries. Images and voices came to him, stalking him in his fitful sleep, taunting him in his nightmares.

Wealth can be yours, moaned an ominous wind from deep within the earth.

Power can be yours, croaked something inhuman from the darkness.

Revenge can be yours, uttered a horrible voice in his mind.

Find it! Find it! Find it! The voices began to shriek louder and shriller deep inside his brain. *Seek the dark place! Find it! Use it!*

Trapped in a nightmare, Balkor's mind drifted through the cavern of horrors and eventually came to a crack that was blacker than black, a slit in the solid stone that looked like a sliver of starless night had been ripped from the sky and plastered onto the rock. It was barely wide enough for his withered physical body, yet his dream-self forced itself inside and descended deeper and

deeper into utter blackness.

An encompassing, claustrophobic darkness came alive around him, and writhing demons reached out for him with tormented minds and grotesque appendages. Fear and revulsion gripped him as they stroked and caressed him with slimy feelers, both physical and mental. He wanted to cry out, but his scream was frozen in his throat, gagging him. Madness crept into what little sanity he had left until the thought of death became a welcome retreat from the terror engulfing him. His mind could take no more, and it collapsed into nothingness.

* * *

Awakening with a start, Balkor's emaciated body jerked away from the phantoms in his dreams. He was awake, this he knew, but the terror still gripped his pounding heart. He struggled to sit and shuddered as he held his pounding head in shaking hands.

It had only been a dream, the warrior told himself—only a dream.

Once again, Balkor found shriveled fruit and some sort of small, dead creature lying beside him. This disturbed him more than the dreams, more than the insane statues stretching across the cavern floor. What was happening? Where could this all be coming from? It defied meaning. What was going on? Was he dying somewhere near the surface, and this was how his crazed mind was reacting? Trying to make sense of the senselessness?

Balkor had no stomach for dead flesh now, so he picked up a piece of desiccated fruit and bit into it. It tasted

sour but edible. His eyes darted back and forth in case whatever it was that had brought him this bounty might be hiding nearby. Then he realized with a start that something was different; something had changed. A shiver of pure terror twisted his bony back, and he sucked in a ragged breath—one of the statues was not in the same pose as before! It had moved!

Was it his imagination—and curse the gods for giving him an imagination if it was so!—or was one particularly gruesome, winged beast now pointing a stunted arm at a dark crack in the far wall that he did not believe was there before? Should he flee to the surface, go back to the deadly Burned Lands, to get away from this madness? Or dare he follow the pointing claw and venture farther into the cavern of horrors? Either choice filled him with dread, but something compelled him to move, to continue...to obey. And was that the wind he heard, or were the statues whispering to him?

Some cold, terrible power seemed to pull Balkor to his feet like a puppet. What could do such a thing? No matter—he had to obey. He stumbled through the petrified carnage, eyes downcast so he could not see the haunting gaze of long-dead victims pleading with him not to forsake them. Was it paranoia, or were the dark eye sockets of the monsters gleefully following his progress, waiting and watching expectantly?

Balkor abruptly halted before the pointing, winged demon, which loomed easily thrice his height. Before him, at eye level, the creature's other claw tightly gripped a warrior who had been carved while being sodomized. He dared not look at the man's excruciating expression even as he wondered what

kind of depraved mind would create such a scene. It was just too much to bear. Instead, his gaze was drawn to the grotesque, grinning, bat-like face high above him. Somehow that released him from the spell, and he stumbled backward, only to be jerked forward once again by some evil force toward the nearby black fissure.

He soon found himself forcing his way into the ominous crack, caring not that the rough rock scraped and cut his weakened skin. He headed deeper into the bowels of the earth as the dark power compelled him to submit to its will.

Down and down, farther and farther into the black crack he went until the chasm ended at a blank wall. Confusion reigned in his mind until he realized there was a small, unnatural dark niche in the rocky surface. Even as his mind recoiled at the thought, his shaking hand probed the fist-sized hole, scrabbling inwards like a five-legged spider. Why was he doing this? What would he find?

Balkor screamed when his fingers touched *it*. It was cold and smooth and somehow felt ancient. It had squared edges, flat surfaces, and was smaller than his fist. His whole body trembled as his fingers convulsed around the object, and a sudden freezing shock shot through his body and mind. He cried out and fell backward, the astonishingly heavy thing landing on his chest, sucking what little warmth was left from his wretched body.

Some poor, pitiful creature shrieked in his ears, a wail so agonizing as to make his heart stop. It took a moment for his dazed mind to realize the screaming came from his mouth. He jerked back and forth like a ragged piece of hide being fought over by two

crazed dogs until *it* finally fell out of his paralyzed hand and onto the dusty stone floor.

Balkor found himself wedged sideways in the jagged fissure, and even though the thing was almost touching his nose, his eyes seemed unable to focus on it. His impression was of a small, perfectly cut cube of some highly polished black stone. But its weight, just as everything else that had happened to him since he had murdered the shaman, was highly unnatural. Was this all part of a curse put upon him by his victim? No, it could not be. The shaman had been a man of magick, but this—this—this *thing*—was beyond the power of mere mortal men. This was something ancient, something wicked, something inconceivable.

Every fiber in his body told him to flee, to leave this accursed place, but he realized that this *thing* was something extraordinary. He was afraid to touch it, yet also terrified not to. His breath came fast and ragged as he reached out his aching, unsteady hand, even as he battled himself physically and mentally. Which side would win? Would it be common sense or madness?

Finally steeling his courage, Balkor, warrior, murderer, and outcast, reached out and put a finger and a thumb on opposite corners of the black cube.

He thought he would be ready for the numbing coldness, yet still, it surprised him. And the pain! His hand went numb as something dark and evil and nameless shot through his body and mind. In a panic, he let go of it again, but whatever this thing was, he had to possess it! It was calling to him, enticing him to take it.

He ripped off a piece of filthy rag and picked up the cube; still, it sucked the warmth from his flesh. As he began the

long trek back to the cavern of demons, the wind moaned mournfully from somewhere above. Or was it the sound of many souls crying out in torment? Were they coming alive after all these centuries? His mind could only imagine the horror of what he might find. Would he find the statues waiting for him when he emerged from the chasm? Grotesque creatures ready to do to him what they had been frozen in the middle of doing to their victims for a thousand years?

But no, everything was as he had left it. Only his shuffling footprints had disturbed the centuries of dust. Except...were more demons smiling now? Grinning idiotically at his triumph? He suddenly became afraid of their frozen, demented, mirthful expressions.

Having decided to leave the cavern of horrors once and for all, Balkor rested before heading up toward the surface. No matter that either the heat of the day or the cold of night would kill him, it would be preferable to the terrifying stone statues surrounding him. He lay down on the hard, chill floor, and sleep came quickly...as did insane nightmares.

* * *

Balkor jerked awake, heart pounding loudly, eyes darting around wildly. Bile rose in his throat, and though he did his best not to look, his gaze was drawn inexorably toward the unmoving carnage nearby. Oh, the madness! And the scene had changed again! Several statues *had* moved! He was certain of it. Or had they *been* moved? Had some strange force unlocked them from their eons of stony silence? Unlocked? How?

What kind of key could release them from their petrified prison?

At that thought, his hand tingled strangely. He stared down at the thing clutched tightly in his hand, its penetrating chill painful yet numbing at the same time. When had he grasped it so tightly? Had he done so in his sleep? And why did the thought of a *key* keep popping into his demented mind? A key? A key to what? Then a thought slammed into his head—it was a key to unlock the darkness, the fear, the hatred!

Suddenly Balkor understood what *it* was, and he became sorely afraid. Not only was this simple black cube the key to freeing all the statues from their eons of imprisonment, it was the key of ultimate evil!

Balkor dragged his weary body upright and began to wander around the cavern, somehow not quite so disgusted by the frozen visages of depravity. But still, he had no clue what to do with the key. How would he unlock the demons from their confinement in stone? Did he dare? It all seemed too insane.

Whispers began to echo in the darkness and in his head, coming seemingly from everywhere and nowhere. *Use it, the whispering said. Use it. Touch it. Touch me. No, me. No! Me!*

Balkor eventually found himself back where he had started, standing before the towering, pointing bat-like statue that depicted a winged demon suspended in the act of sodomizing what looked to be a warrior of a long, lost age. The warrior's chiseled face was contorted in a grimace of pain and humiliation, while the demon's expression was of jubilant ecstasy. It was as ghastly a thing as he never could have imagined.

Suddenly, seemingly of its own volition, Balkor's hand jerked out, and the gleaming cube brushed the demon's stony knee. He snatched his wayward hand back, astounded at its sudden act of independence. Terror gripped his heart and mind.

What have I done?!

He waited, but nothing happened. He waited some more, then breathed a sigh of relief and was about to turn away when something caught his eye—tiny bits of grit had begun to flake off the paired statues. He turned, staring wide-eyed, and watched in awe as the cold, hard stone began to take on the semblance of weathered, leathery flesh. Cracking and popping sounds began to reverberate throughout the cavern as if rock was splitting asunder ...and it was!

Balkor staggered back, mouth open in a silent scream as the demon and its victim slowly came to life. Demented, fiendish howls filled the still air and almost—but not quite—drowned out the tormented wail of pure pain and terror coming from the bent-over warrior. It was such a pathetic sound coming from a grown man, a soldier from another time, and Balkor's legs went weak, and he fell to his knees.

The winged demon, unexpectedly alive after untold centuries of dormancy, shrieked its pleasure as hips thrust grotesquely behind the ancient man, suddenly reanimated in the midst of humiliating torment. A claw that had been frozen in a death grip around the stony neck dug deeper into the now-pliant flesh.

Balkor watched in growing horror and revulsion as the warrior's free hand—the other having spent an eternity trying to disengage the claws from his neck—darted up from his waist, a dagger clenched in the tight

fist. The demon let out a bone-chilling screech as it slapped at the puny weapon.

But the dagger had not been meant to harm the demon, even if it could reach a vital spot; the sharp blade was aimed elsewhere. The warrior plunged the ancient, rusty blade deep into the soft flesh of his own throat, sending a thick stream of bright blood spilling onto the cold stone floor. The demon gave one last carnal thrust as its victim went limp in its grasp.

Suddenly realizing what had happened, that its prize had ended its life, the demon howled its displeasure. The enormous sound shook dust loose from the distant ceiling as it flung the lifeless body far across the cavern. Even before the limp body landed with a sickening wet thud, the bat creature's cold, malevolent gaze turned slowly toward Balkor.

Balkor's blood felt like it congealed in his veins under that horrific gaze. He wanted to scream, to turn and run, but the sound would not escape his stricken throat, and his muscles would not respond to his panicky thoughts. He was as immobile as the statue was a moment before.

My god! What have I done?!

The foul creature's slavering maw opened wide, revealing numerous rows of jagged fangs and a forked tongue that flicked sensuously as it tasted the scent of fear in the air. It scrabbled slowly toward him, claws clicking loudly, the drool making little explosions of dust as they struck the stone floor. It seemed hesitant, almost careful, as if afraid of scaring or hurting him. It paused, then stretched and flapped its massive wings, stirring up a cloud of choking dust, clearly shaking off untold centuries of immobility. It reached misshapen arms

toward the distant ceiling and let out a bellow of unabashed triumph. Then it turned its cruel attention once again toward Balkor.

A harsh, cruel sound came from its throat. It waited; then again, it made a grotesque, hoarse noise. Balkor stared, frozen in terror, as the sound changed to a guttural grunting. It leaned down, its beady eyes focused on him, and an overpowering reek of decay washed over him. It was all he could do not to wretch or die from sheer fright. But something strange was transpiring, and as full of terror as he was, he had to endure this nightmare until he could figure out what was happening.

Next, the creature produced a nasal rasp, and hot spittle sprayed Balkor's face. The demon then chirped a high-pitched and bone-grating sound at the far edge of human hearing. The strange noises ranged back and forth, up and down, echoing throughout the cavern as the demon continued to stare at the stunned, gaping human.

A sense of understanding began to intrude on Balkor's senses; although he could not understand the individual sounds, he began to perceive feelings and perceptions behind the noises. The bat-thing was not just making random noises—it was trying to communicate with him! And it was asking him ...what he wished!

Balkor risked a quick glance at the cold, black object still clutched tightly in his numb hand, and an understanding began to dawn in his muddled mind; the object *was* a key! It was a key to unlock these statues, a key to control the demons. Looking up at the huge, bat-like creature, Balkor saw that it was staring at the black cube. Could he really hope to control such a vile and dangerous creature? What about all

these other foul beings? Did he dare? There was only one way to find out if this was not just another nightmare conjured inside his demented mind.

"I'm hungry," croaked Balkor, barely able to make his mouth work after such a long silence. "Bring me food."

The demon's dark, bat-like eyes stared vacantly, its head cocked sideways as if trying to decipher the strange sounds. Balkor spoke again, and the creature suddenly leaned in close. His heart almost stopped as it raised one gnarly claw toward his face. Had he made a mistake? Did it remember and hate who—or what—had turned it into stone a thousand years ago? Would he now die for simply being the one who had reanimated the creature?

But instead of tearing him apart, the bloody claw gently brushed his lips. The huge, evil beast made a soft, mewling noise as the ghastly tongue flicked out and touched his forehead, his cheek, and his nose. Then the demon leaned back and waited.

Since words had failed him, Balkor tried again, this time *imagining* what he wanted. He pictured a big haunch of timber boar, and, amazingly, understanding flickered in the demon's eyes. It spun around and rushed eagerly across the cavern—to the corpse of the ancient warrior!

Using a clawed foot for leverage, the monster yanked a leg off. As the sickening crunch and moist snap echoed throughout the cavern, it scampered back, raising a cloud of dust in its passage. Then it bent down on one knee and offered the bloody prize to its new master.

The creature was puzzled at his revulsion and sudden dry heaving. Balkor shook his head and waved the grisly prize away. Somehow it finally

realized that the dead warrior's flesh was not acceptable food. The demon lumbered off into the darkness, its claws clicking on the stone floor and its wings flapping softly in the dry, still air.

Balkor collapsed when he finally found himself alone, his muscles no longer able to bear his weight. He did his best not to look at the ancient, dead man's booted leg lying in a puddle of congealing blood, but everywhere he stared were more scenes of others awaiting similar fates...*if* he chose to use the key again.

As much as he wished for revenge, could he put others through such gruesome deaths as the ancient warrior had just endured? Or maybe, by bringing the other statues back to life, he would be ending an eternity of pain and despair? Were they conscious of what was happening to them? Were they aware of how much time had passed since they had been turned to stone? It might be kinder to let them end their perpetual anguish than to continue for untold millennia, frozen in grotesque circumstances.

A whisper of air behind him startled Balkor out of his grisly thoughts as the demon landed silently in a swirl of dust. In its gnarled claws, it held a golden bowl of filthy water, and dangling from its slavering jaws was a bloodied rodent of some sort. As Balkor tried to think of what he really wanted, the demon kept glancing expectantly over its bony shoulders and bat-like wings at the other creatures still imprisoned in stone. Balkor did not like what that look signified.

Trying to get the demon to understand that he would rather not eat the rodent raw remained impossible. He might as well be talking to a rock as it continued to stare blankly at him, its

evil gaze uncomprehending. So, gathering a handful of dried, dusty detritus from the cavern floor, the banished warrior sat down and struck a piece of chert on another stone, creating a few weak sparks.

At the first flicker of flame, the demon shielded its gaze with one wing and cried out, its screech piercingly loud. Balkor watched, befuddled by its sudden timidity, as it slunk over to the body of its recent victim and dragged it into a dark corner. The tearing and crunching noises of its feeding repulsed him, but he was still too dazed and confused by all that had happened to be too disturbed. As he gathered a few scattered wooden shafts and handles of ancient weapons for the growing fire, there were hundreds of other questions and concerns racing around in his head.

* * *

Time went on immeasurably in the eternal dimness of the caverns. Balkor found a refuge of sorts in a side grotto, out of sight of the nearby grotesque gallery, and ever so slowly began to bond with the winged creature. He now understood that he had become its master but dared not impose his will too forcefully on the wild bat-like thing. It now read his thoughts more easily, but that in itself was a danger. He had to be careful not to be fearful or show indecision.

Meanwhile, he discovered and began to explore other areas of the immense subterranean cavern where great stores of weapons and armor were stashed, as well as treasures beyond compare that had lain hidden for centuries.

As his strength returned, so did his

resolve. Balkor began thinking of returning to his people, his tribe, to those who had Banished him. And once—only once—he made the mistake of picturing the demon bringing him a horse so that he might finally ride north. But the creature misinterpreted. Assuming he wanted food, it brought him most of a carcass of...well, something he could not even put a name to.

Even as he puzzled how it seemed to come and go from the vast underground lair, he was not sure how to get it to understand he wanted a *live* steed so that he somehow did not have to walk back to civilization across the Burned Lands.

Eventually, he realized that the creature could sense if it were day or night in the Burned Lands far above. However, it was getting out, it would not venture out in sunlight, and more than once, he had angered it by demanding that it obey him. Several times it had snarled and swiped at him, and he knew it could easily disembowel him with a flick of its claws. He was beginning to be able to read its moods, but still had to be very careful.

Once, when the creature had gone elsewhere, he turned a singular warrior he had found in a dark corner back into living flesh. But the demon must have sensed his thoughts, for while he was trying to calm the hysterical soldier—who spoke no language he had ever heard—it came quietly out of the darkness and ripped the poor man in half. Then it turned on him, its eyes blazing with rage. He stood his ground and thought commands as fast and forceful as possible until it finally backed down. Still, he would not soon forget that lesson.

One day he was deep in thought,

trying to figure out how to get across the vast Burned Lands when the most amazing event occurred. A sharp claw on his shoulder startled him out of his reverie. Luckily, he had conditioned himself to project anger when he was surprised, thereby keeping the demon from realizing how utterly terrified he was of it. The creature ducked its head deferentially before prostrating itself on the ground next to him. As the great, leathery wings folded in, he noticed a thick rope looped around the creature's neck. It turned its fang-filled mouth away from him and snuffled loudly. In the past, this had signaled approval to approach.

Balkor rose slowly and brushed the dust off his newfound leather and bronze armor. Certainly, it could not mean for him to—? He projected an image of himself riding the demon, astride its back like a horse, and the bat-like thing mewled softly—another sign he was now certain of. By the gods! It wanted him to climb on!

Many days later, Balkor was finally ready to leave the cavern and journey back to his village. He, too, had begun to sense when the unseen sun had set, and it would soon be dark above. But still, the demon was loath to leave. Even when he projected a mental image of traveling by night, it screeched and whined and chattered.

No, no, no! Balkor interpreted. Then, another extraordinary thing happened; a crude, prickly voice howled in his head. It hurt like someone had poured fiery sand into his brain. But somehow, somewhere inside his mind, he heard...words!

Darkness, master!

Balkor was stunned! The creature had spoken! Somehow, after all this time, it had learned how to send its crude

thoughts into his head. He tried to question it, to query its bizarre mind, but it seemed not to hear or understand.

Darkness, master! It cried and groveled. *Bring darkness!*

Balkor was confused. How could he *bring* darkness? When he continued to try to coax the demon upwards through the twisting passages, it snarled and gnashed its teeth and spit and cursed at him.

“I am your master!” he shouted, even as he projected the same message mentally with all the strength he could muster.

The bat-demon scabbled across the cold, bare floor on all fours, dragging its wrinkled wings behind it. Even in supplication, it was taller than his head. Its wrinkled snout snuffled puffs of dust as it carefully approached him. When it was close enough to strike, to rip his flesh into shreds, one claw reached out and almost—but not quite—touched the leather pouch on his hip that now held the black cube. Then it snatched its bony arm back and quickly retreated. It sat up, still towering twice his height, even though leaning back on sinewy haunches.

Thus began his initiation into the real purpose of what he eventually called the Key of Darkness. And since the creature also needed a name, Balkor christened it Blaka, the demon-beast.

He eventually learned not only that the Key would turn the statues from stone into living flesh and back again, but with it, he could enfold himself and Blaka in soundless darkness. He was still loath to physically touch it, since the flesh of his hand would temporarily turn gray and dead, but it was the only way it would work. Yet when he grasped it tightly, his thoughts were not of pain and decay but of anger and

revenge.

The Key would make him a god!

The first time he filled the cavern with cold, terrifying darkness, Blaka screeched and roared excitedly, which caused dust to shake loose from the distant ceiling. The master had found the secret! But inside the darkness, Balkor only heard a whisper coming from the nearby beast. From within the darkness, he saw the world without color. Everything seemed hazy and indistinct. It did not take long for him to begin mastering the little black cube.

Not long after, he rode the demon through the night in the middle of a cold, silent cloud of black. They traveled inhumanly fast, far above the Burned Lands, hidden in a veil of roiling darkness. It was almost dawn when they descended unseen and unheard upon the southernmost village of his former people.

Balkor wreaked his revenge far too easily; it was like sending warriors against children. Once begun, he was unable to halt the creature’s bloodlust. Only with full daylight came a respite from trying to constrain Blaka’s unbridled derangement. He now realized how difficult it would be to keep a tight rein on his demon.

As the sun rose over the blood-splashed landscape, the creature was forced to retreat to some caves in the nearby mountains, leaving its master standing in the remains of his village. Even he, having spent so much time underground, found the blinding light of the sun excruciating. And as he strode alone through the carnage, he wondered what would happen when next the sun set. Would he be able to control his monster? And when he finally completed his revenge, could he turn Blaka back into stone? Or would the

creature feel his betrayal and turn on him?

As other nights and other villages were swept up in a whirlwind of butchery, the demon grew bolder, prowling beneath the stars it once cowered from and growing more tolerant of late dusk and early dawn.

Many nights later, with his bloodlust finally sated against his tribe, Balkor decided it was time to turn his demon back into stone. He rode the creature far into a deep, dark cavern and barely completed the foul deed before Blaka understood his intent.

As word and rumor spread far and wide about what had happened, other tribes came to pay tribute to him. He began to gather warriors for protection and slaves to construct an underground fortress, for the more he had used the Key, the more he could not bear the heat and brightness of the aboveground world.

As he began to build an army, he had to find an enemy other than his own people to wreak havoc upon.

So it happened that one day he heard rumors of some western tribes that traded with a rich, powerful kingdom of golden-haired people far beyond the horizon.

He decided it was just the challenge he needed!

The immense cavern lay deep within the barren mountains. Access was by way of a deep, narrow canyon that had fractured the earth's crust eons before. Along the tops of the steep-walled cliffs stood thousands of weathered skulls on tall poles, bleached sentinels for the endless ranks of blood-painted figures streaming through the fissure far below. What little sunlight that reached the shadowed depths was reflected upon the rough rock walls by the passage of

thousands of gleaming blades.

Deep within the enormous grotto, hundreds of sputtering lamps sent their oily smoke curling into the remote reaches of the unseen roof. In the middle of the main cavern loomed a vast mound of human bones, behind which towered a statue of a huge, winged, bat-like demon. Upon the gruesome throne of mummified remains crouched a wizened, decrepit creature, a man-shaped thing that radiated hatred and fear. Only one man dared approach, but even he was loath to do so.

Arbako carefully made his way up the treacherous pile as it crunched and shifted beneath his sandal-bound feet, doing his best not to notice the shadowy things that could be seen only out of the corners of his eyes. Nearing the grisly throne and its repugnant occupant, he averted his gaze and kneeled at his god's feet, touching his forehead to a well-worn rib cage draped with chains of precious metals. Atop a nearby cracked skull rested a gold crown festooned with precious stones.

After a respectful amount of time, Arbako stood, and though he willed them not to, his eyes could not help but stare at the obscure silhouette seated before him. It took all his strength and mental ability to keep his body from fleeing the sight of the writhing tendrils of darkness that coiled obscenely about his god.

"Balkor." Arbako's voice was barely a whisper. He said his god's name with fear, with loathing, with awe, for Balkor exuded that and much more. Balkor was the embodiment of the darkest parts of men's minds, the insanity hidden deep within, the vilest of secrets. Even he, the mighty Arbako, could not stay overlong in the overpowering presence of this man-thing-god, for his mind

would begin to go cold and numb and empty. Many were the times, he thought he would lose his sanity and kill himself on the spot.

“The Other has come,” rasped a whisper like a cold wind blowing from the depths of the earth itself.

Arbako felt terror sweep over and through him, becoming his whole being for a moment. Dark tendrils of cold touched his mind, and it was all he could do to focus his thoughts on anything but the fear that caressed his soul like an icy lover.

“The Other has returned?” Arbako was barely able to speak. He had already heard the rumors but hoped they were just that.

“Yesss!” hissed the soul-chilling wind. “Do not fail meee again!” A freezing tendril of blackest black barely brushed his cheek as it pointed toward the distant entrance, and even that infinitesimal touch burned his flesh. “Gooo!”

Fear stabbed Arbako’s heart, and he felt sure it would burst within his chest. No more words were necessary; he knew what he must do. Clutching his chest to ease the pain, he turned and slid noisily down the slope of bones to the cavern floor as tentacles of cold darkness trailed after him, seeking to possess his sanity. A keening wail filled the cavern as he forced himself to keep from running; scared as he was, he dared not let the nearby soldiers see his fear.

Having once again survived an encounter with his god; he made his escape into the world of yellow sun and blue sky. Gasping for air, he leaned back against a sunlit boulder and let the warmth flow through his body and mind as terrified soldiers marched and rode by to a man, all relieved to have

escaped the maddening darkness.

Why me? Arbako cried silently to the distant sky. But he knew why.

He had failed his god just once, but how could he have known the golden-haired devil he captured and tortured and brought back from the land to the west had not been the Other? Had not the threatening presence of the Other disappeared at that time? Could it really have been nothing but a coincidence?

But now the Other’s presence had returned, making a mockery of his pride all those years ago, and his god had reached out and assaulted his sanity for his failure.

I will not fail again, Balkor! This he vowed a thousand times a day. My bones will not be added to your throne! I will kill this foul creature that dares challenge your rule!

Arbako stood up straight and threw back his shoulders. *Better to die as a warrior*, he thought as he trudged down the narrow, winding canyon, following more fighting men than he knew how to count.

This time, he would be successful. This time, he would make sure. This time he would bring the head of this Other back to his god to prove his worth and assuage Balkor’s wrath. This he would do—if only for his own sanity.

For good or bad, somewhere out in the barren lands to the west lay his destiny.

The End.

Beyond Anwar

By D. G. Ironside

In the dusk, early stars appeared accursed.

I joined the wretched within, shadows upon opaque glass reflecting three moons upon all grief. Awful odors perfused the room, a mix of sour paprika and wilted coriander in the stew, rotten apples, the sweat of broken men. Suppressing those notes was a haze of smoke, empty souls pulling on pipes between whispers. For myself, I sat to read my book of poems and put my lips to straight whiskey, no water to dilute the brown poison. I chased drunkenness within a fog of doom, for there was nowhere to be free. King Quention was dead.

Across the clouded space was Elise, unspeakably older than I saw her days before. I gazed with resignation, deeper than my regular, spying hollow bones and drawn cheeks. Despite her forever ignoring my advances, just then she cracked her lips at me, a condolence, I concluded. For the image of her soft thighs opening for pity alone, I felt I would rather cease to exist. Even fallow lust could not hold my attention.

Weeks earlier, Luca had emerged from the countryside in the hard gusts of autumn. He had been travelling down the coast from city to city, doing some trading on horseback, only to stagger upon the terrible truth. He confessed to me the news, a painful strike. I shook with disbelief, a crash upon my heart.

“Pox the angels,” I had sworn. “The king suffers a dark fate. And he comes to it defeated, a broken soldier, weapons on the ground. Nothing will be left of us as he yields to heaven.” I had wept then, for knowing. Luca had only coughed, shook his head, and worked my bellows

for me as hot tears beset my cheeks. He amended my clumsy work. A scared child I became, hearing my only friend crush my hopes.

“Why do you spill your eyes?” Luca had chastised me. “Do not cry for a king who lived a golden life. What do you possess that even smells of silver? Nothing. Cry for yourself. He will be gone in a week, three at most. From then, it’s us that must go on.” Six horseshoes he turned from bad to mediocre as I grieved that night. I then broke into my hidden store of rye whiskey and drank deep.

Some seventeen days later, the word came: It was over. In the guildhall of the metalworkers, I swigged the last of my coin, my own three bottles gone. In days, I figured, money would be worth nothing. Some meaningless chunks of nicked metal impressed with the image of the only good sovereign, leader of the last free people. All gone. His law would soon be a ghost to haunt memories. Poems were pointless. Elise approached, wielding a tray of high proof.

“You’re a sad sight,” she said.

“I’m destroyed as the overlord,” I agreed, downing a small cup of Devil’s Eye, my fifth.

“He was only a man,” Elise said, pouring me another. “Only but himself, flesh as any other.”

“Who could be grander than a mortal, than the High Lord of Seven Cities?” I asked back. “He brought truth and light to our land. Sacrificed his only kin to protect us. Triumphed in the Verdency Wars for his wits alone. Saved us all from the darkness of Coils Kunder.”

“True enough,” Elise said. “He did all that.” She poured me a sixth and one for herself. I downed mine, my heart unquenchable, a melancholy fire.

“Don’t get so full as to be empty,” she advised, downing hers.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Right now, everyone’s sipping death ‘til they’re dead,” she said. “Don’t be as them.”

“And why shouldn’t I?”

“Because I don’t sleep with folks as them,” she told me. She showed her nice teeth, eyes that had never wanted me suddenly flashing a hint of yearning. Then she skipped off into chaos, and I didn’t see her until the moons had set. She crept into my rented room in her nightdress, bare feet, wild hair flowing on shoulders.

“Love me while you can,” she whispered. Her hands were rough and dry, yet still fine, and dancing all over. Her heart was not in the room, her mouth awash with liquor. Still, I found the courage to take her body as it was, curvaceous, faded from youth yet still lustful with feminine merit, all anyone might need plus half again. She quivered so deep to my exertions I thought she might shake the roof. She tested fully the bed that held us, jostling my addled skull against the headboard. To hell with the world, and let Elise consume it with her moans. She rode me until my middle gave up, four rounds gone. Knowing we could soon be dead as the king, we slept restless, writhing in doubt.

When I mustered my woeful mind to leave, I knew her breasts and hips would never again be so full, even if she lived on to motherhood. If I ever wrote again, I swore I would scrawl words of her tenacious beauty.

* * *

Luca met me in the stark woods upon the high north bank of the Yedding

Valley. Below, the water slowed and widened, turning southwest to disappear into vile lands. The rising hills in the far distance were all white with the dust of snow, the sky thick and grey, contrasted by the deep black of stolen horses. He had pilfered two of them, a crime for which we could pay with our right arms removed. But we thought nothing of the risk, not a word spoken between us on that line. In truth, the animals were halfway gone, two haggard palfreys, underfed, and one having been mildly burned not too long ago in a barn fire.

“I saved them,” he said. “Screaming and left to die. Now they’re mine.” He was somewhat scorched himself, on the hands and legs, looking to have jumped through flames. For all that I had worked as a farrier, I had not ridden in a long while. It came back to me in a spate where I almost tumbled off.

“Don’t worry, Shev, they are tame and aged. Like you,” Luca smirked.

I was worn down, there was no doubt, a third of what I was only a decade ago, cracked from the heat and the hammer. From there I hadn’t ridden three leagues before my back felt broken, desperate for a roof and a decent bed. An educated lad I was in my heart, never strong to the bellows, never tough as the task. Before necessity demanded otherwise, I had worked soft for a time. Indeed, I had fallen in disgrace, but that hadn’t damaged every edge of my wit.

“These mounts are unkempt and black as night. Are they thus more like your heart or your sense of justice?” I asked.

“They are most like my armpits... Or perhaps my arsehole, save that I have only one,” he joked.

The unoled saddles and tack he had acquired should have been thrown away

long ago, yet we made the most of our half-chance. We rode for the Watchtower of Anwar-on-the-Sea. There, the old ferry might take us across the river to the old ruins, if coin or chance still had influence. While Luca could hold his own, I was no fighter, even for my sharp knife. We could not force our way across as brigands, I knew. Discretion and composure instead, which was the reason Luca brought me, I thought. Or perhaps no one else might be swayed to his plan of utter nonsense. Danger for danger's sake.

It rained a late fall drizzle, shivers in every drop, even as Fondatrice, the First City, burned behind us. A tower of foul swirling ash rose over what we believed to be the central square. We could hear no screams, but my heart could feel them on the air. In my mind, I saw the crazed stares of part-innocent villains and heard screams of victims fallen to a frenzied mob. The world was crashing down only moments behind us, I believed.

"Stop imagining," Luca said to me, seeing my neck bent. He was right. In my internal eye I saw a hundred terrible ways to find the final ditch. I blinked. My horse was glad to have my attention back as I pulled my cloak tighter around me. Luca led the way.

I had been to the Great Watchtower once, as an envoy. In my youth, I had read aloud excellently. I gave much exuberance and feeling to messages in three languages, even at first reading, unpracticed. Further, it was true that I could embody the spirit of the writer if I knew them the slightest. I imbued my voice and body with selected tones, gestures, mannerisms, akin to an actor. For a time then, a de facto actor was what I was, passing threads of

command much as if the commander were standing there himself. I did the same with missives of desire, entreaty, contrition. I breathed the work of diplomacy, pleaded cadences of love. Those glorious days had fallen behind me in a single moment of utter foolishness. But for those fallow skills, we went to read the runes on the broken walls of Varkoss, abandoned city of Coils Kunder, beyond the border of the River Yeddling.

"Your drifting mind will be your doom," Luca said, drawing on his horse's reins to navigate deadfalls and rotting logs covered in wet. "Concentrate on what you're doing," he said. The horse underneath me had no name I knew; thus, I called him Shade, patting him, begging for the last of his energy. We longed for shelter where there was likely to be none. The palfreys seemed to know our needs, bringing us around a wide turn to look upon the scenery of a white-dressed forest. To our surprise, there sat several log houses, homesteaders, hearth smoke rising to dissipate into the mizzle.

"Luck has us. Let us go before my horse dies of old age," Luca said, starting us downward. I thought to myself that if we were very lucky, these farmer-folk would not yet have heard of the king's illness and death. If they had, we might be taken for outlaws, robbers, or worse, believing only desperation behind us. If not, we could just be travellers, rough messengers of a lowly baron, of which several names I knew.

"Stop now, Luca," I said with some urgency as a boy emerged onto the path. He had a maul for splitting wood, a big tool much too large for his growing limbs. We drew our reins to have hooves sink in mud.

"What mean you here?" he asked,

spying our sopping wet cloaks. His broad hat and well-crafted slicker had him looking much drier than us.

“Who is the sheriff of this land?” Luca asked.

“There is no sheriff. Not this far south. This is free land, anyway,” the lad said from under flowing sleet. I quivered badly, and Shade was cold from his foam. I almost demanded the boy to get out of the way, but one wayward encounter could ruin our horses and our chances. I had no strength in my throat to jump forth rash.

“Listen, lad,” said Luca, the smallest dollop of honey on his tongue. “We are two riders making for Anwar, the watchtower of the world, at business of the ill king. We need shelter for the eve, warmth, a meal. We can pay for such, and for direction to whatever farmer that might put us up.”

“King’s men would have better horses and demand hospitality for free,” the lad said, regripping the maul. Then he let it down. “But I don’t believe you’re in any shape to steal a goat, let alone spit it and cook it in this cold and wet. Come with me.” From there he led us on without looking back.

* * *

The boy was named Jerrod, and his father was a big, tall farmer with the same name. They had recently lost their mother and wife by the looks of things, but we did not ask. Fire burned in a broad stone hearth, the room ill-kept and all in disarray except the tools, the wood, and the implements to manage a flaming log. The barn where we housed Shade and Shadow was similarly ragged, empty of horses save ours. Instead of stew as we expected, we were gifted chunks of meat wrapped in

thick cloth. A dress and apron hung nearby, but there was no woman to fill them. Small and simple shoes near the fireplace were covered in dust and wood chips. Jerrod the elder found us beer. After a long reticence, he asked questions.

“We did not spy a patrol or messenger all this past summer,” he said. “And here you are after first snowfall with damaged horses. Strange. What say you to this?”

“We are no brigands,” I said. Luca gave me a hard look, which meant to be silent. He turned back to the older man and dared to explain a partial truth.

“In honesty, there is chaos for things changing. We had word the king might be ill and near the end. The law in Fondatrice was all askew. Many knights had gathered and many more rode north. For why they were so forlorn, we could only believe what we had been told. We heard no tolling of the bells, but as you know—”

“—there would be no bells to announce a new king,” said the younger Jerrod.

We nodded in silence and ate. In compensation for our worry, we drank the finest homebrewed ale I’d ever tasted.

“So, you figure the city would go to lawlessness? If all this was true?” asked Elder Jerrod.

Luca finished his cup and agreed. I nodded again, trying hard to wash my head of visions of pillared smoke and the wails of the doomed. My face must have appeared telling, for Jerrod the younger saw me in the firelight. His eyes pierced me.

“We should steel ourselves for what’s to come, no?” the Elder asked, as if to the ceiling. He looked about, over his shoulder, taking in the space, his own

home, as if seeing it for the first time. Then he drank deep and had young Jerrod fill all our cups. Younger Jerrod drank too, even if he was but a sapling. His shoulders and face showed seasoning akin to a grown man, and a weathered one at that.

“And you go to Anwar? What is there besides a tower of stone and a shaken sea?” Elder asked.

“To be honest, just sufficient distance and open space,” said Luca. This appeared to be an answer the Jerrods appreciated, father and son mumbling agreement about freedom.

“And you’re not vassals of some Lord?” Younger asked. Luca was stumped for a second, not wanting to expose his lie. I jumped in to save him.

“Not anymore,” I said. “I was once an emissary, serving in the Cobalt Guard. I served under Jarrus Mott.”

Elder grunted and took a long swig, not seeming to recognize the name of the vitriolic spymaster.

“Ah, a hard life, but probably an interesting one,” said he, wiping his chin.

“And what ended your position?” asked Younger, a touch too bold.

I paused.

“Poorly placed love,” I answered, finally.

Younger gave half a laugh, a guffaw, and then his father chastised him into silence with sharp words. The Elder calmed himself.

“Apologies for my son. In this house we do not scoff at affection,” he said, hiding wounded eyes. “Not with the scant remnant we know of it.”

We all drank and breathed to hear the fire spit and crackle. We smelled the beautiful odor of cherry and cedar wood mixed in flame. We sighed heavy over our full bellies, wondering if the future

held a speck of light.

“To be honest, for all I know of Anwar and their absent Captain, I cannot be certain that they will take you in,” Elder offered.

“We know this,” said Luca, looking at me, like he was going to do something stupid. I offered nothing to abate his choice.

“To speak the truth, we mean to go beyond the Yedding,” Luca confessed.

Younger laughed again. This time his father laughed with him, a big roar, which he contained once he saw Luca was sincere and I was complicit.

“Beyond the river to Coils Kunder? Why in the sky would you do something so foolish?” the older Jerrod asked. He looked back and forth between us. I offered nothing but strange silence. Luca and I had been drunk when we had decided. I barely remembered why.

Luca rubbed his temples, his long greasy hair always giving him fits of itch. His drawn face contorted, trying to conjure a plausible excuse to our rashness, our stupidity. Luca’s thin shoulders, too small for his shirt and his jerkin, came upright. I rubbed my short-cropped head as he paused, detecting my own filth.

“We shall go across to Varkoss, the dark ruin,” Luca admitted. He appeared as a child owning a shameful crime.

Elder shook his head, stunned. Younger made a sound like he might choke, dribbling out a mouthful of beer.

“Varkoss? What means this? You mean the ruin of the wicked angel? Did your mother or uncle never tell you a bedtime story?” asked the older Jerrod. “Are you meaning to chase death, empty of purpose? The world has changed, so life means nothing?”

“You’ll be eaten!” insisted Younger.

“The devils that dwell there are a myth,” Luca insisted.

“Oh, for the bloody sake of all that’s good and green,” Elder spat. “Devils and demons and all fires of the damned. Myths, yes. But south to the river there is little or naught there for a man to eat, less on the other side. In Coils Kunder there are unnatural white wolves the size of monsters. And the clan of the Yellow Fang still lingers there. Poison plants and thorns across a wasteland of boulders. Do not be so foolish.”

“Even the rabbits there have horns and razor teeth,” Younger added.

“They do not,” said Elder. “But you will not have success in a hunt or foraging. You go to your end is all.” He was ripe with his ale but spoke with no lies or exaggeration to my eyes and ears. Luca saw the same as I.

“We cannot protest that our aim has clear meaning,” Luca told them.

“Then why go?” asked Younger.

“Because,” Luca said. “There is nothing left but to look upon this mystery. We are free now, in the tumult of the king’s ending, as never we might be again. What’s more, my friend here was once a reader of runes. The mystic Angel of Varkoss is said to hold a great treasure, a gateway to beyond the beyond.”

“That’s naught but myth as well,” the older Jerrod told me, shaking his chin, belching. He wiped his mouth, again with his sleeve. He seemed at last to be drunk enough to understand. Slowly his eyes changed, and he almost smiled.

“Then I suppose we are on a fool’s errand on a grand scale. But the truth behind the tale shall be sought,” I spoke.

“And we will chase that truth to the very end,” said Luca, with something other than a frown. He stood. “To the

end of all dark myths and the glory of the king’s justice!”

Both Jerrods could drink to that, and they did, letting the notion of the impossible pass over into the haze of belief. Then we pursued the bottom of the barrel as a reckless foursome.

* * *

The weather broke on the third day, whereupon we stopped assisting with the repairs of the barn and rode for the tower of Anwar on a crisp morning. The sun merely decorated the sky, cool and low in the north. We came over the crest where old Jerrod had directed us. Over the massive mound of grey stone we went, beyond mature alders and thick clutches of beech. There we saw the great Tower in the distance. I had been there once before, but somehow it appeared more breathtaking in stark autumn light.

As we rode closer, we saw the tower’s height and breadth, each stone fitting perfectly, smooth and clean, constructed with ancient techniques lost to even the greatest stonemasons. Anwar’s main tower was grand and round on a natural prominence abutting the violent Veridian Sea. Framed by frothing green, the tower cast out tiny motes of aquamarine and emerald from its strange whitish stones, gleaming under a crimson roof. Jutting from the main structure was its secondary tower, ascending so high its tip was dozens of feet above us as we moved our horses to sit a hundred feet above the water on a high rocky cliff.

Within the thin second spike, radiating from the top, was a pinkish-purple light, shining as a beacon, reflected off the white-capped waves that churned out to the horizon.

Even Luca took a breath to look at the sky-cast beauty before us, calloused as his heart had become.

“They claim it was not built by human hands,” I said, admiring the shimmer and the sea that smashed great thunderous foam to no avail against the mighty base of natural stone. I had to shout over the winds that buffeted the cliff top.

“Those who claim such are knuckleheads,” yelled Luca. “But I know a handsome thing when I see it.” He said no more for the whipping air as we watched hundreds of birds, maybe thousands, all moving about in a wild cascade of grey wings, diving for fish in a small adjacent cove that had natural protection. From our vantage point above there could be seen an immense school of blackness just under the water, innumerable little fish so thick they were bubbling to the surface and spilling onto the shore. The cove’s beach was ripe with the smell of their deaths and a mass of red and black that must have been an army of feasting crabs. The sounds of the calling gulls, exploding waves, and howling wind were enough to drive a man to madness, and our horses were jostling with discomfort.

“Let us find the way down,” Luca called out, and he spurred on Shadow. Shade followed. We found a gravelly switchback trail that brought us lower. Nervously we descended, our mounts shaky upon the gravel, each advance a tricky step. Finally, we set hooves onto flat rock below the cliff, where we mercifully received relief from the screaming seabirds. We were afforded further protection by a natural spur of the cliff that half abated the flow of air. Luca and I both muttered thanks to the gods for the stillness, the quiet, and the

lessening of the rotten stink. The horses walked an old stone path, making for the tower, now high in the sky like the bident of the ocean god, whose name I’d forgotten.

Fifty yards distant from Anwar, we came around a turn of stone to see a guard rise from his watch-fire. He snatched up his spear. Driftwood was aflame near him, whipping in the softer breeze, sheltered as it was by a wall of piled rock. At the same moment, we could see to our left and much further down shore was the vast mouth of the Yedding, pouring grey-brown silt into the roiling sea. We approached the sentry.

“And who are you, strangers?” the man called, his armour looking to be made of interwoven shells, some unearthly blue mollusks or some such, so many hundreds somehow formed together into a mosaic of beauty and strength. His spear was tipped with glass of the sea, a razor rock that reflected the sun and flames in a cascade of brilliant color. His face looked weary, blasted from grit in the air. Grey hair poked out from beneath his polished helm. As he took a few steps closer, it was plain he was much too thin for what he wore.

“Riders for the river yonder,” Luca said. “Passage past. And fish, we hope.”

“There is no fish that you could eat,” the guard said.

Luca and I stared at each other warily, hearing again the sounds of so many feasting gulls in the distance.

“You mean what?” I asked of the guard, his drawn face and hollow eyes shaking me. The orange and yellow of the flames wreathed him from behind, his hoarded pile of driftwood furiously ablaze. I could feel the heat, my horse nervous.

“There is a blight upon the sea,” he said. “We have starved for a month now, most ill and some dead. You’ve not any food, have ye?” he asked. I thought it most strange, a weird scene where he was supposed to be guarding Anwar but instead was desperate and hungry, as we could see.

I offered him a bit of hardtack and jerky from what I had left of my dry goods, not much. We had pemmican of moose and rabbit from the Jerrods, but I did not spare him any. He stood there and ate old bread like it was honeyed cake. Luca gave him water. We watched his fire burn down without hardly a word. Then he sat down on a boulder, much sated, slow, affected by the food. He dropped his spear and laid back on the rocky ground like a bed. Had we been robbers we could have killed him with little fuss, but instead we dismounted and looked out at the rippling river while he closed his eyes. Luca was as patient as I’d ever seen him, working over and over to light up a spare pipe the older Jerrod had given us with a stick pulled from the driftwood fire. It was quite a challenge, but once he had the tobacco lit, he stepped some paces away, knowing how the smoke bothered me. I sat by the guard, to at last ask his name.

“Keldon,” he told me.

I asked how long he had been at Anwar.

“Six years and some,” he answered. “But it has not been so troublesome until late. So proud a place, Anwar, for centuries I was told, the great watchtower, the eyes upon the water. Any man with pride and strength could make his name here, a guardian for all the Seven Cities. A privilege it has been.”

“But now?” I asked.

“Now we cannot eat. There was a massive red bloom in the summer sun that ruined the beach and the tide pools. Everything went bleached pink and was poison to eat. The cisterns were brackish, the waves too high, almost no rain. The torque of the moons someone said. A dread high tide to flood and barely recede. We cannot fish out upon the wretched waves. From bounty to famine in one season.”

“Did no ships come past?” I asked, gazing at the massive stone pier that jutted far out, covered unnaturally with high waves, near submerged even in the troughs.

“The winds and storms have been up for weeks and weeks, a fury to unmake the world,” Keldon said. The ships go higher up before going coastward, dreading to crash to come any closer. We’ve naught left to trade as it is.”

“Did you send a messenger to Fondatrice?”

“Four,” he said, closing his eyes. This signaled me that those four never returned.

“I am sorry,” I told him after a long breath. I had nothing good to tell him, no relief to offer, only more terrible news. I kept such fuel for suffering to myself. In the pause, we heard the wind, birds, and waves, smelled the stone, salt, and sea. We breathed the blowing air as if we were forced to against our will.

“Where will you go from here?” Keldon asked, his hands resting on his now round belly.

“We mean to cross the Yedding,” I admitted.

“Idiots,” Keldon muttered. “For why?”

“There is nothing left but idiocy now,” I said, regretting my words immediately. Keldon didn’t flinch.

Instead, he agreed. The time for rashness had come, he told me, the words of a man whose hopes had been dashed for different reasons than my own.

“How do they get across these days?” I asked.

“Years ago, there was a ferry, maintained by order of the old laws. It sunk into the bay and was never salvaged. And there was a bridge four leagues farther back inland, to a forgotten dale, now abandoned. But that span is ruined now. Which I suppose leaves you the tunnel.”

“There’s a tunnel?” I asked, incredulous.

“There is, but very likely it is flooded. But what do you care? You mean to die anyway.”

I imagined a terrible tunnel under the Yedding. A notorious death under giant swells of green and black, frozen, soaked darkness, washing away every bit of my body and soul. Those images in my mind’s eye had me ruminating of a famous tale I couldn’t quite remember.

“Do you read poems?” I asked him.

“I cannot read,” he said.

“Would you like me to recite a verse I learned from the famous Lady Corwen, a brave construct on how death can be defeated?”

“Why would I endure such nonsense?” Keldon asked me, still with his eyes shut.

“Because you will remember it as the last words I spoke, should Luca and I never return.”

“I doubt it,” Keldon claimed. “But please, indulge yourself.”

I opened my small book and found the page where I had copied the work of the poetess. Luca returned, stunned to see me reading the words with all the

drama I could muster. He interrupted.

“What’s all this?” Luca said with a half-smile.

“Our last rites,” I answered.

Luca only replied, “I see,” and went to feed the horses.

* * *

It was not a natural tunnel or cave. I was not a mason or builder, only a meager smith and farrier. Even from my studies of story, poetry, languages, and history, this was construction on a scale I could scarcely conceive. It was a masterwork of excavation, carved into the heart of the earth, and it was more suffused with shadow than anything I had ever seen in illustration. In the torchlight were vaulted stone walls, abandoned perhaps for decades, as they matched the Watchtower of Anwar in their scale and cascade of subtle colour. There was dripping, the sound of trickling water, thick mud on the floor, and an impenetrable black hiding the source of stale rot.

We had entered through a steep narrow opening with rough hand holds, like a sinkhole into hell. The horses would be left with Keldon, and truthfully, I believed he would eat them. But to swim the Yedding mouth was to ask for doom for man or mount, even in the lowest tides of calmer water. There were no bridges for miles and miles east, and Keldon suspected any of those intact might not be trusted should they be reached, in any case. We knew it would be folly to ride out on poor suspicion alone, exhausting our food and energy over wet snow. It was the underpass or nothing.

“How does anyone create such a thing as this?” Luca asked, holding up his torch to light the impossible

darkness. He coughed for the acrid smoke and bad odour of the weak brand, just as I did.

“Are you going through?” Keldon shouted down to us, his face filling the rough circle of light above.

I looked up, wondering if Keldon would perish just as us, for his own reason.

“We are going,” Luca called.

“I would wish you good luck,” Keldon called. “But I am not sure you desire it.” He smiled a grin so bizarre I wasn’t sure if he was sending us forth into a trap or giving us the key to salvation. He looked crazed with mirth.

“You will find the black angel is hundreds of feet tall,” Keldon called. “But you cannot see it from this side of the river.”

“How is that?” I shouted up.

“It is disguised by the warp of arcane light. Such is the power of Anwar,” he yelled, still grinning.

“I... well then, I...” I stammered, not knowing what to say regarding sorcery.

“Ignore him now,” whispered Luca. “We go beyond him, beyond all this.”

I tore my eyes away to light another torch, my first sputtering. When I looked back up, Keldon was gone. We had a dozen more brands he had given us in a sack, stinking of their age, part-rotten.

As we plodded our way into the jet black, slowly going downward into the great gap below the river, I imagined dramatic ways we might meet our end. Drowning, crushed by the falling roof, poison gas, flammable fumes ignited, some unseen monster, falling into a crevasse. These were first on my list of possibilities. From there it got more gruesome. Then I forgot about dying somehow.

I could only hear the two of us

breathing and hacking on smoke, two specks of light on an underground highway unused and unseen for an era. All around us were the squeak of rodents, the slither of bugs and worms as we navigated a ponderous layer of silt. Sucking mud pulled at our heels, threatening to devour our boots. We slogged onward, fearing every bit of shadow that gave way only reluctantly to the burning light, pushing upon us like a vise of nightmares. Ahead we heard a calling, a terrible keening.

“Phantoms,” I uttered. We stopped to listen.

“Only in your mind,” Luca said, but I knew he internalized dread, same as me. He peered to his left and right, then a circle, waiting for the sound to repeat. It did not, with only our huffing and grunts in the silence. We continued, lower, deeper into the heart of awfulness, unable to see walls or ceiling, only grime below our feet. Then we came to standing water up to our ankles. It stank like a corpse in heat.

“Will it get deeper, you think?” I asked, trembling.

“We are below a river,” Luca said, looking at his sunken boots, hearing drops, the sounds of a rustling noise, endless, ever so faint, groaning soft across rock. We knew the entire Yeddling was some unknown distance above, crying, moving, ready to crush us.

“Stop speaking your thoughts now, before I think it too,” Luca ordered.

“I cannot help it,” I said. I clumsily lit another torch from the stub of the previous, spewing a terrible wash of harsh fume that made us sputter and spit. The brands were crumbly. Then the keening came again, a banshee, a wailing apparition. I swore I could see it, a moving wisp of air just beyond the

light. Luca blinked.

“No,” he said, to dismiss my half-spoken horror.

We stopped again, the wavering light around us failing to show anything, betraying our eyes. I felt disaster pressing inward, coming perhaps just as I wished it, but a fraction too soon, too close. Sweat came upon me. My heart pounded so loud it thumped, while Luca breathed, the only sound in my mind beyond my unvoiced scream. I peered each way, my torch fluttering as I spun, daring to discover my end. I sensed my doom would flash before me, and my blood would spill as fangs came. This wasn't right. Such a fool's end wasn't ordained by our quest, whatever we were doing. Unjust would be our poor and ignominious end. We were not meant to die in some forgotten place, never the world to know, I realized at last.

“Shut up,” Luca hissed.

I grunted a few noises of confusion.

“You draw danger near with your mumbling. Cease!” he said with force, twisting in the black same as I, spinning every which way.

Sweat rolled down my brow even for the chilled water in my boots. I was overcome. I began to giggle for our terrible spot, like some child or idiot staring a charging beast in the face. Right then, Luca spotted it and called my gaze. He had to call several times more before I calmed enough to look. There was a pipe, or the end of one, exhaling as a groan or low whistle, a foot wide and exhaling fresh air into the space. The torches jumped with new life. For a moment, I knew we weren't dead.

“How can this be?” I asked, exerting myself to detect, amazingly, the sea upon my nose.

“By the great gods of wonder,” Luca said as he inhaled it deeply. We were dumbfounded by this masterwork of engineering so far below the surface, beneath a devilish river, a million pails of water every moment flowing overhead. We heard the pipe breath and groan again, somehow alleviating the oppressiveness of the darkness just outside the flames. Luca wondered aloud if we were past the mid-point. I shook my head, unable to detect decline or incline.

“This is it,” said Luca. “If we pass to the other side, we will have cheated the fates.”

I laughed a little, not my moron's fear, but rather I exuded the hope of a soul awaiting birth. Or so I imagined, hearing my voice in my ears. We had to continue, water and cold and all plagues of smoke be damned. Plodding through the reek, the water rose to our thighs, then our waist, and we stared at each other, knowing neither of us could swim. The chill of the water had us labouring, my bones like ice. I could no longer feel my feet as the level went to my chest, torches held high. My faith was in tatters and my mind held only fear. I sensed something moving in the water, a slithering thing ready to bite and burrow into my flesh.

“Silence yourself,” ordered Luca. “That's my leg.”

“Oh,” I muttered, realizing just then that the water level was an inch lower. We were walking uphill, at last and for certain. Past the midpoint. We knew it then. We would go beyond and dance in the apocalypse.

* * *

Light came, so bright as to flood the eyes with blindness. I had prayed to see

the three moons even though they had brought so much chaos to the land and sea. Instead, the morning sun had emerged when no one had been there to see it. It shone golden yellow-orange, just a touch of warmth upon the skin as we emerged from the tunnel like new men, infants to new air. We emerged from a hole in the ground not much wider than our shoulders. It was a smooth cylinder carved through solid stone, with a ladder of metal threaded through, a groove for a cap at the top, no cap to be seen.

“Praise every god in the heavens,” said Luca as he ascended after me, dust covering his head like a corpse in a coffin. He batted away crumbs of earth from my ruined shirt and I from his as the shiver fell away a bit. Even for our wetness, we choked with relief, giggling, rubbing snow on our faces, and eating some. I asked Luca and he said he felt no hunger, same as me. We should have felt starved for losing our pemmican somewhere in the crossing.

We had nothing left for what the journey had robbed us of, our drinking water exhausted, torches down to the nubs. I had my knife and Luca his, for all there was nothing to cut or fight. Our boots and britches were soaked, and my toes were apt to turn purple and fall off. But as I felt the heat on my face, I could not have cared an iota. The river was behind us, blasting its noise down boiling rapids.

We had made it to where heroes of legend were said to have gone to prove their mettle. This was south of the Yedding, to Coils Kunder, the lost land, ominous and forbidden. Stark trees were all around us, their trunks and bare branches helping us climb a hill, up from bare rock to a mossy slope, then all manner of fallen leaves under us, an

inch of snow atop that. My teeth chattered and Luca heard. We walked to avoid the freeze of wind upon our wet clothes.

“Even for the hard climb,” he said between breaths. “The cold comes at us again.”

I agreed, knowing that if we stopped only once, the air would chill us to the core. Any fresh disheartening would break us. Before I had the chance to worry further, we crested the rocky bank, and before us was a legend of mounted stone, myth made real. We gasped.

A gargantuan black angel of stone with wings sundered, pinions gone, stood higher than the tallest oak in the sunbeams. The Varkoss Angel was radiant, unearthly beautiful, and demonic. Its features were carved sharp with piercing eyes, nose and brow alert, hair as a demi-goddess with flowing thick tresses down her back. In one hand she held a lance or spear that might skewer a mighty hero, to pin her adversary in a single blow. The weapon was cast of darkest ruby glass or some such, twinkling crystal within the blade. We saw fierceness that could stab the world.

Luca and I stared at it, trembling with the cold or the very sight of the Varkoss Angel, both. Behind the statue were the ebony-rock walls of a massive fortress or temple that I’d heard described in fireside lore. Those beer soaked tales did it no justice. It was a twin pyramid of massively-tiered risers, and in the centre of the two sides we saw hundreds of steps, maybe thousands, ascending to the top. There, situated high in the air, were silver and onyx-black shrines to challenge the sky, their edifices showing dark mockery of holier places. The two main structures were

connected by what looked to be a passageway or great hall, we could not know. Yet it was intact and, just as the two pyramids, covered with inlaid glyphs cut into the black material that composed its façade. Gargoyles and serpents, demon imps with leather wings, spider lords with half-human features; all were visible, wicked in their countenance. Among those profane images were also ordinary creatures. We saw stags and wolves and monstrous cougars cast in dynamic poses. Every bit of this was covered in scrambling vines devoid of foliage, with smaller patches of thick red moss.

We were shocked to see such profanity, as I looked once at Luca's face, awed and agape just as mine. As we viewed the surroundings, we saw Anwar-by-the-Sea, its great white spike there, miniature in the distance, cliffs behind. We could see from exactly where we had come, but just as Keldon had claimed, though we never saw this mighty statue from there, despite that it should have been impossible to miss.

"This is a place of foreboding magic, is it not?" I asked, mostly to myself. Luca nodded, a strange expression on his wizened face. Even for his wonderment, he was a hard and weathered man, which was part of why I desired to be near him now, to feel his strength pressed upon unknown wonders and horrors. I could not have witnessed Varkoss alone.

"This is beyond everything," he said, meandering forward over rocks and stumps. I followed. Some indescribable essence was in the air, like a mist of suspended oil, a stink within a vibration, all unearthly.

"I read a poem about Denfarrian the Mighty, who came here as part of his sojourn," I said, stepping slowly.

"And?"

We grunted with exertion to get closer, weaving past small boulders.

"He was said to have discovered a time, an age, older than anything known."

Luca made no sense of my words, shaking his head. He drew his knife to cut at a tangled weave of odd vines holding a sinister-looking dried fruit of purple-blue in places.

"Help me," he said. I did. We ripped at the strands until we could get through, our damp gloves a mess. We bellowed steam in the frigid air, smelling earth and snow and rock and dying plants, married with the odd odor of the thrumming air.

"What do we care of a forgotten age? Of Denfarrian's fable?" Luca asked, gruff, moving ahead.

"What Denfarrian claimed was evidence of another world. This, here before us, is just the same as he saw. The dark stone angel, the pyramids. Not abandoned ruins of our own societies or a forgotten cult, but the wreck of another culture. Alien, from another epoch, another race. They could be thousands of years old, from forgotten aeons of history," I explained.

"I do not know those words," Luca said. "Eee-pok. Ay-ons"

I breathed hard, striving to keep up.

"Another history, another reality," I said. "Perhaps something we could never hope to understand, so far removed it might be from what we know."

I recalled the great tunnel we had navigated, and a long-lost engineer carving it with secret knowledge, artistry, and assembling what we could no longer contemplate or conceive. I gazed at the looming blackness of Varkoss, perhaps a temple of sacrifice, a

burial site, a place of clandestine purpose. All three. The mysteries were layered.

“But it is here now,” Luca said. “Right in front of us. Do we care its age?”

“I cannot help but dream of its mystique. I ponder every enigma,” I said.

“You dream far too much, with the secrets near our grasp and waiting to be unveiled. Come now. We have runes to read.”

With weary legs we went higher onto black stone of a foreign texture. It was crystalline yet had the strangest flex under our feet. Perchance, I imagined it moving underneath us. It smelled of spoiled grapes, a living thing beneath our heels, foundations that seemed to shift the light with each step, different with each glance. We saw our reflections on the barest parts. I saw myself in that glass not as I remembered, an unfamiliar countenance. Luca urged me on before I could look again. We edged up to the base of the black angel, rooted upon its colossal plinth. Above us she towered, awesome and intimidating, looming as an icon of destruction, a symbol of a society that dreamt of every iota smoldering in fire.

“Stop it, Shev,” Luca said. “Speak not. Your muttered thoughts unnerve me.”

I apologized again.

“There it is,” Luca breathed. He gestured to the center of the plinth, where we spied a massive chunk of onyx.

It was a rectangular shape sitting under the angel’s legs, a monolith that might have weighed a third of a mountain, many tons sitting upon the foundations of the earth. We walked

close to find it was inscribed with thousands of characters and symbols, perhaps a tribute or dedication, perhaps an alien script to advise the secrets of the spheres. We only knew that these were words and shapes of vaporous legend. I conjured a thought, the absurdity of speaking a dead language, no one with the knowledge to listen. I lulled to think of sounds made real to one’s mind alone.

“What does it say?” Luca asked, staring at endless lines of symbols. They were etched silver on black, perfect, immune to time.

I stood confused and stared at a mosaic of everything and nothing. The very first symbol, like a triangle with odd enhancements, cast itself into my mind. My eyes could not trace from left to right. The single figure danced within me, a shape, a symbol, nothing more. Then, after a moment’s contemplation, more came. Much more. Thus began an ineffable rhythm. I fell into a foreign space, a trance. The symbols flooded into me, a thousand-thousand images, a gushing waterfall, cascades of imagination.

“Well, what say you?” I heard Luca ask, so distant, even with him at the length of my arm.

Everything began to fade. The first symbol struck me like the piercing thrust of a bolt of lightning, rattling across my teeth. I shook with the sound, mouthed the word with a wisp of smoke on my lips. There were countless layers, too much for a human tongue. Thousands of figures were embedded within each single rune, echoing into a cascade of open space, my vacant soul. Luca was talking, his mouth moving but with no sound. I could not hear. I could only resonate, the resounding hum driving into my center and squeezing.

The pulse clutched me without mercy. Every idea exploded inside my head, until all was white and ringing, a hundred giant sounding bells, the light of all stars multiplied. I staggered, then fell, overcome with blindness and deafness both, gibbering in delirium.

* * *

“Shev!”

“Shev!”

Hands were upon my chest, grasping.

“Shev!”

Luca’s face was nose-to-nose with mine, his breath atrocious.

“Stop,” I said, squirming.

“You were raving like a madman for half a day, I figure. The sun disappeared behind clouds. Time is unhinged here, I think,” he said. He sat back and began to shiver. It was he that appeared like a crazed person, covered in mud and cuts, dishevelled like a beggar.

“I’m hungry,” he said, leaning on his boot heels and folding his arms, vibrating with cold. He looked down at me, curious, angry, suddenly full of mistrust.

“You were blathering nonsense, eyes rolled back in your head... You... I...” he said. He wanted to say more, but I could tell he was distraught.

I said nothing. He waited for me to explain what happened. I did not.

“What now? Are you alright?” Luca asked. “Do we enter their temple? What could be within that we could eat?” He tilted to look up at the paired pyramids. He was desperate and maybe dying, all angles of him like thin glass.

“I cannot feel my feet,” he said, his voice small, akin to a child. He was trembling without and within. He was doomed, as anyone could see.

I stood, and realized I was entirely

changed. Luca’s eyes came wide to see me. All things were within, transformed. All at once, I was aware of an entire history. I recalled a bold and ancient age that had fallen to a calamitous ending. It was a bygone era of gods and kings and monsters, all legends walking on the land, unphased for their rapturous glory. I saw in my mind a time when the world was born, young like a budding leaf, reaching for the sun. In stark contrast, I knew that our modern moment had withered to grey, impoverished and decayed. The appalling age of the present was broken and done. The end was nigh, and I would bear it up to its deserved finale. A herald I suddenly was again, just as I once was, and was born to be. I had become the harbinger of ruin.

I turned to Luca, who stared at my new form with a broken and fearful gaze. I leapt once in a great bound, like a hunting cat. Luca was overcome with fear to see me, terrible, fell, a lithe beast.

“Don’t... Shev, please,” he said, holding up his hands but for naught.

“I am come. I am Varkoss. This angel of umbra does return to cease the world.”

My wings erupted, dark and wicked, from the soft flesh of my shoulders.

“Shev, stop it. Stay away! Stay back!”

I approached. Luca feared my dagger, but I would have no need of it. From then unto forever, I would wield claws of obsidian.

Ω

The End.

The Hunt

By Liam Porter

*"A Hunter Stalks. A Predator Waits.
Who is the prey?"*

‘Only a lunatic would take on a dragon by themselves,’ were the words that circulated the young warrior’s head. The battle between confidence and self-doubt had begun.

‘Their hide is like solid cast iron. No normal weapon can penetrate it,’ the members of the tavern had yelled.

‘We’ll be drinking to ye death by tomorrow’s end girly,’ another had added in a solemn tone.

All eyes had lowered as the youth had left the inn’s doorway, leaving behind the drinking patrons, and stepped out into the snowstorm.

Now, atop the windswept peak of the nearby mountain, she could feel another set of eyes upon her despite the storm.

Watching.

Waiting.

Regardless, she continued her mission.

Slowly, the warrior carefully pressed the fur covered boots through the white blanket of snow beneath her. Feeling the crunch of the freshly laid snowflakes, she waited until her foot met hard rock underneath until she made her next step.

A large black arrow lay nocked and ready to be fired on the edge of her hunting bow. She nervously squeezed her fingers tight around its grip, somehow finding a little comfort in the habit despite the impending danger.

As the winds that kicked up the chill around her began to subside, her vision became clearer. She could see the top of the mountain just ahead. Rocks jutted sharply through the fallen ice and

created a desolate line between the earth and the crisp night sky above. Through the dancing northern aurora, a large full moon now peeked past the clouds and illuminated the landscape on a light blue glow. She took a moment to scan the immediate area with a hunter’s keen eye. The treeline had fallen away much further down the hill and the snow storm had given her some cover to move closer to the likely location of her target. Now though, with the small blizzard subsiding, she realised how exposed she was. All that lay between her and the mountain top was a steady incline and to her left was an edge of rock with a sheer drop for hundreds of feet to the valley below.

Feeling as though stealth was now no longer an option, she began to trudge harder through the snow toward the peak. Her heart began to pound - a mixture of fear and the physical exertion taking control. She was going nowhere fast.

It was at that moment, her error was realised, as a tremendous roar erupted from the rock line above. With her wide eyes looking through her matted locks of blonde hair, she witnessed what she imagined had been the final sight of many a strong warrior before her. A dragon, far larger and far meaner looking than any of the stories that had been sung around the campfires of her former village, reared up upon the outcrop before her and stretched out its massive leathery wings. With a slow lumbering sweep of its tail, it sent splinters of earth and rock down the mountainside toward the young warrior. Rocks and stone rained down around her and rolled to a stop on the ice.

She froze.

A shiny object had caught her eye from the rubble. A quick study revealed

that it wasn't clumps of earth and stone, but rather decayed skulls and armour. Remnants of the dragon's previous adversaries.

Satisfied that the lone human was now terrified, the dragon decided that it didn't feel like flying tonight and instead began to scramble and slide toward the easy prey. It's huge form shaking the ground as it moved.

The warrior turned her attention to the ferocious beast and steadied herself with a deep breath inward.

The dragon, almost revelling in the audacity of the foolish warrior, had decided to go straight for the kill. It eyed her wildly as it approached. It was pleased to see that its meal was wearing nothing more than some leather and animal furs. Steel and iron had always given it an upset stomach.

The girl moved almost instinctively. Lifting her bow she chose her mark, just below the creature's eye. With a surge of strength through her shoulders and back, she drew the heavy arrow back from the bow.

The dragon was now almost on top of her. It too, began its sharp inward breath, only this time, its exhale would be rather fiery. The beast contemplated for a moment. '*Medium rare*' or '*well done*'?

The girl released her breath and arrow first. With a whistling *hiss* it wavered through the air and found its mark, burying right to the fletching in the dragon's tender right eye socket. The sharp pangs of pain radiated through the skull of the beast and it choked on the fire it had been preparing to release. It clawed wildly at its face and thrashed about, sending more chunks of mountain through the air. Flames spat forth with clumps of dragon spit as it wailed.

The girl, feeling somewhat fired up by the success of her shot, let out a roar of defiance. In its blindness, that roar gave the dragon a sound to try and pinpoint the culprit of its pain. Once again it inhaled deeply, this time with the intention of igniting the very fabric of the mountainside. It would scorch the earth and leave nothing but ashes. In that moment, as it opened its gigantic maw, another arrow, as accurate as the first, found another chink in the creature's armour. The iron arrow tip punched a mortal blow through the roof of the beast's mouth and tickled the internal brainstem. Death was instant and with a final involuntary choke, the giant beast simply stopped.

Soon, the only sounds that could be heard on the mountainside was that of the wind whistling through the rocky crags and the squelching noises as a young warrior retrieved her arrows from the massive carcass that now belonged to her.

The End.

The Last Lesson

By Frankie G.

If I'm being honest, I was never a particularly impressive student. I was the oldest apprentice at the Spire of the Elect, yet I read the least, worked the slowest, & dreaded attending class. But I just wanted to learn the basics & go home, really. Because I figured, if learning magic puts me in the 1%, why work myself to death trying to be in the 0.001%? I don't need to teleport or enthrall armies. And as it turns out, magic is *very easy* if you just set your sights low! I just wanted to know

enough to make a comfortable living curing cows & blooming crops.

As it turned out, my stunning lack of ambition would save my life.

It was around midnight, by my reckoning, when the demons got loose. The valedictorian and salutatorian had finally taken their rivalry to the next level, I guess, and each set a demon upon the other. Their display of unparalleled hubris was going to impede heavily on my Saturday night plans of frivolously using magic to fill my wine cup.

Magic's supposed to make our lives easier. Why did those overachievers have to make it such a headache, all the time? With the constant jockeying for position, the spectral pranks between dorms, the startling spellstorms under the outhouses. Many times I had wished they'd all just cut it out. I tried not to dwell on whether some irony-minded god had chosen to finally fulfill that.

But, you know — not to rub anything in their dead faces — you'd really think two wizardlings who were so "smart" would have known to phrase their request better. "*Make me top of the class,*" I heard them both shout to their snarling pets. Really? Even I — who couldn't be bothered to summon cake much less demons — knew not to ask dark powers for something so vague! Obviously, the easiest and most evil way to fulfill that demand is to simply kill the rest of the school, leaving the survivor as 'top of the class'. And as the cautionary pamphlet every freshman receives makes clear: 'Easy 'n evil' is every demon's M.O.

So that's what those demons did, with plenty of help from the apprentices themselves. Most of my 'peers' were all too eager for the chance to vanquish a demon, lusting for bragging rights.

They rushed in, screaming their strongest spells & flailing their biggest wands & grinding their finest crystals. None of it mattered. These were *proper demons*, from *proper Hell*, and none of these scholastic wunderkinds had even fought in a proper duel. All the 'combat practice' we got had intense teacher supervision, because of several lawsuits a few centuries past. Those nerds had power, and they had good grades, but they didn't have the wisdom of experience. All their magic was for naught.

But I didn't join them! Oh, no. That night, I played it smart for once.

Can you guess how?

That's right! I ran and hid.

Does that make me a coward? Sure! An *alive* coward. I ran to the building where I often took naps, which happened to be the Chapel of Loghain. They're a Paladin order, so naturally, all their squires had charged out and gotten themselves slaughtered too. Which was dumb, because the chapel was so damned holy there's no way a demon could set foot inside. So yes, I hid, in the safest place to be, and it turned out I was in good company! For as I stepped inside, a bespectacled face peered out from behind the altar. The only other smart guy that night was the Headmaster himself.

"Cheldag?" he asked, with an offensive amount of surprise in his voice.

"Headmaster," I replied respectfully, thinking it an inappropriate moment for sass.

"How many others are with you?"

"None, Headmaster. They've all died, trying to prove themselves to each other."

He gulped the gulp of a man with inadequate liability insurance.

“And you, Cheldag?”

I shrugged the shrug of a man with inadequate everything. “Me? I’ve nothing to prove to anyone. I just prefer livin’ to dyin’.”

The Headmaster nodded, taking it all in. Can’t have been his proudest moment. All his students dead except the underachieving hedge-wizard who couldn’t even *Turn Air Into Gold*.

“What do we do, Cheldag? You’re the second-most powerful mage left in the Spire.”

“Much to our misfortune.”

“We have to do *something*. We can’t let those fiends roam freely.”

I thought we probably *could* let them roam freely, if we *really* tried, but decided not to suggest it.

“Cheldag, what brought them here, do you know?”

“Er, well, I did hear the boys chanting a bit. Sounded like Argive Bottlestop & Theodric the Middler both asked their demons to ‘Make me top of the class’. If you can believe it.”

That stung the Headmaster, I could tell. His lecture series on demonology had clearly *not* been as comprehensive as he’d thought.

“You’re the only student left?”

“Seems so. I guess that makes me top of the class!” I joked, as the Headmaster choked back tears.

SHBWOOFSH!

The terrifying noise from something outside was followed by two ghastly shrieks, and I caught a whiff of mushrooms & sulfur. The Headmaster tiptoed over, bravely, and cracked open the door while I cowered in a giant pile of scripture.

“They’re gone! Cheldag, you did it! You fulfilled their contracts, and sent them back to Hell.”

“I did?” It sounded a bit far-fetched,

but if either of us would know when demons were gone, it’d be the Headmaster. I waddled over to confirm, laden cautiously with holy symbols.

“I’ll be damned. Or not today, I guess. I really did it!”

“Yes. You, of all people, did it.” The man’s continued lack of confidence was truly cutting.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was meant as one. After all, you defeated two demons, who slew dozens of magelings & paladins-to-be. Which, if you ask me, certainly fulfills the final praxis requirement. Thus, I have nothing left to teach you. Consider yourself a fully-accredited Service Wizard, now licensed for practice in the Ragbo Empire and its dependents.”

“Now that’s *definitely* a compliment.” And a huge savings, as it meant one year less of student loans. Dragons ran that racket, and refinancing was *unpleasant*.

“Where will you go? The capital? With the entire class gone, you’ll be in high demand.”

I shook my head. He’d never get me. “No. That’s a good way to wind up dead, and we’ve been over my feelings on that. I’m going home. I’ll be in high demand.”

“*Home?*” He made a retching sound. “To do what? Tend cows?”

“Sounds good to me.”

And so I left, on foot, as the only graduate of the final class of the Spire of the Elect, and the unlikely recipient of its last lesson.

The End.

With the Death of Kings

By Denise Longrie

Intaphernes, bow carrier to the King of Persia, ran through the palace corridors to the second court, where the king feasted with his most trusted advisors on this tenth day of the New Year celebrations. He waited at the threshold for the herald to announce him.

“Ah, friend Intaphernes, come in,” King Darius said, motioning to the others to make space for the newcomer. “Join us.”

“I am honored.” The bow carrier crossed the room and sat, noting from the glazed eyes and red faces that his lord had opened his finest wines. *The better to loosen tongues*, he told himself.

“So, if I must go forth on campaign this spring, where best for me to begin, my wise advisors?”

Swaying as if in the wind, Yima said, “Un... Unrest in Phrygia, Your Majesty.”

“And Ah... Ahss... Assyria,” added Gaubaruva, whose beard would be gray if not for the ministrations of his barbers.

“Your Majesty,” said Intaphernes. “Babylon is in revolt. My spies have confirmed it only now.”

Darius clapped his hands. “Call for the scribes and messengers!” he cried.

Intaphernes’s message echoed up and down the tables.

Far down the table, a young man stood and bowed to the king. His broad shoulders spoke of strength, and his dark eyes shone. He’d traveled abroad more than most.

“I am Kaveh, the son of Otanes. Forgive me if I speak out of turn, Your Majesty. Let me, if I may, suggest a

proposition of immeasurable benefit to Your Majesty. It is said that an immense treasure lies for the taking in the city of Babylon, unguarded. Any who wish to might seize it.”

“If this is so,” the King asked. “Why do the Babylonians not lay their hands on it?”

“Out of reverence for an ancient queen of theirs, who sleeps with it,” Kaveh said.

“Yeth. The people of Bab... Babylon revere her,” added Gaubaruva.

“So, this tale is true then?” Darius asked.

“In-Indeed,” the inebriated counselor said. “And well known.”

Intaphernes waited while his old friend and comrade considered this news. Judging from his flushed cheeks, Darius had had his share of wine. *Disturbing the dead of a subject isn't a sin like disturbing the dead of a venerated ancestor. And Babylon had revolted. Its riches, wherever they were, were forfeit.*

Darius rose to his feet. “Call for the wise men!” He slumped back into his chair, gripping the armrests while his summons echoed throughout the room.

Intaphernes noted that a messenger ran through the great doors. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Kaveh sitting unmoving as chaos erupted around him. The young man smiled.

* * *

The magi on their observation roof received with dread the word of the king’s demand.

“Look at the heavens,” said Head Astrologer Babak after the dispatcher departed. At nearly forty years old, he showed some gray in his beard, yet his dark eyes remained keen.

His student Farbod looked out at the moonless night. A few wispy clouds drifted by, but the stars twinkled clearly with no bright moon outshining them.

The men sat with thick wool cloaks draped over their robes, sipping heated wine. A servant woman had brought them bricks wrapped in straw to keep their feet warm.

“Master, I don’t see what you see,” Farbod said. Admissions of this sort never made his teacher impatient with him.

“The wanderers,” Babak explained. “The wanderer that the Babylonians call after their god Marduk rises. The red wanderer is in retrograde.”

“How do you interpret these signs?”

A cool breeze whipped across the rooftop.

Babak drew a heavy sign. His shoulders slumped. “His Majesty will want to know his fortunes in war as he sets out on campaign. The Babylonian god rises, while Warahrān, the smiter of resistance, withdraws from the King of the Persians. He will not bless the king’s endeavors.”

“We cannot tell him that, yet he must know,” Farbod said.

“Yes. My old master used to counsel his students to tell the old king that such signs were ‘obscure’, not ill omens, and ask for more time to study them. It accomplishes the same thing. That is, waiting until the portents are better. And we avoid telling the man who could remove us from our jobs, if not worse, that the gods do not favor his ventures.”

Farbod smiled and sipped his warm wine.

“Tomorrow, my young friend, we will sacrifice a sheep and read its liver.”

“Why? What will that tell us that the stars have not?”

Babak paused before he answered. “It will tell us the king’s fortunes will prosper in two months.”

Farbod spat out his wine.

* * *

Darius’s visage darkened. He raised his eyes from the entrails of the slaughtered sheep and faced his oldest diviner. “Babak, you have always told me the truth, but this cannot stand. I have already sent for the levy from the satrapies. Last night, I received word that makes leaving immediately imperative. We march when they arrive, regardless of what your omens say.”

Babak bowed to Darius. “I can only say what the gods reveal, Your Majesty.”

“Bah!” The King of Kings climbed the stairs of his dais and addressed his troops assembled in the courtyard below him. “Armies of the King, hear me! Word has reached us that Babylon has rebelled! They planned this for many months in secret and only now act openly. The chief traitor is a man named Arakha. I tell you this so that when you meet him, you will know him and bring him to me.”

“You have followed me across a hundred lands and have helped me secure a thousand victories. We go now to punish a rebel, to return a wicked city to its proper place. Riches and spoils lay in the open for the Great King and every fighting man. I offer a magnificent prize for the man who returns the traitor Arakha to me alive. A lesser one goes to the man who returns him to me dead. So, we fight for the glory of Persia. Be ready to depart at my order!”

A deafening cheer arose among the assembled soldiers. Spears raised and swords banged against wicker shields.

Farbod turned to his teacher.

The older man hung his head. "I cannot change what I cannot change."

Over his master's shoulder, Farbod glimpsed a young man arrayed for battle as a noble. The young man's broad shoulders and taut muscles let all who saw him know of his strength. His dark eyes gazed into the distance. He raised no call for battle like his fellows but stood unspeaking. He smiled.

* * *

Daily the levied troops arrived from the various satrapies to the point where they nearly overran the city. Requisition masters sent far into the countryside for food and wine for the men. When a soldier killed a local merchant in a dispute over prices, it was a signal that the time had come to leave.

The soldiers marched by the gibbeted body of the man who had committed the atrocity. A sign at the base of the gibbet listed his sins, though few could read.

First came those bearing shields and javelins, then row upon row of archers, for Persian archers were the best on earth. Next came those armed with slingshots. Even the light infantry, men bearing short swords and shields, carried bows and arrows. Behind them came the cavalry and the chariot of the King, surrounded by his Immortals. The ground shuddered beneath hooves, many feet, and wheels. The Immortals numbered no more or no less than ten thousand. If a man fell in battle, his fellows replaced him on the field—or so the Immortals claimed.

Finally, the baggage, cattle, servants, and concubines followed, raising dust for leagues around.

The people lined the streets, watching the army set off. Many had sons and husbands among those going. One boy, the son of a recently deceased merchant, sat on a hillside outside the city. When the king approached, he picked up a pebble and threw it, hitting a hock of one of the horses that pulled the royal chariot. The animal screamed in pain and bucked against its harness. The procession halted to switch out to a fresh horse.

By the time reports reached the royal ears of a stone deliberately thrown, the culprit had disappeared. No one knew him, but a boy was found and hanged. The army marched on.

* * *

Naudar wrapped his cloak around his shoulders and turned to his older brother, Sear. "How long do we have to wait out here?" He was hungry and frightened on their third night out alone, hiding the sheep. Stars shone above. In their hiding place in the valley, walls of rock protected them from the wind. Light from the campfires of the forces lit the horizon almost as brightly as the dawning sun, and the smoke brought the scents of roasting meat to taunt their bellies.

Sear poked a stick at their small fire. "I don't know. Until this plague of locusts moves on. Tomorrow, I hope. Curse the king and his pack of thieves for stealing our livestock and food."

"You shouldn't say things like that," Naudar said.

"I know, but I've said it. You're the only one my words have reached. No

harm will come. Sleep now. I'll wake you when it's your turn to watch."

The younger boy said nothing but lay down, pulling his cloak over his head. He remained awake for only a short while, staring at the stars.

* * *

At dawn messengers from Babylon arrived under a flag of truce at the campsite. Darius consulted with his advisors as to what course he should take.

Yima said, "Receive them with honor. Offer them food and drink. If the Babylonians sue for peace, all is well. If it is a trick, we have hostages. Hear them."

Gaubaruva said, "No Babylonian was born with a drop of honor in him. It is a ruse. Hear them, but don't believe a word they say. If they tell you to go east, go west. If they tell you the river is unfordable, cross it."

Darius considered these words long. He turned to his bow carrier. "What say you, old friend?"

"Far be it from me to decide," Intaphernes said. "But hearing them and knowing what they have to say is better than not knowing, to my mind. A king can question them and act with knowledge."

Darius smiled at these flattering words. "You have the right of it, of course. You usually do."

Intaphernes bowed his head with a modest smile.

He sent for the messengers and ordered that they be given food and drink and allowed to bathe.

The first divisions of the army had left, but the king remained with his chariot, Immortals, and advisors. The

messengers arrived and prostrated themselves as was proper.

"What is your message?" Darius asked without further ceremony.

"We express our gratitude to the great king for his hospitality toward our humble selves. He has indeed shown us more honor than we deserve. Our Lord Nebuchadnezzar"—Darius started at the name—"sent us with word that the army of the King of Persia should withdraw, for it will take Babylon only when mules foal."

The assembled held their breath.

"Begone from my sight," Darius said. "While you still have feet to carry you."

The messengers prostrated themselves and disappeared as quickly as their tired feet could carry them.

At the far end of the table, Kaveh smiled.

* * *

In a temporary stall in the Persian camp outside Babylon, Zopyrus stared where his servant pointed. A mule nursed a foal.

The whole land had heard Nebuchadnezzar's taunt to the Persian army. Now this sign had appeared among his own animals. The hands of the gods were here.

He said nothing. If the gods had decided Babylon must fall into the hands of the Persians, then fall it would—and he could work it to his advantage.

* * *

Once his spies had told him that the Persian army was no more than a day's march away, Nebuchadnezzar and his generals sent the people into hiding

places in the hills around the city. For years, he had laid aside stores to withhold a siege. The ancient walls of Babylon were mighty, and her people brave.

“Let the enemy come!” he cried to the assembled troops.

The army roared.

The king retreated to his chambers, his trusted general Arakha at his side.

“Well, friend. It has come to pass. It will be no easy task to throw off the Persian yoke. The women and children cannot last long in their hiding places. We must vanquish the foe quickly, or all will be lost.”

“We will prevail,” Arakha said. He paused, putting one hand to his ear. “Surely that is the sound of Persian women weeping for their men.”

Nebuchadnezzar sighed. Arakha always was given to the poetic. “Set trusted guards on all the stores,” the king ordered his aid. “And hang any man caught stealing.”

The general bowed and ran to implement the order. He did not tell his lord that all who guarded the stores had helped themselves to some—a little or a lot—over the years. Nebuchadnezzar was perhaps the only man in the city not to know this.

* * *

“Your Majesty, is the capture of Babylon really of supreme importance to you?”

Darius turned to the man posing the question. Zopyrus was the son of Megabyzus, one of the seven slayers of the pretender and companions who had helped him win his throne. He owed almost everything to Megabyzus, but he'd always had reservations about the son. Darius judged him to be about

five-and-twenty, with a magnificent build for a warrior but with a wily air the king disliked.

“We will return to Susa with the riches of Babylon or die.”

Zopyrus bowed. “I believe I have a way to win this siege. It will require assistance—”

Oh, here it comes. “How much will this assistance cost me?”

“No money! No gold! I request only... If I may have Your Majesty's ear in privacy.”

Darius nodded. He cleared the tent of all except two of his Immortals, who served as bodyguards, then turned to the young man before him.

“Very well. Speak. The guards I trust with my life.”

* * *

The watchman on the walls of Babylon cried out, alerting all that a man approached from the Persian camp. The man moved slowly as if injured. As he drew closer, the watchman noted blood streaming down the sides of his face. A crude bandage encircled his head. His torn clothes hung about him, and he wore no shoes.

“Halt!” the watchman called. “State your business!”

The man fell on his knees. “I seek refuge,” he called back. “I throw myself on the mercy of the great king Nebuchadnezzar.”

The watchman leaned over and said to his younger second-in-command. “Fetch the watch commander.” The young man took to his heels.

“Who are you? Whose son are you? How came you to be here?”

Without lifting his head, the man outside the gate replied, “I am Zopyrus, the son of Megabyzus of Susa. All my

life, I have faithfully served the King of Kings, Darius. Yet, you see how he abused me—beating me and cutting off my ears. I will serve the King of the Babylonians with all the fidelity I have served Darius until now.”

The watchman said nothing. Someone had abused the man, but for what reason? If he were indeed so loyal to Darius, why was he so willing to betray him now?

“Well, what is it?” The watch commander appeared at his side in a foul mood. The watchman pointed to the man outside and relayed the story.

“This is not something for you or me to decide. Let me send to Arakha. If nothing else, we can keep the man under guard until the king decides.”

The watchman looked once more at the broken, bloodied man.

What did the wretch do to deserve this treatment?

* * *

Arakha and Nebuchadnezzar stood atop the wall overlooking the Urash Gate. Here, their informant Zopyrus had told them, Darius would send a small contingent to test the strength of the Babylonians. They were not so naïve as to not see this attack as a possible feint, and the deserter a spy, so they’d posted men all across the wall.

Two of Nebuchadnezzar’s bodyguards held Zopyrus in chains below them. He could not signal any troops that approached. If the king sensed betrayal, the bodyguards could dispatch the man at a wave of the king’s hand.

A watchman called: A line of bowmen approached, running over a hill.

“Hold till they are within range,” Nebuchadnezzar ordered. “Then fire at will.”

His troops obeyed. Before the enemy was within range, arrows flew at them, some hitting the wall. A few landed inside, burning with pitch. These the soldiers extinguished with shovelfuls of sand they had at the ready.

The Babylonians shot down at the attackers. Brave (or foolhardy) archers shot their flaming arrows back at them. No call came of an attack elsewhere.

“This can’t be all the king wishes to throw against us,” Nebuchadnezzar muttered, watching the number of dead and wounded Persians lying along the ground. “There is more to this than meets the eye.”

Arakha cast a glance toward the prisoner/guest, Zopyrus. “The Persians have already cut off his ears. Cut off his hands and hang him over the wall. Let us see what that brings.”

Nebuchadnezzar followed his gaze. “No, my friend. Let me try one more test.” He called down to Zopyrus. “Deserter, can you tell us when the Persian king’s next attack will be?”

The king couldn’t be sure in the darkness, but it appeared the man smiled. “Yes, Your Majesty. I will tell you not only when but where.”

* * *

After the second rout of the enemy, Nebuchadnezzar sent his personal physician to treat the Persian. He ordered his servants to give him the best food and drink and to find suitable clothes and shoes for his use.

Arakha accompanied the physician. “I come to warn you, deserter,” he said. “I disagreed with the king on this matter. My counsel was to have you

hanged and your corpse thrown over the wall. Because of his orders, I can set no guard on you, but you will be watched.”

“Never fear, my lord,” Zopyrus said. “I can barely walk. Even if I were disloyal to the King of the Babylonians, there is little mischief I could achieve.”

Arakha made a sound of disgust. “You’ve achieved a great deal of mischief already, judging by the number of corpses of those who served your former king.” He said nothing more but turned and left the room.

The physician soon finished. Zopyrus did indeed feel relief. His wounds were cleaned and bandaged. For the first time in many days, he slept with his belly full of good food. He woke in the night.

“A little walk will do me good,” he said aloud with a smile.

* * *

Several nights later, a flaming arrow shot from behind the mighty walls of Babylon and landed outside, near the Euphrates River. The eyes of both defending and attacking armies followed it.

The watch commander shook his next-in-command. “Wake Lord Arakha. We are betrayed.”

The cry of “We are betrayed!” echoed up and down the line along the walls.

In the Persian camp, Intaphernes woke Darius. “The sign has come.”

“Excellent.” Darius sat up. “Go. Take twenty of the Immortals and follow the Euphrates to the entrance our loyal man has left open for us. The army will surround the city. Open the first gate you come to and let them in.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

* * *

“By the good god, there was no one about,” the watch commander cried to Arakha. “I saw no foreigner at night, only a harmless old madwoman. Her words were nonsense. She had no ears—”

“No ears? You fool,” Arakha said. “You’ll not have a chance to make such a mistake again.” He rammed his short sword into the man’s belly upward toward his heart.

The commander collapsed, gasping for air for a few moments.

“Reinforce the gates!” Arakha ordered, realizing how thinly the troops were already spread.

If the gods have deserted us, I will face death and defeat like a warrior, he vowed.

* * *

By noon, the Persians had sacked the ancient city. Nebuchadnezzar and Arakha stood in chains before the Ishtar Gate, neither speaking nor exchanging glances. The gods of Babylon—Marduk, Ishtar, and Adad, the storm god—had turned their backs on their people. Nebuchadnezzar could not bear to look at the striking blue and yellow glazed bricks that lined the gate and the Processional Way leading up to it. Once the soldiers had their fill inside the walls, they would search the countryside for the women and children. All was lost. His life, kingship, and family would be a disgrace forever.

At the sound of running soldiers and hoofbeats, the two prisoners stared at their feet, not caring to see the splendid figure of Darius riding his chariot down the Processional Way escorted by his Immortals. The sound of the cheering

enemy standing by to witness their ultimate humiliation was unbearable enough.

The chariot halted.

“I, Darius, by the grace of Ahuramazda, am king. Ahuramazda has granted me the kingdom of Babylon this day. Do any deny that I am king?”

Cries of “You are king!” met his proclamation.

Darius turned to the captives Nebuchadnezzar and Arakha.

“And so, rebels will pay the price for their rebellion. But not yet. I want you to watch me seize your riches. Call the scholar and the sappers.”

Riches? Oh, no. The fool intends to desecrate the tomb of Nitocris, Nebuchadnezzar thought.

A slave stepped forward and prostrated himself.

“Your name?” the king asked.

“Tushnamatay.”

Darius laughed, not trying to spare the man’s feelings. Someone had given him the name of a goddess of thought to mock him. “Very well. Read to me the inscriptions of the Ishtar Gate. Have no fear. Only read to me their true meaning.”

Again, the slave prostrated himself.

He looked at the first inscription. “Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, the pious prince appointed by the will of Marduk, the highest priestly prince, beloved of Nabu, of prudent deliberation, who has learned to embrace wisdom—”

Darius waved him aside. “No, I don’t need to hear that. We will change that.”

The slave then found a smaller, older inscription. He squinted, for time had worn the marks. “If any king of Babylon in the future needs money, let him open this tomb and take as much as he likes: But let him not open it unless

he is in need, for it will be the worse for him.”

Darius smiled. “Where is the young man, the son of Otanes, who first spoke to me of this? I will reward him. For his story is true.” He called for the sappers to open the tomb.

Half a dozen men bearing sledgehammers, pry bars, and chains stepped forward. They walked around the area of the tomb, which was about as high as their heads, murmuring among themselves and gesticulating. At last, the man who appeared to be their leader approached Darius, prostrating himself.

“Your Majesty, if I may, we are only humble engineers and sappers. We are happy to do the bidding of Your Majesty. But we must warn you of a possible danger.”

Darius cursed them and their fathers. “I care not for danger. Open this tomb and be done with it. Do not endanger your lives or the lives of my people rashly, but open that tomb.”

“It is as you wish, Your Majesty.”

He returned and conferred with his fellows.

For the first time since he had heard the cry of betrayal, Nebuchadnezzar smiled.

After shoring up the tomb with logs, the sappers called for the help of the impatient soldiers. The soldiers struck the first blow. Glazed bricks began falling to the ground.

On the fifth blow, the crew lead lost the head from his sledgehammer. He stared at it, perplexed. “The gods have a hand in this,” he muttered.

“Stand aside, old friend. You have softened it up for me and the others,” said one of his fellows. Three men lined up, each striking blows in turn. A crack

appeared. They attacked the crack until the wall of bricks crumbled.

“We are through, Your Majesty.”

“Finally,” Darius grumbled.

The sappers enlarged the hole. Darius pressed forward, eager to see the first glimpse of his treasure. He saw only an old-fashioned coffin. After the sappers called for a ladder, the largest of their number climbed down. He could just barely fit through the opening they had made.

“Tell me what you see!” Darius ordered.

The chamber was too small for the man to stand. “I see only a coffin,” he replied.

“What is this?! Open the coffin!”

The sapper paused to pray to his god for forgiveness for disturbing the dead, even if it was enemy dead. The wood was old, and the lid gave way without a struggle. “Only a corpse. And writing.”

“Slave! You! Read what the coffin says!”

The slave prostrated himself and then climbed down the ladder. “It’s difficult to see.” He entered the chamber. With so little room, the sapper climbed back up. The slave said a prayer and wiped the dust from the inside of the coffin. He called up the ladder, “I beg the king to recall that he wanted the truth of the inscriptions.”

“Yes. Tell me the truth, and you need fear nothing from me or any under my command,” Darius said through his teeth.

“That I am only a humble slave and bound to do your will.”

“Yes.”

To a man, the sappers looked up, examining the underside of the gate, hearing creaks and groans. The large sapper who had exited the chamber when the slave entered turned to him.

“By all you consider holy, get out now, man.”

The man climbed up the ladder and prostrated himself before Darius.

“The writing in the coffin says, ‘If you were ever satisfied with what you had, and did not disgrace yourself seeking more, you would not have opened the coffins of the dead.’”

Darius roared. He kicked the slave in the head. Before the creaking of the gate became rumbling, the sappers scattered. The largest of them picked up the stunned slave. Within a few heartbeats, the rumbling became a roaring. The bricks of the gate fell upon the tomb, covering Darius, his bow carrier Intaphernes, and a dozen Immortals even as they fled.

Bricks and dust washed over and buried Nebuchadnezzar and Arakha standing outside the gate.

Kaveh strode up among confused lines of Persian soldiers, wondering and amazed at the death of kings. Surveying the destruction, he smiled.

“Perhaps with the death of so many kings, we should learn to rule ourselves,” he said.

The End.

Author’s note: The story is taken from a couple of apocryphal accounts recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus. Unlike the Darius of my story, the historical Darius the Great ruled 522-486 BCE over the Achaemenid Persian Empire, a land mass extending from the Indus Valley to parts of the present-day Balkans and North Africa. He died peacefully in his bed in his sixties.

After Thoughts

By Charles Moffat

Did this first effort at a literary magazine go as expected? To some extent, yes and no. It is shorter than I originally intended.

However upon reflection I have decided that “Less is more” in some circumstances, and this might be one of them.

When I first started this project I was rather ambitious, aiming to create a magazine that is in the range of 90,000 to 100,000 words. Instead what has resulted, due to a combination of time constraints and life interfering, is a magazine that is approx. 55k instead.

40,000 to 60,000 words is more manageable and feasible, and less likely to result in publisher burnout, which I suspect is the leading cause of literary magazines failing and going defunct. If a publisher finds themselves with less time and is stressed then something has to give, and a literary magazine that is not important to the publisher’s bottom line, or is possibly a huge expense, will be one of the first things to go when times get tough.

I suspect that quite a few literary magazines met their doom during the pandemic, and now with rampant inflation, people are looking to make cutbacks. Such economic circumstances are the death knell for magazines.

Time is more valuable than money. I have two sons, but the good news is that they’re both in school or daycare right now. During the summer I didn’t get much editing or writing done, but come September with my eldest son entering grade one and my youngest going to daycare I suddenly had more time to edit and write.

Having volunteers to help with editing and proofreading certainly makes a difference. More volunteers in the future would certainly improve the chances of longevity for this enterprise.

I do feel I am on the right track by not having deadlines and a firm publishing schedule. Setting myself an October 1st goal of releasing the first issue was a mistake, just like setting a goal of 90 to 100k was also too ambitious.

A shorter amount like 40 to 60k, and a flexible publishing schedule, is the wiser path.

The other change I want to make is the word count range of stories. I started off with the goal of 1k to 40k per story, but in retrospect I think that is also too ambitious. A shorter word count range would be easier to proofread and edit, and in the case of works that I might have to reject due to ineligibility or poor quality, shorter works are also less time consuming. I really don’t want to waste time reading a story that later turns out to be ineligible for some reason.

Going forward I think the new goal will be to accept stories that are between 1k and 8k. Most of the stories within Issue #1 of *Peasant Magazine* fall within that range, with only two exceptions.

With experience comes wisdom, and I feel that this first issue has been a valuable learning experience. A shorter and less ambitious goal, shorter stories, and more flexible deadlines are the way forward and the way towards longevity.

Until next time. Happy Reading!