

The background of the cover is a digital illustration of two female Vikings standing in a snowy, mountainous landscape. They are both wearing fur-trimmed tunics and trousers, with intricate leather straps and buckles. The woman on the left has blue eyes and a serious expression, while the woman on the right has brown eyes and is holding a battle-axe. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The title 'Peasant Magazine' is written in a large, black, gothic-style font across the top, with 'Spring, 2024' in a smaller, simpler font to its right.

Peasant Magazine

Spring, 2024

Stories By
Helen E. Patterson
André Medeiros
Geoff Nelder
J. VanZile
Arin Lee Kambitsis
Alexis Veenendaal
Daniel Cano
Joel Glover
J. J. Egosi
Charles Moffat

Issue #2

Peasant Magazine

Issue Two, May 1st 2024

The PDF version of *Peasant Magazine* is free.

If you paid money for a PDF copy then someone has been selling it without our permission.

Publisher: Charles Moffat / fiction.charlesmoffat.com

Magazine Established March 2023 in Toronto, Canada.

All Rights Reserved.

Authors retain full control of copyright of their Work.

No portion of an Author's Work may be reproduced without their consent.

Art Director: Charles Moffat

All cover art & any illustrations are created using photoshop.

Acknowledgements

PM would not be possible without the hard work of the authors and the volunteers.

The following people volunteered their time to help make this issue happen:

Tricia Humphrey, Doug Ironside.

Our apologies to anyone we may have missed.

CONTENTS	AUTHOR	PAGE
<i>From the Publisher</i>	<i>Charles Moffat</i>	3
<i>About Our Contributors</i>		4
<i>A Loyal Man</i>	<i>Helen E. Patterson</i>	5
<i>The Bed of Penitence</i>	<i>André Medeiros</i>	20
<i>The Clock Meister's Revenge</i>	<i>Geoff Nelder</i>	38
<i>A Stable Master's Gambit</i>	<i>J. VanZile</i>	45
<i>Nuttingham</i>	<i>Arin Lee Kambitsis</i>	59
<i>Lights of the Lidth</i>	<i>Alexis Veenendaal</i>	66
<i>The Mists of Gaulion</i>	<i>Daniel Cano</i>	69
<i>Violence's Red End</i>	<i>Joel Glover</i>	76
<i>The Owl</i>	<i>J. J. Egosi</i>	79
<i>Raiders of Pravda Vremya</i>	<i>Charles Moffat</i>	86
<i>After Thoughts</i>	<i>Charles Moffat</i>	100

From the Publisher

Should individual magazine issues have a theme?

This is a question that I have been debating since the first issue of *Peasant Magazine*. I haven't yet set a particular theme for any issues, although Issue #1 feels like it had a sea monster theme since it had two separate submissions of selkies and several other stories involving water.

I am keenly aware that other magazines frequently have themes, but I haven't yet decided to narrow down any themes for *Peasant Magazine*. Perhaps this is because I feel that *PM* already has a theme: Fantasy, Historical Fiction, and by extension also Historical Fantasy. Anything set before 1750 (before the beginning of the industrial revolution) is good.

I suspect that some publishers decide to set themes when they start to get 'too many submissions' that they cannot read them all and so they decide to set themes in an effort to narrow the focus of individual issues. This way if they set a theme of Winter, for example, they can disregard any story submitted that doesn't take place during winter - or at least has snow or ice as part of the plot.

It also would help from the rejection letter perspective because it is easier to say that a story didn't fit our theme of Halloween (or whatever) than to try to explain to a writer why their story wasn't quite up to snuff.

However I dislike the idea of doing this. The purpose of *Peasant Magazine* was to create a publication where any fantasy or historical fiction authors (especially indie authors) can publish their work and have their work reach a wider audience of readers. Limiting authors to a particular theme would limit our ability for the magazine to serve that purpose.

However, it has occurred to me that we could adopt a loose theme. Meaning that issues could have a theme or multiple themes,

but it isn't mandatory. This shouldn't dissuade authors from submitting their work because the theme would be optional.

Thus if I were to set the next issue's optional themes to be Asian, Flowers, and/or Herbalism, well then I would hope to get some submissions that fall into one or two themes, but because it isn't mandatory I would likely get a mix of other stories too.

Some writers like to have a theme to give them inspiration so they know roughly what they want to write about. Other writers may feel constrained if they have to mould their story to fit a particular topic or topics.

I also don't want to pick themes that are too narrow either. Eg. "Viking Berserkers" would likely be a great topic for an anthology book, but for a magazine it might be too narrow of a topic. It would be easier to pick broader topics like "Pirates, Corsairs & Seascapes", which includes vikings.

And so while Issues #1 and #2 had no themes, Issues #3 and future issues will have optional themes for those writers who want a bit of direction.

The optional themes for Issue #3 will be *Asian, Flowers and/or Herbalism*.

And I want to reiterate that submitting a story that isn't on one of these three themes doesn't mean your story will be rejected automatically, or that you have less of a chance of your story getting accepted. Indeed, I'm not even going to publicize this theme on the website, although I may mention it on social media during my advertising efforts. I still want a variety of stories in every issue of the magazine, but if I can get two or three stories out of the ten stories to fit the theme then I will be happy to have helped out the writers who feel that they need a topic to help inspire them.

Sincerely,
Charles Moffat
fiction.charlesmoffat.com

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Helen E. Patterson is a life-long book addict with no interest in rehab. She lives in London, Ontario and spends most of her days working on a collection of short stories and the third draft of a sequel to her first (as yet) unpublished fantasy novel.

André Thomassim Medeiros is a Brazilian writer and a teacher of literature, ESL, and Portuguese. Two of his poems are available in the anthology of speculative poetry *Pulpversos-Terror #3*. Learn more at twitter.com/OfADeadDreamer.

Geoff Nelder is an escaped teacher and geriatric cyclist all over Europe, but mostly in his home British Isles. He researches his historical fiction too much so he writes a lot of science fiction to let his imagination escape. He's nuts so he became vegan 50 years ago. More to see at geoffnelder.com

Josh VanZile is a Mississippian by way of New Orleans. When he is not dodging alligators or vicious raccoons, he enjoys influences such as Robin Hobb and Joe Abercrombie. He has been previously published in *Indie Bites* and *Swords and Sorcery Magazine*. He welcomes comments on twitter.com/JVanParThree.

Arin Lee Kambitsis is a 47-year-old writer and musician originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but currently lives in Florida. His first novel, *Days of Yore*, won a silver medal for fantasy at the 2011 Independent Publishers Book Awards. His recent book *Sparkle* is currently available at amazon.com/Arin-Kambitsis/e/B00JIUU04Q/

Alexis Veenendaal is a Canadian living in Cardiff, Wales, where she travels and writes for a robotics automation company. In her free time she draws fantasy maps and crochets Star Trek characters. Learn more at alexisveenendaal.com.

Daniel Cano is an English/Creative Writing Major at Providence College. He likes to spend his time playing tabletop games, listening to power metal, and historical drama movies. Follow the legend of Darvell in Daniel's first series *Mercenaries of Destiny*.

Joel Glover is a punk, a poet, an extrovert, an accountant, and a reformed mandarin. He is a cuddly teddy bear really. Visit instagram.com/joelgloverauthor to confirm. He lives in the woods of Hertfordshire with two boys and one wife.

J.J. Egosi is a dark fantasy writer with a penchant for crafting tales centered around mythology, a myriad of settings, and demons. His writing journey began with a very bleak and surreal dream 8 years ago. After reworking the themes to make them more sensical and less disturbing, the idea for the first book was born. He's been transcribing this series and many other works onto the literary canvas ever since.

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

A Loyal Man

By Helen E. Patterson

There once was a man named Morgan who lived with his wife, Melina, in a great city high in the hills. Morgan was not a wealthy man, nor was he especially clever. He was, however, incredibly strong and a formidable fighter. In fact, Morgan was regarded as the finest warrior in the realm. Morgan did not take this for granted. He did not assume that his abilities were a gift from the gods and goddesses; He knew full well that his livelihood depended upon his strength, his prowess as a warrior, and the quality of his weapons.

For this reason, Morgan spent many hours a day practicing with his sword and shield, his mace and spear. He labored at building up his strength by going into a neighbor's pasture and lifting young calves, sheep, and goats above his head. As they grew, the young animals became heavier, stronger, and less inclined to let him hoist them about, so each day provided more of a challenge to his strength. That was fine with Morgan. That was the whole idea.

Morgan earned his daily bread as the king's most trusted and most capable Companion. The king was quite aged and not always able to rise from his bed every day, so Morgan was not called upon to do very much. Instead, he and the king spent many long hours talking. Morgan grew to love the old king as though he were his father, and it grieved him greatly when, one day, it became clear that the king had seen his last sunrise.

"I fear my time has come," said the old king. "I am tired, and I am ready to go.

There is just one last task I would place on you."

"Anything, your Majesty. Ask me anything, and I shall do it for you."

"Look after my eldest boy. Protect him as you have protected me all these years. I will not ask you to be his advisor. He is a headstrong youth who will listen to the counsel of no one, so I cannot lay that burden upon you. But do your best to keep him safe. Will you do that for me?"

Morgan looked down at the old king lying before him, and his heart sank. He had never spoken at length with Dougall, the king's elder son, but he had seen and heard enough of him to form a low opinion. He was brash and unruly, too proud and full of himself to pay much attention to the needs of others. But Morgan could not deny the king's last wish, so he nodded.

"I swear to keep him safe. No one shall harm a hair on his head unless they walk over my body. I give you my solemn oath."

That day, just as the sun touched the western horizon, the old king breathed his last. Morgan was at his side along with the king's physician, his holy man, and the king's younger son, Callum. The elder prince, Dougall, was sent for when it became clear that the king would not rise again, but he had not yet been found.

The physician whispered to Morgan, "Did they look in the gaming house? Or the brothel? If not there, he's most likely in the tavern."

Morgan sighed. He had known his new task would not be an easy one. He had not known it would be so unpleasant.

The old king had been kind, fair, generous, and thoughtful in his rule of his

people; High Prince Dougall, soon to be crowned as the new king, was quite different.

Dougall was not what anyone would call a good man. There were some who said, in a voice no louder than a whisper, under cover of night, in places of utter solitude, that he was not a man at all but some sort of demon who had taken on human form. Certainly, his actions were not those of a good man. Prince Dougall was well known as a creature of moods, whims, impulses, and quirks. He was easily offended, and when some purely innocent act caused him to feel slighted, his revenge was swift and frequently fatal. He had been known to have a personal attendant hanged in the city square, leaving the body for the crows to devour, simply for allowing the prince's favorite cape to fall to the ground. He'd had his barber slathered with honey and staked to the ground over an anthill because the prince did not like the way he had been shaved. He had even had a traveling minstrel's tongue torn out because he took too long to tune his lute. So, Morgan did not look forward to taking up his duties as Companion once Dougall became king.

The next day, as Morgan was wrestling with a particularly uncooperative young heifer in the pasture, he became aware of others watching him. As he released the heifer, he turned to face his audience. His heart nearly froze in his chest. There, on the roadway that bordered the pastureland, was a group of men on horseback. In the midst of the group was Dougall, the High Prince. As a rule, anyone with an ounce of sense would not willingly let him or herself come under the notice of the prince. It was generally considered a careless act to be avoided at all

costs. One could never tell when some act or word, or even article of clothing, would invoke the wrath of the prince with anything but pleasant consequences.

It was with a certain amount of nervousness then that Morgan realized the prince's eyes were upon him. He knelt, bowing his head, sending a heartfelt prayer to the deities that when next he lifted his head, the prince and his entourage would be moving on. When he heard the sound of someone approaching through the grass, he cursed under his breath.

"Arise," a gruff voice directed. Getting to his feet, Morgan looked up into the face of one of the prince's attendants.

"His Royal Highness commands your presence. Come with me."

"Why? What does he want with me?" Morgan asked.

The attendant met Morgan's look with something like pity in his eyes.

"Don't ask questions. Just come along. And don't look the prince in the eye. He hates that."

The man started back towards the road. Morgan had little choice but to follow. He wondered, should he try to flee, if the prince would have one of his men run him down, even trample him into the dirt. But Morgan had never run away from anything in his life; Not even Dougall could make him do that now.

As Morgan approached the prince, the only sounds were those of the horses, swishing their tails, mouthing their bits, and now and then, the creak of saddle leather.

Morgan knelt in the dust at the feet of the prince's horse.

“Your Highness,” he said, bowing his head.

“I know you, do I not? What is your name again?” the prince asked. Morgan marveled that the prince sounded so ordinary. There was no thunder or lightning in his voice—no howling of wolves. The earth beneath him did not shake. It could have been the voice of any man.

“My mother named me Morgan, your Highness, but I have been dubbed by my fellows as ‘Oath-keeper.’”

The prince threw his head back and laughed. “Oath-keeper? Since when do the common folk deign to bestow titles on their friends? How presumptuous! Yes, I thought you looked familiar. You were my father’s man.”

“I had that honor, your Highness.”

“And now, once I have been crowned, you will be my man. Is that not right?”

“I have taken an oath to be so if it pleases your Highness.” For a brief moment, Morgan felt hope flicker in his heart. Perhaps the prince would not want him at his side. Perhaps he had the place marked for one of his favorites. But that would not release Morgan from his oath. Nothing would, save for the death of the prince. Or his own.

“I shall look forward to having a warrior of such renown at my beck and call to see to my every need. Make sure to be at the coronation so that you may assume your duties at the earliest possible moment. I shall have many little tasks for you to see to.” The prince laughed and spurred his horse forward. The attendants hurried after him. Morgan watched them go and felt anger rising in his heart.

I am the king's Companion, not some lackey to fetch and carry. I am no trained monkey to amuse him. I am a warrior. I will refuse his service.

Even as he thought this, Morgan knew they were idle words. He had sworn an oath to the old king. He could not go back on it.

* * *

On the day Dougall was to be crowned, Morgan sharpened and polished his sword, and his wife, Melina, brushed his cloak until it looked like new. He had even purchased a fine pair of boots for the occasion.

“You look very handsome, my love,” said Melina. “All you need now is to change the sour expression on your face. You look as though you were about to attend your own execution rather than a coronation. Try to look at least a little happy.”

“Nothing to be happy about,” said Morgan, as he closed the door behind them. “I feel like a condemned man. This may be my last day of freedom. What shall I do?”

His wife patted his cheek. “You shall do your job as you always have. And you can pour out all your complaints and grievances into my lap when you get home. As you always have.”

Morgan smiled. “I don’t know what I would do without you, wife.”

“Nor do I, so let us hope you never have to find out.”

As the days and weeks and months progressed, Morgan had more than ample opportunity to bemoan his promise to the old king. Most days, he was given silly little

tasks to perform, like picking flowers from the castle gardens for King Dougall's luncheon table or watching the washerwoman to make sure she did not put too much starch in the king's undergarments. On many nights, Morgan was sent to rescue one or another of the king's favorites because, after excessive drinking, one of them had insulted someone's fair lady, or was refusing to pay a gambling debt, or had stolen someone's horse. It did not take Morgan long to tire of this. He was a warrior, not a nursemaid. He was trained to defend the king in battle. True, there had been little need of that during the old king's reign, but he had better things to do than clean up after the king's hangers-on. And he was well aware that Dougall took special joy in seeing him reduced to such tasks.

One day, after a long discussion with Melina, Morgan decided that he would speak to Dougall and ask to be released from his service. Morgan did not think he could honorably withdraw without breaking his oath. And it would never be wise to do his job poorly since Dougall would more likely have him beheaded than dismissed. It did trouble him that if he were no longer in the king's service, he would have no means of putting bread on the table for himself and his wife. And he would still be bound to fight for the king in times of war, but these were peaceful days, at least until Dougall's self-indulgent nature caused a quarrel with a neighboring realm.

I think I would rather beg for pennies in the street than serve in such a manner any longer, Morgan thought as he made his way to the castle that morning. He had begun to feel tainted by the king's behavior, as though

the very air he breathed in the castle was infected with the evil, cruel essence of the king's vile nature. He feared that if he stayed as the king's Companion, sooner or later, he would become like him. That was something Morgan could not bear to think about.

He took up his position beside the door to the king's bedchamber and waited. He could hear sounds of movement within, but he was not permitted to enter until called for. The door slowly opened, and a young woman peered out. She did not seem to see Morgan at first. As she closed the door behind her, she paused and then leaned back against the door. It seemed she had dressed hurriedly; Her blouse needed tucking in, her hair was loose about her shoulders, and she held her shoes in her hands. Morgan gently cleared his throat. The young woman gasped and stepped away, one hand at her throat. A flush of pink spread over her cheeks. Then she giggled. Morgan was about to speak when the young woman turned and ran down the hallway, to the stairs, and into the shadows. Morgan stood peering over the balustrade into the open courtyard, wondering who the girl was and where she had come from, when the door behind him opened again. There stood the king, still in his nightshirt.

"There you are, Morgan. It's about time you showed up. Come in here. I have need of you."

Morgan followed the king into his bedchamber. The king flopped down among his bedding and stretched out, hands behind his head.

"Go tell one of the servants I am ready for my breakfast. I worked up quite an appetite this morning," Dougall smirked.

Morgan hesitated. The sooner he spoke to the king, the sooner the issue of his service would be resolved. On the other hand, the king might be in a better mood on a full stomach.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Are you deaf as well as stupid? Go get my breakfast!”

Morgan sighed. “Yes, your Majesty.”

Once the king had broken his fast, he did, in fact, appear to be in a better mood, better than his usual foul one, that is. As his attendants dressed him, he smiled, made little remarks, and managed to refrain from striking any of them. Morgan decided that this was as good a time as any and better than most to speak his mind.

“Sire, there is a matter of great importance on which I need to speak to you.”

“And what matter is that, pray tell?”

“It concerns my service to you, m’lord.”

“Ah, so of great importance to you, but not necessarily to me, then.”

“I have given the matter a great deal of thought, Sire, and I wish to be released from your service. I ask you to dismiss me.”

The king turned to Morgan, frowning. He pushed away his attendants, who scurried to stand in the corner.

“Why, in the name of all the gods, would I do that?”

“Surely your Majesty has a man of his own to take my place. Just because I served your father, you should not be compelled to keep me on.”

A flicker of annoyance passed over Dougall’s face.

“I am not compelled by anyone or anything. I am the king, and I do what I

damn well please. And it pleases me to keep you as my Companion. Are you not the finest warrior in the realm?”

“Modesty forbids me from saying so.”

“Have you ever been bested in battle? In sword play? Have you ever been unhorsed in the jousts? No. So why should I tolerate second best when I already have the finest to protect me?”

“Your Majesty, we are at peace. Your attendants see to your every need.” Morgan took a deep breath. “The tasks you set me could be done by anyone. You have no need of me, Sire.”

“But you have sworn an oath to protect me. How can you protect me if you are not at my side? If you are not there to wipe my arse for me, I might fall and strike my head and die. Then where would the realm be, hmmm? And where would you be, having broken your oath? No, Morgan. I will never release you. In fact, I want you closer. You will move into rooms here in the castle so that you can be at my call, day and night. And I hear you have a pretty little wife. She must come with you. I am sure I can find tasks for her as well.”

Morgan cursed inwardly. The image of the young woman fleeing down the stairs came to him. He had made things worse rather than better. He looked at the king, standing there in all his finery, smiling triumphantly.

“Yes, your Majesty,” was all he could think to say.

“But I don’t want to live in the castle,” said Melina when he told her. “I love our little cottage and our garden. And what am I to do with the cat? Is she supposed to be imprisoned in the castle as well?”

“We will not be imprisoned. Rooms will be provided for us, and I’m sure they will be at least as comfortable as our cottage. And at least the roof won’t leak.”

“And what am I supposed to do all day while you are waiting on His Majesty hand and foot?”

Morgan shrugged. “I suppose you will do much as you do here. I hope. You will look after me.” Morgan took his wife in his arms and held her close.

“I am so sorry. Why did I ever think the king would be willing to lose one of his favorite playthings? When will I learn to hold my tongue?”

Melina kissed him on the cheek. “I know you meant well. It is difficult for someone as kind and honest as yourself to anticipate what a nasty beast like King Dougall would do. We shall just have to try to make the best of things.”

The next day, Morgan and Melina moved into their new home. Morgan had not expected to be given the finest rooms in the castle—those were always reserved for guests of the highest rank, which definitely did not include Morgan, as far as King Dougall was concerned. On the other hand, Morgan had not expected they would live in the three dingy, dusty, mean little rooms to which they were led.

“Oh, dear,” said Melina as they crossed the threshold. Morgan groaned. What sort of hell had he brought his wife into?

“I am so sorry, my love. You deserve so much better than this. Perhaps if you abandon me, then the king might allow you to leave and go back to our little cottage.”

“There is no chance of that,” said Melina as she began to pull down the filthy

draperies covering the tiny windows high on the walls. “You are not getting rid of me that easily. I would not be my mother’s daughter if I let a little dust and dirt frighten me off.” She peered into the darkness of the other rooms. “But we shall have to send for more of our things to make this place feel like home. Especially our bed, since there isn’t one here.”

Morgan left Melina to her tasks to return to his own duties. The king had decided to go hunting that afternoon, and as Morgan rode out with him, he could not help but feel guilty. He would be spending his time in the fresh air and sun while his wife, on her knees, scrubbed floors.

At the end of the day, he returned to find the buckets of water, the mops and rags stowed away, and the rooms clean and shining in the dim light. Melina was flushed and tired but unaccustomed to idle hands. From a deerskin bag, she produced the small harp her father had made for her and, for a time, amused them both, playing and singing some of the old songs she had learned at her father’s feet. She stopped after a time, for the music brought many memories of happier days, and they were both overcome with feelings of melancholy.

* * *

Two days passed. Dougall was in a particularly foul mood that morning, as he had been informed that his favorite horse had gone lame and could not be ridden. To vent his rage, he had ordered the farrier to be flogged. It was only because of Morgan’s

intercession that the farrier had been saved a beating. This served to worsen Dougall's mood. Not only did he not have the entertainment of a ride or even the satisfaction of seeing the farrier flogged, but now he felt as though Morgan had scored some sort of victory over him. That was unbearable.

Dougall sat at his table, glaring at his Companion. Morgan stood staring straight ahead, waiting for the next pointless, degrading task to be set for him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dougall begin to smile. Morgan knew this was not a good sign; Dougall never smiled unless he had some manner of deviltry in mind.

"Morgan," said Dougall. "It has just occurred to me that you have been remiss in your duties."

Morgan swallowed. "I beg your pardon, Sire. How have I failed you? What may I do to amend my faults?"

"Here you have been staying under my roof, eating my food, you and your young wife, and you have not even done me the courtesy of presenting her to me."

Morgan began to sweat. He had no intention of bringing Melina within a stone's throw of Dougall, not if he could help it. "I did not wish to presume, m'lord," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"One of the servants heard her singing and playing the other day. He said she has a sweet voice and plays as well as any troubadour. Since I am not to ride today, have her come to my chambers to sing for me. I should very much like to meet her, in any case."

Morgan felt flashes of panic beginning, and his bowels began to churn. "I am not

sure she is well today, Sire. She looked quite pale this morning."

"Oh, as pale as you are now? Perhaps I should have my physician examine her? No? You are a persuasive man, Morgan. You managed to save the farrier from a flogging—I am sure you can persuade your wife to come to see her king and yours. Go fetch her. Now."

"Yes, your Majesty."

Morgan and Melina climbed the steps to the king's private chambers. They spoke not a word to one another. They had already had words when Morgan had relayed the king's command.

Just before they reached the door to the king's chambers, Melina stopped and grasped Morgan's arm.

"I don't want to do this. Morgan, I am afraid. What if he doesn't like the songs I sing? What if he doesn't care for my voice? I am so nervous I shall probably forget the words, or the tunes, or sound like a crow with a sore throat. Morgan, I don't want to end up in the dungeon. Or worse. Please, let me go back to our rooms?"

Morgan looked up and down the hallway to make sure they were alone, then leaned forward and kissed Melina.

"You sing like an angel, my love, and you have sung those songs since you learned to talk. The king cannot help but be soothed by you. Do not be afraid. I shall be there at your side to cheer you on."

Melina looked unconvinced, but followed Morgan over the threshold. As the king turned towards her, she dropped into a curtsy and waited for permission to rise. Morgan cleared his throat.

“Your Majesty, I humbly request to present to you my wife, Melina.”

“So, this is your lady. Yes, I can see why you might wish to keep her to yourself. Rise, my dear. Let me have a good look at you.”

Melina rose so unsteadily that Morgan reached out to take her arm. He did not let go.

“And I see you have brought your harp. Excellent! I was hoping I could wrest a song or two from those lovely lips of yours. Thank you, Morgan. You may go now.”

Morgan felt as though he had been kicked in the stomach. He looked at Melina, who was staring back at him, her eyes like the full moon.

“Your Majesty...?” Morgan stammered. “I would like to stay.”

“And I would like you to leave. I don’t need you here. Your wife is hardly going to attack me... Are you, my dear?” Dougall turned and smiled at Melina, exactly the way a fox would smile at a plump chicken. Melina, wordless, shook her head.

“Oh, no...” she said, at last.

“You see? This will give me a wonderful opportunity to get to know Melina better. And it is so important that I get to know the members of my household. Intimately.”

Morgan stood frozen, staring first at Melina, then at Dougall.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Go!” There was a steely edge in Dougall’s voice as his always limited patience ebbed even further.

“As you wish, m’lord.” Morgan glanced at Melina, who stood cradling her harp in its bag. Biting his lip, he turned abruptly. He had barely crossed the threshold when the

door slammed closed behind him. He stood there, confused, anxious, and angry.

He may send me from the room, but he cannot force me from the door. Morgan took his stance in the doorway and stood like a statue, listening intently for any sound coming from the room. After a little while, he heard the strains of Melina’s harp, and softly, through the thick oak of the door, her soft, sweet voice singing a ballad of two lovers who died in one another’s arms.

Morgan leaned back against the door, lulled by the sound of his wife’s voice. His thoughts wandered to happier times when he and Melina were first wed, and the only cloud on their horizon was that they could not spend every waking moment in each other’s company.

Morgan came to himself with a start when he realized that he could hear no music. There was no sound at all. He pressed his ear to the door. He heard a low murmur that seemed to be Dougall’s voice, but he could not make out the words. Then he heard what sounded like a whimper from Melina. Without thinking, Morgan opened the door and stepped over the threshold. At first, he could not see either Dougall or Melina. A movement caught his eye, and he turned. There in the corner of the room was Dougall. Just beyond him, standing with her back pressed against the wall, was Melina. Her eyes were like those of a rabbit in a snare; He had never seen her look so pale. Dougall looked back over his shoulder, scowling, angry.

“Did you call me, your Majesty?” Morgan asked, fighting to keep his voice level, his knuckles whitening on the hilt of his sword.

“No. Now get out!” Dougall snarled.

Morgan was at a loss. He could hardly say he had burst in unannounced to protect Melina from whatever Dougall was about. He swallowed hard.

“I do beg your pardon, Sire. I was sure I heard my name.”

Dougall turned and stepped towards Morgan, his hand reaching for the blade at his hip. Melina slipped from behind him. She retrieved her harp from the floor where it had fallen and clutched it in her arms like a shield. Morgan stood, uncertain. If Dougall drew his blade, could Morgan defend himself and his wife against his king and master?

Morgan heard footsteps behind him. One of Dougall’s attendants pushed past into the room.

“I bring you good news, your Majesty,” the attendant began. The tension in the room washed over him, and he began to babble. “I am sorry to interrupt. I...I thought you would want to know. The farrier has seen to your horse. He is quite fit now. I can have him saddled for you. If you wish to ride out, I mean. I...uh...What is your wish, your Majesty?”

Dougall’s hand slid from the haft of his dagger. He looked from Melina to Morgan to the attendant. His shoulders dropped and his back straightened, but his scowl remained.

“Yes,” he said. “That would please me.” As he stepped past Melina, he paused.

“Thank you, my dear. That was quite enjoyable. I shall send for you again when we shall have more time together. Undisturbed.” He passed Morgan and held his eye for a long moment. “And you... I shall excuse your intrusion this time, but if

you ever again dare to enter my chambers unbidden, I shall have your head.”

Dougall swept past and strode down the hall, the attendant scurrying after him.

“Are you all right?” Morgan watched Melina carefully place her harp in the deerskin bag.

“Yes,” she said. “Just. If you had entered any later, I doubt my answer would be the same.”

“Do you think Dougall would have harmed you? Surely not with me standing outside the door!”

Melina turned and stared, open-mouthed, at her husband. “Morgan, I love you, but if you truly believe that, then I have married a fool. Dougall said things to me that no decent woman should have to hear. He laid hands on me in a manner that made his intentions quite obvious. If you had waited any longer...” She shuddered. “I don’t wish to even think about it. Why did you wait so long?”

Morgan felt the blood rush to his cheeks. “I could hear very little beyond the door. And Dougall is the king whom I have sworn to protect.”

“Against your wife? Granted, if he had touched me again as he did, I would have resisted. What would you have done? Run me through with your sword?”

“Of course not. But I have sworn an oath...”

Melina pushed Morgan aside and stepped into the hallway.

“Sometimes I think you love your oath more than you love me.” And these were the last words she spoke to him for two days.

Dougall was clearly angry, as well. If Morgan could not tell from Dougall's harsh words and insults, certainly the tasks set for him conveyed the message. The following day as Morgan sat in the hot, airless smithy, sharpening Dougall's swords, daggers, and other weapons, he looked up to see Randall, the Companion of Prince Callum, the king's younger brother, watching him.

Morgan knew Randall well. They had trained together, fought together, and, more or less, grown up together. It was well-known that the only man in the realm that could best Randall at any military art was Morgan himself.

Randall came to stand beside Morgan, then pulled up a stool.

"I'd heard you had been banished to the smithy. You must really have pissed Dougall off for him to set this task for you. I hear from the servants you well-nigh had to pull him off your wife. What is the matter with you, man? Why do you stand for it? Why haven't you already slid a dagger between his ribs and put us all out of our misery?"

Morgan stared at Randall. "Lower your voice, you fool. There are ears everywhere, and what you are suggesting is treason."

Randall gave a bitter laugh. "You have no idea, do you, Morgan? You are the most loyal man in the kingdom. A worthy achievement, were it not for the fact that you have almost no competition. Perhaps it has escaped your notice, but Dougall is reviled everywhere in the realm, save only by yourself. He is hated by the people and feared by his attendants and soldiers. He is

hated and feared by his younger brother. You are the only man who stands for him. If you took him on, no one would come to his aid." Randall leaned forward, locking eyes with Morgan. "In fact, we would all cheer you on."

"Aye," said Morgan. "And then you could all cheer me on as I was led to the gallows. Thank you, but no."

Morgan tested the blade of the dagger he had been sharpening, running his thumb along the edge. He stared at it for a long moment, his knuckles white against the haft. He slipped it into its sheath and picked up an axe at his feet.

"If, as you say, the king is so detested, why have the people not rebelled against him? He is the king, but he is only one man. There are more common folk than there are king's men."

Randall shook his head. "You know well the common folk are not fighters. They are afraid of the king's men and afraid of what they will do to them if they rebel. And most of the king's men are afraid of the king for the same reason."

"Then why come to me?"

"Because you are closer to the king than any of the rest of us. You have the best opportunity to slit his throat as he sleeps, poison his drink, or do whatever seems best and quickest to rid us of him."

"You know I cannot. I have sworn an oath to protect him. And if I am the only hindrance and there are so many of you who oppose the king, why do you not all overpower me and gain your end that way?"

Randall sighed. "No one holds any ill will toward you. You are admired and held up as an example of a good man. Not to mention

that you have already trounced all the armed men in the realm at least once, including me. Even the best of the king's men stand in awe of you."

"But if you all came at me at once..."

"Where's the honor in that? You would fight to the death. Perhaps with so many against you, we could triumph, but no one wants the blood of a good man on his soul, even to rid ourselves of Dougall."

"Then you must be satisfied with things as they are, for I will not take up arms against the king, nor can I allow harm to come to him undefended."

Randall got to his feet and paced in frustration. "I can understand how, if you did not know the ways of the king, why you would continue to protect him. But you know who he is, what he is—a vile, twisted, evil man who takes pleasure only in the pain of others. When you swore your oath, you had no idea to what you were pledging your allegiance. Now you do, and yet you still defend him. Why?"

Morgan sat back and regarded Randall.

"When I was a wee'un, my family had nothing: No money, no land, no real belongings. My parents were serfs. We survived only through the goodwill of our master. Most of my life, I have had nothing more. Nothing, save my honor. My word. I don't have a great deal more than that now, but I do have that. I cannot give up the only thing of value I possess. I know Dougall is not half the man his father was. Do you honestly think I take any pleasure in what I do? Do you think I don't have dreams in which I run Dougall through, behead him, or chop him into tiny pieces and feed him to the dogs? Or, because of Melina, cut off his

balls and hang him naked in the square? Some days, those thoughts are the only things that keep me sane. And then there is my oath. I cannot give that up. I will not."

Randall shook his head and studied Morgan.

"So much of my life, I have envied you. I wouldn't be in your position now, for all the tea in the East. I pity you. But if you change your mind..." He clapped Morgan on the back. And then he was gone.

That night, as Morgan returned to his rooms, he felt more weary than he had ever felt before. He sat, slumped, at the table while Melina prepared their food. As she sat across from him, he lifted his head.

"I know I've been a poor husband to you. I am sorry you have not been able to depend on me. What good am I? What is the value of my strength, my skills, if I cannot even defend the honor of my wife and keep her person from harm? I am useless. The only thing that is keeping me from falling on my own sword is the thought that as pathetic as I am, if I were not here, you would be in even a sorrier state."

Melina put down her knife and fork and looked steadily at Morgan.

"Then what are you going to do about it? Morgan, I have always thought of you as a good man, and I know sometimes good men find it hard to recognize that not all are like them. But even a blind man can see that King Dougall is a monster. He does vile, horrid things to undeserving people for his own twisted pleasure. And you allow it. Is that what a good man would do? I know you have sworn to protect him. I know your loyalty is important to you, but if you are loyal to an evil, vicious man, then what is

your loyalty worth? The next time he calls for me to attend him, I have no doubt that I will not escape with my honor intact. And if the stories the housemaids tell are true, perhaps not even with my life.”

Morgan pushed away from the table and got to his feet.

“No,” he said. “That I will not allow.”

“Then, if you love the memory of the old king, Morgan, if you love me and truly meant the vows you made to me on the day we were wed, you have to do something. You have to decide if you are a loyal man or if you are a good man.”

Morgan reached out and took Melina’s hand, and told her what he and Randall had discussed. From time to time, Melina asked questions, nodding thoughtfully at the answers. Then the two of them sat silent.

“I understand your heart better now,” Melina said finally. “You truly are betwixt and between. But an idea has come to me that perhaps allows you to keep your oath after all.”

“Tell me!” Morgan’s voice cracked with desperation.

And so she did.

* * *

The following morning, Melina received a summons from the king to attend to him that night.

“Have you changed your mind?” Melina asked Morgan as he held her close.

“Nothing has changed. I gave you my word to do what we discussed. I will speak

to Randall on this day. You shall not entertain the king this or any other night.”

Melina nodded, and her heart ached when she saw the pain and sadness on Morgan’s face.

When Morgan attended King Dougall that morning to receive his orders for the day, it was with distaste bordering on sickness that he stood before him.

King Dougall was in high spirits, which bode ill for someone or another. Morgan was determined that it not be Melina, no matter what it meant for himself or anyone else.

“I have a full day ahead of me,” Dougall said with something like happiness in his voice. “And a very busy night. I will be receiving an envoy from the Lower Reaches. Lord Tobias is a timid little mouse of a man, so tormenting him is sure to be amusing. Then I must prepare for the banquet tonight. Make sure your uniform is clean and brushed. I won’t have you standing at my elbow looking like some street ruffian. After the banquet, if all goes well, I shall be entertaining the envoy’s daughter in my chamber, so I want you to make yourself scarce. Then, of course, your lovely wife, Melina, will be entertaining me. Make sure she is here as arranged, but not too early. I don’t want my time with the envoy’s daughter to be interrupted.”

Morgan wasn’t sure which he desired most at that moment—to strike Dougall where he sat or to vomit up his breakfast. He bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood.

“As you wish, your Majesty,” he muttered between clenched teeth.

Dougall peered up at Morgan. He frowned.

“Do I detect a note of disapproval in your tone? Do you dare to presume to pass judgment on your king?”

“No, your Majesty. I would never be so bold or so misguided. I only wished that I could be more certain of the timing. I should be mortified if I, that is, if Melina should arrive too soon.”

Dougall stared at Morgan, his fingers tapping a rapid rhythm on the table. He stopped. He smiled at Morgan, and his eyes narrowed to slits.

“I see. Well then, I cannot have you taxing your poor wits about such a thing. Bring Melina to me after twelve bells. If the young lady is still in attendance, Melina can join us. I am sure the three of us would find some means of amusing ourselves.”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

“In the meantime, take my boots to the bootblack. Tell him they must shine like the sun. And I need them back before noon.”

“Yes, m’lord.”

Morgan’s day was filled with many such mindless errands and tasks. For once, he was grateful. His thoughts were only of Melina and what was to come that night. He was not looking forward with joy to any of it, not the reception of the envoy, not the banquet, and certainly not what was to follow. But because he was the king’s man, he had to bear all of it with, if not grace, then at least with stoicism. So he did. Even Dougall remarked in his stone-faced manner and rigid posture.

“Morgan, cheer up. You’re casting such a pall of gloom over the proceedings that it feels like a wake rather than a celebration.”

“I shall endeavor to do so, m’lord.” Morgan’s expression did not change.

“Ye gods, man. I cannot stand to look at you. Go! Go to your wife and tell her to wear her prettiest gown tonight.” Dougall turned and whispered to his attendant. “Not that she’ll be wearing it for very long.”

Morgan heard the snicker of the attendant as he bowed to the king and made his way out of the banquet hall. He saved his muttered curses until the doors closed behind him.

It was nearly midnight when Morgan and Melina, instead of making their way to the king’s chambers, descended the stairs and left the castle. Once outside, they crossed the courtyard quickly, furtively, like thieves bent on some dark mission. As they passed beneath the portcullis, Morgan nodded to the guards, who stood watch. One of them whispered: “Godspeed, Morgan.”

It was a clear night, and the moon was nearly full. Morgan and Melina stood at the edge of the drawbridge, listening. A questing owl passed almost silently overhead. Morgan watched as it floated over the long grass at the far end of the drawbridge. The air about them was so still, so quiet that even the tiny shriek of the owl’s prey reached them over the water.

“There!” Melina grasped Morgan’s arm and pointed. The glitter of moonlight on blades and shields warned of the approach.

Morgan stepped onto the drawbridge and peered into the darkness. On the far side of the moat, a group of men appeared out of the shadows. The two men in the lead stopped in a pool of moonlight—Randall and the king’s younger brother, Prince Callum.

Melina took a step towards the slope that led down to the waters of the moat. Morgan

did not move. She tugged at his arm. Lost in thought, he flinched at her touch.

“Morgan, my love, you agreed this is the only way.”

“Of course, you are right. I value my oath, but I cherish you more. Forgive me for ever letting you doubt that. Now, let me go first.”

Morgan made his way down the slope, holding tightly to Melina’s hand. When he reached the bank of the moat, he took his place directly beneath the drawbridge, Melina at his side. As Melina placed her arms about him and held him close, she could hear his heart pounding, almost drowning out the sound of the soldiers walking on the wooden planks overhead.

As Randall, Prince Callum, and his men burst into the king’s bedchamber, they were greeted with the sight of Dougall and the daughter of the envoy struggling at the side of the bed. As Dougall turned to face the intruders, he loosened his grip on the girl. She broke free of his clutches and ran to take refuge behind Randall.

Dougall, his face a livid crimson, strode towards his younger brother.

“What do you mean by presuming so? I shall have your head for this.” He glanced at the guards gathered behind Callum.

“Take him!” Dougall shouted.

Not a man moved.

“What? Are you all deaf? I order you...”

“Hold your tongue, Dougall,” said Callum. “We have no need of your words.” He slowly drew his sword.

“You have only two choices, brother,” Callum said. “Either I skewer you in your nightshirt, or you dress yourself and let me take your head off like a gentleman. You

don’t deserve to have a choice, but you are my brother, after all.”

Dougall’s eyes darted from Callum’s grim face to his blade near the door.

“Where is that fool, Morgan? Where is he when I finally have need of him?”

Callum laughed. “He is where he should be, comforting his loving wife, celebrating what a narrow escape she had from your vile designs.”

“But he swore to protect me!”

There was a stir in the hallway. Morgan suddenly appeared in the doorway, pushing past the guards and coming to stand before the king.

“I swore that no one should harm a hair on your head, save that they walk over me. And that is exactly how these men entered the castle—over my body.”

Callum turned a brilliant smile to his brother. “Morgan has kept his oath and has been released. And now you shall die.”

Dougall scrambled back to his bed and retrieved the sword he kept beneath his pillow. Raising it over his head, he turned towards his younger brother, who came at him with his blade. For all Dougall’s faults, he was a capable swordsman and a skillful fighter. He dodged Callum’s sword and brought down the hilt of his own on Callum’s head. As his brother tumbled to the floor, Dougall raised his blade for a killing blow. The blow never landed, and Dougall found himself sprawled at Callum’s side. Standing over him was Morgan, his own broadsword in his hand.

“What, in the name of all the gods and goddesses, do you think you are doing? How dare you assault your king!” Dougall spat out the words. “Guards!” he shouted again at

the armed men who were now filling his chambers. "I command you to take him to the dungeon and put him in irons." Again, not a sword was raised.

"These are Prince Callum's men," said Morgan. "They will not take orders from such as you."

Dougall's face began to pale, and he attempted to rise, only to be pressed again to the floor by Morgan's foot.

"I will not take orders from you, either. Not any longer."

For a moment, Dougall lay still, gazing up at Morgan in astonishment.

"But you swore to protect me. You swore an oath to my father!"

"Aye," said Morgan. "And I kept it. May the gods and the old king forgive me for being such a fool. Hear me, Dougall. When I was a boy, my father gave me a puppy that I loved like a brother. I cared for it, fed it, trained it, and even slept with it. But on the day it sickened and went mad, I killed it because it was a danger to all. You, sir, are worse than a mad dog. I should have done this long ago."

Morgan brought down his blade and with one stroke, took off Dougall's head. So ended the unhappy reign of King Dougall, first of his name.

There were few in the realm who grieved the death of Dougall. His funeral was held with little pomp and great speed. The handful of mourners who did attend seemed more interested in making sure he was actually dead than in lamenting his passing. As Morgan stood at the graveside, he knew he did not grieve Dougall's death, but only the manner of it.

As Morgan and Melina began to return their belongings to their little cottage, he said as much to her.

"You have no reason to mourn, either," Melina said. "Dougall was an evil man and a horrid king. You did well to help Callum to the throne. And you kept your oath to the very last."

"I kept to the words but not to the spirit. I failed my oath. I failed the old king. I suppose it is only fitting that I be the one to slay Dougall, as it was my fault that we all suffered as long as we did. My loyalty was wasted on an undeserving beast. Callum asked me if I would be his chief of the guards, but I told him I was not fit to serve any longer. I have left the king's service and am now a humble subject, like everyone else."

Melina put her arms around Morgan and hugged him tightly.

"In the end, you had to choose," she said. "You could protect your honor and an evil man or protect the kingdom. And your wife. You chose what a good man would choose."

Morgan shook his head. "I don't feel like a good man. I was loyal to one who did not deserve my loyalty and belatedly loyal to one who did. To you, my love, my loyal wife. From this day on, I will do my best to be a proper husband. You deserve better than I, but you agreed to marry me, so this is your lot in life."

Melina smiled and kissed Morgan. "I could ask for nothing more."

In time, Morgan came to be known as Morgan the farmer, Morgan the strong, and even Morgan, the husband of Melina, who played the harp so beautifully.

One day while he was working in the field, a traveler stopped on the road and asked for water. Morgan passed him his waterskin, and the traveler drank gratefully. As he wiped his lips, the traveler studied Morgan.

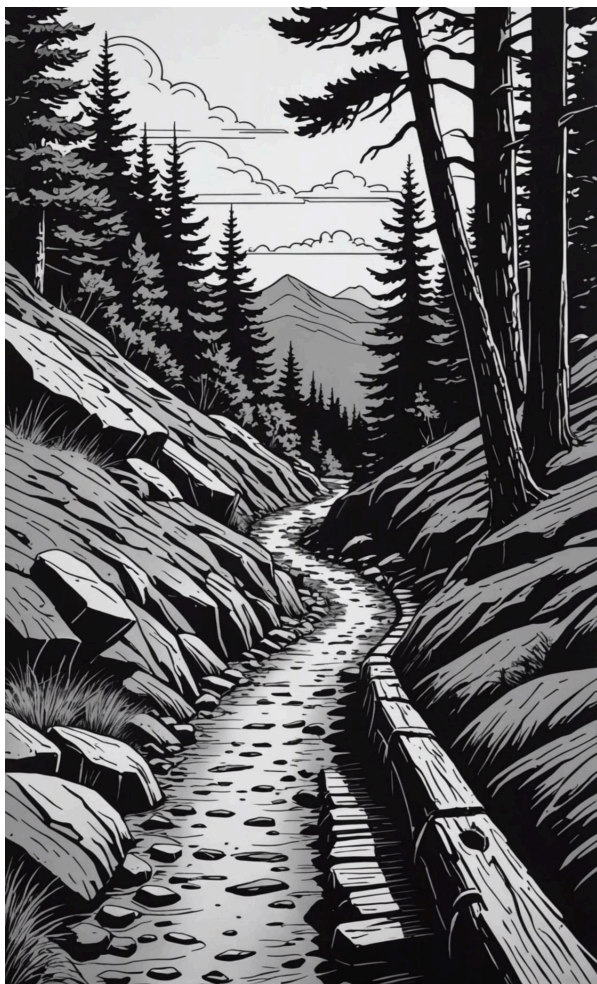
“Are you not Morgan, the Oath-keeper?”

“No,” said Morgan. “That man is dead. He died alongside King Dougall.”

The traveler shook his head. “I have heard otherwise.”

Morgan sighed. “Here, sit yourself down and rest in this shade. I’ll tell you a story about the dangers of being a loyal man...”

The End.



The Bed of Penitence

By André Medeiros

In any battlefield, money-loving mercenaries outnumber faithful soldiers and noble knights at least five to one. The reason is simple: although heroes are the subject of ballads and legends, one of my kin, such as a *condottiero* of the pure Venetian tradition, hardly feels the compulsion to die a hero's death. Although courting death is our way of life, none of us is anxious for such final rendezvous. As a rule, we leave the acts of selfless sacrifice to the honorable fighters.

I myself had lived until my thirtieth birthday at the time of the story I'm about to tell you. It's an impressive age for a mercenary, although I have met a few who kept even longer records before they laid their swords to rest and rust in some room on the farmhouses they had bought out of their blood and sweat, retiring just as I did. Michalletto Attendolo lived to be seventy, and had been defeated several times before being forcefully retired. Maybe you should try counting on your fingers how many heroes of legends and patriots did the same. I am sure there will be plenty of fingers left once you are done.

This story is not about how different humans seem to be built from dissimilar material, even though that was the impression I gave you. Actually, I am about to tell you how a *condottiero*, who is supposed to love money over everything else, can also sometimes display the regular array of human feelings against his better judgment.

Once my emotions suppressed my reason. Contrary to all Machiavelli's advice, I had

left alive an enemy who would seek revenge. For all I know, she might still be planning something against me, no matter how many years have passed since then.

* * *

Some have said I, Maricuse of Naples, am a coward. I would rather consider myself a realist. There is no better place to be a realist than an inn. I was then at Smolensk's Inn, drinking with a friend. We were part of the forces serving under the voyevoda Mikhail Borisovich, defending the city against King Sigismund the Third, the King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. It was the second year of siege.

"Mikhail's witch says we shall survive the siege," my companion, Alexsei, said.

It was well-known that, in his despair, the voyevoda started consorting with a strange sort of fellows, among them the said woman. According to rumors, the woman was a Gypsy clairvoyant, untrustworthy; Others said she was a Sammi wise woman who was kidnapped from her people when she was a child... There were even those who believed she was Zhiva, a pagan goddess, coming from the dark past of Russia to protect her native land.

"According to her, new Russian forces are gathering and soon they will sweep the Poles and the Swedes from our doorstep," he continued, roaring in empty bravado. He was tall, powerful and hairy; more a bear than a man, so people had nick-named him Alexsei the Bear. If all men on our side were like him, we would have expelled the invading

forces in the first week, smashing their skulls under our feet like the dry leaves of Autumn.

He drank deeply from his cup, as if he hoped to get drunk enough to fully believe his own words. The beer bore a resemblance to what it had tasted before. It had been diluted in water probably a thousand times since the siege had started. We had to drink a thousand cups before it started to have any effect.

He was a good man, but he was a Russian soldier fighting a war in Russia, for a Tsar he truly believed in. Once I had made the mistake of calling Dmitry II *Tushinskya Vor*, a popular name given to him, but which meant *Criminal* or *Rebel* of Tushino. Since I am as ignorant of the Russian language as it is possible for someone working under Russian command, I thought the epithet was something to be proud of, but Alexei knocked three teeth out of my mouth until I had learned my mistake.

As a rule, I never fight wars on a territory I happen to care about, even a little, and never believe in anything I'm fighting for. My own native Naples still struggles under Spanish rule and, even though I have heard about a revolution brewing to release it, I have no interest in joining it.

"I have always taken you for a rigorous Orthodox, my friend," I replied. "I could not imagine the words of a witch would have so much weight on your heart."

"I'm Russian, first and foremost." He struck his chest, like a barbarian standing at the gates of decaying Rome or a Rus striking his sword against his shield when going a-viking. "I believe in the Orthodox Church because it is a *Russian* church. The problem

with you Catholics is that you believe in God, then, sometimes, you believe in your country. You're not very different from the Jews."

"I would rather say I believe in money first, but you are right. The native soil weighs little on our soul. The Protestants are even worse, I have heard. It is said they can kill their own family members for their church and I am inclined to believe it, since I would do the same for money."

"That is the problem with all of you!" People around the inn looked worried while the man roared like a challenging beast. Alexsei got too emotional when he drank and he had broken more than a few tables and chairs, besides a few noses, during his outbursts. "There's no problem to kill a Russian man for Russia or for Russian money, but once you start killing a Russian for foreign money or for another country, then you might as well be dead!"

"If you say so," I replied, trying to pacify him.

"And I'll tell you more! God's only of any use if he is Russian! I would rather have a Russian witch and a Russian whore at my side than a thousand foreign angels! If God is *not* Russian, then we have a thousand demons to serve us in His place!"

I humored him, accompanying him in his blasphemous toast, but I had other thoughts in mind. Like a rat who knows the ship is about to sink, I knew I would have to try my luck against uncharted waters sooner than later.

The city, back then, was protected by a few native soldiers, most of them untrained volunteers. Mercenaries outnumbered them. They were like myself: They would not fight

to the bitter end even for their own homes and would prefer to pillage the city themselves, as soon as the gates had been opened by some traitor on the inside, which they were bound to be.

There was a large population of wretches of no consequence, cut off from any supplies, starving to death at every street corner. Only a few rich merchants had enough to bribe an enemy soldier into allowing a few suppliers to enter the dying city, but even those could not escape the Plague. Most of the Russian garrison had actually died from the Plague, before the enemy blades or bullets had any chance. It really seemed like God would not suffer Smolensk to live.

I left my companion drinking himself to his hopeful stupor, in which he dreamed the Pole King's head was between his jaws, and returned to my room.

I rented the most expensive room I could afford. A luxurious inn in Russia is not the same as one in France or Spain, but I ended up spending almost a lifetime of savings. There was plenty left, though. I had then purchased a company to make the waiting feel more bearable. Many of those who survive battles succumb in the long pauses between one and the other. Although I enjoyed spending time with my fellow soldiers, wrestling, gambling and drinking, I have learned female company is the best in any given situation.

* * *

When I first arrived at the inn, back when

the Siege of Smolensk first started, no one could imagine the city would become ruins and memories two years from then. I remembered how incense imported from exotic Eastern lands filled the place with the most wonderful perfume and was enough to cover the stench of fear. If one cared to listen, like a rumor on the wind, there was already a certain melancholy on Smolensk, a certain despair. People were trying to put their minds into more profitable business than self-pity, and I congratulated them for that.

Soldiers drank and enjoyed the expertise of musicians of rare skill, before selecting a female companion for the evening. In the depths of their hearts, I think most men already knew they had little time left. That being said, there was little reason to hold back at any impulse which happened to seize them.

The ladies sat at their tables, looking uninterested and rather bored. At the same time, they studied what their probable patrons had to offer. More than one had already identified me as the most desirable client, but I did not have eyes for them, after I saw her, the special woman most of my story concerns. She was the most beautiful, and I was among the richest, so she accepted, once I invited her to my room.

"I'd rather you did not learn my name and I yours," she said, once I asked her name.

"Why this?" I asked, undressing her.

"What is in a name, if we are never to see each other again?" She started undressing me, too.

"Maybe we will," I argued, but I had no real conviction. I had learned it is better to not think about the future. When it comes, it

comes. Nothing you had planned or dreamed about before really matters, once the future is before you.

"You are lonely and probably about to die," she replied. "Either way, we will never see each other again, once your life or your loneliness are over." She laughed and, even when I knew she was mocking me, it was the sweetest sound I could hear. "No offense, but I imagine the first will end, rather than the later. I am always up for a safe bet."

"No offense taken. But I will not feel lonely when I die: a lot of my enemies will be dead by my side. I guess the safest bet is that both will end at the same time."

"You are confident in your abilities, I see."

"One hardly gets at my age without some expertise."

"Not too old, though," she replied, studying me.

I nodded. Maybe I was not the most handsome man, but I had some handsomeness left in me and the money to compensate for what I lacked.

"And do you have any other talents?" she asked, after studying me for a while.

She looked at me in a way that dared me to show her how a lifetime meeting different women in different parts of the world had taught me a trick or two. I like to think my abilities had not disappointed her. People are seldom sincere when you are a professional killer, though. She came to me because of my money, but I suspect she stayed out of true consideration.

Whatever I thought or talked about when I was away, once I returned to my room, we had something resembling domestic peace. The threat of the enemy army outside the

city walls never escaped my mind, but I think I managed to enjoy what I had while it lasted.

She waited for me when I came back from the common room and had that tragic conversation with Alexsei. Looking back, I consider she also knew it would be our last time together. After we made love, she slept as an infant. She looked like a dark angel, for her beautiful and long black hair seemed as plumes of darkness against her white back.

My room was on the second floor of the inn. Through its windows, I could see the city as the sleeping shadows of manors, palaces, and houses under moonlight, for the night sky was clear. It had been a pleasant summer when one ignored the threat of death. It was not even like I was in Russia most of the time. I could come to care about that city and, if not for all its people, at least for Alexsei and the nameless woman. Which meant I could not fight for them, according to my own rules.

Although the enemy army was outside, the war entered Smolensk most of the evenings. Bodies got piled beside the great church of the city and burned, trying to stop the Plague from spreading. Sometimes there was turmoil caused by miserable crowds of the underprivileged, revolting, wanting to surrender, and to be spared.

That night, though, it seemed as if time itself had come to a halt. Silence does *not* suit a city Smolensk's size. It seemed things could go smoothly for a longer while, but I had learned time and again it is dangerous to be entertained by such thoughts. All the calm was nothing but the prelude to a storm, which would come at the break of dawn and

leave nothing standing.

I could have stayed either way. I had survived the aftermath of many sieges before. Not without my own scars, but nothing that had been particularly bad.

Once the pillaging starts, most of the soldiers care more about what treasure they can put their hands on than wasting their time killing some miserable bastard. But I also had never fought for the losing side of a war which had shaken the land to such a degree. Alexsei taught me there was a certain brutal passion at the heart of those Slavic types and it seemed to grow worse when they fought one another. For all Alexsei's talk of kinship between the people, it seemed they could not possibly hate anyone more than their own neighbors, be that a Russian, a Pole, or a Turk.

There had been two years, and the city had stood cleansing the walls with the blood of its daring invaders many times. I suspected the winning side would demand vengeance like I had never seen before, cutting down every woman, child and man they could find, only because they had lived a miserable life for so long and now wanted the world to pay the price... One must always expect the unexpected.

I decided Smolensk was not worth the probable sacrifice of my life. There was little there worth saving. As I had done many times before, I decided to do what would give me a chance to live another day. If it was not clear enough at this point of my story, I am not a hero. Even if I did not have any reason to keep living, I had always valued my skin as my most prized possession.

There were flowers on a jar by the bed. I

took one and left it beside her while I got up. She seemed about to wake up. If she had done so, I would have taken her with me. However, I barely knew how to take care of myself, after a long time having only me to rely on. It would mean death for the two of us if spotted by our allies, abandoning the city or by enemies while trying to escape through their siege.

I was almost certain two people could not make it. I thought Fate would be gentler to her if I did not interfere. A woman like her could find someone else to look after her, a man that would effortlessly be worthier than I could ever be.

* * *

I had run away many times before. I had learned there was only one who could accompany me, while I sneaked away, covered by shadows. I came to the stables to recover the only friend who accompanied me while I saved myself.

The strangest horse I had ever come across. Judging solely by his appearance, one could never imagine what the animal had meant to me. Still today, people would never believe what he was capable of. I had taken him from an enemy soldier, once a band of Winged Hussars had tried to enter the city through a breach in the outer wall, back when the war started. He seemed to not mind fighting for one side or the other, as long as the fight was what he considered *honorable*.

He was awake, and he looked at me eagerly. He had seen little action in the last

two years and it was never happier than when it rode against the tides of war.

He looked around to see if there was anyone there with me. Then, certain there was no reason to disguise himself any longer, he spoke:

“Is the enemy coming?”

Every time I visited him, there was always the same question. I had always thought an animal which grazes for a living would have a more specific disposition, but not even life as a herbivore can affect the warmongering spirit from ancient times.

“No, my friend,” I replied. “I am afraid to say the only action we shall see tonight shall be of a less violent kind.”

“You are running away, then, aren’t you?” he asked. I could hear the disappointment in his equine voice.

The horse happened to be a vessel from the spirit of Marcus Aecius, a fallen Roman legionary who was cursed by Epona, an old and forgotten Etruscan goddess, to reincarnate as a newborn foal every time he died or was killed.

Of course, I did not have much reason to believe him when he said it, but the other plausible explanation was that I had gone insane. I pride myself as a rational man and I would rather disconsider the possibility of insanity whenever there is a better option.

Like the Smolesk’s Russians with their witch counseling the voyevoda, desperate times had made me see any situation with an open mind. I had never engaged with the supernatural before, but I had always been aware that most of what the common people believe in, be it ghosts, demons or the like, cannot fully be discredited.

I also knew it could not be a

hallucination, for, if I were to have a dream, the horse would not be so disagreeable. I have discussed with him a few times my personal philosophy of survival. He used to discourse about how he had fought against the odds many times for noble causes and how a man's worth was defined by it, etc. His current state as a farm animal, however, seemed to me the most eloquent argument against his own points. I had done some questionable things, but no deity had ever bothered to curse me yet.

"Do not look at me like that," I replied. "We are just fighting for a pretender to the throne of a backwater hellhole. There is nothing noble about that."

"I suspect those who live here also just pretend to be people. Am I correct?"

I did not bother to answer him. More than anything, he loved a good argument. We could go back and forth until I had an arrow lodged on my shoulder and an enemy bullet entered my throat. I think the idea that he had an infinite parade of lives ahead of him somewhat justified him wasting mine, be it only to teach me a lesson.

* * *

I followed the quickest route to the nearest safe city. I just wanted to be the farthest I could go from the damned Eastern Europe. I did not dare to look back.

Once Marcus Aecius and I stopped for dinner, the bastard kept looking in Smolensk's direction. I knew one of his unwanted nuggets of advice was coming. My father was a merchant and, before I

deserted my household to join a group of *condottieri*, he had tried to put something else on my mind. He had hired a tutor who would often talk like the Pope appointed him. Marcus Aecius reminded me of him.

"Memory is but a prophet with eyes on his back, Maricuse," my tutor used to say. I hated how he said my name like I stood before a judge. "Are you afraid to look at what he is seeing?"

I cannot deny I felt something for the city where I had found love, brotherly and otherwise, but I could not get a conclusion out of it. After all, I knew my only ties to the war between the False Dmitry the Second and Sigismund the Third was the money the Tsar's servants had paid me to fight against the second's army. I would have never defended the city otherwise.

People die, and that is a fact one has to accept. It keeps the ghosts of remorse away. I knew my own fate could surprise me any day, and I did not have the time to think of anything else, besides my own well-being.

Many died at the end of the Siege of Smolensk and that is the only reward one has for taking any duty to the end. Alexsei would have killed the man or men going against him otherwise, so he had it coming. Only a certain woman did not deserve such a faith, if that is what she got.

I wish I had listened to my own wisdom more often. It would have saved me considerable trouble later, besides a broken arm and wounds that never truly healed.

* * *

I was still fleeing from the war. My journey brought me to a plain, filled with small little hills that made it seem like a wide green sea. It was the kind of place which makes one think there is still something in the world of beauty and peace, even when the evidence for it is lacking.

I was already thinking about what job I could find soon. Maybe my destination would be Spain or France. It is not like one who leaves to deal with death and violence will ever be idle for long periods of time.

Even though my bag was a little emptier than it should have been, I could not regret what I had spent to stay with the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Looking at the field I was crossing, I wondered if she would have enjoyed such a view. I imagined she would, but it's interesting how much of ourselves we dream of people that we will never have the chance of knowing.

The wind whistled a melody that made me feel light. It was a pleasant morning. Although I am very much a son of the Mediterranean Sea as there ever was, sometimes the Bohemian region surprised me. The sky was as infinite as the land, both merging into the embrace of lovers on the horizon. The sun burned bright, but its touch was rather pleasant, since the wind blowing was chill, bringing about the first whispers of Autumn. Yet, I did not know why I could not say to myself I was at peace.

I felt lonely. I had never stopped to consider loneliness was the only logical outcome of the life I was living, but it seemed something deep in my mind, a part of me that I was not completely aware of, knew it already. I almost wished Marcus Aecius would talk to me, so I would have

something to be angry about and lift me out of that misery.

Soon, I found myself listening to sounds that were not pleasant to my ears. Somewhere, someone was screaming. I recognized a woman's voice. Although I would be the last one to answer to a damsel in distress if there was no money involved, I let my curiosity get the better of me.

"I wonder what it may be," I said, guiding Marcus Aecius in the direction of the sound.

"Are you finally becoming the hero you could be?" Marcus Aecius asked.

"Never, horse," I replied, mockingly angry. "But I would rather know if there's something here that can be a threat to me and my faithful companion."

I rode the horse the fastest I could. Without realizing, I was very close to the outskirts of a small village. I wondered how I had come so far and should have asked myself how the sound of a woman screaming could travel so far, when there was nothing else calling my attention there.

For those who had been present at *autos de fe* in Zaragoza and Sardinia, like I have, seconds were enough to understand easily what was about to take place. I thought they were celebrating something until it became clear there was only the enjoyment some folks feel when other's lives find their end.

The villagers had raised a pole at the village's entrance, outside its small walls. They sang words I could not understand, but I suspected it was not a mass in Latin. I only realized those words were very repetitive and monotone.

I heard the woman screaming again and realized they tied her to the pole. The villagers were stoning her.

Usually, I do not interfere with executions of any kind. Someone who had grown up reading chivalric romances would say a woman is never to blame for whatever wrong befalling her. They would also say the duty of a true man is to rescue one of the fairer sex whenever the situation calls for action.

I have seen children and elders being executed in far more cruel ways, sometimes only for the crime of trying to protect their homes. More often than not, though, whomever is being executed by the authorities, or lynched by a mob, deserved it. My intention was to observe the situation unfold and only after they had all dispersed would I make my way through the village, so their violence would not find in me a scapegoat.

However, the woman I saw tied to the pole was someone I needed to save. I did not think at the moment how that could be, how a woman with no mount arrived before me at this village, having left the same city later.

I thought Fate was giving me another chance to be the hero such a woman deserved. The dark angel had been haunting my dreams with her beauty for a while, whenever I managed to get some sleep, since I had left Smolensk. If I rescued her, I would live my dreams again.

“Charge!” I yelled.

As eager for action as always, Marcus Aecius raced through the crowd. Some tried to stop us, so I unsheathed my saber and soon was slashing against nameless peasants as if they were an enemy horde. Once they seemed about to dominate me, I took my flintlock and threatened them. I can still see the anger and the fear in their eyes if I set

my mind to it. I suppose I was not different from the beautiful murals in Rome in which the Italian masters represented angels battling vulgar demons surrounding them. The only time I have been something resembling a heroic figure. Thank goodness, also the last.

After I had managed to disperse the crowd, I took the woman and then we were sharing the war horse. Some stones hit me, but I still had my armor on since I had left Smolensk, so I did not feel much of it. The woman I had rescued, on the other hand, was bleeding from a dozen different spots. Her simple cotton dress ripped open along her legs and shoulders.

As we both rode away, some villagers tried to pursue us. I feared they would attack Marcus Aecius and it would be the end of my fast and comfortable journeys, besides the only companion I had taken out of Smolensk. They did not follow us far, though. Soon the stones stopped and there was only the sound of angry shouting behind us for some time.

Once there was silence, I stopped and, looking over my shoulder, saw the angry crowd had gone. I realized I was not much sure of where I was going after it. The village had been the first sight of civilized life I had seen since I left Smolensk, if one can call anywhere east of France *civilized* or something similar.

I was about to ask the woman what she thought of it, but when I was about to talk to her, I realized she was not the one I had left behind, the woman of Smolensk. They were not even similar at all. I wondered if my fondness for a woman I would not find again had blinded me to reality and made me see

what I wanted to see.

That woman's hair was much lighter and her skin was coarse and hardened by the sun. She also had many scars, all over her body. She still had much beauty left, and I realized her dress had almost fallen when I snatched her from the pole, revealing most of her body, which was still young and beautiful.

"Thank you," she said. Her head fell against my chest, like she was a kitten looking for comfort. She was very small, although far from a child.

I was very surprised when I realized I was more shy with our current situation than the woman I have rescued. Having met many women in my journeys, I used to think I could always be certain what to say about any lady I happened to encounter. This one dazed me, though, although I had met before more beautiful women which had not affected me in such a way.

"Where do you want me to leave you?" I felt inclined to add a *lady* after the question, but I bit back my tongue. I had acted too much like a knight in shining armor already. I thought it better to not spoil what was left in me of the battle-hardened mercenary, since I suspected the damned horse would hold against me whatever kindness I showed to strangers.

To offer her anything was but another of my many mistakes. As soon as I saw she was not whom I was expecting, I should have left her there. But there was something wrong with me, although I did not notice at the time. Why should I propose to ride her to whenever she had in mind, like I was her betrothed or something? I should have known by then things were not business as usual.

But it would be hypocritical of me to say there was not much of my own volition. The stones the crowd threw at her had hurt her body, mostly visible and unprotected. It was easy to see the new wounds besides the old ones, like new flowers of suffering which sprung among their old and withered companions. Of all the flaws I know I have, pity was never an issue until that moment. And I was surprised the woman was still conscious.

"My home is not far from here," she explained. When she looked at me, her small and dark eyes had the power of an arrow to penetrate me. "I was gathering herbs when they found me. If it was not for you, I would never return to my boy."

We rode in silence for a while. I had little interest in learning more about the woman. The sooner I got her wherever she wanted to be, the sooner I would be on my way to the next battlefield and maybe to some more coins on my bag, after my unreasonable spending in Smolensk had made it lighter and the defeat of my former employees meant it would not be filled for a while.

"The boy has no one else other than me to take care of him," she continued. She had the most pitiful expression one could have. "His father had come beyond the darkness of the night and for it he returned, when he had what he was searching for in me and I what I wanted from him."

Our world is cruel to whomever has ever been born in it, but I have always been aware how much more of this weight falls over the women. If she lived alone and had a son, as she had told me, I imagined two possibilities for her livelihood: a witch or a whore. Both can attract an angry crowd

claiming for justice, depending on the context.

If I had taken her poetic description of a romantic meeting literally, I would have had my answer. It was not likely I would have thought better or worse of her either way. Although no men would admit it in all Christendom, sometimes the same lords that employed the likes of me also employed witches. I did not believe in any of it, but they were said to read the future in an animal's guts, or to prepare potions which would give the men a surge of renewed energy, after a long march. It was my opinion that belief was the most potent magic, but a magic which affected only those who had it already. Since I did not have any of it, I always thought I had no reason to be afraid.

Witches had never seemed to me more than normal women, whatever different knowledge and habits they had. That their executions attracted so much attention always, be it among Catholics or Protestants, had lessened my faith in humankind, which had been little since I remembered.

"Are you sure it is not far from here? I would hate to be out of my way for long," I said. It was not like I had much of an idea where I was going next, but I did not want to be in anyone's company for long. A talking horse was bothersome enough, even though he sometimes was entertaining.

"No," she answered. She pointed to a dense forest almost on the horizon, which I somewhat had not seen before. "It is right there, in the forest's entrance," she explained. "After we arrive there, I will give you something."

"What would it be?" I asked.

"Something you shall never forget."

Her expression suggested a kind of reward that anyone would enjoy, coming from a beautiful woman. Although I did not want to be close to people for a while, it also crossed my mind that maybe it was exactly what I needed. Maybe only a woman could heal the wound on my chest the other had done. After all, what kind of mercenary would I be if I received nothing for my services?

Marcus Aecius decided to pull his reins hard, and I almost fell. To know the animal did not morally agree with that arrangement made it even more appealing to me.

* * *

It is not difficult to recognize a witch's cabin, even for one like myself, whose only previous experience with the supernatural was a brown horse which happened to have a human soul on him. I had only heard of these kinds of places in songs and old tales told by the elderly peasant matrons selling charms to the gullible and the frightened soldiers, when they told stories around the campfire, during dark winter nights. Of course, like any Catholic, a few priests had tried to stir in me the fear of an evil lurking on every corner, but a rational education and a materialistic instinct had always brought my attention to other aspects of life.

It was like the cabin grew out of the trees. I could only perceive it was something different from a gathering of vegetables, for it had some stone in its making—a thing one could barely see, even after looking at it up

close for a long while. The door to the witch's lair seemed like a huge gap between the brown trunks, which revealed only the darkness of the forest.

"We should leave," Marcus Aecius said.

I had never heard him talk in the presence of strangers before. The woman, however, did not seem to mind the talking horse. I should have done as he said, but it seemed I was journeying through a dream and something had shackled me to a series of events I was supposed to witness and suffer. The horse also did not try to escape, so I suspected something similar was affecting him.

Moss, leaves, and bones of different sizes decorated the entrance. Some, I was certain, were human. Again, I had all the signs that I should leave, but acted against my better judgment. There was an invasive thought that told me I was not the most inclined to judge someone for killing after I had done so too many times.

"Mommy, you left me!"

I heard a strange voice coming from the house. It was enough to awake me from the stupor the witch had laid on me. I raised my blade and prepared my pistol to fight whatever was coming our way. Although the words were of a child, it was obvious the voice was from no boy. It was coarse and deep and it was clearly not human. It seemed a demon had taught an animal to speak like a human.

The creature came out of the darkness. It was slow and it protected its eyes, like it was not used to sunlight—although there was little more than the embers of the dying sun on the horizon. It walked towards us as if it had never learned to balance its massive

body. It bumped against the walls and almost trumped on its own feet.

It looked like a man not much taller than myself and I was never the tallest of the men I have known. However, its head was deformed, and it was as broad as a boar at the shoulders, chest, and hips. An old tunic, made for a much smaller man, covered it. Maybe it was something from its childhood—if it had ever had something of the like.

A strange copper hair covered his whole body. Its arms were too long for the proportion of its body, going almost to his ankle. It smiled at the sight of the woman he called mother. The teeth it had were not human, though.

"I did not leave you," she answered calmly, still on my horse.

"You did!" protested the creature, coming closer.

"I brought you company." As she talked with the monster, she put her hand inside her dress and uncovered a package, unwrapping it while she spoke. "There has been a long while since someone laid on the Bed of Penitence."

I was so focused on the creature that I did not see her turn to me until it was too late. She carried the package unwrapped in the palm of her hand. It had a dark powder, and she blew it in my face. I tried to strike her with my sword, but my limbs had become numb. My eyes closed. It did not matter how I fought to stay awake.

* * *

When I woke up, I found myself on a long table, my arms stretched above my head. A huge metal bar fastened to the table restrained my wrists and ankles.

Looking around, I saw I was in what could only be a witch's kitchen. There was a huge cauldron where water boiled at the fireplace and many herbs laid around, drying while suspended from the ceiling by strings. There were also many dead animals conserved in pots of glass. Most of those creatures I've never seen before. The ones I knew I had heard about from old legends of horror and dread.

I saw many human corpses lying around on the corners or even close to the table where I was held, as if they were leftovers from a meal. Most were old bones with little meat left rotting on them. Some had their limbs and neck or their skulls broken and fractured in ways that it reduced them to little more than shards.

Instead of yelling for the help I knew I could not find there, I stayed quiet and tried to think. When one is imprisoned, as I had been many times, to stay quiet and pray that your captors forget they have you in their power is the most sensible thing to do.

My weapon and the armor they had taken off me laid close, like they did not have any use for those things that were so precious to me.

That to be a prisoner in a witch's kitchen is very different from being a prisoner in a lord's dungeon or in the enemy camp was not something I had considered until then.

I heard footsteps approaching. I closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep. If they wanted to kill me, they would have done it while I was unconscious. Maybe if they

thought I was still under the influence of the black powder, they would leave me a little longer. Maybe it would be enough time to reflect on my current situation and plan a way out of it.

"I know you are awake," I heard the woman's voice. I tried to ignore it, but she continued: "To pretend will not help you. I can see your thoughts clearly when you try to plan."

"I gather this is the reward you had in mind for the man who just rescued you," I replied, dropping any attempt to disguise my wakefulness.

She chuckled. Even if her charm was no longer over me, the woman, revealing her evil nature, had become one of the most beautiful creatures I had ever seen. When she laughed, it was like a majestic cat playing with his prey: a wonderful creature beyond good or evil that is only taking the pleasures Nature has offered it.

"Do not try to pretend you are some kind of hero." She was then over me, caressing my face with possessiveness, but without real warmth. "I have cast the net of my power to attract one fit to rescue me. When you saw me, you thought you were rescuing someone else. A woman you have left behind, I imagine. You seem like the heartbreaker kind."

"Yes," I replied. There was no use lying, telling her I would have saved her either way when it would not change our situation. Instead, I tried to argue another point: "But I could have left you when I found you were not who I was expecting. I still rode you to your destination."

"That may be so," she said, but did not sound convinced. "However," she soon

added. "My son needs something only you can give him at the moment. If he does not have it soon, I am afraid the consequences will be terrible for him. I could have used the horse, but the curse binding the spirit to the flesh was too strong for him to be of any use. I hope you can understand. The child needs a healthy life."

I could almost understand her case. I had killed to defend my existence, and I suspected the moral calculus behind a parent doing the same for their child is not that much different. However, I would have been more sympathetic if I had not seen what kind of monster her son was, imagining what kind of man had impregnated the woman.

"I will not ask for forgiveness," she added, soon before she left me. "For I do not need yours. However, I hope you can understand your death is serving something better than yours or any man's life. My son is a gift, and as such I could not possibly attempt to have one again."

She spoke of the lovely child of her womb, and I heard its gawky stomp approaching. There was also the sound of something heavy being dragged across the floor, like the demon bastard had found a huge lump of iron for it to play like it was a wooden sword and I was his training dummy.

She turned away from me and started caressing the creature. I noticed it had in its hand something that was between a hammer and an ax, bigger than a weapon any normal man could carry, let alone rise and strike with.

"Bigger or smaller, mommy?"

The creature asked, while she petted it like it was the most faithful dog in the world.

Although I did not understand its intention, its excitement when it said those words made clear whatever was about to happen to me would not be pleasant.

"Why do you ask, my bright boy? He is obviously smaller than you," she replied, her tone expressing the most maternal patience.

"Smaller is always better, mommy."

I knew then it would be the worst.

"You have fun, my beloved." She caressed him once again and turned to me, a cruel smile on her lips. "Your mother had a very difficult day, and she needs to rest now."

She left the kitchen through an opening to a dark corridor. I almost begged for her not to leave me. I dreaded to be alone with the creature she called her son, even if her own company was not that much better.

When it got closer to me, I saw it had taken off the small tunic it wore, and that it was completely naked. Among the long hair on its chest, it had small holes that moved by themselves. They opened enough for me to see they were many mouths along its body. I imagined they were eager to chew on my flesh until I was as naked as one of those old bones lying around.

"This is the bed of penitence," it said. The longer I listened to its strange animal voice, the more abnormal it sounded in my ears. It felt the need to explain to me the rules of its twisted game: "You have to pay for the crime of being smaller than me. For that, I will make you grow taller, until we are the same."

It raised its strange weapon, the hammer part facing down. The creature raised it above its head and brought the weapon down. I thought he would smash my head

like a ripe fruit and that would be the end of my career as a survivor, but instead it hit my left arm, not far from the shoulder.

My reaction was to try to recoil from the attack, but since my wrist was trapped under the iron bar, it hurt. I tried to struggle to at least avoid the next strike, but I could not move enough.

“You must be fixed,” it said, every time it raised its weapon, like it was the only piece it could remember of a deranged prayer it had learned.

Every time the monster hit me, I could see the small mouths on its chest sucking the air in a voluptuous trance. I soon wished it had killed me. Why go to all this trouble? I wondered if I had not died while trying to escape Smolensk and it was only a Hell fitting for the likes of me.

It stopped for a while, as if it had grown tired of hitting me. I thought I could have some time to consider my next move, but suddenly there was another standing beside the monster, looking down on me, tied like a sacrificial lamb. I found myself in the depths of despair. I wondered if the witch did not have another son who had come to enjoy the game.

It was then that I realized the man besides the monster was not only normal-looking but also very handsome. He looked much like the old marble statues that had survived the Burning of Rome by Alaric and his Visigoths. A face of lost antiquity which could not be born again.

“Listen to me,” it said, and I recognized the voice, although I have never heard it coming out of a human mouth before. “The creature feeds on pain. Those mouths are not supposed to eat your flesh. At least, not at

first.”

Its tone seemed to imply I should be grateful for it, but I could not bring myself to be. I would have protested and cursed, but I was too weak to do more than babble, trying to understand why it all was happening to me.

“Demons feed on pain,” the apparition continued. “To keep a body that is a mixture of the two kinds, it has to inflict an amount of pain on a victim. Probably the stupid creature itself is not aware of it, but its witch mother knows what is necessary to keep it alive. It will only get stronger, as it feeds on your pain. You must consider a way to stop it before it is too late.”

As if it was but an image projected on a pole which had started to ripple, the presence beside the monster started to disappear, becoming a disjointed inhuman image. It was in time for the creature to start attacking again.

“Wait!” I screamed. Not only I could not endure the torture for much longer, but also because tried to keep the strange presence. I wanted to understand what it meant.

My words, however, had the fortunate side-effect of affecting the creature. It stopped with the weapon raised to attack me again. I realized that was the opportunity I needed. I did not have much time to think, but I decided to use the few things I knew about my two captors.

“Your mother goes away often, right?”

It let the weapon down while it thought. My small victory is that the monster was at least a little stupid.

The monster nodded, like he was beginning to understand. Maybe it knew it could not trust the men the witch bound to

the Bed of Penitence, but only the fact it was not attacking me at the moment seemed to be enough.

“You say that I’m wrong—”

“You need to be fixed!” the monster screamed, interrupting me and raising the weapon to strike again.

“Wait!” I could still show authority enough in my tone for it to obey me. I feared the witch would wake up and stop what I was managing to accomplish. Fortunately, she did not appear. “If I am the wrong one here, how come I was out of the house with your mother while you were here, waiting alone?”

The monster was confused again. The creature let down its weapon, facing a cruel possibility its deranged mind had never considered before. The eyes—small eyes like the witch’s, while in the rest of the body it was more similar to its father, I think—gazed at the void between it and me, unable to understand the thoughts rushing through its skull.

“If you become like me,” I started, aware it was the most critical moment of my plan, “you can go out with your mother. You will never have to wait for her here again, all by yourself. You both can walk the forest together. It would be nice, right? What do you say?”

After some consideration, the creature agreed to release me from the torture device it had put me in. The monster was clumsy, unable to use its hand for more than the blunt affair of torture.

“Slowly,” I said, when it almost broke the table laying over it. “We do not want to wake up your mother. We are going to make her a surprise.”

The creature smiled, easing itself on the table and accepting with no complaint when I restrained it. In another situation, I would have felt bad for deceiving a creature which, despite a predator, was also innocent as a child. But the pain in my left arm was enough to shut out of my mind any idea of mercy. I had been merciful before and it had cost me much already.

I understood again what the spirit had said. The creature had grown while it feasted on my pain. But, again, I was lucky. It was still only a head taller than me. To remove the excess from the neck up was a swift process.

* * *

After what I did, I fetched a torch from the fireplace and left the kitchen. I intended to search the witch’s hiding place. Unaware if the witch was still resting, as she had said to her monstrous child earlier, I also armored myself the best I could without one of my arms. I started my search with sword ready and carrying the make-shift torch in my armpit, prepared to fight the best I could for whatever new horror the woman could summon to battle me.

There were only a couple of rooms in the huge cabin. Most were filled with bones and valuables of the previous victims, left as macabre mementos of those who had not had the chance to defend themselves against the monster and its mother. I still carried the monster’s head and decided to let it lay among the other forgotten creatures.

I wondered how long the witch had been

playing her cruel game on people she came across. Sometimes I ponder if those rooms are not in an even more dreadful state, in the many years which have gone by since then.

One of the rooms still haunts me in my dreams.

At first, I thought I had found another monster while searching for a way out. I could only perceive a huge shadow leaning against a wall and two red dots staring at me. When my eyes got accustomed to the darkness, I could see clearly it was a statue and what I had seen shining were two rubies it had for eyes.

The creature represented seemed to be the bastard child of the whole creation, the kind of god a madman would be afraid to worship.

It seemed like an envious entity had taken many of God's ideas and decided to pervert them for its own ends. It had horns, which were as long as an ibex's, but followed a convoluted pattern unlike those of the simple nature. Behind it, it had a peacock's tail, bearing a thousand blind eyes. Its face was like that of a donkey, but its grim was human-like. I found the similitude of the monster I had just murdered because its arms were too long for its torso and its legs. It sat cross-legged, waiting for its mistress to come and worship it.

When I dream, it is like I am seeing the very same statue again, but it speaks to me. It says I had taken one of his children and so when I die and my soul is taken to hell, I will be like his son, but he will play with me unlike any human father should play with his child. I always wake up screaming, my heart about to burst from my chest.

* * *

Then, I did not know what would happen. I left the strange statue's room with a worse impression than I had with any other, just trying not to think about what I had just seen. I found the witch's room right after. Hers was the only one without bones or any bizarre witch memorabilia.

She still slept. I wondered how she managed to rest while I screamed, and even after her own son had done so. The bones all around the cabin were proof she was probably used to the screaming, though. I suspect she also trusted her child, capable of doing the simple job of torturing a tied man. Or maybe to be tied to a post and almost murdered by an angry crowd had been exhausting.

She laid under the pelt of a strange beast I had no doubt her beloved son had killed at her whim. Looking over her sleeping body, she was similar to many other women I had found. When a city is conquered, one sometimes finds women that way: still in bed, defenseless, while the world around them is falling apart.

One of her arms lay uncovered and I could see the horrible wounds left by the stones, although there were many older, deeper scars covering her whole body. Although she had killed many, it was more than likely many others had tried to do the same, or even worse things, to her.

My saber's tip kissed the uncovered part of her neck. She opened her eyes and the first thing she saw was the blood still dripping from my blade. I could see all her

willpower was needed to not drive herself against my blade and be united with her child in Hell.

We stayed this way in awkward silence for a while.

“I had to do it. You know I did,” I said. I never felt the need to apologize for murdering someone who would have ended me in an even more gruesome way. But I had never before looked into the eyes of a mother whose child I had just killed. “While he died, he thought he was going to be closer to you, if it is any consolation.”

“It is not,” she replied. Due to the small light of my torch, I could see tears streaming from her eyes.

She took some time to recover.

“Demons are lustful creatures,” she added. “I can also make another, a very similar one.” I could see in her voice she was saying it more to herself than to me.

“If I kill you now, it will never happen again,” I replied, as most matter-of-factly as I could sound at the moment. “In fact, I am well inclined to do it.”

“May I ask you why are you taking so long to do so?”

“I need you to do one more thing for me, as if you have not done enough already.”

I felt ashamed of what I was about to ask, struggling with the right words. I had begged for my life many times under the threat of execution. I could tell many times I had laid wounded on a battlefield, crying to save a life I had no reason to love. And yet, I had never felt so small and fragile before or after that event.

“In case you comply, I will not lay a finger, let alone my weapon, on you. I will leave and you can do whatever you are

planning with the rest of your life.”

“If you are going to ask me to heal your arm, you can kill me now.” Her tone was cold and determined. “I want you to suffer all the pain the human body can endure. If you kill me, my only regret will be that I was not able to make you suffer even more.”

“No.” The truth was, I had not considered my broken arm for a second. The other idea I had in mind had taken complete control over me, since I had considered it. “What I have to ask of you will not relieve my pain in any way, if that is your concern. In fact, it may make me feel worse.”

I could see a glimpse of interest in her eyes, where the tears had already dried. Witch or not, women are often tougher than men. While my half of the human race wallows in self-pity whenever misfortune comes our way, women never let themselves cry over spoiled milk. They are analyzing what they can do next, always aware they will have to walk another step if they want to survive.

“You made yourself appear as someone who was very dear to me when I rescued you from being burned alive.” My throat was dry as I spat the last words: “I want you to do it again.”

She laughed. For a moment, I thought she was not going to do this for me, but then her voice started to change. It was the lovely giggles I had heard many times while I was with the woman I had never learned the name. Soon, the dark angel I had left behind was in front of me again. It seemed nothing had happened since the night I had abandoned the city of Smolensk to its fate.

* * *

I found my way out of the cabin alone, unafraid of any horror the witch might have unleashed upon me. In fact, I thought I would have welcomed the end of my days. The one regret gnawing at the back of my mind had been somewhat resolved.

When I found myself looking at the sky after a very long while, I discovered the corpse of Marcus Aecius beside a tree next to the entrance. I had already considered they had killed him, but I still hoped I could be mistaken. I remembered the spirit which had appeared in order to advise me.

If there was a thing the horse had been certain of, was that his spirit was immortal, at least while the curse upon him endured. I had hoped time and again he had found something akin to rest, but when I remember what awaits on another realms, what still torments me and taunts me every night in which I wake up screaming in terror, I am afraid there is no peace to be found, in that life or the next.

While I made my way through the night, I looked over my shoulder often. I was afraid I would see the headless creature coming out of the cabin, eager to finish its work. At the same time, I wanted to see the woman again, the one I had left in Smolensk. I wanted to see her waving, like I had seen many faithful wives waving at her husbands when they left for war. Memory is indeed a prophet with eyes on his back, but it seemed what I left behind had disappeared and nothing similar would come again to my life.

Since then, I have never seen either women, the witch or the prostitute, again.

Sometimes I wonder if I should try to return to Smolensk, but I shall never come around to it. I had taken as much as a man should of the supernatural, so I had decided to never chase after ghosts.

I suspect I will see them both before I die, though. When the time comes, both my loneliness and my life will be over, as I had told her the first time we talked. Since then, I am only more certain that everything good and beautiful in life is nothing but a silent night awaiting the storm about to come at the break of dawn.

The End.

The Clock Meister's Revenge

By Geoff Nelder

Author's Note: You've heard of True Crime; this is True Horror and the fact that the gist of it happened in Prague in 1410 to real people at the hands of other so-called civilised people made me shiver to write it.

If only he knew that time wasn't on his side, especially not for his master, Mikulas of Karan, the greatest horologist in 15th century Europe.

* * *

Jan Sindel watched his shadow stride with him along the Charles IV bridge in the bright cool dawn. Shadows had always fascinated him as if they were a peripheral part of his

existence, this time stretching its grey across to the parapet. He lifted his wide-brimmed, floppy hat to see it replicated, though distorted. This red sandstone bridge in Prague was only opened eight years before, in 1402, and was his favourite place. He couldn't help smiling, not just because of the sun's rays glinting off the cobbles and statues adorning the bridge, but because finally the great clock was finished. Jan was in awe of what he and Mikulas had created; a time piece larger than two people standing on their shoulders, that showed the hours with gilded hands on a blue face, but also the relative locations of the moon and sun, and with figures such as the devil's skeleton, who would nod his head when trouble for Prague was coming.

Jan laughed at a flock of geese that had taken off from the Vitava river, that honked at him as they avoided the bridge statues to head east to the Elbe.

He ran after them across the bridge, eager to reach the town square for the unveiling ceremony. He pushed past other early risers, cursing at having to slow down as he passed the cobblers yet to open, and having to hold his nose to get past the smelliest fishmonger in Bohemia. Jan leaned to the right onto the street of bakers—

“Hold it, Mister Sindel!” called the musical voice of Eliska. “I have breakfast pastries.”

Blond pigtails waved in the air as she jumped up and down making her grass-green dress perform its own dance.

“Oh, all right, but I can't dally with Clock Meister Karan needing me.”

“I'd give Mikulas a pastry and a kiss, too, were he here. But stop or I'll spill your hot

cider,” the girl claimed.

The apple aroma filled his nostrils, so Jan stopped and hugged his fiancée.

“Now you've made me spill it, you clot.” She scorned him yet smiled and let him hug her with one arm while he grabbed the sweet pastry.

“I'm always afraid of breaking you, Eliska, you're delicate, like a porcelain doll.”

She harrumphed at him, “I could wrestle you to the ground, Jan, as I did last spring games. Come, drink before it gets cold. Anyway, it's hours before the ceremony.”

Jan hadn't realized how famished he was. No breakfast because the few groschen he'd earnt last week was spent by his mother on flour, lard and paprika, along with the cheapest gristle. They grew a few vegetables and like every other home, kept a few scrawny hens for eggs. Those birds were lucky to be alive. He broke his pastry, wrapped the largest chunk in an oily kerchief and stuck it in his pocket for mother.

“I'm promised a bonus if all goes to plan, today, Eliska. Another reason to get to the clock early.”

“I'll see you there at noon. Madame won't let me go earlier, as if I was her only seamstress.”

“More stress than it's worth.”

“Oh, Jan, you think you're a wit, but you're only half right.”

He grabbed her shawl to drag her close for a tickle, but she escaped.

* * *

Jan found Mikulas in the town hall, upstairs at the south wall clock tower. He was tottering on a wooden scaffold wielding a long paintbrush to coat cogs with pungent bitumen. He looked like one of the artists Jan had seen in the galleries. His linen coif had been splattered with oil, various shades of red, green, and yellow paint (blue was too expensive to spill). His work smock was worse, giving no clues to what its original colour might have been. Mikulas was only five feet tall, which Jan thought was the main reason why he was apprenticed, for his six feet of height. Luckily, he also had an aptitude for mechanics and in haggling with the local blacksmith.

“Good, you’re here, lad. The third weight on the foliot needs tightening and I cannot reach.”

“Yes, Sir. Although I did tighten all of them before we mounted—”

“Yes, yes, yes but something wasn’t right with the test, so I adjusted it with the long-handled spanner. Which reminds me, do you have the escapement diagram for the proposed Venetian clock?”

Jan had moved the heavy wooden stepladder into place and was rummaging in the large toolbox. “Yes. Er, no, sir. I examined them last night but decided not to bring them today with all the ceremony and what not.”

“Indeed. Did you agree with the improvements? I’m particularly pleased that I’ve thought of gearing the winding of the weight lifts.”

“Yes, sir, and I believe that the verge and foliot ratchet escapement will be superior to

this one, even though this clock has yet to be seen by the public.”

Mikulas coughed his embarrassment. “It would delay the deployment of this Prague clock by at least a year to rework the mechanism.”

“Agreed, sir, and it would cost so much more plus the improvement is more to do with future maintenance than any issue of time keeping and appearance.”

“Lighter, too, lad. Now, I believe we are ready. Was the tarpaulin still covering the face and figures?”

“Yes, sir, and a council sentinel was there to waylay any mischief.”

“In that case, my apprentice, we will repair to the Patisserie de Paris on Zlata for breakfast. Yes?”

What? Of course, he would. Such a rare treat, but he hoped it wasn’t in place of a monetary bonus.

* * *

It was dark inside the patisserie, bringing relief from the strong September sun. The Clock Meister and his apprentice sat on rough beech benches but didn’t wait long before a serving girl took their order of warm mead and gingerbread with plum broth for dipping.

Jan couldn’t help smiling at the crumbs that found their way into the salt and pepper beard of his master but frowned to hear an unexpected question.

Mikulas leaned towards Jan and whispered, “Lad, you have not mentioned the Venetian clock to anyone, have you?”

“No, sir, of course not. You told me not to.” But had he? A sneaky chill crept up his spine as he recalled snippets of conversation between himself and Eliska. Of late, he had been sometimes too merry with drink and his fiancée was often pressing him on his prospects. The future seemed bright, and his tongue might have said as much.

Jan knew municipal clocks were enormously expensive, mainly for the materials and extra hands needed in the assembly and building involved, but also for bribes and moneys to those who might sabotage the effort. There was much corruption in town hall finances. Eliska wouldn't have told anyone though. Ah, possibly her mother, who didn't think an apprenticeship to a money-scraping clockmaker was worthy of her daughter's hand. Jan was sure it wasn't important; after all, the councillors would know that Mikulas would need new employment once the Prague clock was complete.

Jan deflected further questioning with his own. “I wonder if it is noon yet?”

“Hah, lad, we'll soon not need to wait for inaccurate church bells to tell the time in this town. I see the shadow of yon sundial on the victualler's south wall isn't quite showing noon. You've no need to worry, I heard the Tierce bells of Saint Havel not long ago but not yet the Sext. After that, we start the ceremony. Or is it you're more interested in your lass?”

The master paid for their repast, and they strolled back to the town hall square. Jan patted his full stomach, a rare feeling.

“Goodness, Master, they're not taking any chances with pilfering or misdemeanours. Just look at the number of sentinels!”

The old man stroked his beard and muttered low obscenities into it.

“Sir, what did you say?”

The old man halted his shuffling walk and turned sideways. “That fool of a head councillor, Petr Baxi, is looking over at us. He has never liked me, God knows why.”

“Ah, Master, it could be me he's glaring at. I danced with his wife at the Michaelmas Carola. I didn't want to. She made me. Honestly!”

The sundial was full on noon now, followed by a cacophony of church bells from throughout the city. It was an amusing farce to hear all the town's clocks trying to be the closest to the actual time.

They approached a red-roped cordon around the town hall's south wall. Several councillors, the mayor and their wives were already there, and Jan supposed King Wenceslaus would be in an ornate carriage drawn by white horses, clattering down the cobbles. A sentinel blocked Jan and Mikulas from passing through a gap in the cordon.

“Excuse me, guard,” Jan said, “this is the Clock Meister. I am his apprentice, and we built the clock. I'm sure at least Mikulas of Karan should be at the ceremony.”

The sentinel fidgeted and glanced over at his sergeant, who was walking over.

“Leave it, lad,” the old man whispered and pulled Jan's sleeve to go back into the crowd.

“But, sir, they are disrespecting you.”

“I fear foul play. Let us go. I have a friend—”

“You've not been paid, have you?” Then a shiver rippled up Jan's back as he realized that whatever his master feared was more dreadful than the sum they were owed by the

city.

“Alright, then. I’ll follow,” Jan muttered to himself. Catching up, he glanced back at the revealed double clock and while gasping at its magnificence. As if a sign, he noted the skeleton’s skull was nodding its disapproval. Jan gulped.

The pair scurried through the crowd trying to keep their heads down. They got as far as the Powder Gate when again they were blocked by pike-wielding soldiers. Jan spun round to find more behind them.

As his hands were bound, Jan’s head was buzzing. Such treatment couldn’t result from his dancing with Baxi’s promiscuous wife. Surely it wasn’t just a plot to avoid paying them for the clock. His master had received instalments, but the last was months ago.

They were marched to the guardhouse, Mikulas half-dragged. Just before they were pushed behind bars, Jan caught a glimpse of a verdant dress in an isolated cell. He recognized Eliska even though the girl’s face was red and blotched. Her torn dress hung off a bare shoulder. Before he could speak, he was pushed on.

The cell was stone built with a wooden door—old, stained straw about the floor. A raised stone privy in a corner was the only furnishing. He was used to foul stench, living in the city where excrement was only collected from street corners weekly, and urine ran down open drains to the river but this cell made him gag. The foul straw moved with rats and faeces was daubed head height on the walls. His stomach was on the move making him rush, bent double, to the privy.

“Hold it in, lad, although you might as well throw up, it’d make not a ha’pence difference in here.”

They were given no food nor drink. When the light filtering in from the barred window in the door failed completely, Jan guessed they wouldn’t see anyone else until morning. Jan’s ears unfortunately worked as well as his nose, picking up every sound through the dank, stone walls. A single cry of anguish was just about bearable. He was inclined to call out himself but the Master stayed him. Then a building series of screams from a man or woman—he couldn’t tell—indicated torture. He tried in vain to ignore anything from outside their own ghastly cell.

“Master, how can we sleep when there’s nothing dry to lie on or lean on?”

“No need to call me master now, lad. In gaol we’re equals.” The old man kicked at a heap of stinking hay to drive away a rat and laid down. He was snoring in moments.

Jan was astonished. How could the master sleep on that filth? And sleep with all this going on? Ah, being older and wiser he must know that the councillors just wanted him out of the way while the king attended the ceremony. They could take the credit and any boon the king bestowed. What a nerve! Jan’s face heated with pent up rage. He rushed to where he thought the door was in the dark and beat with his hands.

“This is outrageous! Let us out! We’re horologists and engineers, not conspirators or any kind of enemy!”

“Shush, lad. It could be worse,” Mikulas uttered, awakened.

“How? We are in the pits of despair. And just what have they done to Eliska? And why?”

The old man struggled to his knees but just as he was about to answer, the door opened abruptly. Guards pushed them both towards the privy making Jan put out his hands to the slimy wall. A lantern was brought in followed by two leather-aproned men carrying a small brazier holding red-glowing coals. They settled it on the floor, making the wet straw sizzle and emit an even fouler stink. A council official all in tan and black walked in, to wrinkle his nose while guards grabbed the Clock Meister's arms. The official read out from a parchment:

"Mikulas Karan, you have been found guilty of conspiracy. You have been found to have entered a commission to design and construct a better clock than our Orloj, which we have paid you for its exclusivity. Your sentence is to be carried out immediately."

The man nodded at the guards holding Mikulas.

Jan sobbed. "There's no conspiracy because there's no exclusive contract. He can legally work for others—" A guard hit him hard across the face sending him sprawling.

"No good, lad. The councillors *are* the law here."

The official spat at Jan while a guard's foot held him down. "You should know, apprentice, your fiancée told us everything. Not that she wanted to, at first."

Jan was sure the man grinned and wanted badly to strike him. He squirmed away and sat up. However, when one of the leather-aprons pulled a hot poker out of the brazier, Jan was frozen, staring at the glowing point. The guards forced the old

man to sit on a stool that had been brought in and pushed his head and shoulders into a special wicker frame. They pulled at straps so that his head was immobile.

The aproned man looked at the official, who nodded. To Jan's horror, the poker was pushed, spluttering, into the old man's left eye making him scream louder and more piercing than any human's voice should have been able. The awful sounds were still bouncing off the walls when the poker burnt out the poor man's right eye. Through stinging tears, Jan watched as they somehow tilted the frame so that his master's face pointed upwards. The other aproned man held a steaming terracotta jug and poured some of the contents into each socket.

"Boiling vinegar," said the official, "to ensure your eyes do not regrow. Now, Mikulas Karan, you will not be designing or building any clocks for Venice or anyone else and Prague's new wonder will remain the envy of the world."

* * *

A month later, Jan was struggling for sleep, his nights plagued by nightmares where he was blinded, just as his master. He found it petrifying to visualise that red-hot poker coming to his eye. He imagined closing his eyes, just as the hot metal was searing through the lid.

Jan had found employment repairing small timepieces for minor nobility. Mikulas had been taken in by one of his friends and was slowly recovering from the burns to his eye sockets and face, although he was

completely blind. Try as he might, Jan had not been able to see Eliska. Her parents had blamed him entirely for her sexual assault under inquisition, although recent notes from her indicated that she still loved him.

Jan sat in a corner of the tavern *U Krále Brabantského*, which was close to the castle walls. Warm beer and stale biscuits were all he could afford. He shared a room at the inn with two other young men, one of whom was persuading him to give engineering lectures at the university.

“You already have a degree, Jan, and much experience, which the other lecturers lack. I’ve persuaded the dean to give you an interview. Please consider it.”

“Another beer and I will forget enough of my other worries to do just that.”

“Ah, one of your worries has just come in.”

Jan turned to the door. “Eliska? No, it’s the master and his friend. Make room, make room.”

“I’ll leave you to it, Jan. His scarred eye-sockets make me want to puke.”

Jan ran over to Mikulas. “Sir, it is so good to see you. Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“No need, lad, no need. This is Francis, my friend and saviour. Sit us down with you, Jan. I have a proposal that needs you. But no other ears.”

“Then we’ll go to my room. I’m afraid it’s up a rickety spiral staircase.”

“Nothing wrong with my legs, lad. Lead me.”

Francis helped the old man up the winding stairs and the three of them sat on beds in Jan’s room. They shut and wedged the door.

“I need you, lad, to help me get into the clock room.”

“Really? Is it that all our tools were left behind? Do you need some back?”

“In a way. And your eyes. What say we adjust the vertical verge bar and bend the foliate just a tweak.”

Jan thought for a few moments. “The clock won’t run true. If we want to completely sabotage the clock, we could replace some of the weights too. Together the clock would be horrendously wrong. I like it.”

Francis coughed, making his red beard shake. “Even if the councillors believed this was a matter of error rather than sabotage, what if they suspect you arranged all this, my friends?”

The old man grunted a laugh. “I’d told them that I’d need a few months with the clock running to discover any errors. Fine tuning. They’ve denied me that and more. It would serve them right.”

Francis put his hand on the Clock Meister’s shoulder. “It wouldn’t be discovered immediately, I hope. We would need time for you to be taken to a cousin of mine in Liberec. You met him years ago. You could live peacefully there. What about you, Jan? Should I find you refuge too?”

“I’ll stay. There’s a position at the university here.”

“Yes,” Mikulas said, “Jan wasn’t even considered a threat. They underestimate his brain and hands. Become a professor of horology, my lad.”

And so, he did..

The End.

Author's Notes:

Relevant medieval clock stuff for nerds. Medieval clocks before the invention of spring-loaded clockwork and long before pendulums were noted by Galileo to be useful as a control were weight-driven with an escapement controlled by the action of a verge and foliot. The foliot was a horizontal bar with weights near its ends affixed to a vertical bar called the verge, which was suspended free to rotate. The verge escapement caused the foliot to oscillate back and forth about its vertical axis. The rate of the clock could be adjusted by moving the weights in or out on the foliot.

The Astronomical Clock in Prague wasn't repaired for fifty years and Venice was furnished with *The Torre dell'Orologio*, a magnificent clock tower and clock designed by a Jan ... somebody.



A Stable Master's Gambit

By J. VanZile

The bones were broken, shattered and bent in all unnatural angles. The wasted bodies, heaped unceremoniously in the cart, were decimated, crushed beyond recognition other than they used to be human. Maven watched from his perch atop a barrel in his stained work boots as the cart slowly trudged down the dirty town path, followed by the fugitives from Mitwarren. Women and children gasped at the horrid sight rolling near their homes. Men grumbled, audibly voicing their displeasure of the new arrivals and the disruption they brought with them.

Maven had heard the rumors as they trickled into Crowtown. A creature, a nightmare, leisurely stalking from village to village and pillaging, eating its fill, then moving on to the next in a traveling buffet. He had kept his head down and plowed through each day without giving it much thought. Maven never found it useful to focus on what he could not control, but the rumors had given way to hearsay, then to eyewitness reports, and now the terror was only one village away.

A jingling clamor down the road announced the arrival of the mayor and his guardsmen. He strode out in his fancy clothes and jewelry that left Maven, sitting in his worn work clothes, a little more than envious. Maven glanced at his manure splattered boots with the holes that allowed all sorts of unwanted guests in at his feet, then at the opulent polished brown of the

mayor's own shoes. He pictured having such lavish boots of his own, maybe even a matching shirt with actual toggles instead of the broken wood bits that masqueraded as buttons on his own.

Maven blew air out of pinched lips as he tossed the thoughts from his imagination. He wasn't getting expensive items like that on a stable master's pay.

The anxious townspeople gave way to the mayor, pressing their backs to the wood shanties and hovels they called homes, allowing him to pass unimpeded. Beneath a crooked nose his thick well-maintained mustache bristled, nearly covering the entirety of his upper lip. He held his hand up and beckoned the villager at the head of the wagon forward.

The weary villager was gaunt and frail. Clad in dusty rags, he barely looked as if he could stand on his legs, so twig-like and crooked they were. The villager peeked over his shoulder at the few survivors with him. They hung their heads low, refusing to make eye contact with anyone. Reluctantly, the beckoned villager stepped forward to the mayor, his legs bouncing like a baby deer.

"What news have you?" the mayor asked in a well-oiled orating voice.

"Our village has been taken, sir," responded the man meekly as he fumbled with a small trinket about his neck. "We are all that escaped."

"I see," said the mayor dismissively. "Tell me, who has taken your village?"

"The ogre, sir," the man replied with a tremble in his voice.

Gasps quickly turned to worried whispering by the assembled townspeople. The mayor for his part did not seem

concerned as he waited for the villager to continue.

"It was four times my size and width. He attacked with such force, we did not stand a chance. Some of us he ate, others he crushed for sport." The dusty villager waved at the cart, piled with bodies, behind him as proof.

The mayor twirled his mustache thoughtfully. "And what does this ogre want?"

The villager's face twisted in confusion. He tilted his head to the side and arched a thinning gray brow. "To eat us, sir."

The whispers were slowly turning to a roar. Through their strained voices and fearful eyes, Maven could sense the panic creeping into the town, setting in like an infection settled in the lungs. He had been unsure whether he believed the stories of an ogre, but the shattered men and women in the cart were damning proof. No man could have warped bones so horrendously.

The mayor held his finger to his lips to silence the crowd, but to no avail. Losing his patience, he held his arms out and shouted: "Quiet now! Quiet now!"

The panic dulled to a degree, save for a pervasive low murmur that refused to quell.

"What are you going to do?" one townspeople cried.

"We will be next! We need to leave now!" another shouted.

"Listen to me!" hollered the mayor, stifling the townspeople's panicked remarks for a moment. "We will deal with this and we will deal with it now, but everyone must remain calm." The mayor scratched his mustache as he addressed the dusty villager again. "Where is this creature now?"

The villager drew a long breath before

responding. "He is still in Mitwarren, where we left him. He still has some of us there captive to... eat as he pleases."

A shocked silence followed, but again the mayor did not reveal any surprise. The mayor extended a hand, thick with jeweled rings that made Maven's eyes go wide. "My friends, you are weary and need rest. Take yourselves to my estate." The mayor waved down the path to the large two-story home that stuck out like a sore thumb amongst the rabble. "You may set up in the barn for now until we find a suitable place for you. Leave the cart and we will see to it that your dead are buried as well."

The dusty villager nodded and he motioned the survivors of Mitwarren to the barn. The thin, dirty villager remained, however, and cocked his head with curiosity to the townspeople. He listened as the voracious uproar from the people of Crowtown returned. Some called for an evacuation, others wanted to take up arms and attack the ogre in Mitwarren at once.

Maven sat back on his barrel and watched the scene unfold. He did not have much vested interest in the outcome. There was little that tied him to Crowtown other than his work, so leaving was not a problem. Being the stable master paid him well enough to take care of himself, but the job would never make him rich. A comfortable if tiresome life, nonetheless, but one that could be found in countless towns and villages of the land should he need to move on.

The townspeople swiftly began to turn on the mayor, who was quickly losing sway with the angry rabble. Some had begun to lob insults, accusing the mayor of inaction,

or worse, willfully allowing the creature to assault Crowtown. Realizing the situation was about to get out of hand, the mayor, no stranger to the fickleness of a mob, acted quickly.

"I will send my guards." the mayor cried out in haste. The townspeople quieted enough for the mayor to again be heard. "I will send half my guard to kill the ogre while it rests in Mitwarren. We will take it by surprise and kill the beast before it leaves."

The guards standing behind the mayor shifted uncomfortably upon hearing this. They eyed each other with apprehension but did not protest.

The mayor's proclamation did not pacify the crowd. Murmurs still reverberated the length of the throng with thinly veiled insults lobbed in the mayor's direction.

The mayor listened intently to the crowd for a moment before adding, "And... I will place a bounty on the creature." The mayor smiled, just barely visible under his mustache, at the sudden silence for he had snatched the crowd's attention for the first time so much so that they went utterly quiet. "One quarter of my wealth goes to any man who brings me proof of the ogre's death." The mayor relaxed as he noticed nods and smiles among the crowd turning his way. "I will send out messengers with the bounty offer to our nearest villages to the north, east and west. Surely someone will rise to slay the beast and protect our lovely town."

Maven's head snapped up at the mention of a bounty. He eyed the mayor closely, noting his posh clothes and well bathed appearance. Maven could not remember his last bath, at least one that wasn't in a horse

trough.

The crowd seemed to approve as well and began to disperse with nods and a few hearty cheers for the mayor's proposal. The mayor stayed for a moment, glad to be shaking hands and waving to the departing crowd like any good politician.

Maven stayed on his barrel deep in thought until he was the last of the townsfolk remaining. The bounty wealth would free him from his toiling existence, but he was no warrior. He knew the trade of a stable master. He was good with rope, horses, hay, pitchforks, saddles and not much else, yet he yearned for the chance to collect such a bounty, or more precisely the chance to shatter the doldrums of his life, if but only for an instant.

Maven sighed deeply as he forced the thoughts from his head, keenly aware he would have no chance to collect the treasure, only to lock eyes with the dirty, thin villager who had spoken with the mayor only minutes ago. Getting a good look now, the man was even thinner than Maven thought possible, nothing but skin and bones. They were the only two remaining on the road, locking eyes long enough for Maven to shift uncomfortably under the scrutiny. Maven, not knowing what else to do, nodded politely to the man, genuinely lamenting the thin man's loss of home. Not waiting for a response, Maven hopped from his barrel and left.

He trudged down the grimy town paths to his stables on the outskirts of town. Water and dirt soaked into his battered boots, dampening his feet until each step produced a wet spongy squeak. He was greeted by the stable boys who were just tidying up at the

end of a hard day of cleaning stalls. Maven plopped himself on the end of a hay bale and watched them work, ankle deep in slop with muddy splatters up to their waist. He let out a deep sigh as he worked up the will to finish his own chores.

Muffled footfalls approached. Maven turned to find the thin villager shambling down the same path that had led Maven to his stables. His gait was unsteady and it seemed he may topple at any moment. Maven resisted the urge to jump up and assist him. Despite the villager's fragile appearance, an uneasy sense of apprehension kept him rooted in place.

"May I help you?" Maven called out.

The villager did not respond right away. He slowly stumbled closer, his ragged clothing flapping about his waist, until he was only a few arms' lengths away from the hay bale Maven sat upon. The villager paused and dipped his gaunt frame to catch his breath before he replied. "I hope I may help you."

Maven ignored the villager's offer as he glanced behind the thin man to the path beyond. "You followed me here?" Maven asked with a crooked eye.

"Yes," the villager wheezed. "I may be able to help you."

Maven stifled a grin. "You may have that backwards. I think it is you who are the one that is seeking help."

The thin man struggled to stand upright as he fumbled with an unremarkable necklace about his neck. "Perhaps we may help each other," he said with a croak.

Maven shifted on his hay bale and leaned closer to the strange villager. "What is your name?"

“They call me Finch.”

“They call you?” Maven questioned. “Is that not what you call yourself?”

The villager seemed a bit puzzled as he answered. “Oh, I have been called many names over the years.”

Growing impatient, Maven struggled not to roll his eyes. He did not wish to speak in circles all night so he cut to the chase. “Well, say what you have come to say, Finch.”

Realizing the time for formality was over, Finch nodded curtly. “I would like to accompany you to kill the ogre.”

Maven scoffed as he sat back in the hay, shaking his head. “What makes you think I want to kill the ogre.”

Finch took a shaky step closer to Maven. “I saw you on the side of the road. The rest of your people left quickly even after the mayor offered his reward for the ogre. But you remained. You have thought deeply about it.”

Maven took note of his aching wet feet then shrugged weakly. “Yes, I thought about it, but I am no warrior. I think it best we let the guards handle it.”

It was Finch’s turn to scoff. “I would not trust those guards to mind my lunch. They have no idea what is in store for them.”

“And you think I would fare any better?” Maven asked incredulously.

Finch took a longing look at the hay bale Maven sat on. Realizing the old man must be weary, Maven scooted over and offered a spot on the hay for his guest. Finch gleefully shambled over and sat next to Maven with a relieved grunt. After he had settled himself, the bony villager presented his offer. “What if I could give you an advantage no one else would have? What if I could offer you a way

that would ensure you could not be injured by the ogre?”

Maven didn’t answer. He hung his head, biting off many insults before they left his lips. After a few moments of silence, Maven found himself staring at his wasted boots covered in manure. He decided to finally take the bait. “Yes, and how could you ensure that, Finch?”

Finch reached up and held the necklace about his neck with a pale hand. “This necklace makes the wearer invulnerable,” he said with pulsating conviction.

Maven snorted derisively, suddenly wishing he hadn’t bothered to ask. “If it can do that, then why have you not defeated the ogre yet? It was your village, you could not stop him?”

Finch recoiled with a tinge of regret and sadness drawn on his gaunt face. “It may make me unable to be harmed, but I am still frail. I can barely walk, much less hold a knife or sword. I need someone who can do this for me.”

“And what is to stop me from just taking the necklace from you then?” Maven mused.

“Ah!” Finch said, holding a frail finger upwards as if Maven had just won a prize. “It only works if I give it to you willingly. If it is taken by force or against my will the magic will not work.”

Maven pinched his lips together and shook his head. He did not know what to make of this character sitting next to him.

His head shaking above his frail neck, Finch blinked lazily. “I see you need proof.”

“How do you propose we do that?” asked the baffled stable master.

Finch pointed at a pitchfork stuck in a hay bale nearby. “Take that and thrust it into

me.”

Maven grew very still and quiet. He looked at the pitchfork and back to Finch before holding his hand up in defiance and shaking his head forcefully.

“Go on, you will not hurt me.” Finch urged.

“Do it yourself, if you wish to prove it to me,” suggested Maven.

Finch shook his head. “Magic does not work like that. It will not protect me if I wield it myself.”

Maven grew weary of debating with Finch. It had been a long day. It was time for supper, for bed, not for drawn out games with strange villagers. “Blasted magic and all its rules,” Maven shouted angrily as he leapt up from his seat and grasped the pitchfork. “Are you ready, Finch?” Maven threatened, pulling the pitchfork from its resting place.

Finch nodded passively, kicking his legs back and forth like he had no care in the world.

Maven had no intention of stabbing the man, but wanted to see how far Finch would let this go on. Maven feigned a thrust directly at Finch’s chest. To his shock, Finch did not twitch or move a muscle. Maven jerked the pitchfork back just in time to not impale his guest.

“You will have to do better than that.” Finch prodded the bewildered stable master. The thin man then presented his left arm in open invitation. “Here, stick me in the arm if you are too afraid of me.”

Maven stood his ground as he tried to digest the scene before him. He glanced at the pitchfork, then Maven’s outstretched, willing arm.

“It’s just an arm.” Finch taunted, nodding. “If you can’t hurt my arm, how can you hurt an ogre? Maybe I have come to the wrong person.”

Maven gritted his teeth and moved forward with intent if only to shut the ragged villager up. He pressed the tip of the pitchfork against Finch’s arm and to his surprise Finch did not fidget or twist away. Finch gave Maven a wink, urging him on. Maven pushed the pitchfork a bit further into Finch where he could see the flesh being pressed inward. No blood was drawn. Maven looked up to find Finch grinning at him. The frail man nodded, urging Maven on. Suddenly intrigued, Maven gave a forceful thrust into Finch’s arm only to be met with resistance and not a drop of blood spilled.

Maven pulled the pitchfork away from Finch and pressed the heel of the shaft into the ground. He placed his finger above one of the sharpened stakes and pressed his thumb down until he saw blood, his own blood, trickle down the pointy silvery spike. Maven stood slack jawed, ogling his guest who was still sitting upon the hay bale and completely unharmed by the same implement that had just stuck his thumb.

“Once more? Try the other arm this time?” Maven extended another feeble limb.

Maven sucked in a deep breath. He hesitated briefly, then something inside him urged him on. He thrust the pitchfork into Finch’s exposed arm nearly as hard as he could. The metal prongs deflected as they struck exposed skin, bouncing away harmlessly from Finch’s stick of an arm.

“Would you like to try my chest now?” Finch offered confidently.

Maven ran a hand down the length of his face and swallowed hard. "I'm not ready for that, no. But let's just say that I am very interested in your offer now."

* * *

They awoke early, ready to begin their journey to Mitwarren. After having spent the better part of the evening in discussion, it had been decided that Maven would accompany Finch to Mitwarren. After surveying the scene and only if Maven was comfortable, Finch would hand over his magic necklace for Maven to take on the ogre. If they were successful, the pair would split the mayor's bounty on the ogre, making them both rich.

Maven shrugged on his manure stained boots and slung a duffel bag of provisions about his shoulder. He was still dubious of this supposedly magical necklace and his ability to defeat this beast. The lure of treasure, a better life, and if he could only admit it this one time, a longing for a shakeup of the stagnation of his humdrum life forced his legs into motion with his skinny and unusual companion in tow.

At the exit of the stables Finch came to a complete stop and cocked his head. "Are we not taking the horses?"

Maven sighed and bit his lip, just a bit. "We can't take them. They are not my horses." The puzzled expression on Finch's face agitated further insight from an impatient Maven. "They belong to some of the townspeople, visitors, and the mayor. We only house and take care of them here for a

fee."

Finch nodded reluctantly, clearly disappointed in their traveling situation.

"Come, we best move on before the sun gets too high," Maven urged with a beckoning hand.

Maven and Finch pressed on into the brightly lit forest. The sun was just baking the woods with its illuminating warmth, lending a cheerful note to their departure. The siren birds sang a cheerful welcome as the unlikely pair plodded with purpose along the single dirt road connecting Crowtown to Mitwarren. The path was well worn with travel and free of brush. While the surrounding forest was sparse, one could still lose their way if straying too far off the path.

Occasionally, Maven would slow his gait, stop and pretend to fasten his strap or adjust his boots to allow the wobbly Finch a moment to catch up. They went on like this for some time until Maven caught the sound of words in the distance ahead of them. The voices were loud, raucous even, and they were not trying to hide their presence. While the roads were usually quite safe and routinely patrolled by guards, the unusual circumstances of the day left the pair apprehensive.

Maven breathed a sigh of relief as he recognized two of the mayor's guards from town who were crouched and relaxing along the path. The guards quieted for a moment as they noticed Maven and Finch, then continued their conversation once they recognized the pair were no threat, just travelers. Maven hoped to pass them without conversation, but his hopes were dashed as one of the guards raised his hand.

“Hey, don’t I recognize you?” asked the guard in a husky voice.

“Yes, you would. I’m Maven of Crowtown.”

The guard nodded and waved his hand dismissively at Maven. The guard then stood, shifting his lightweight padded doublet to be more comfortable. “No, you, I know you’re the stablemaster.” He pointed a hairy finger at the frail Finch. “Him, I recognize.”

Maven saw no reason to lie. “He is from Mitwarren. He came in with the survivors yesterday.”

The other guard quickly sprang up from his seat. “I see what this is!” he exclaimed. “You wish to slay an ogre and collect a bounty, don’t you?”

Maven’s face fell as the guards began to laugh in unison.

“I think you are right,” the first guard added. “The stable master and the twig, off to slay the ogre. The stuff legends are made of!”

The mayor’s guards continued laughing as Maven nodded to motion Finch onward. If Finch was cowed by the guard’s insults he did not show it. He simply followed along in his uneven gait as if he were treading a meadow of flowers.

“We will let you get a head start. Then after the ogre is tired of playing with you, we will finish him!” one of the guards blurted.

“They don’t even have a weapon!” the other chortled.

“Here.” With a wide grin, a guard held out his knife to Maven. “Take this with you. It will even the odds!”

Not knowing what else to do, Maven

pocketed the knife and quickly ushered Finch away, at least as fast as Finch would dare to walk, until the brutish guffaws drowned in the distance. Head down, Maven forged ahead and followed by his unflappable companion.

They traveled with no further incident the rest of the day. At one point while resting, the mayor’s guards passed them on the trail and they endured a few heckles at the slow pace they were forced to keep due to Finch’s measured gait. The slight did not bother Maven, on the contrary, he was somewhat relieved when the guards passed them by, so they could make sure the way was clear.

* * *

After a mostly sleepless night on hard ground, Mitwarren was now in sight. Maven took a deep breath and slowed their pace down to a crawl out of caution. They were just into the scattered outskirts of the sprawling village, passing abandoned shacks and shanties. The closer the town center they neared, the more tightly packed it became with wide paths turning into narrow alleys that twisted through the buildings like a winding stream.

Not far from the courtyard center of Mitwarren, the clang of pitched battle carried on the wind and the roar of what could only be the ogre shook the village. Maven hurried Finch along, throwing his arm around the ragged villager’s shoulder and ushering him to a shanty just outside the main village circle. The shanty was small but secure with wood slats and a thatched

roof. They ducked inside the teetering shack just as the unfolding battle burst into view. Maven dared to peek through the uneven wood slats to watch the scene unfold.

The beast, at least twice as tall and twice as wide as a normal man just as Finch described, fought viciously against two armed guards. The mayor's guards, as Maven recognized, were hardly presenting a challenge. The great ogre carried one of them in his beefy hand. The guard's legs kicked furiously beneath the creature's outstretched hand as it chased the other guard through the village center. The guard swung his sword wildly in the air in a feeble attempt to hold the beast off. One of the wild swings must have nicked the ogre's hand, enraging it. In a show of strength, it took the guard trapped in its hand, crushed him with a squeeze and tossed the lifeless body away. The body flipped through the air until it landed with a thud just outside Maven and Finch's hiding spot.

Maven watched as the ogre, both hands now free, reached out with surprising speed for such a large brute and ripped the other guard from his feet. The guard's sword clattered to the ground as he began to whimper and plead for his life. The ogre tilted its head sideways, regarding the pleading guard curiously for a moment before it lifted its helpless victim to its open maw. Jaws opened larger and wider than they should be able to for a creature with its head size, and snapped into the guard's skull with a sickening crunch.

Maven tipped his head away from the scene, unable to watch the ogre's victim be devoured. Popping one by one, the crunching bones pounded Maven's ears as

the guard was slowly devoured. Silence followed and Maven once again dared to peek through the rickety slats. The ogre was lumbering right toward them, quieter than he would have expected for something so large. Maven made himself as small as possible, but kept his eye fixed through the wood shanty boards on the closing ogre.

It stopped not but a few lengths from the two men cowering in their hut. Now so close, Maven could take the creature in through nervous breaths. All its facial features, especially its jaw, seemed too large in proportion to the rest of the head. The bulbous eyes and nose jutted at unusual angles from the face. Its arms and legs were muscular, but its belly protruded like a pig's. If it wasn't so dangerous, it would've almost looked comical.

The ogre leaned down and retrieved the mayor's guard it had tossed only a few moments before like he was unwanted refuse. It prodded the lifeless soldier in the chest a few times with a pointy bent finger. Satisfied its prey was dead, it let out a great huff and lumbered off content with its kill draped over its shoulder.

Maven relaxed and slumped down in thought as the onerous creature departed. He looked over at Finch who sat quietly in the corner looking back at him with weary eyes.

"So, will you kill it now?" Finch asked in a hushed voice.

Maven was reluctant to answer. He had no idea how he was supposed to defeat this massive creature. If the guards were no match for it, what could he possibly do, he thought. "Will you give me your necklace now?" Maven asked, pointing to Finch's neck.

Finch shook his head. “The agreement was, I would willingly give it to you if you decided to kill the ogre. To my eyes you are still undecided.”

Maven did not flinch. The ragged villager was right. Maven had not made up his mind yet. “Stay here,” Maven whispered to his companion. “I will head out and see what can be done. When I return, I will give you my answer.”

Finch nodded happily, seemingly satisfied with Maven’s words. The stable master rose steadily to his feet and peered out of the shanty with caution. There was no sign of the ogre. With a final nod to Finch, Maven silently slipped out of the rickety home to search the village.

Staying to the shadows and taking great care with his steps, Maven worked his way through the shambles. Overturned carts, broken homes, and discarded tools haphazardly thrown about marred the area. Carts with hay bales and pitchforks lined one alley and another with broken shovels and bloody dirt marked the scene of a ravaging. One home had the entire side of its frame ripped open and Maven could only shudder at the thought of what had happened to the innocent villagers who must have taken refuge there.

Maven carefully made his way through the village homes, edging closer and closer to the stone lined courtyard center. He paused as he approached, carefully tilting his head, just so around the edge of a hut as cover, to scope the open plaza. In the center was a makeshift structure of broken wood sourced from the surrounding homes. The wood was not cut, but broken in shards, and forced savagely into the ground, not dug,

into upright timber walls. The harshly arranged wood structure was pieced together by its ogre designer as a prison for the terrified occupants within.

The stable master counted no less than eight occupants in the stopgap cell. The confined people were in varying states of shock. Some lay in the dirt unmoving, some cried, others clung to the boards, their faces mashed into the gaps as if they were willing their way through. Discarded body parts littered the outside of the cell, leaving a sickening feeling well in the pit of Maven’s stomach as he realized this was the ogre’s food bin.

It was then that Maven saw it, just past the prisoner’s cage. He almost missed it, so large it was he nearly mistook it for part of the scenery, but the shifting of the feet gave away the ogre lounging against the side of a village shack. It haphazardly waved an elongated hand at the flies buzzing about its face as it yawned its cavernous mouth. Maven reflexively grimaced as he swore inwardly that he could smell the stench from the beast’s great mouth waft through his nostrils.

Maven stepped back around his shelter and weighed his options. He knew there was no hope for him in an open fight with this thing, but perhaps he could lure it away, but then what? He scanned the alley for inspiration. He glanced over the busted carts, pitch forks, rope, hay, and broken wood strewn about again, hoping for something to leap out. A plan slowly formulated in the stable master’s head. He thought it over, turning the developing plan over in his head, gaining more confidence the longer he reasoned it out.

There was a sudden undeniable ache in his feet. Maven glanced at his manure stained boots. Using the toe of his other boot, he scraped some of the stain away, revealing the worn threadbare leather underneath. Maven closed his eyes and pictured the mayor's polished comfy shoes and imagined they were his. "Yes. I can do this," he whispered.

Maven returned to the rickety shelter where he'd left Finch. The expression on Maven's face must have tipped Finch off to the stable master's intent. "Ah, so you have decided to take the creature on, then?" he said with a level of hope Maven had not detected before.

"Yes and no," Maven replied. Finch scrunched his face in confusion as his companion continued. "I can't fight it out right, but I may be able to lure it into a trap and kill it."

"How will you lure it?" Finch questioned.

"How else?" Maven licked his dry lips. "With live bait."

Finch stared at him for a moment and slowly nodded. "You will use yourself as bait then," he stated more than asked. "I would like you to show me what you have in mind."

Maven opened his mouth to argue, but realized Finch would likely not listen. Instead he took a deep breath and nodded. He cautioned Finch they needed to be quiet and carefully led the villager from their shanty to the alley just outside the courtyard opposite the resting ogre. After mindfully making certain the ogre was not alert to their presence, Maven laid out his plan in wary muted tones.

The stable master quietly shifted a cart

into the center of the alley. In the base of the cart, he placed a half dozen pitchforks with their pointy ends skyward, angled just slightly pitched forward. After a quick glance around the corner to assure himself the ogre was still resting, Maven grabbed some hay and covered the angled pitchforks just enough to make them not so obvious.

Finch watched, staring at Maven blankly for a moment until slowly, but surely, he began to nod with a weak smile as he watched his companion set the trap. Maven grabbed a length of rope and secured it to the base of the strongest lumber he could find that fortified the nearest hut. He then pulled the rope taut in front of the trapped cart, looping the other end in a tight saddle knot around a small quarry of heavy stone on the opposite side of the alley. The rope was about knee high to Maven, about the right height to trip an ogre, he hoped. He then tested the rope, pulling on it with some force, until he was satisfied it would hold well enough against great weight.

After a final inspection of his work, Maven grabbed Finch by the arm and led him into another nearby shanty. "Okay, you see now?" Maven asked. "I will be the bait. The ogre will chase me and I'll lure it into the alley trap." The stable master paused for a moment as he peeked out the shanty with a watchful eye. "And you will wait here until it is done."

Finch seemed to consider Maven's words, almost judging if he felt the ruse was worth his time. He finally gave a determined nod and reached for his necklace, slipping it off gently from around his gaunt, veiny neck. He held it out to Maven, who quickly grasped it, ready to get on with his mission

before he lost his nerve. Maven felt some resistance as Finch did not let the necklace go readily.

The skinny villager leaned forward and spoke in a whisper. "Remember, it will protect you from being crushed or cut, but other things could still happen. You could be trapped, grabbed, imprisoned. If the ogre locks you in a cage or sits on you, you still will not be able to escape even if it cannot harm you."

Maven took a deep breath and carefully measured the villager's warning. "I understand, Finch," he responded as evenly as his nearly trembling voice allowed. "And if this works out, I will not forget our bargain."

With a nod, Finch released his grip on the necklace.

Maven held the item aloft for a moment, marveling at the simple locket. It was unremarkable, a wooden dollop with a woven rope cord braided through. He slipped it over his head and gave it a slight tug to ensure it was secure. For some reason, Maven thought he may feel different, like the magic would work through his body in a tingle or pulse, but there was nothing. No light or glow, no surge of power. Just a simple necklace about his neck. Maven did not let the disappointment show on his face and with a curt nod to his companion, the stable master quietly exited the shanty to begin his ruse.

Ducking through the rubble and scattered debris of the broken village, Maven deftly maneuvered his way around the edge of the courtyard, all the while keeping a wary eye on the still lounging ogre. When he was close enough, only two huts away, he

crouched to compose himself behind a barrel. Even with the necklace, his nerves were shot, and he was starting to second guess his decision. He closed his eyes and gripped the necklace. This brought Maven a bit of comfort and with a final deep breath he opened his eyes and boldly strode out into the open space of the courtyard to confront the ogre.

The ogre was gone. Maven spun about wildly, searching, to find the ogre reaching into his food cage and plucking a new victim from among the selection of prisoners. Maven only had a moment to think. Intent on its meal, the ogre had not spotted him yet. The ogre was now blocking the way to the trapped alley and Maven was dubious of his chances of running around the beast. He could retreat and wait for the creature to move to a more favorable position, but that would leave another villager to be eaten and Maven was unsure if he could leave that on his conscience.

"Hey!" Maven found himself shouting, much to his own horror.

The ogre hesitated from fishing in its cage and cocked its head towards the stable master. The prisoners regarded him curiously as well, but it was not lost on Maven that there was not a single hopeful look amongst them. The ogre blinked its bulbous eyes at him as its brain caught up to what it was seeing. Maven found the bravery to wave at it with both hands, prompting a sneer to etch the beast's lips. It tilted its hips and began with a step toward Maven. The stable master did not hesitate, turning himself around and running back into the thicket of huts surrounding the courtyard. The thud of large feet behind him confirmed

the ogre was in pursuit.

Maven could feel the hot breath of his pursuer on the back of his neck. In a flash he darted to his right down a new alley. He dared to glance behind him to see the ogre, unable to adjust quickly enough, fly by him as it just missed his head with an outstretched limb. The stable master did not linger, pumping his legs furiously to keep up his pace. He made another right, turning back towards the courtyard. The sounds of pounding feet were already growing nearer and the stable master knew he needed to make his move soon.

The courtyard was not a welcome sight. While it brought him closer to his trap, Maven felt exposed in the open with no cover or jutting alleys to squeeze into and out maneuver the giant oaf that chased him. The stable master dared to peek behind him. The beast was hot on his trail. Murderous intent blazed in its eyes. It was still a distance out but gaining ground on Maven with every step.

Maven hit the center of the courtyard at full sprint, passing the prisoners. He peeked in and their eyes met his with despondence. Maven suddenly felt a cold chill run down his spine as he realized the prisoners had no hope for him or themselves. They had seen this play out before, and the ending had always been the same. Maven gripped the pendant around his neck and felt confidence flush back into him, warm and comforting. He could do this.

Again the hot breath beat on his neck and Maven knew he had no time to waste. He raced around the courtyard, angling himself so he could enter the trapped alley without breaking stride. He knew he needed the ogre

to be at full speed for his ruse to play out properly. The hot breath was now unbearable, the stench it carried even more so. The pounding rattled his ears in thunderous waves.

Maven slipped into the alley at full speed, taking care to time his footfalls just over the taught rope. He dipped around the pitchfork cart and twisted his head about to watch his stalker.

The ogre rounded the bend with a swivel of its wide hips. The beast's eyes widened as it spotted the rope, but just as before it was unable to slow its momentum. In fact, the creature's long limbs and odd gait made the trap even more effective. Its massive foot caught the taut rope, tipping his giant head and bulbous gut forward. The ogre thrashed wildly at the nearby huts, all fists and rotten fingernails, ripping wood and thatched roofing on his way down. Its body smashed face forward helplessly into the cart with a nauseating wet thud as the pitchforks did their work and pierced ogre flesh.

Maven had slowed down and slowly backed away from the cart as the ogre wailed and continued to squirm on the skewers. Hay was flung from the cart in clumps, pushed aside from the savage wriggling. The cart groaned, suffering under undue weight its design could not hold, then succumbed with a sharp crack as the axle gave way, crushing the cart to pieces under the ogre's mass. The ogre vomited a wet gurgle and was finally silent.

Maven readied the knife the guard had given him as he cautiously approached the fallen beast. The ogre had been impaled fully by at least four of the pitchforks. One had pierced so deeply as to poke through the

other side of the creature's neck. Maven gripped Finch's magic necklace tightly in one hand and with the other warily pushed the knife into the beast's side to confirm it was dead. The blade pierced flesh without protest and the stable master breathed a sigh of relief.

Maven snapped his head to the front of the alley as he suddenly noticed he was being watched. Finch, as thin and ragged as ever, stood with the ogre's prisoners. He had let them loose during the skirmish, and now they stood, silently glowering at their fallen tormentor.

A villager stepped forward. The haggard villager held his hand out to Maven's knife and bent his fingers inward. Maven glanced at the knife, then passed it over, handle first, to the ragged man. He looked at Maven with hollow but grateful eyes and nodded. Maven returned the nod as the villager hacked at the ogre's neck repeatedly until the gruesome head fell, rolling off the tilted cart like an apple falling from a tree. The man lifted the head by its crooked snout and held it out for the stable master to take as his prize.

* * *

They returned to Crowtown with the ogre head before them. Maven walked slowly to ensure Finch could keep pace. A few of the freed Mitwarren villagers had accompanied them and they were already spreading whispers of the daring fool who had bested the ogre with confidence and guile. Word spread quickly and by the time Maven and Finch arrived at the mayor's doorstep a

wooden chest with metal strappings lay open before them with jewels, gold, and shiny trinkets of value that made Maven's eyes pop.

The mayor stepped down from his porch, grabbed Maven's free hand and thrust it into the air to the cheers of the townsfolk. Maven let the ogre head drop to the ground as the Mayor leaned into him to be heard over the din of the crowd. "I had hoped my guards would have dealt with the creature, but from what I am being told they are never coming back," the mayor whispered.

Maven shook his head acknowledging the guards' demise.

"Well, they would have saved me a pretty penny, nevertheless this is money well spent. The people are happy with me, and we have a hero in our town. Take your reward, you have earned it." The mayor waved to the crowd, reveling in the adulation as if he were the one who defeated the enemy.

Unconcerned with the ceremony, Maven anxiously looked to his rewards. Finch had already lifted one end of the chest. Maven reached down to assist him when his hand slipped off the edge of the handle and scraped the wood side of the rugged strongbox. A splinter lodged itself in the palm of Maven's hand, drawing a well of blood that trickled down to his wrist.

Maven blinked for a moment, then with a jolt, his uninjured hand flew to his chest to ensure the magic necklace was still there. He found it just where it should have been, looped about his neck. His face contorted as he tried to comprehend how he could have been cut if he wore the necklace. He looked over to Finch in bewilderment to find the frail villager with a grin plastered on his

face.

Finch leaned in and whispered: “I thought we had more time, but I guess now is as good as any.”

Mouth slightly agape, Maven continued to look at the ragged Finch blankly.

Finch shrugged, half a smile still on his lips. “You see, it was never the necklace. It’s just me. I was born like this. The magic, it’s just me.”

Maven impulsively looked down at the necklace still in his grasp.

Finch smiled again, lifting one frail shoulder. “Oh, that thing? Nothing but a trinket I found on the way here before I met you,” the villager asserted.

Maven continued to stare blankly. “But... why?” he finally stammered. “Why deceive me?”

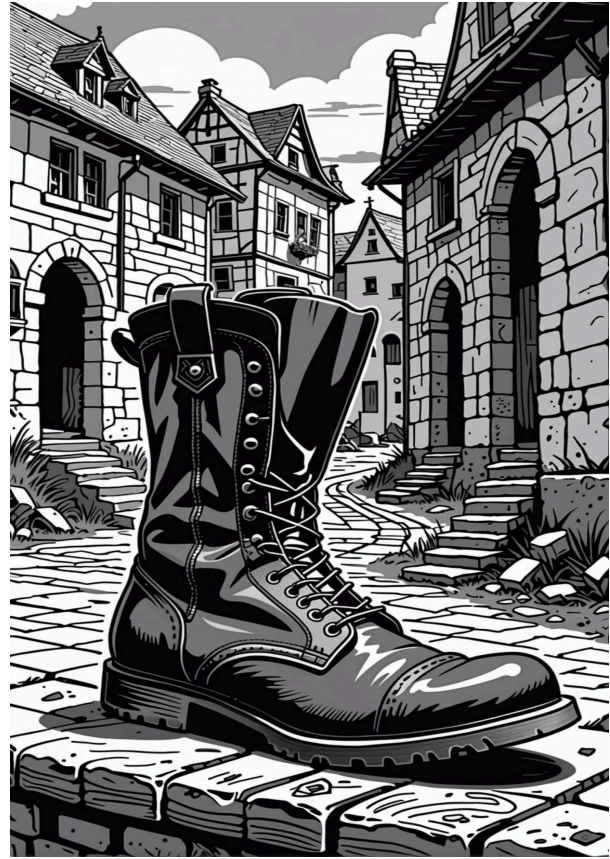
Finch squinted at Maven and pouted his wrinkly lips in disappointment. “Well, would you have gone with me to kill an ogre if I didn’t?”

Refusing to answer, Maven’s jaw tightened.

“Ah, you see. I thought so,” Finch said as he leaned down and grasped one side of the chest with five of the thinnest finger’s Maven had ever seen. “Now will you help me with our reward? I’m too weak to carry it by myself, you know, and there is no magic necklace that can help with that.”

Maven found himself staring vacantly at his busted boots, wondering how quickly he could get some new ones made.

The End.



Nottingham

or

A Day in the Life of the Sheriff of Nottingham

By Arin Lee Kambitsis

Nottinghamshire, in the opinion of its Sheriff, was a county full of lunatics. This was the worst day of the month, too - the morning after the full moon. That bright, bloody useless disc always brought the worst out in people. In the days following, there were always reports of trouble: Knifings, rapes, murders, beatings and brainings. There was, further, the peculiar story of a drunken lout forcing his way into a home to steal an old set of wooden spoons. It seemed that on the full moon, a peasant’s worthless belongings were suddenly coveted by one

miscreant or another.

These sorts of incidents made a Sheriff necessary; This was why the king had appointed him. Although, the truth be known, Edward III couldn't give a mossy turd for any such problems. All the king really cared about was taxes. Still, Nottingham's Sheriff believed the county held a special place in the king's heart, for it was in Nottingham Castle where the monarch had caught his mother rutting with her lover Roger Mortimer. Such a scandal had been the perfect excuse to lock the dowager in the Tower and lop off poor Mortimer's head. Yet being in the king's heart was not as good a place as all that. To the contrary, the further one was away from the king's heart or mind, the better. For even if one were dear to Edward, the most common idea to cross his mind would be how to pump that person for coin.

Additionally, Edward hated France, mostly because it had a king of its own that was not him. Edward loved war, so war with France was a perfect fit. War was costly though, and when Edward needed money, the hills of his beloved England shook. This was more reason why Nottingham now had a Sheriff, where before it had none. Not because of criminality so much, or the dire need of management for its cache of lunatics, but because the Exchequer claimed the Bailiff was not collecting enough taxes. Edward learned of this and hence this knowledge allowed the ascendancy of Curtis de Groote.

Curtis had always been a fair man, and a healthy man too, not prone to drink or gluttony. A good man, daresay. Not the kind that would flaunt and abuse power, even

though he wielded much. In his heart he represented King Edward, for whom he'd die. He was the king's servant, first and foremost, and second, a wise governor of the people in his charge. A kind, loving husband second, and father was for him, ranked a distant third. He didn't enjoy power, honestly, although he'd thought he would when he accepted his position. Yet Curtis learned regrettably that the good nutters of Nottingham didn't seem to hold the law, or the office of Sheriff in sufficient awe; It was the application of force they respected.

"Nutters," grumbled Curtis. "Each one, a shit-stained, god-forsaken nutter." Often, when he corresponded with friends by post, he named the place 'Nuttingham'.

Curtis' head was often in his hands, just as it had been his first hour on the job. For the past week, on top of everything else, the courthouse had been filled with feuding burgesses. A backlog of plaintiffs had kept him from addressing them until this very morning. The wealthy burgesses claimed they were a guild, and that only those in the guild could sell wine, bread, and pies. Conversely, the poor burgesses claimed they were only doing as they'd always done, and what their parents had done, and every bloody, little burgess branching back to the birth of Christ had done, to sell wine, bread, and pies.

Those men of lesser coin claimed they'd never heard of any burgess guild. The rich burgesses countered to say such claims were false and expected, since the poorer men could simply not afford the guild fees. In fact, claimed the wealthiest burgess of all, there was no need to inform the poor burgesses that they were infringing upon the

rights of the guild, since such a message was sufficiently conveyed when the guild hired rough men to terrorize the poorer men in their homes and to distrain their possessions. This, even though by strict word of law, such action was not allowed without the Reeve's consent.

"And why, pray tell, did you not seek the consent of the Reeve?" asked Curtis de Groote of the leader of the richer half. The little man flustered. He was sweaty, small, bald, and mustachioed, nearly indistinguishable from any of a hundred other imbeciles in Nottingham. *Another bloody nutter.*

"Well, sah," the damp little man replied. "We didn't know who the Reeve was."

De Groote woke up just a little bit. "Mister de Holcombe, did you just say you didn't know who the Reeve was? Is that what you said?"

A knot caught in de Holcombe's throat. "Yes, sah. Didn't know who he was." The little man held up his hands.

The Sheriff sat back and crossed his arms. "It didn't occur to you to ask?"

De Holcombe seemed to relax a bit. He tilted his chin up a bit, jowls jiggling like a turkey's. "The situation required urgency, sah. The faire coming up and all. Action in the matter of the non-guild burgesses couldn't wait."

De Groote wasn't done. He seemed genuinely curious now. "Mister de Holcombe, sir. Why didn't you ask the Bailiff? Our good bailiff appointed the Reeve, so, obviously, he would know. Having said that, why not ask some of your neighbors? Someone around you was bound to know the man in question, a public

official, don't you think, Mister de Holcombe?

"Ah. Right, sah."

"You do know who the Bailiff is, don't you, Mister de Holcombe? I understand he is your sister's husband?"

"I do, sah. Indeed, I do."

"But rather than ask the Bailiff the identity of the Reeve, such that you could be granted permission to kick down doors and invade the homes of your poorer colleagues," he gestured toward the cluster of poor burgesses. "You just went ahead and broke the King's Law?"

De Holcombe immediately stiffened. This was the first mention of law breaking. "Strictly business, Sheriff. Not a matter worthy of the king's attention, I'd say. Sah."

"All matters are the king's, sir!" spat the Sheriff, with walloping volume. "Especially matters of the assizes, and more, especially, in times of war. You've admitted your guilt, and I place you and your guild in mercy." There was a hush among the rich burgesses, and excited whispers among the poor, who smelled money. The Sheriff's eyes were hard, but tired, as he stared at little de Holcombe.

"Reparation for damages to tenements and property will be paid as a fine, the total sum to be decided by me. There shall be no more interference by this 'guild' of yours in matters of commerce without writ or permission from the Sheriff, who happens to be me! Next time you're in my court, Mister de Holcombe, if you should be so unfortunate as to meet me again before this table, I suggest you shave that mustache since you can't be bothered to comb it out!"

There were half-hearted words of protest

as the bailiff and his men escorted the many burgesses out to the street. Curtis was immensely glad to have them all out of his court, for it had been so crowded and hot the last few days.

"Who's up next?" asked the Sheriff. The bailiff, a smug-looking man in his forties named Fuch, stepped up next to him.

"We have a writ against a man named John Little, Sheriff. Brought by a Roger Forbes."

"What's the complaint?"

"Lost teeth, sir."

"Ah. Simple enough. Did this John Little show up?"

"Yes, sir. He is here."

"All too easy, Mister Fuch. Step forth, Mister Forbes and Mister Little."

On the Sheriff's left stepped up another small, sweaty, bald, and mustachioed man. He looked miserable, with some kind of poultice in his mouth that looked to be made of assorted grasses bound by twine. He took the poultice out of his mouth and spat on the floor, his lips sagging over his gums. The injury made him look like an old man. To the Sheriff's right stepped up a roused giant, whose shoulders were even with the next tallest man's head. The big fellow wore a tunic belted over green hose, bulged out at the crotch, as if it was stuffed with a codpiece.

De Groote usually had an intuition when it came to civil cases. He could size them up, instantly, before he'd even read the writ. But looking at these two ragamuffins standing before him made him scratch his head. He somehow sensed that there was more to this than the writ claimed.

De Groote looked over the document and

rubbed his sore temples. "So, what say you, Mister Forbes? You claim that this man, John Little, assaulted you without provocation and knocked the teeth from your head. Is this correct?"

Forbes hacked and coughed, and de Groote saw into his mouth as it came open. The man sucked in a sloppy breath and a sound, much like a boot sinking into mud, bubbled in the bottom of his throat. Forbes tossed his head back and spat out what looked like a lungful of grease, curdled milk, and sick. Curtis' sympathy for his condition was all that kept him from having Forbes tossed out into the street.

"It is, Mister de Groote. John Little made a fist and cracked me without a word of warning. If you'll look at his right hand, you'll see evidence of his guilt. Ask him to explain what tore the skin off his knuckles, why don't you?"

"Show me your right hand, Mister Little."

John Little, as big as a bear and just as hairy, made a bitter face and held up his right hand, squeezing it into a fist. The skin was almost completely flayed off his knuckles, like two ragged cuts had been made just outside his middle three fingers all the way back to his wrist. The man probably had removed the flap of skin that might have remained. It looked quite painful, and the Sheriff wondered how anyone could possibly survive such a blow to the face, if Little had indeed struck Forbes. The big fellow seemed inordinately strong, the muscles on his chest and neck like the flanks of a warhorse. He looked like he could kill a man with a slap on the back.

"Hmm. The evidence seems difficult to refute. But I can't believe such violence

happened without provocation. What do you say to these charges, Mister Little? Were you drinking?"

John Little shivered with indignance. "Baw! You're right 'bout this not jus' 'appenin', you are, Sheriff," he rumbled. "Should be me handin' yer tha' writ. 'T'was he that done me first, the bastard! He's the one done me!"

Curtis did not appreciate emotional outbursts in court. He sighed and tapped his fingers on the bare tabletop. "What are you saying, Mister Little? That Mister Forbes here threw his head at your fist?"

"No, I...e bit me, the bastard!"

"Bit you. I see. Bit you where? Can you show me?"

The giant man's face suddenly froze. "Eh?"

"You've just made an accusation, Mister Little. Now did he bite you or did he not?"

"H'well, I...yeh."

"And was it this bite that provoked you to strike him in the mouth?"

"Yeh."

"Then show me the bite mark, please. It's evidence, and this is a court of law where we observe evidence when we have cause. Show me."

John Little paused a moment, seeming ever more nervous. Sweat started to gather at his brow and his jaw juddered up and down as he stammered.

"I... Well, I..."

The Sheriff's head was getting worse, and he was starting to get suspicious about this bite. "Do you understand these instructions I've given you, Mister Little?"

"Yeh, sir."

"You do? Good then. Just to clarify

things, what did I just ask you to do?"

"Yer... Yer wanting to see me bite mark."

"Correct. And you do have one, do you not?"

"I do, sir."

"Excellent. So, what should you do next?"

"I..." Little looked suddenly defeated, his once angry, gesticulating hands falling to his sides. To the Sheriff's utter astonishment, the large man began to undo his belt. The Sheriff was going to comment but stopped himself, choosing rather just to watch. John Little slid his green hose to the floor and his feet. Wrapped around his waist was what looked like an infant's swaddling.

"My God, sir! What is all this?" asked the Sheriff. "What have you done to yourself?"

"He bit me here," said John Little, pointing at his crotch. The swaddling was stained and crusted red in the exact center. Bled through. Judging by the brown and yellow stains and streaks, it was obvious the linens had certainly not been clean even before he'd dressed his wound.

The Sheriff's jaw dropped like a sack of grain. "He bit you there?" De Groote stood up and pointed at the red stain as if it were a vision of the Virgin Mary, naked and nursing a hangover. "Right there on your bloody tarse?!"

"Aye," agreed John Little sullenly. The Sheriff was almost speechless, shaking his finger as if it were on fire. He turned to Forbes, eyes ripe.

"Explain yourself, Mister Forbes! How does this..." he wagged his finger, again. "Happen?" Forbes squealed and stiffened, too frightened to talk, but the Sheriff was in no state of mind to be patient. "Well!"

"I... was... I..." mumbled the terrified

plaintiff. De Groote swung around to face John Little.

"Can you explain, Mister Little?"

John rubbed his beard, his eyes pensive.

"T'was like I said, ye see. I 'ad a reason to be hittin' 'im. Just like I said."

"Yes, but..." De Groote shut his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to be calm as his aching head throbbed in time with his pounding heart. He sat down and placed his hands on the table in front of him. When he was ready to continue, he threaded together his fingers and gently addressed the defendant. "I gather now that you struck him *after* he bit you, which is to say it was a reaction, which is natural and perfectly within the boundaries of the King's Law. However, I must ask how this type of injury is possible."

John Little paused for a moment, nervously scratching all over his furry face. "Well, you see, Sheriff... Well..."

"Just tell me what happened, Mister Little. Surely you'd remember a man biting off your cock."

"Well, tha's jus' it, Sheriff. It's not bitten off. You see, well..."

Curtis rolled his eyes. "Well, then, I suppose I should take a look a closer look at the offense. Please undo the dressing and step up to the table."

John Little seemed uncertain but obeyed. He reached and untied a thick knot down between his legs, then started carefully unwrapping the layers of cloth and bandage. The blood had congealed and cemented the layers together, the separation of each crackle and flake revoltingly. De Groote was disgusted. It seemed the distraught John Little hadn't tended the wound so much as

simply covered it up. When Little, at last, had removed all but the final bandage, he grimaced a moment and yanked off the last with a quick yelp and a wince that mirrored the Sheriff's own. Thus, the extent of the injury was revealed to de Groote, as well as the remarkable dimensions of the injured person's business.

"My Lord," said de Groote breathlessly, his eyes rounded out, his head creeping forward. He didn't know what was more astonishing: The painful sight of the wound or the immensity of the offended organ. "I... That looks absolutely dreadful."

John Little's partially eaten tarse hung significantly. Curtis had never seen anything like it. He almost complimented the man. The bite, more of a tear, was off to the side, not on the mushroom top as he'd assumed. After a few moments, Curtis leaned back in his chair, the creaking of it quite audible in the now thickly silent room. People were leaning forward to gape at Little's exposed manhood from both sides, too shocked to even murmur. The only one who didn't seem surprised was Forbes.

Sobered from the view, the Sheriff continued on. "Now Mister Little, you've yet to explain how this happened."

A glance was exchanged between plaintiff and defendant, both men now nervous enough to make it obvious that they'd affronted the law, somehow. In the pause, the Sheriff found himself wanting a second look at Little's gargantuan tool. He stood, then began to sweat, wondering if his gawk was being noticed.

"A second look," he said. "For the sake of clarity. This is a court of law, after all. We cannot skimp upon examination of

evidence.” His second look became a third, then a fourth. Now Curtis was certain he'd been noticed, for the whole court was silent and waiting for him, staring at the Sheriff as he stared at... The evidence. Curtis was unsure he was curious or envious. Further he wasn't sure of the difference. Somehow, he pulled his eyes away and sat back down.

"Well?" asked the Sheriff. "Back to business, Little. So what was it?"

"Ye see, Sheriff..." said Little, his face flushed, his brow creased with worry. He was possibly realizing that his life was on the line. "Is uh bit 'ard to 'splane."

De Groote could see what was coming. Sodomia was a hanging offense, as were all fleshly trysts between men. The Sheriff knew he would hate to administer a capital penalty for such an act, for after all, weren't the monks at Newstead Abbey all bloody sodomites? Rumors went that King Henry II buggered every young man who'd ever changed his bed pan. Some elements of justice were a damned nuisance, something he knew even more acutely now that Stanford the Leper and his children had returned to Nottingham, having been kicked out of Leicester for bathing in the town stew. Damn it all! Who'd ever heard of a leper who washed?

Despite all that, Curtis respected the need for law, to maintain civility. The church hadn't converted all of Britain's bloody pagans just to have them sticking their damned yards in where God intended only evacuation. As Little and Forbes waited for him to respond, he realized he was being afforded too much time to think. Curtis sighed, tired, and resentful of every passing moment. There would be hangings if the

farmer couldn't come up with a reasonable story. "Cover yourself back up, Mister Little. Now tell me what happened before my patience disappears."

John Little quickly wrapped his crotch and pulled up his green hose and flashed a toothy smile. The man was clearly nervous, like a child about to lead a recital of the Lord's prayer before his family. "Well, Sheriff, I came upon Mister Forbes in the forest, ye see," said Little, carefully. "And it did happen forthwith."

"Forthwith, you say. Just like that? So, Mister Forbes, as soon as seeing you, leaped upon you and nibbled your cock?"

"Well..." said Little. "Not as forthwith as all that."

"Ah. So, things did transpire between your meeting and him biting you?"

"Yeh."

"And what things were they?"

"We... Eh..." said John Little, wincing, either at the memory of the assault or the anticipation of his imminent execution. "I can't...er..."

De Groote, above all things, hated liars. Not for their lying, so much, but for the ridiculous zigzags their testimony took, dodging incriminating evidence. A murderer would have the court believe that he had been absolutely in the right when he split open his arthritic mother's skull with a blunt axe to stop her hurling at him a hot bowl of pottage. A rapist would plead for the court to understand that his genitals would have tragically exploded had he not forcefully emptied them into his neighbor's stepdaughter.

Curtis might have been willing to acquit some criminals if they'd just come up with

something bloody clever. Considering how many citizens were missing tongues, ears, and noses already for past offenses, it was obvious how much the people of Nottingham lacked imagination. Instead, the desperation with which they clung to their contrived alibis and forced earnestness had nearly set de Groote off trusting anyone, despite his willingness to entertain clemency for those with creativity. Perhaps time was needed. The exhausted Sheriff pounded his gavel. Little and Forbes flinched from their reticence.

“Let’s continue this tomorrow, for I am weary of it presently. Be back here early. And do some hard thinking.”

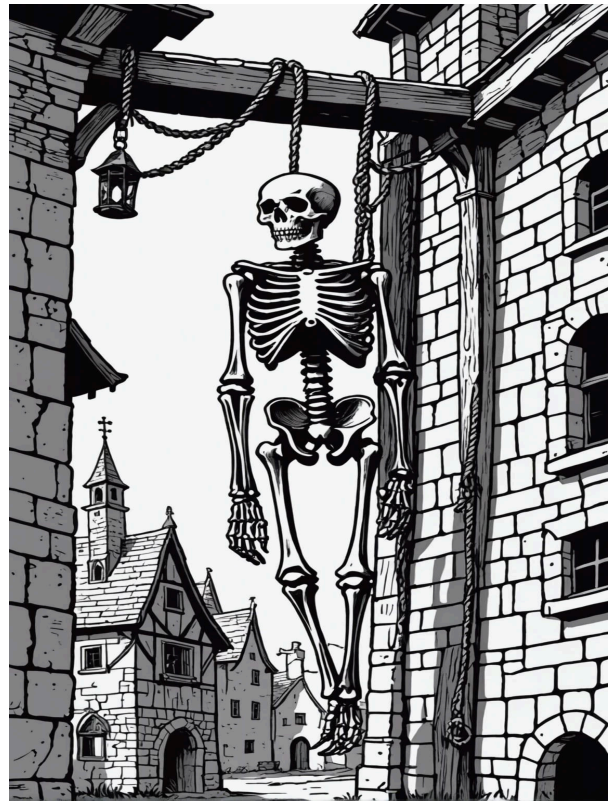
The pounding in De Groote’s head was relentless. He looked around the room, seeking sympathy where none was. *Bloody nutters. If I must endure one more bloody nutter, guilty or not, he’s going to hang. I swear before Christ.*

Fuch placed another writ before the Sheriff. “Poaching, sir.”

De Groote scowled. *Wonderful. Poaching the King’s deer. For that, I can’t look the other way.* He looked up and saw a tall, skinny young man of about seventeen years being led towards the bench. His previous thoughts about hanging were abated and he immediately began formulating a plan for the poor young lad to wiggle out from the charges. But when he looked to read the writ, something in him changed. Anger surged.

“This, Sheriff,” said Fuch. “Is Robin Nutter.”

The End.



Lights of the Lidth

By Alexis Veenendaal

Drektah’s snow-laden boots dragged through the layers of white blanketing the mountainside. Blistering cold spattered her exposed cheeks; She bundled her fur cloak tighter to stave off the wind. Through the slated bone mask over her eyes, protecting her from the blinding rays reflecting the sun on the snow, she saw Anik and followed. Her brother laboured forward, ploughing a path. When he grew tired, they would trade off. That was how it had been for weeks.

They would stop to rest every few hours, cloaking themselves in a wolf-fur blanket stitched with heavy seams. They would eat dried meat rations, chewing with chattering teeth. Afterwards they would pack up their few belongings and Anik would start as the

lead through the snowy mountains, trudging through untouched snow until hunger made them stop.

"The ancestors will favour us," Anik told her, as they huddled beneath the furs in exhaustion.

"I don't feel favoured," Drektah muttered. "I feel cursed."

"The lights," he said, looking up, his breath as steam under the musky furs. "They're brighter here. We're close. I can feel it."

She too had watched the coloured lights snaking across the inky sky, but she didn't share his hope. It was too much to bear, while their peoples' fate rested with them.

The lights were the ancestor's spirits, the *Lidth*, sent to guide them to the Ancient One. The ancestors had chosen Anik to carry such responsibility. The elders had sent him on the journey, along with their best warriors. Drektah insisted on going too. Now, she and her brother were the only two that remained.

"We can do this," he said.

Though the furs trapped their body heat, Drektah couldn't help the familiar shiver passing up her spine; It curled around the back of her neck like the claws of a feral beast. "We never asked for this."

His smile was the only true warmth. "I am here."

A few days later, the cold took him, too, starting the same as it had with the others. They sat beneath the furs sharing the last of their waterskin when Anik unbandaged his foot and revealed his three toes that had completely blackened. "I will be fine," he said, shoving the foot back in his boot.

But of course, he wasn't. And soon the shaking started. Then stopped.

She left his body to freeze like the others because she couldn't do anything else. And still, the lights in the sky gyrated and whirled, ushering her on.

She was alone on the mountain.

* * *

Drektah stood on the rise of a cliff; Below it spanned a large valley. Nestled upon layers of rock were signs of green, and a half-frozen stream with cracking ice where a waterfall pushed trickling froth past thick, rippling sheets. She'd forgotten the sound of running water or the sight of anything but the mountain's blanched indifference. She dropped her cloak to expose her bare face to the sunlight pouring through the clouds.

The ancestors had led her, just as Anik promised. "Sielijkt," she said in whispered prayer, touching a gloved finger to the spot just above her eye. *Faith renewal*.

Drektah broke through the ice and dunked her face into the water, sucking down as much as she could before splashing out of the icy stream with a gasp. Her face numbed in the air. Only when her aching belly was full did she notice the subtle rumbling behind the frozen waterfall, and the shadowed shape of a colossal beast.

A great opalescent eye blinked at her through the ice.

Drektah stumbled back, falling over her feet and landing painfully.

The beast unfolded itself from the rock, splitting the waterfall and sending massive icicles smashing to the ground. The lights of a thousand spirits twisted around its

night-black body in shifting greens and blues. It stretched to its full height and stood like a small mountain, then levelled its huge serpentine snout to her. Its immense wings quivered around its bulk.

The beast's voices shook the air as more *Lidth* lights sprang up around its glowing eyes. "What are you doing here!?" They demanded.

Drektah fell to her knees. "Ancient One!" she cried, somehow finding her words. "I have come on behalf of my people." Her voice cracked as she spoke the last syllable.

The Ancient One tilted their head, and somehow, she knew it was a gesture to go on.

She raised her courage to speak trembling words. "An unending cold covers our land, blanketing our people in ice and death. Our elders sent a group to find you. My brother and I travelled for months. Please, can you help us? Can you warm the land before my people starve?"

The Ancient One's eyes roamed the blanched slopes beyond the green valley.

"You would ask me to stop nature itself?" They boomed.

Drektah's voice was a hoarse whisper. She could not believe she had travelled so far, and lost her brother, for nothing. "I ask only that you spare my people." She couldn't hold back the tears. They froze halfway down her cheeks. "*Please.*"

"Where is your brother, girl?"

Drektah swallowed the ache in her throat. "I am alone."

The beast let out a low rumble. Its massive snout bent towards her until it was mere feet from her face. Drektah didn't dare speak as Their breath bathed her with

mulch-scented air. "I cannot leave this valley. But I can bestow what you seek."

"... bestow?"

"Take my light and heal what has broken." The Ancient One's voices were a thrum, more inside her head than out. Before she could speak – before she could ask what They meant – the great beast dipped Their head and gently touched the tip of Their snout to Drektah's upturned face.

A burst of sky lights exploded and Drektah collapsed into darkness.

* * *

When she awoke, she was alone in the valley, lying on packed snow. No running water, no green grass. She blinked up at the starlight. She'd grown so used to the *Lidth* above that the absence felt like a void.

She felt a strange warmth and looked down. Her hands radiated light. It danced over her, almost playful. She felt a pulse of something in her, a strength she hadn't felt before. She sensed a pull to the sky, drawing her to her feet. She stood and the lights hugged her.

"Drektah...?"

She spun around. No one. She was alone.

"Drektah."

"... brother?"

"Yes, I am here."

"Here. Where? I don't see you." *You're dead*, she thought.

"The lights," her brother's voice came, clear as if he was standing beside her. "I am in the lights. I am with you."

She felt the power spark from her

fingertips and saw it shine all around her. Drektah was glad, for now they could save their people. Together.

The End.



The Mists of Gaulion

By Daniel Cano

All Agelatus could see was the mist beyond the bonfires of the camp. Marking the borders of their impromptu base, they were unable to illuminate the gray wall blocking his view of the valley. He realized

he was staring into nothingness, or a close approximation of it. The mist was real since he could feel it glide across his face whenever the gentle zephyrs blew. But the shape of this shifting creature had no definite size. This imposing mass had no up, down, left, or right to comfort his senses. Days of guard duty had melted his memory of entering these foreign lands and his wits had become eroded. All he knew was why he let the mist envelop him.

The Mavoran Republic sent the Fifth Company to Gaulion to quell the emerging revolts. The republic sought to instill order across the mountains and valleys. Before, the land was rife with chieftains vying for domination over one another. They were wild men who painted tattoos of beasts and eerie symbols on their pale skin. Cloaks made from the hides of ferocious beasts covered their muscular bodies. Their weapons and shields bore unintelligible runic script. Reports from previous Mavoran Companies noted that they followed soothsayers into battle. They were figures masked with the painted skulls of animals. They carried rods decorated with bones and glittering baubles. The language of these leaders, like that of their devoted, unsettled those accustomed to the noble Mavoran tongue.

But they were still men and could be brought into the fold of civilization. He saw it firsthand while passing through the tributary lands. Learned rhetoricians dedicated themselves to teaching the language with varying degrees of success. Those willing to learn became translators for the republic. Some even served positions as officials in the tributary governments. They

abandoned their bestial cloaks and wore proper clothing, unstained by tribal violence. They weren't Mavoran in the eyes of the republic, but their acceptance of Mavoran custom allowed them to be the next best thing.

It was those who rejected the Mavoran Republic that caused him to worry. It was the unfortunate effect of introducing civility to the wild. While some embraced Mavoran custom, others dedicated themselves to armed defiance. They were the raiders pillaging the colonies for their food and wealth. Survivors who managed to escape their wrath recounted nightmarish tales of howling killers gripped with madness and bloodlust. Any foolhardy to behold their eyes swore that a vile creature had blessed their insanity.

The Fifth Company consisted of hardened soldiers from all over the Mavoran Republic. But even the most war-scarred felt their stomachs churn entering the grove temples. A veteran and commander of the Fifth Company, Maius Delimius Superbus, spared no gruesome detail when dealing with the recruits. He did so to test their mettle and prevent any future losses. Maius would default to the story of his first victory over the Gaulic barbarians in the Beldurem Forest.

A man roughly in his late thirties, he was the idealized soldier. He possessed the virtues of a dutiful soldier and bore a winding scar across the left side of his face. Though he could still see, it left his eye clouded and unblinking. Few men knew what had caused the mark of war and fewer dared to defy rank and ask.

The scar helped Maius Delimius deliver

the Beldurem Forest story to the recruits. Whenever he did, he made sure to focus on the grove altars where the Gaulic barbarians performed sacrifices. He told that part because the recruits feared it the most and often begged him to stop. He explained the telltale signs of grounds used for sacrifice. The surrounding trees bore deep gashes, ones that could be mistaken for the claw marks of a bear. The only difference would be the footprints of men in place of bears encircling the tree. The foolhardy, who oft ventured further, found the surrounding underbrush and thorny bushes wilder. The cawing of ravens would grow louder, and the air would be thick with unfamiliar burning herbs. It was at the heart of the grove that demonstrated the brutality of the wild men.

Agelatus had never seen a ritual in practice and prayed to the Oracle that he never did see one. All he could see was what remained from their revels. The battered body of a man or woman, often a captive of war, was bound to a sturdy tree. They often bore painted symbols made from a mixture of blackroot and water. Symbols around the mouth, heart, and stomach were often concentrated around those places. The area around the stomach was always in the worst condition. Maius Delimius explained that they took their weapons and tore out their intestines. They dangled from the stomach like withered rope.

Maius Delimius had once remarked that he dreaded what screams had escaped their final moments. The Gaulic converts who served as Company translators had explained to him the cause of their gruesome deaths. The captives were sacrifices to

portend the success of a battle. Though it mattered not if they won or lost, the translators explained, they would fight brutally anyway.

It was the same story he'd been told when he first joined the Fifth Company. It succeeded in scaring him out of his wits the first time he was subjected to it. He couldn't see the Gaulions like men for a while and was wary of the converts within the camps after a few years of service. His anxiety whittled away into disgust after fighting for so long. Though none as gruesome as the one Maius Delimius described, he had seen these grove altars himself a couple of times. They were vile things to behold, and he often had to comfort the newer soldiers from the horror.

One thing was for certain, he admired Maius Delimius' bluntness in his descriptions. Every grove altar had a few variations between them. Some spots had larger pools of blood and others were littered with gnawed bones. But they always had the sacrifice bound to the tree, painted with the symbols, and their internals made external.

Time dragged on his psyche as the memories of his service seemed to paint themselves against the imposing mist. It was the call of his name that broke his burdened consciousness.

"Agelatus."

"Hmm?"

"Superbus has ordered the watch rotation for the riverside wall."

"Ah, thank you, Casorias. I hope you enjoy watching the mist."

"I pray to the Oracle that it's just mist. We barely survived that ambush through the pass."

"Then you should keep your senses keen."

"I shall. Rest well for the march to Irhaem will most likely be shrouded in mist as well."

Agelatus nodded before he left Casorias at his station. Descending from the ladder, he made his way toward his tent. Opening the flap and entering, he removed his helmet and loosened the straps of his armor around his chest. Rest came easy to some in the camp but the ambush and mist had left him weary of his surroundings. He did his best to relax as he lay on his cot.

When Agelatus awoke, his sense of time had left him. His body felt heavy and pulled toward the earth. Yet he managed to get up and don the rest of his armor. He emerged from his tent and looked up to see the last of the golden rays of the sun dip below the horizon. The mist, though still fearsome in its presence, had died down. Some Mavoran soldiers were walking around camp, perhaps taking the last shift before everyone was to retire. In the center of the camp, a few torch posts illuminated a gathering congregation. Agelatus made his way over and found himself horrified at the sight of a mutilated body.

Someone had decimated the right shoulder and lower jaw of the corpse. The jaw dangled to the side, barely attached to the rest of the skull. Agelatus' careful eye noticed that none of the teeth were missing. Instead, there were deep cuts along the roof of the mouth and inner jowls. The face caught in a perpetual scream could no longer experience peace in death.

The veins of the body seemed filled with a questionable black tint. Like lightning

scarring the flesh of a stricken tree, the black veins infested the body and concentrated around the lungs. The skin seemed like a thin vellum and a window to the bruised internals of the body. Whatever caused the death of this corpse had taken wild forms in the worried minds of the soldiers.

“The perimeter around camp must be checked,” Maius Delimius ordered. “Have a small group of men test the integrity of the fort walls. Have our quickest horse and rider send a message back to Vineam. We may need more men if we wish to hasten the destruction of these barbarians. Have someone burn the body and seal the jar tight.”

“Yes, commander.”

The soldiers set out to fulfill his orders, and Maius Delimius turned to those who had gathered around the body.

“Since you are under my command, I owe you an explanation of our situation. The enemy threatens us and attempts to instill fear amongst our ranks. This once proud Gaulo-Mavoran is now a bloodied corpse. He was tossed before the gate for us to find. The barbarian does not know honor or integrity when it involves brotherly bonds. We must root them out like weeds in a field and spare them no mercy lest the roots of their foul minds grow once more. Those of you here shall join me for an excursion into the mist.”

A deafening silence overcame his audience. Apprehension was palpable on their tongues. Maius Delimius, though sworn to defend the Mavoran Republic, understood the fears of his men. Even in his bravery, they were his fears, too. Agelatus stood forward and raised his sword, and

those around him beheld him.

“I have followed you before. I shall follow you now.”

Slowly the men began to raise their swords and swear their efforts to this deadly mission. Maius Delimius raised his sword in response and ordered the men to meet at the gate with supplies. He turned to Agelatus and beckoned him over.

“You surely have come far with me, Agelatus. I can’t say I’ve ever had a soldier more devoted to the republic than you.”

“You’ve seen us through dangerous missions, sir. Any other Company in the republic would be honored to serve under you.”

Maius Delimius laughed heartily while Agelatus stood at attention. The mist beyond them had thinned out more and revealed the long-lost stars above.

“I will need you at your best. The translators spoke with me and explained to me what those savages have done to this man.”

“Shouldn’t we let the other men know, sir?”

“My trust is in you, Agelatus. You have been forged in combat, but a few of these men are still raw. Since boyhood, they’ve been told stories of the distant barbarian. They’ve come to fight them as men do, but these people do not act like men.”

“Beasts, sir.”

Maius Delimius was silent. He looked toward the mist and scowled.

“Sometimes worse.”

After a few minutes, a party of about ten readied themselves in front of the fort’s gate. Maius Delimius looked up at the watchtower and signaled them. The guard in the crow’s

nest began to turn a wheel as the doors opened. The party passed through the doors and entered the chilling mist of the Gaulion valley. As they passed through, Agelatus looked back at those who stayed behind. Some pitifully raised their fists as a sign of solidarity. Others watched them depart with solemnity in their eyes.

The march into the Gaulion mist reached its first hour. Aside from the occasional startling raven cry or shifting zephyr, the valley seemed dead. Agelatus marched just a few men behind Maius Delimius, watching him lead the party along an established Mavoran route. Two men had the task of illuminating the surrounding area with torches. Agelatus felt a chill rise along his spine as the sight of a treeline broke through the mist. Maius Delimius raised his hand to stop their march.

“Canus and Celerus, bring the oil pots here. Merula and Severus bring the torches as well. Your orders are to spread the oils as best you can along the trees. Once we’re out, we’ll set a blaze to the forest. Be conservative with the oil, we don’t have much to spare. The rest of you set your shields high and blades close.”

The soldiers assumed their formation as the oil and torch bearers trailed behind them. The men marched into the trees and followed Maius Delimius’s direction. Agelatus’ eyes wandered everywhere in the forest. The mist around him marched with him, darting behind trees and hiding in the canopies.

Though Agelatus’ greaves protected his legs, he felt the thorny brambles scrape him. His helmet felt heavy upon his head and his armor started to tighten around his chest.

Agelatus readjusted the blade in his hand over and over, feeling that he couldn’t get a good grip on it. The scent of burning, bitter herbs took hold of his nose. He glanced toward the others and saw that their eyes began to dart left and right. They knew the stories and Agelatus could see their resolve begin to waver. If there were still any among them clinging to bravery, the sound of Gaulic chanting and screaming cries did away with them.

Their voices growled through the mist and called out to unholy names. As the men approached the sounds, they saw the light of a roaring bonfire. It reached toward the sky at incredible heights and lashed around to the tempo of the chants.

Twenty of the barbaric Gaulions knelt by the fire, dressed in their flayed animal skins. They used the animal heads to obscure their faces while they sang fervently. One among them stood like a giant and was, in no doubt, the shadowy priest. The priestly figure stood by a sturdy tree dressed in a flowing shawl made of deer hide. The sound of cascading water erupted from the staff they carried. It was the deer skull crowned on their head that blurred the line between human and monster. The skull must have been fresh, for its hue was a sickly pinkish white and still had bits of deer flesh dangling from it. The antlers of the headwear unfurled into six points. Etched into the skull was the script of these wild men painted black to stand out. The eye sockets of the deer skull replaced those of the priest and no human light shone from them. Agelatus dread to think that the mask was this priest’s true face.

But this dark druid did not cause solely the horror. No, for it also lay with the

sacrifice bound to the tree. Agelatus had only seen the aftermath of these depraved rituals. Now his fortune betrayed him and sorrow embraced him. The nude man struggled and cried in his Gaulic tongue. He seemed to be of barbaric stock, like those who were performing the ritual. Pity erupted from Agelatus' heart, for in the man's screams, he knew he wanted no part of this.

The priest procured a dagger of iron inlaid with burning onyx stone inlaid within the hilt. They thrust their hand and blade into the raging bonfire, crying out in ecstasy. The worshippers cried out with approval as the priest, raising their fire-scarred hand, pierced the stomach of the bound man. Reciting the vile incantation, the script written on the deer skull began to glow with a heinous, fiery sheen. Goaded by the desire of the barbarians, the priest slowly opened the stomach of the sacrifice. Agelatus didn't know why merciful death didn't descend upon the man. His hollering grew only more intense as the priest removed the dagger.

Agelatus prayed that his senses were failing him when the depraved sight made his belly queasy. The bound man continued his screams as the markings around his mouth and heart began to glimmer. The intestines that dangled from his stomach started to twitch and slither the same way snakes strangle prey from tree branches.

The ritual approached its climax as a glimmering wind blew inside the body of the bound man. Something inhuman writhed inside him as a bubble formed within his chest above his heart. It rose toward the throat before a furred arm burst out from the mouth. The forceful emergence of the arm shattered the lower jaw as it sought purchase

on the corpse's body. The hand continued to emerge from the corpse's mouth as the priest presented itself to the daemonic appendage. The furred and hairy fingers slowly entered the priest's mouth.

The Gaulic barbarians quickly became possessed with madness as their chants echoed amongst the fire and mist of the altar grove. They raised their hands and weapons to the sky and chanted one single word. The word chanted in perfect unison didn't grow any louder. But Agelatus could feel the word eat away at his body and soul. Amid the metaphysical destruction, Agelatus managed to hear something else that brought him back to reality.

"Kill them!" Maius Delimius yelled with sword raised high.

Though he didn't will it so, Agelatus felt his body lunge forward. His fear began to mix with his fury as the soldiers emerged from their hiding places. The chanting froze on an uncompleted syllable and the Gaulic barbarians attempted to defend themselves. Agelatus couldn't tell what fueled the strength in his arm to swing. He hacked and maimed without remorse, as if doing so could erase the presence of evil. The stories of these wild men proved true again as they bit into the Mavoran soldiers. Their wide eyes harbored something mindless and wanting in them. Their red, pulsing veins seemed like hands forcing their eyes to look straight ahead. It only furthered Agelatus' need to see them slain.

When it was done the bonfire flickered alone, standing to testify the defeat of Gaulic barbarians. The ground was rich with the slain and dismembered. The Mavoran soldiers looked around, their bloodlust

simmering.

Maius Delimius called them over, and the men gathered. They saw their commander standing by the tree. The corpse had no signs of life remaining. Unlike the one from camp, half a severed arm dangled from the mouth. It swayed in the wind. Maius Delimius pointed to the felled body of the druid. On the ground was the other half of the arm lodged deep inside the mouth of the dead foe. There was no sword wound on its body that the commander could claim as his kill. Instead, the hand of whatever dark creature the Gaulic barbarians had attempted to summon had ripped apart the priest's throat. Perhaps that was why none had heard the scream among the other dying Gaulions. The men looked to Maius Delimius for orders.

"Heap every single body into the bonfire. Light the oil and burn the grove. If we get reprimanded, I'll take the punishment. Few men in the Republic Assemeblia would believe these things were happening along the borders of the republic. I'll convince them one day, but that is not today."

Maius Delimius turned to his men and saw them raise their swords high. A salute reserved only for those of the highest authority. Maius Delimius raised his sword toward them so that he could honor them.

"You have joined me in these unholy endeavors. There is no honor higher in this world than calling you all my brothers. Let's leave this profane ground at once."

The Mavorans hurled the bodies into the fire, spitting on them before they let the fire have its due share. For the corpse bound to the tree, Agelatus did little to convince the men to give him a proper Mavoran burial. When all was said and done and the men left

the grove, Maius Delimius pointed out the oil that Canus and Celerus had left behind. Merlua and Severus lit the trails ablaze, and the men watched the fire rush into the forest. Though the fire and oil were not consecrated in origin, Agelatus sensed that the men found comfort in seeing them reduce those evil bodies to ash, which alleviated them a little.

The march back to the fort was silent except for the gentle wind dispersing the mist around them. The men were hailed with honors and cheers, and many returned to their tents after indulging in undiluted wine. Before Agelatus went to his tent, he went searching for Maius Delimius, and he found him by a dying campfire drinking alone.

"Commander."

"Yes, Agelatus."

"I have a question to ask you."

"Proceed."

"How long have you served on the Gaulic front for the Republic?"

"I entered when I was sixteen. Since then I've never left. I'd say twenty years, Agelatus. Twenty years of fighting these depraved Gaulions. Seeing them worship those dark things in their minds and hearts. I entered the military hoping to settle new lands for the republic. My brother became a politician since he had such a sly tongue. It was like that since youth; I fought, and he talked."

"Do you plan—"

"Plan to retire? If it were up to me, I wouldn't. I admire one thing about these Gaulic men and every Concordian barbarian out on the fringes of the Republic. They die a noble death fighting. The Republic has rules about being commander for too long,

so they'll sign my retirement papers soon enough. Though I pray that by then these lands will know civilization and abandon darkness for light."

Agelatus was silent as he sat opposite his commander. He finally saw what others may have blocked from their vision. The torment of age in emerging white hairs and wrinkles around the glorious war scar. How many times had Maius Delimius fought against the horde only to feel defeated by himself?

"Who will become our general, then?"

"Who could I ask to bear this silent burden? What man should I condemn to fight daemons while others live leisurely?"

"I offer myself."

Maius Delimius smiled as he beheld Agelatus. The stoic and unsmiling soldier who entered his regiment in the spring of youth now turned hallowed by war.

"Then my dream will surely come true with you in charge. The men pay you great respect when I'm unavailable. I'm certain they would follow you without question or doubt. When we reach Irhaem I'll send a letter to the Assemeblia for my retirement and your promotion. Go get your rest. The city shines on you, son."

Agelatus rose and saluted Maius Delimius before heading to his tent. He watched the soldier leave and returned to his drinking. He looked high and could see again the stars once hidden by the mist. With it gone, he could count the stars and trace the paths they hid in the black velvet night.

The End.

Violence's Red End

By Joel Glover

The temple roof made a noise halfway between a yawn and a groan as it collapsed into the pyre beneath. Beside me Kas laughed.

"Even their god doesn't care about them!" He had to yell to be heard over the cackling of the fire and the screams of the women and children he had pushed inside before barring the door.

I do not know how many temples I had burned, or seen aflame, in a lifetime of doing my holy work. There was nothing unusual about the blaze itself, the sizzle of flesh rendering within, the crackling of glazing giving way, the shimmer of the heat.

There was nothing unusual at all about that day, until there was.

The hiss of the flames yielded to a howl, the birthing shriek of the earth spawning something infernal, a thing of bared teeth and tusks which ripped its way through a bleeding wound into the world. A demon, limbs like knife blades, skin the colour of clotting blood, shrouded in the reek of things long dead. It scuttled from the fire on bodkin-tipped feet glowing as if lit from within by the inferno which had birthed it, rubble sliding off it like grains of sand cascading down the side of a dune. The scorched stone and charring timbers which were all that remained of their church shattered under its weight as it stalked us.

Kas turned to run, not fast enough, his flight ending as a tusk as long as a spear pierced him. He wailed as it pawed him, rending him, transforming him from a man of violence to violence's red end. My feet

refused to move as I watched it swallow him, the joints of his bones writhing within its gullet as if he was struggling to escape. I watched his face, his screaming face, slide down the inside of its throat and disappear into the scabbed horror of its chest. I watched it cough up his hand, still clutching his favourite knife.

I ran then, too. We all did, scattering like children playing catch-if-catch-can. All thought of duty, of faith, drowning in a pool of blood and despair.

There was one road to that place, one road in and one road out, stretching between civilisation and desolate waste. Travellers were warned not to step from the road lest the desert consume them. Some fools in our number heeded that advice, and found themselves devoured by something equally implacable. The beast sped across the stone of the road, faster than any horse, faster than any man could run even when inspired by terror. I watched over my shoulder as it tore flesh and smashed bone. I ran into the desert, though the sand sought ever to pull me down. When the noise of feasting stopped, I knew it was now pursuing us.

I saw it take more men as we fled, splitting dunes with its poniard paws, sending men tumbling as their footing disappeared. I ran, as my lips cracked and my skin blistered. I ran until the sun set then ran onwards into the dark, stumbling and falling. It was silent in its hunger, gliding across the sound, betrayed only by the cries of its victims. I ran, ran until the screams of dying friends no longer reached my bleeding ears.

Eventually, a lucky few reached an oasis, where we rallied. When I thrust the brand

into the eaves of the temple, we had been threescore and eight, dressed in the ivory of our vestments. Now we were a bloodied and sweat-stained seven, truly a blessed number for the mercy we'd received. We drank deep of the cool water, muddying the pool as we plunged our hands into its shallows. Water and prayer calmed our minds. All that night we huddled, listened, and waited. The creature did not come.

In the light of a new day we stumbled back to the monastery with new proof of our righteousness. For all their insidious lies about peace and forgiveness the religion of the heathen was shown to be naught but dark magic and witchcraft. We told all who would listen of the demon they had summoned, sacrificing their own children in a vile rite to conjure a beast of damnation. Proclaimed from pulpits and whispered in frightened ears, the truth spread. Those few fools who had bleated for tolerance and acceptance were dragged from their homes and stoned, accomplices to the dark magics befouling our holy realm.

Voices were raised in council, furies stoked to a furnace blast. We burned more temples, killed more pagans. Their vile and unholy actions, their mere presence polluted the land, an affront to all that was good. I could not count the number of pagan curs that died whimpering on my spearpoint, given in sacrifice to our god or theirs. I cared not.

Each time my blade met flesh I saw that crimson demon in my mind, felt the terror that had fixed me in place as it had closed its fangs around the ruin of my friend, washed that terror away with the glory of vengeance. Each time I closed my eyes, I saw its

sanguinary glare.

The devil worshippers raised more monsters, more demons, tearing their way into the world and thirsting for the flesh of the devout. Corrupt spirits, conjured with the dying gasps of infidels each one was more horrifying than the last, twisted things of folklore or half-heard fireside whispers.

A shamble-man, formed from the corpses of children, clawed its way out of a catacomb to devour a bishop. A ghostly widow, shrouded in night, dragged a priest screaming from his bed and drank her fill of his blood, leaving him an empty husk wrapped in a velvet sash. The bricks from a scriptorium crumbled to razor sharp dust, swirling in a dervish spiral which shredded the men who had been sent to destroy sacrilegious tracts. Rumour said that it spun through the streets, scouring believer and unbeliever alike, stained crimson with the blood of its victims.

If I had not seen the first demon, I might have thought the tales the babbling of soft men safe behind city walls.

Some creatures made nests, in the high places, knitting bones into skeletal thickets. They spawned there, new waves of horror and filth spilling forth. Some clouded minds with fear and anguish, lurking in the shadows, digging up graves to suck the marrow from the cracked bones of the newly dead. Spectral hands stole children from their beds.

To bring the age of terror to an end the Holy Father proclaimed the need to war without mercy. All men aged under a score and one took up arms. All men who were too poor to avoid doing so at least. The most charmed and blessed took shelter behind a

screen of silver and gold, protected from the violence of the world by their gilded raiment.

Heretics, non-conformists, and apostates were killed or driven out. Their few remaining groves were uprooted, the soil beneath salted. Standing stones were scoured until no mark of supplication remained. Farms were ploughed under, crops burned. The land at our border became a wasteland haunted by the spirits of the slain and carrion-eaters beyond counting. When people speak of that war they call it the Time of the Jackal, the Vultures' Hour.

The Consuls declared victory. The armies were disbanded. The Orders Most Militant allowed men to renounce their vows, or change them, to better serve the people. I kept the faith, searching out enemies within, ever vigilant.

Mothers of sons slain, fathers of sons crippled, found cold comfort in the parades and holy days which followed. The dead were exalted martyrs, who had done holy work and found their place in paradise. Those claims did nothing to fill the bellies of children who could not fish or farm for themselves. Children went hungry in the street even as the Consuls compounded their claims with calls for a day of feasting.

Declarations do not slay demons, nor could they clear the miasma of fear which clouded the streets. Food soured on the table. Plagues of locusts consumed crops. Husbands awoke with bloody knives in their hands and spouses dead at their feet. Martial brothers were found in their cells, suspended from the rafters on ropes made from their own guts. The spawn of the creatures in the mountains returned, haunting the passes.

Then the foreigners came.

Dressed in burnished brass and rich leather, they formed squares, not lines. Their spears clouded the skies like flocks of crows, heavy points dragging down our shields, short iron swords making light work of our armour.

We had made war so long amongst ourselves, against our fear, that we were unfit to face more mundane foes.

Children were taken, shackled, sold.

The invaders allowed adults to live, if they submitted to bondage. The marks of our status as slaves were branded onto our faces, a burning iron pressed onto our cheeks. Their holy sign on one side, the mark of our owner on the other. If you screamed or fought the iron might shatter your teeth in your jaw or boil your eye in its socket.

And though our idols were shattered, our churches filled with the icons of their faith, our people brought low, our monsters remained.

Lurking within us, hiding beneath the sands, waiting in the shadows, waiting, always waiting.

One day I found a stone in the grounds of my owner's field, a flint, its sharp edges glittering in the sun. It called to me with a voice like bone crumbling beneath a boot heel.

In the dark of night I drew it down my arms, opening the veins, blood pooling in my palms.

My demon came for me then and dipped its snout in the scarlet taste of me, savouring it. As it opened those red jaws wide, I saw that my soul was already trapped between its teeth.

It had been all along.

The End.

The Owl

By J. J. Egosi

The forest whispered gentle tunes through the calm fall winds. I ventured into the peaceful night in search of an explanation or proof, perhaps, of a reported strange sighting in the night sky.

My eyes peered over the web of barren branches, gazing at the ivory moon—the moon, stars, and pitch-black canvas were all I could find beyond the fog. Doubts started to settle in; Perhaps I was being swindled by the people of my less-than-savory town into believing there was a supernatural occurrence in these woods. At the same time, I kept up hope that there could be some truth to the rumors of a castle in the sky.

I marched through the narrowing trail, hearing the faint chirps of crickets and the hooting of owls. Something raced by, through the shadows. I made out a grin lurking in the darkness. Perplexed and rather nervous, since I thought I was here alone, I pursued this most unusual specter of my vision.

I was fairly certain it caught my stare. It began to move quicker, leaping over the creeks and ducking under branches. I moved faster, determined to understand what this entity was. I ran until we were just ten feet apart, with just a few trees between us, when it paused.

My heart pounded. The creature turned toward me, flashing a haunting smile. From underneath the veil of its ebony silhouette came the face of a man, a most peculiar one with a pinkish face that resembled a rat's. There was a bit too much hair on either side of his face for my comfort. His nose was

rather pointed, and his upper teeth protruded.

“Seems you’ve caught me,” he said. “What a tenacious man you must be... stalking the shadows.”

I gulped at the sight of his grin. I still hadn’t any idea who or even what he was. Was he even human?

“It wasn’t my intention to disturb,” I said. “I’m chasing a supposed castle hanging in the sky. Perhaps you’re here for the same thing and can tell me if there’s any truth to the outlandish stories?”

He looked at me and stretched his grin from ear to ear. “Outlandish, indeed.”

My eyes sank with disappointment. “Are you telling me I’ve been led astray?”

“Oh, not at all.” He stepped closer and patted me on the shoulder. My skin crawled from the sudden embrace of his bony fingers. “I’m saying there’s far more beyond the fog than your eyes would have you believe.”

I tilted my head to the right. What was he trying to tell me? What exactly did he know? His attention then turned toward another trail in the distance.

“You’ll need to summon it—the castle that floats over these woods.”

My eyes widened. I was almost positive he was joking. Just what sort of lunatic had I found in this forest?

“Summon a castle?” I asked.

“Yes. To do so requires a rather peculiar ritual and specific ingredients.”

I could only imagine manifesting the various spells and incantations I’d studied in the old Miskeritonic library after hours. I didn’t believe any of them could be true, yet he spoke with such conviction. And I wanted to see this castle.

“What ingredients would I need?”

He grinned and leaned closer. “You’ll need to start with these three herbs found down that path behind me...” I looked toward my left. For whatever reason, the shadows seemed darker, and the trees devoid of their essence. “Oleander, hemlock, and lilies of the valley. A large handful of each.”

My eyes widened. “You jest? All those plants are poisonous.”

“You’ll also need the tail of a rat and the eye of a frog. Extract the parts while the animals are still alive. Otherwise, the ritual will fail.”

I gulped at the morbidity of this list and questioned whether I had the stomach to attain what he asked for.

“Lastly, a sharpened stick dipped in the blood of the one performing this ritual. In this case, yours.”

My face flushed. There was no veering from his stoic red eyes. I took a deep breath and nodded.

“You’re not tricking me, are you? I perform this ritual, and a castle will appear in the sky?”

“That is correct.”

“What is? Did you answer my first or second question?”

His only response was a docile chuckle. I looked at the darkened clouds, which somehow appeared clearer, as if sprouting the seeds of my doubt.

“And what do I do once I attain all these ingredients?” I asked.

“Gather them in the meadow eighty paces from where we stand. Place them in a circle and wait for the owl’s hoot. All will be made clear.”

“The hoot of an owl?” I raised an

eyebrow. “But that isn’t—”

He vanished—swallowed into the shadows, leaving me alone with this scavenger hunt.

What he told me wasn’t clear at all, nor did it sound possible. One thing he said was true, however; There’s more to this world than what lies beyond the fog. For years, I’d studied such occurrences and read about the bizarre creatures that inhabited this land. Perhaps there was more fact than fiction to this ritual.

I took a deep breath and set off on the scavenger hunt, starting with the three plants.

I walked down the darkened path, gazing at the bushels of plants by every stone and tree. These grounds were more fertile than they would have me believe. The variety of plants was quite impressive, yet also deadly. Nearly every leaf or root by my ankles could kill me if I got too close. I dug into my long coat for a pair of gloves.

I found the first of the three plants he listed—oleander. Their long and dipping petals were as mesmerizing as they were lethal for those unaware of the plant’s touch. I carefully plucked about a dozen and placed them in my knapsack before moving on.

Next was hemlock. Its tiny white petals in clusters hardly drew my attention. I probably walked past a few bushels before finding the one before the rotten tree. These were far from subtle if consumed. I yanked a handful of them before shaking off the shivering sensation I got from being around so much poison.

Last of the plants were lilies of the valley, so dainty and small like teacups. I remember reading of a seductress of the same name

that fostered the world’s earliest sins. I wondered if her temptation had inspired the emotion these plants would give you. Regardless of my speculation, I needed them for this ritual. I took a dozen of them and stuffed them into my knapsack before leaving this lethal path for the pond up ahead.

I wasn’t looking forward to gathering the next few ingredients. However, the bogs were full of croaking frogs. I just needed one of their eyes.

I looked around for the largest one, believing it would be the easiest to keep from slipping, and found one perched on a rock. I took light steps toward it with my hands out, holding my breath.

I was just inches away now, but it still didn’t seem to notice me. In that moment however, doubt filled me. I always disliked humans for the way they mocked my fascination with the occult. Animals of all kinds, however, I liked. They never judged my interests. They never bothered me. This frog was no different, so could I harm it? I couldn’t. There was no way. It turned toward me, and I had no choice but to abandon this venture and hope I could grow wings to fly toward this elusive castle instead.

I heard something in the water a few feet away. I stepped forward to investigate and found a severely injured frog laying on its back. Its guts were pouring out, and it had bite marks burrowed within. It seemed a larger animal—a snapping turtle, perhaps—had attacked it. There were no other creatures around as it struggled to hold on to life. Its eye would be sufficient for the ritual, and the frog looked as if it would die soon, anyway.

I had to close my eyes, rather selfishly, given what I was taking. I kneeled and wrapped my hands around it. I slid my thumb across its body, feeling for what felt like eyes. Everything was so slimy. I reached for a potential opening and a bulge out of the head. In a swift motion, I plucked what I needed.

I tried to rid myself of this memory. I stormed from the forest in tears and guilt, leaving the frog alone to die.

It was heartbreaking as it was a sobering reminder of my childhood. I'd lost many relatives, my father included, yet their demise never bothered me; Nature merely ran its course. No medicine could save them, and that was all. But with this frog, I felt so empty, torn and scavenged, like how I treated it.

In my mind, I could see the haunting punishment for my actions reaching out with a purple claw. Fog of the same shade plagued every corner. There came the screams of those I'd lost, torn away. I dropped to my knees. What was I supposed to do?

I didn't have to ask myself; I made the wrong decision, and I knew it. A part of me now agreed with the mockery I'd always received. How could I defend something like this with just curiosity? Perhaps I hoped to prove the naysayers wrong in the end. To show them the value that comes with knowledge.

I still had two ingredients to gather. The next was a rat's tail. Hopefully, if I imagined the face of the man I encountered prior and his more human characteristics, I could make gathering this piece easier.

I looked toward the trees for one

scurrying across the bark. I could hear squeaking in the distance, loudening amidst the sound of flapping wings.

I walked toward what appeared to be a nest high in the branches, where many owls sat inside. I watched the mother owl feed worms to its many kin when the sight of a rat told me she was also hungry.

If the rat would be food in the end, who was I to save it? Just like the frog was likely to be eaten soon, so would the rat. That was the flow of nature; You eat or be eaten. I was merely taking a piece for myself.

I reached for the rat with both hands, hoping for a quick pull. My attempt got the owl's attention, and we met eyes. It turned into a competition for the vermin, and I couldn't afford to make a mistake.

I held my breath and lunged forward. I grabbed the rat by the tail and body right before the owl swooped for the catch in my hands. The wings of the owl moved silently and stealthily in the night, of the very highest order, until it showed its talons.

A cacophony of rat shrieks and owl howls met me as it continuously plucked at my hands to snatch the prey from me. It hurt. Its beak was like a dagger jabbing at my fingers. I couldn't afford to lose the rat and couldn't let the rat die before I took what I needed, either. I had to act fast despite the pain. I yanked the tail off the rat, earning a squeak before I rushed down the trail.

The owl hooted, settling for the remaining rat with a hint of vindictiveness, or so I imagined.

I wiped my tears caused by another atrocity. Was any of this worth it? I could only hope the floating castle and the secrets within could tell me so.

There was one last ingredient, which I had no problem attaining. I broke a branch from a tree and dug it into my palm. I wasn't told to carve out any specific shape, only to stain it with my blood. Still, most rituals I studied seemed to emphasize a star shape, and I didn't want to fail after how far I'd gone.

I grunted when the stick made contact with my flesh. I bit back the pain and watched my crimson fluid darken the stick's edge. When the star was formed, I took a deep breath. It was over, and the most important part was about to begin.

The rat fellow's instructions specified eighty paces, but I was far from the trail and couldn't even hope to find it. Still, he spoke of a meadow. Surely, it couldn't be that troubling to find.

I traversed the forest, keeping an eye out for any places where the trees began to thin. I walked for about ten minutes, meandering toward the left without realizing it. From there, I saw what I was looking for—an open meadow in the center of the forest shining under the moonlight.

I smiled with relief as I made my way toward it, leaving the forest and taking my place on the flat grass. I sat beside a rock and emptied my bag of the ingredients. I placed them in a ring before me. What the rat-faced man told me to do from this point was still ambitious. My qualms washed away, however, when there came through the cold air the echo of an owl.

It was a low, ominous sound. My heart pounded as my eyes searched for what could have concocted such a noise. Shortly after, the air went silent, and I was alone again. Until I wasn't.

I heard metal clanging over my head. Was I imagining things? I looked up and saw an unbelievable sight manifesting. It broke through the fog, forged from twisting gears and walls like sinew against flesh. It was colossal, reaching several hundred feet across the sky. There it was... the flying castle.

"It worked. It actually worked."

A smile formed on my face as I rose to my feet. I was ready to laugh with excitement at the mysteries that awaited me.

To my left, a figure appeared from the shadows. It was the same rat-faced man. I jumped out of my skin.

"You again?" I spoke in a panicked tone.

He grinned back at me. "Well done. Now, I believe it's time I take you to my master."

"Your master?" My mind became muddled. Just who would a man like him serve?

"Yes, I am merely his apprentice. To find what you're really after, I'll have to take you into the castle itself."

My eyes widened with shock as I looked toward the moving structure over a hundred feet above my head. "You mean you can fly?"

The rat-faced man chuckled and placed his hand on my shoulder again. "No."

Suddenly, our location changed. I felt incredibly dizzy, as if someone had knocked me out. I looked around and found myself somewhere else entirely. The interior was lavish with green and black walls adorned with paintings of royalty. Many of the faces were obscured by shadows and others were clawed out.

"Welcome, my friend," the man told me. "To the living castle."

It was all astonishing. I walked toward the nearest window and realized I was, indeed, standing inside a castle suspended over the ground. I could see the chambers moving against the wind like the limbs of an animal passing through the sky. The things I could learn from such a place, the ways they could benefit humanity, were unfathomable. My fingers itched with elation as I turned around.

“Thank you so much for this. You have no idea how far my gratitude goes for—”

Before I could finish, the sight of two shadows met my gaze, the rat-faced man’s and another approaching from the dark corridor to my right. It was enormous, far from that of any mortal. I couldn’t keep my heart from racing with terror.

“Sir, there’s something in the shadows. Move while you can.”

The rat-face man grinned and tilted his head. Every aspect of his expression was so unsettling, like he knew something I could never.

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said. “That’s only my master.”

Suddenly, the master soared out of the shadows with a manic hoot, beating feathered wings as he pounced on the rat-faced man and began consuming him.

I looked on with such dread. My entire body shook as the towering entity dug its teeth deeper into him.

I couldn’t speak; I stumbled back, peering toward the window. I wondered if I could survive the landing. I could hear a snicker that took me by surprise. I gazed at the rat-faced man, who kept a smile on his face, even while being consumed.

“Don’t be afraid. This is only human

nature. We all eat or get eaten in the end. This was simply my time.”

My heart thundered in despair as the ferocious jaws ripped at his face. I recalled something I’d said earlier, but how did he know? Was it him stalking me from the shadows all along?

“This isn’t human,” I whimpered. “None of it is.”

There was nowhere to run, nowhere for me to hide from such an abominable creature. I could only watch as the master devoured the rat-faced man, ripping him apart until only his bones remained.

This creature had a human-like face and cast a shadow of an owl against the castle walls as he snickered with delight. He wiped his mouth before standing upright. His oversized physique mortified me.

He rose to an astonishing twelve-foot build with feathered wings connected to his arms and had scaly bird-like legs. His eyes were pure red like blood, and he dressed aristocratically like in the paintings.

Never had I seen or heard of such a creature. Never had I been so terrified at the face staring me down.

He walked toward me on his legs that bent backward. I could hear a faint bellowing hoot with each step he took. He smiled down at me, flashing his blood-stained fangs.

“Now, you must be the witch doctor.”

I gulped and nodded. “How did you—and what are you?”

He smiled from ear to ear. “As my meal told you, I’m his master and owner of this castle. You can call me the Owl.”

I took a deep breath, yet my heart raced when he leaned forward. I’d heard of a few

cases of anthropomorphic entities, but never one like an owl. Never so large.

“Come with me.” He reached out his hand. “I have something I’d like you to see.”

There was no way I could follow him. No secrets or truths at the end of this nightmare could be worth it.

“I have a few patients I’d like for you to take a look at.”

“Patients?” I said out loud without realizing it.

“Yes.” He darted forward until his crimson eyes were level with mine. “They’re in urgent need of your care. A mortal curious enough to make his way this far wouldn’t turn away from an opportunity such as this, would he?”

I could feel something inside me being ripped out as he spoke. His blaring gaze swayed against my soul, burning brighter and turning my inhibitions to stone.

“I suppose I could take a look.”

“Excellent. This way.”

The Owl proceeded down the path on the left, making ominous strides through the shadows as I followed him, shackled by his gaze.

We walked through a hall that appeared endless. It twisted and turned as its very structure would reconfigure. I glanced at the paintings again, this time with the vacant stare he left behind. I could only notice now the amount of blood that had splattered across the walls and the scratch marks.

We finally reached our destination—or so it seemed. A large door with a curved arch stood before us. I could hear high-pitched hoots from the other side. I hadn’t the control over my mind to figure out what it could be; I was still under his spell.

“I’m glad our paths crossed this evening, you know. I was getting worried I’d missed my window of opportunity.”

He flung the door open. Inside was a massive chamber of gray silhouettes and the smell of rotting flesh and excrement. There was a single stone path in the center and a steep incline all around. I could feel something was wrong while we walked. The chamber overflowed with countless bodies picked to the bones. Leaves and branches scattered all around, and the echoes of hoots only grew louder. His spell could no longer contain me. My location took hold of me.

“Here, we are.”

The Owl walked me to the path’s end, of which were his patients, a colossal nest filled with infant owls. Each owl was greater than human-size. Blood stained their faces and skulls scattered in the center of them.

Fear took hold. I wanted nothing more than to run, and that’s exactly what I tried when I felt his claws pulling me back.

“Now, now,” he said. “You haven’t cured them yet.”

“Let me go!” I screamed. I flailed my limbs every which way, sprinting against his grasp. I refused to die here, to meet the same fate his apprentice did. “They aren’t sick.”

“I never said they were.” The Owl chuckled and pulled me closer. “I just said they needed your care.”

He grabbed me by the neck and lifted me over eight feet off the ground and dangled me over the nest. My eyes widened at the ravenous horde just under my feet. I was at the total mercy of this monster.

“My children are hungry, you see. And they’re very picky eaters.” His grip around my neck began to loosen. The owls jumped

higher as my shaking legs reached closer.
“I’m sure you can understand.”

My heart thundered out of control. I tried not to scream. Was there anything I could say? Anything I could do?

The owl leaned forward with a grin. I could feel his fangs just beside my quivering ear.

“It isn’t nice to steal an owl’s hunt. Those that do, get punished, you see.”

My eyes widened. He knew. He knew this entire time what I’d done to that mother owl. It mattered not; She still had her meal in the end. Now, so would the nest before me.

“Farewell, little witch doctor.”

He unfurled his claws and released me from his grip. I screamed the entire way down as I rapidly approached my fate. Everything went dark faster than I could comprehend. I heard a cacophony of hoots and felt my neck snap. At that moment, nature reared its ferocious head. He was the owl and I the rat.

The End.



Raiders of Pravda Vremya

By Charles Moffat

I

*Between ancient stones, a portal waits,
Whispers of time in the wind it creates,
Megalithic marvels, where pasts meets fates,
In cyclical rhythms, its power oscillates.*

The huge wolf's tail twitched lazily, the fireplace crackling nearby. He was old, very old, and quite large for a wolf, for he was closer in size to a pony or a horse. His grey and white fur was a huge shaggy mess, but it was also soft and woolly to the touch. He stretched one leg out behind him, luxuriating in the heat coming from the burning logs in the stone fireplace.

"Good morning Vanha Hampa!" said a cheerful feminine voice. The dire wolf lifted his head at the sound of his name, twitched an ear and laid his head back down and closed his eyes. He would need to conserve his energy today.

Today is the day, thought Tilda as she skewered several pieces of cold roasted venison on a stick to be warmed above the coals. The scraps of meat were leftovers from the feast last night. There would be another feast tonight, assuming that the raid was successful. Plus music and dancing. Tilda had her eyes on one of the young men who would also be going raiding today.

When the scraps of venison were hot she removed them from the stick and tossed one to Vanha Hampa. The huge canine wolfed it down without even chewing. Tilda picked up a broom and banged the tip of the handle against the wooden ceiling, which doubled as the floor of the attic loft.

"Wake up Marta! Time to eat and go!"

A loud yawn came from the loft and moments later a tall golden haired young woman descended the ladder wearing nothing more than an ill fitting linen tunic. No modesty was deemed necessary, not amongst the twin sisters.

The two warrior women each ate their venison, drank down a quart of chilled mountain goat's milk, and without much discussion they dressed and readied themselves for the coming battle. Their armour was a mixture of old scraps of chainmail held together by leather and fur. From pegs on the wall above the fireplace they removed a pair of Loqlandic bearded axes, each weighted for battle and adorned with Ard runes for good fortune.

Exiting their home, they brushed their golden blonde hair away from their faces and made their way down the short hill, and past several rows of pine trees to join the other raiders in the middle of the village near the wooden bridge that spanned a waterfalls-filled gorge.

The war chieftain, Olaf, was waiting for them, as were many others. Most of the raiders were men, but, like Tilda and Marta, there were a fair number of female warriors amongst them too. Each of them had been raised in the Loqpathian mountains, and many of them had blonde or red hair, with very few of them having darker hair, indicative of a mixed Korovian and Loqlandic heritage.

The sturdy and robust Olaf's hair had turned nearly white, but there were still a few rare glimpses of red amongst his hair and beard. He carried a double bitted Loqlandic axe and a large round Targe shield

with notches in the rim from past battles. His face and arms were nearly as scarred as the shield, and the villagers spoke in whispers of how he had once been a wandering adventurer before he had settled down and founded the village of Pravda Vremya, becoming its war chieftain as their numbers grew. There were many in the village who called him grandfather, including Tilda and Marta, but it was also said that he was more likely their distant cousin.

Olaf scowled at the two young women, his one good eye meeting theirs, his bushy eyebrows bristling whilst his forehead furrowed into deep rows like a farmer's freshly ploughed field. He glanced at the others, each in turn, meeting the eyes of every person. Each was as dear to him as family.

"Spring is coming, and with it will come the avalanches. Snow and rocks enough to bury an entire mountainside. You all know what we face. Our village depends upon these raids for survival. We don't go for gold or trinkets. We go to take their children, for our survival depends upon it. The Sacred Portal is a gift. A sign from the gods that our cause is righteous. We must take every child we can so that they can grow up to be farmers, hunters and warriors. Our survival depends upon it."

"Our survival depends upon it," repeated the other raiders.

Olaf paused and turned to face Tilda and Marta and two others, Anatoly and Mikhail, for whom this would also be their first raid, his eyes lingering fondly on the dire wolf. Vanha Hampa had gone raiding with Olaf many times before, but for the twins and the two men this first raid would be like a rite of

passage - a rite shrouded in mystery. The war chieftain looked them each in the eyes once more before choosing to speak. "I know you may not understand what and why we do what we do, especially if this is your first raid, but after today you will understand. I promise you that. Grab as many children as you can carry."

Warm wind from the south whipped up snow from the ground and created a flurry in the air as the raiders lashed their feet into snowshoes and skis, readying themselves for the long trek to the Sacred Portal. Today they were trekking south towards the portal and to the lowland valleys. It would be warmer there, but they needed to hurry if they were to beat the spring avalanches.

The village in the shadow of the mountain was a cold dark place, but it was sheltered from avalanches that were the bane of any who dwell in the Loqpathians. The villagers who lived there were a dark and moody lot, prone to long bouts of quiet thoughts of simpler times, and philosophical discussions about the nature of the Sacred Portal whilst chugging home brewed ale and small batch beer.

Tilda flexed her grip on her bearded axe as she trudged southward on her snowshoes, the sun on her face. Marta was close behind on her skis, followed by the old dire wolf who had been their loyal companion since childhood.

The canine was quiet and sombre, like an old warrior at the funeral of a past comrade. This didn't bode well and it bothered Tilda that their raid was considered necessary for their village's survival, but she knew it wasn't without risk.

Anything could go wrong.

II

Two huge rectangular boulders stood on top of a ledge overlooking the valley below. Individually the stones must have weighed tens of tons, and it boggled Tilda's mind to imagine how they had been crafted and set into place on the ledge. A third stone, the lintel, was no smaller in size and lay balanced above the other two, but it was the void between the stones which caught the most imagination.

It was a nearly featureless black void, rippling with tiny circles of lavender energy that seemed to vibrate across the surface of the void. Blackness didn't quite seem to describe the sheer black of the portal's surface, it was more like nothingness. A void where nothing existed, not even space or colour, light or dark.

Fear crept through Tilda's mind as she stared into the black oblivion. It was somewhat like how she imagined death to be. A blank void of nothingness. No matter. No time. No space. A complete absence of anything. To step through the portal would take more courage than she knew she had.

"It is normal to be scared the first time you go through the portal," said Olaf, stroking and twisting his right moustache with a bit of bowstring wax. "Completely normal. I was scared the first time I did it, but I was also suicidal. I was lost and alone. I rather didn't care whether I lived or died, but I went through anyway and I found a new reason for living. After you go through I promise you will begin to understand."

Many of the others went through with varying degrees of hesitation, including Marta. Tilda watched her sister go, too

frozen to stop her from going. Once she was gone she felt heartbroken and knew that she really had no other choice but to follow. Marta was still presumably alive on the far side of the portal. If she didn't go with her, what might become of her? Tilda walked up to the edge of the portal, the black void of nothingness waiting for her. A large ripple of sparkling lavender energy danced across the surface. She lifted one snowshoe as if to step through.

"Stop wasting time!" Olaf gave her a shove through the void and stepped into the portal after her.

III

It was colder here and the snow was deeper too. Spring was still a few weeks away. The sky was overcast and grey, but there were plenty of pine trees and a canopy above their heads. There was no rocky ledge here. The standing stones stood at the top of a hill, overshadowed by the mountain to the north. Where they had been moments before it had been a cliff. The ground and dirt beyond it had been washed away, torn away, during a violent avalanche decades earlier.

But here, now, the avalanche had yet to happen. The nearby trees were younger, the dead stumps of trees were once more alive, and there were many more trees scattered about the hilltop that would someday be ripped away in the avalanche.

"We've travelled through time," muttered Marta aloud, to no one in particular.

"Now you're beginning to understand," said the war chieftain Olaf, lashing his feet into snowshoes. "But nevermind that, we've

got work to be doing. We need to get down this mountain before the sun sets. You will understand the rest soon enough.”

Marta was faster on her skis going downhill than Tilda could ever go on her snowshoes. Oh, what she would give for a sled just now, or even a targe shield. Instead she had to trudge down the snowy hill like everyone else in snowshoes, while their comrades on skis ranged far ahead of them with little or no effort on their part. The real effort, Tilda knew, would be on the way back. Anyone on skis would need to lash their skis to their backs and trudge uphill in their boots through the deep snow, as it would be extremely time consuming to try and climb back up the mountain with skis on. The warriors on snowshoes however would have an easier going of it.

The sun was setting beyond the mountain to the west by the time they reached the edge of the pine forest and the first signs of greenish hued auroras appeared. The curtains of light danced in the night sky overhead, lighting their path forward. The western mountain was prone to avalanches this time of year. It seemed foolhardy that the lowland villagers had built their homes so close to the base of the mountain, with only the forest of pines to block any incoming avalanches. Perhaps they had never had a big one, wondered Tilda. Maybe the little avalanches only made it as far as the pines and never further than that?

When Tilda caught up to the others, Marta's skis were resting up against the western side of a pine tree and Tilda's twin had seated herself on one of the thicker upper branches, getting a view of the village beyond. Tilda would have liked to have seen

the layout of the village that they would be attacking, but she supposed it didn't matter. This was to be a quick raid. Get in, grab a child, run off back to the portal.

“Remember what your goals are,” barked Olaf, choosing to be louder so that all the warriors could hear him clearly. “Avoid the parents and elders. Get in, use the axes on the doors, grab any children that are small enough to carry, and run for the forest. The children may be hiding beneath the floorboards or in the lofts, but you need to be quick!”

“Are we doing the new plan? Scaring them with fire?” asked one of the raiders.

“Aye, we don't have a choice. The avalanches will begin soon so we need to use more desperate tactics. Archers, you're up first.”

Marta climbed down from her perch in the pine tree and readied her axe. She and Tilda watched as everyone with a bow stepped forward and dipped their arrowheads into buckets of black pitch that smelled of pine resin and charcoal. The arrowheads were wrapped in linen and had a short linen wick that smelled of sulphur. Torches were lit and passed down the line as each archer got ready.

“Nock!” shouted Olaf. The archers each nocked an arrow and stood waiting.

“Light and draw!”

Tilda held her breath and bit her lip as they each lit their wicks, drew back their bows and waited for the main body of the linen covered arrowhead to ignite.

“Loose!”

Fiery arrows streaked across the sky, partially illuminated by the ribbon-like curtains of green auroras.

“Charge!” shouted Olaf, waving his double bitted axe in the air above his head.

The twins charged across the barren snowy landscape towards the village, the arrows overhead reaching their zenith and hurtling back downwards. They landed in the thatch roofs of the houses on the north end of the village, igniting them swiftly. Some of them landed on snow laden rooftops or failed to hit their targets, but most of the arrows found their marks.

Tilda found herself bellowing unintelligibly, too much of a beginner at raiding to even remember a good war cry. Time seemed to slow down as she neared the village. She and Marta ran up to the first building, but the large wide doors were wide open and inside it looked more like a storehouse for grain than a home.

An elderly villager with grey hair charged at Marta, his axe raised, but she shrewdly sidestepped and tripped him, sending him sprawling into the snow. She kicked the axe away from him and threw a weighted net over him so that he soon became tangled up and defenceless.

Vanha Hampa was scratching at the door of a different house, smaller than the first, but his howls were urgent. He kept looking at Tilda and Marta as if they should clearly be paying attention to him.

Amidst the shouts of war cries and the smoke and the chaos, Tilda saw the wolf and failed to understand why the wolf wanted to get inside a burning house. Amongst the noises she heard something however, mingled intermittently with the whining of the wolf...

The cries of a baby.

Marta must've heard it too. The twin

sisters began hacking at the door to the house, each swing chipping away at the wood nearest the iron hinges.

“On three! One, two, three!” shouted Marta. The twins kicked at the same time and the door splintered inwards. Smoke billowed outwards like an avalanche of black clouds that engulfed the two women. Inside the roof was on fire and could collapse at any moment... The fire had already spread to the thick wooden beams that supported the loft.

Vanha Hampa leapt into the billowing smoke, between the two women, and began barking harshly at the rug and floorboards nearest the fireplace. The sisters followed him in, coughing into their sleeves, kicked the rug aside, and began hacking with their axes at the floorboards.

Below it they found a squalling blonde haired baby, a sure sign of their Loqlandic heritage. No, two squalling babies, both swaddled in black woolly blankets. Twins! Not bothering to question their strange luck, Tilda grabbed one of the children and pulled it to her chest.

The roof collapsed, showering the two pairs of golden haired twins with cinders. The loft beams sagged under the added weight, but did not break. Tilda ignored the smell of burning hair in her nostrils and crawled on one hand through the cinders towards the door, shielding the baby under her torso with the other arm. When she reached the splintered door the dire wolf bit into her shoulder, her fur and chainmail armour bearing the brunt of the bite, and the canine pulled her out of the building.

Marta followed behind her, the dire wolf latching on to the hood of her cloak and

pulling her free from the burning building.

Tilda looked down at the bundle in her arms. Golden blonde hair, a pale face, brilliant blue eyes. She was reminded of what she must've looked like as a child.

"Remember the plan!" shouted Marta, struggling to her feet and fleeing to the northern woods. Tilda followed behind her, coughing and clutching her axe in one hand and holding the baby against her side with the other.

It was a long trek up the mountain, through the snowy forest, but Tilda soon passed her twin sister on her snowshoes. Unwilling to leave behind her skis, Marta stopped at the pine tree to strap the skis to her back and resumed the journey.

Down in the valley the villagers had gotten most of the fires under control, with a few exceptions where they had chosen to just let the buildings burn. If the villagers had had a wizard they might have been able to save more homes, but they did not. Wizards were very rare this close to the border of Loqland.

"Maybe now they'll finally leave this valley!" Olaf shouted, his face beaming with something akin to mania.

Tilda turned and stared at him. Was this the reason behind the night time raids? To force the villagers to move? But why then do the raiders steal their children? Why use nets in battle to tangle up the defenders? Why do they not just kill the villagers?

Barely able to catch her breath as she laboured at climbing the mountain in her snowshoes, she didn't bother to ask. She was busy carrying a struggling crying baby and was in no mood to ask questions or to complain. Not yet.

Soon enough they arrived at the hill with the Sacred Portal, the black nothingness was a welcome sight to her eyes. This time she stepped through without so much as a second thought. She just wanted to go home and rest... Dancing and celebrating were now far from her mind.

Tilda looked down, her left arm suddenly free of its burden. The baby was gone. She stared at her empty hand in wonderment, then at the ground and all around her. There was no sign of the golden haired baby.

The Sacred Portal stood there silently, the mysterious ripples of lavender energy vibrating across its surface.

IV

When Marta arrived through the portal and had a similar reaction to the missing baby she had been carrying in her arms, Tilda knew something was unusual. She looked to the war chieftain, his face grinning like a Loqland dragon who had just roasted a fresh kill and was about to devour it whole. She felt the anger rising in her, threatening to overflow like the volcanoes where the red and black striped dragons make their lairs.

"Where are the children?" she screamed, approaching Olaf with her axe raised and at the ready. "What happened to the baby that I carried into the portal?"

Olaf and the other warriors looked at her as if she was insane, but then, just as insane, he started to laugh. Soon the other warriors joined him. Only Marta, Tilda and the two other new raiders were confused and angry.

"Is this the purpose of our raids?!" asked Marta, stamping her foot in the hard packed

snow. "We take children through the portal and they cease to exist? What is the point of this?"

Olaf raised a hand for silence, but he kept his good eye on Tilda and her axe. "Let's start with introductions. I'm Olaf, the leader of this here warband, but you already know that because your memories are different from ours. What are your names?"

Tilda blinked, ever more confused. The axe in her hand wavered and felt heavier than before. She was exhausted and in no mood for mental puzzles. "Uh, Tilda."

"And I am guessing that is your twin sister over there?"

"Marta."

"And these other two newcomers?" Olaf gestured to the other two raiders.

Tilda raised her axe higher despite her exhaustion, getting frustrated. "Anatoly and Mikhail. Why are you calling us newcomers?"

"Because to us you are newcomers. We have no memories of any of you. Such is the nature of the Sacred Portal. Isn't that right?" A chorus of voices and nods from the other warriors added fuel to the fire of Tilda's confusion. People she had known, people who had known her for as long as she could remember, were looking at her with open curiosity, as if they had never seen her before.

Even Vanha Hampa stood by Olaf's side, his teeth slightly bared towards Tilda as if she was a stranger and a threat.

The young woman staggered and dropped her axe, suddenly dizzy. She stared at her hands, for they were blurry in front of her face, and where there should be two hands she saw six blurry hands instead.

"I see the time lag has caught up to you. Don't worry, the sickness passes... With time. You just need sleep. The first journey through the Sacred Portal is always the worst. Changing history can be traumatic at times."

"But this isn't my first," muttered Tilda, sinking to her knees, still pondering her hands. It wasn't that they were necessarily blurry. It felt more like they were displaced by time, like she was seeing them at different points in time simultaneously. "This is my second."

"That's what all the raiders say the first time. To you, I suppose, it is true. You remember going through the portal twice. And in many ways it is true, but this is our first time meeting you because we are from an alternate timeline. Not to worry, all will be explained, but for now you need sleep."

"But what of the babies?"

"You are the babies. Ivan and I saved you and your sister from a burning building."

V

"Once, long ago when I was a very young man I was very fond of hunting. It was my excuse to go exploring, as I often did. I could be gone for days or weeks, or one time I was gone for two months and journeyed all the way to Zipteklund to visit the gnomes who dwell in that strange land of glaciers and geysers." Olaf leaned back, his head resting against the stitched leather canvas of his tent. He scratched at his bad eye with one fingernail, as if the empty socket still pained him.

"When I returned I discovered that my

village was gone, wiped from the face of the earth by an avalanche that had left a huge gouge in the mountainside. I searched and searched, but there were no survivors. There was only me, and my loneliness. I built a new home in the northern shadow of the mountain, our mountain, in a place that was not prone to avalanches, and in time I would later call my new home Pravda Vremya, but more on that later. I continued to hunt, but now I felt compelled to stay close to the valley that had once been my home.”

The war chieftain let out a heavy sigh and toyed with his right moustache, then his left, twisting each into points. “I made a home here and many years passed where I didn’t see another living person. Decades even. Until one day I found the portal while hunting near the cliff north of the old village. I was so lonely by then I admit I just wanted to end it all and I had thought of jumping off the cliffside, but instead I found the portal. I didn’t know what the portal would do to me. The void was so black I thought that it would surely kill me. But I also thought that it might transport me somewhere else where I might find other people. It didn’t really matter to me at the time. I just wanted an end to my wretched existence.”

He looked at each of the four newcomers in his captive audience slowly, deliberately, meeting each of their eyes. “What I found instead was my old village, from a time when I was still a boy, not even yet a young man. It would be years before the avalanche would come and destroy the village.”

“I went into the village and I tried to warn them, the village elders, but none would listen to me. I was a wild mountain man wearing fur rags, a stranger to them, and

must’ve seemed like a maniac who was raving about an avalanche that was going to come and destroy the village. I knew their names however... I knew their children’s names. They all dismissed me as a lunatic, but the fact that I knew their names worried them. They accused me of witchcraft and other superstitious nonsense... They drove me out and threw stones at me.”

Olaf stroked his bearded chin, his one good eye lost in distant memories. “After leaving the village I found a dire wolf pup, all alone, its mother slain by a cave bear. I carried him with me, but when I went back through the portal he was gone, but I discovered I had a new companion. He was-”

“Vanha Hampa,” blurted out Marta. The dire wolf looked up at the sound of his name, twitched his ears, and laid his head back down.

“That’s right. To me he has always been old. I have no memories of our times together or how exactly he was tamed or who trained him, but I am sure he remembers everything. I called him Vanha Hampa because it means Old Fang in an old Loqlandic language, but I am sure people have thought the name strange due to their memories of when he was younger.” Olaf paused to scratch the wolf behind the ears.

“His metamorphosis gave me an idea however. If he became older then maybe there’s a way for me to change history in order to save my village. So to test my theory I went back through the portal with Vanha Hampa. We stole into the village and I found the orphaned stable boy I knew of who slept in the stables. Me. I kidnapped myself. I brought him through the portal and

my memories became, well, overlapped..." Olaf placed one hand on top of the other, the fingers becoming interlaced. "I now remember both timelines, and I like to think that I am doubly the wise for it."

"Soon afterwards I went back and rescued another child, Ivan, who I knew would be a good hunter and a fine warrior when he was older. And so two became four, and four became eight, and the villagers knew we were stealing their children, but they didn't know *who* was stealing their children, or our purpose. They think we are Logland raiders there to enslave them... They've been arming themselves, barricading their doors, hiding their children, becoming more cautious, but we have gotten smarter in our tactics. We use nets now, night raids, and ambushes."

"I tried coming up with alternative plans, but they never seem to work. The only thing that has worked thus far has been taking the children. If we take older people they often die from old age after going through the portal, and those few older people who do survive have more severe cases of time lag."

"Why haven't the people you rescued tried to warn the villagers?" asked Tilda.

"When would they do that? And how? If they go back in time they will be strangers to our own people. Children who became adults. Adults who became elderly. Unrecognizable even to their kin."

"No, I mean... Surely, it is worth a try? If they have memories of living in the new village, why haven't they gone back to the old village, back when it still existed? They could try and warn the villagers about the avalanche."

"Some of them have tried. Tried and

failed. Now we raid them in order to change history. I am hopeful that if we steal enough of the children that they might move. If they move the village we might be able to save them all." Olaf tugged on his moustaches and twisted them, his appearance reminding Tilda of a mountain lion with large bushy whiskers.

"Many of those we rescue are small children whose memories only go so far as walking out of the portal after the avalanche. They don't remember how exactly they got there. They only remember me and Vanha Hampa finding them near the portal and everything that follows. The youngest children, like yourselves who were mere babies, don't even remember that. In time I chose to just accept the sacred gift that we've been given and I thank Belnark for it. Most of us don't even question it anymore."

"Today we tried a new tactic because we're running out of time before the avalanche arrives. We tried to change history by burning down the village and forcing them to move... It was risky, but I was hopeful that we had enough people to do it today, to finally save them all. We're running out of time, their time, before the avalanche comes. Time, it seems, is flexible, but it doesn't break so easily."

Olaf looked to Tilda and Marta, looking each in the eyes, his own eyes reflecting the candlelight.

"And today... We have witnessed a new paradox. Ivan and I saved the two babies, but according to your memories you two rescued yourselves, your younger selves, from the flames. Truly this was meant to be. You have witnessed an alternate version of the raid, but with the same results."

Tilda's twin coughed. "Vanha Kampa had a role in that one. We wouldn't have known about the two girls, us, if it hadn't been for him," admitted Marta.

"Are you sure you have no memories of us?" asked Tilda. "None at all?"

"No, none of us do, except you four newcomers. Your memories however, they are real to you. They're not an illusion. The Sacred Portal didn't just create them, or you. They actually happened to you in a separate timeline where you were rescued from the flames, even if the rest of us have no memory of finding you near the Sacred Portal or raising you. This much we know. Our memories may differ, but our timelines are converging."

"Best not to question it too much," said one of the older raiders, Ivan. "I get a headache when I start thinking about my childhood too much."

The war chief sighed loudly. "And now we are running out of time. Spring is coming very soon, too soon, and the avalanche will cover the village before the next full moon. We have time for maybe one or two more raids to try and save as many people as we can."

VI

"Do you know what Pravda Vremya means?" whispered Anatoly, the big warrior's snowshoes crunching into the surface of the snow beside Tilda. She shook her head in response.

"I think they're old Korovian words," muttered Mikhail further back on his skis.

Tilda exchanged a look with Marta,

sharing the same thought between them with but a look. Anatoly and Mikhail had taken a keen interest in the twins since yesterday, which was strange because they had never before taken much interest in the sisters. Now that they had all been part of the same time paradox however they had taken an almost intimate fascination with trying to learn how Tilda and Marta's versions of events might differ from their own.

There was a key difference between them. The two men could remember being rescued by other raiders, and had been young boys when they had initially arrived through the portal. They could remember much of their early years. Tilda and Marta meanwhile had no memories from that time, having arrived as a pair of squalling babies, and could only remember being raised by Olaf.

As they approached the Sacred Portal the warrioress found herself seeking out her sister's hand and gripping it tightly. Tilda was less afraid this time, knowing that there was nothing to fear from the portal itself. The black oblivion was indeed a blessing from the gods, she knew that now. Whomever had created the portal had given the villagers of Pravda Vremya a chance to save themselves. Whether the creator was a divine entity or a forgotten wizard of a bygone age, it didn't matter. Their gift meant that the villagers could be saved from a tragedy.

The megalithic stone blocks loomed above them and the raiders went through, one by one, until at last it was Tilda and Marta's turns. This time Tilda didn't hesitate, but went through joyously with one great leap.

On the far side she found herself in the

pine woods atop the hill, with the other raiders spread out on the hill below her. She began the trek down the hill on her snowshoes, noting how silent and still the forest was tonight. Silver moonlight lanced through gaps in the forest canopy, lighting up their trail down the snowy hill and making the freshly fallen snow sparkle like a sea of tiny quartz crystals. They reached a gap in the trees, a scar left behind by a forgotten avalanche, and crossed it to the trees on the far side at the base of the mountain.

It was beautiful tonight. A tranquil and wonderful night, with only the silver moon and the stars in the sky above. There were no auroras tonight, but it was just as well. Everything seemed to sparkle instead. The mountain to the west was heavily laden with snow.

“Now!”

Arrows caught the moonlight on their steel arrowheads and dark fletching, several of them taking Olaf in the chest. The big warrior fell to his knees, his heavy axe falling from his limp fingers.

One of the arrows took Anatoly in the right shoulder and he reached for his bow only to take another arrow in the chest a moment later. He fell backwards, blood bubbling from between his lips.

“Kill them all! Kill the slavers!”

“Ambush!”

“Retreat!”

Someone blew a horn to sound a retreat, whilst other horns blew mighty blasts that reverberated through the chill night air.

Tilda turned and fled, knowing that they had been routed already. All the plans of saving the villagers seemed meaningless

now. They were being slaughtered in the ambush.

Marta abandoned her skis and fled uphill, running through the deep snow as fast as she could towards the safety of the trees on the far side of the gap. If they could make it to the forest and up the hill to the Sacred Portal they could save themselves. They wouldn't be able to rescue any more villagers. They would be blessed if they managed to save themselves.

One of the raiders near Tilda went down with a spearhead jutting from his chest. The villagers were getting closer, she reasoned, wishing that she had a targe shield slung across her back to deflect any arrows or spears that came her way. The shield would slow her down, true, but she didn't relish the thought of a spear through her back.

Reluctant to drop her axe as she might still need it, she kept running up the hill with her snowshoes. When she reached the treeline beyond the gap she stopped behind a pine tree and turned, axe at the ready to fight. The villagers might be her people, but she wasn't about to let them kill her without a fight.

Marta was further back, slogging through the deep snow in her boots, and her panic-driven haste had given way to exhaustion as the heavy snow slowed her progress. An arrow was sticking out the back of her left chainmail sleeve. More arrows were ahead of her and behind her, but instead of running in a straight line she was running on an angle to make it difficult for the archers to guess where to aim.

A spear flew past her twin, missing her head by nearly a foot.

Tilda wished she had a bow so that she

might shoot back at the villagers, but she had naught but her Loqlandic bearded axe.

Hunting horns blared. The villagers ceased shooting arrows as most of the raiders reached the treeline, including Marta. They charged across the gap between the trees, most carrying axes, but a few carrying spears, swords and bows.

Grabbing her sister's hand, Tilda pulled her uphill towards the Sacred Portal. It was their only chance now. If enough of the raiders survived and reached the portal they could start fresh in the new village to the north.

Vanha Kampa made a whining noise and started to bark urgently, as if sensing some danger that Tilda and the others could not. Moments later, as they climbed the slope of the hill towards the Sacred Portal, there was a sharp cracking sound like the sound of lightning, but it came from the west towards the mountain.

A low rumble followed and Tilda pulled urgently on her sister's arm, partially dragging her through the snow in an effort to make better time. The rumble grew to a roar, like that of a dragon, and soon the noise dwarfed that too as it seemed like a dozen dragons were roaring in unison. To the west through the trees she looked and Tilda thought it looked like a cloud of white descending down the mountain. A huge volume of ice and snow cascading down the mountain and barreling across the treeless landscape to the rolling hills and forests below.

"Avalanche!"

"Run!"

"Hurry!"

"Keep going! Run!"

"Everyone! Go through the portal!"

The sweat running down Tilda's spine turned cold and icy, but she didn't dare let go of her sister's hand. If they were going to die, let it be together. The portal was very close. Only a few more steps and they would reach the top of the hill.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Five steps. Tilda breathed a sigh of relief as she pulled her gasping sister up to join her. She shot a glance towards the wall of ice and snow coming this way and saw that they were at the very edge of it. Too close really. They could be swept away. The sound was deafening.

Tilda turned towards the portal, dragging Marta with her. The blackness of oblivion was preferable to a cold white death.

VII

After the last of the raiders came through the portal the black nothingness of the void vanished, leaving a vacant archway that only showed the treeless swath of mountainside beyond. Marta reached out a hand towards the portal as if to test the empty void, but nothing happened. The portal was gone. Now it was just three boulders that formed a doorway. No different than any other ancient megalithic structures that dotted the landscape of Korovia.

"What are you doing here?" asked a gruff voice.

Tilda and the other survivors turned and

saw a group of village elders in a line by the edge of the cliff. Some were carrying torches and others were carrying bundles of incense. Stacks of smooth balanced stones lined the edge of the cliffside and the trail leading up to the cliff, like those found in graveyards or shrines dedicated to the ancestors.

Tilda opened her mouth to answer the elder, but Marta grabbed her arm and shot her a glance. “Uh... We’re here to honour our ancestors,” she said.

“Dressed like you’re going into battle?” asked one of the elders with a skeptical tone.

“And with arrows sticking out of your armour?” asked another, pointing at Marta’s arm. “What are you playing at?”

“Uh...” began Mikhail, fidgeting with his axe.

“Leave them be!” snapped Olaf, emerging from behind several other elders. He was fatter than Tilda remembered, but more jovial in appearance, with both of his eyes intact. “Isn’t it obvious? They’re dressed like the sacred raiders who saved our village. The stories must be true. Our people must’ve gone back in time to save everyone from the old village, bringing many of them through the ancient portal to a time after the avalanche. If it wasn’t for them most of us would have perished.”

Much discussion followed as the elders and raiders marvelled at the happenstance and how the villagers had been saved thanks to the Sacred Portal. Tilda turned away from them all, looking instead to the vacant stones. She leaned her axe against the base of one of the boulders, placed both hands flat against the stone and bowed her forehead to the stone to give thanks.

She didn’t know what god or wizard had

created the portal, but it didn’t matter to her. She gave thanks to them regardless. Somehow, for whatever reason, her village was whole once more. Their memories of events would differ from the other villagers, she was certain, but that also didn’t matter.

Everything was finally the way it was meant to be.

Vanha Kampa nudged her in the side with his nose and she looked down at the huge wolf, who was as old and as shaggy as she remembered. He at least, had not changed in this new version of the timeline.

“Come on boy,” she said. “Let’s all go home.”

*Between ancient stones, a portal waits,
Whispers of time in the wind it creates,
Megalithic marvels, where pasts meets fates,
In cyclical rhythms, its power oscillates.*

The End.

Author’s Notes

Pravda Vremya (spelled Правда Время in Russian) roughly translates to ‘True Time’.

Vanha Hampa (Finnish) roughly translates to ‘Old Tooth’ or ‘Old Fang’.



After Thoughts
By Charles Moffat

I have some changes to report that some of you may have noticed when comparing Issue #1 to Issue #2.

Henceforth *Peasant Magazine* will have a maximum of ten stories per issue.

The new desired story length is now 1,000 to 10,000 words. We may make exceptions for stories that are up to 12,000 words. Anything more than 12K will be a very hard sell.

I have increased the font size slightly to make the text a bit easier for people to read.

Some (not all) of the stories in the future will get an illustration at the end of the story. Just something we are testing out that adds some visual appeal.

I cannot guarantee that every story will get an illustration, and I cannot guarantee that I won't later change my mind regarding the issue of illustrations either.

People wishing to submit short fantasy or historical fiction themed comic strips are now welcome to do so. I am thinking of something similar to Wizard of Id or Hagar the Horrible, but don't let that constrain you in any way. It could just as easily be about Romans, fairies, Robin Hood, William Tell, or various other real, fictional characters/creatures, so long as it fits within the established themes (there's that word again) of *Peasant Magazine*.

Until next time. Happy Reading!

