



DOWN BOUND

FEATURING

- Sword and Sorcery
- Folklore
- Tales of Treasure
- Heroric Knights
- Cultural Wars

IRON BOUND

June 2011, Issue 3: Direct Download Version

Iron Bound @ 2009

Iron Bound is owned by Jesse Dedman.

All of the content is either the property of Iron Bound, of other owners under an agreement with Iron Bound, or of other parties that have agreed to allow their content in the online magazine. The material in this document belonging to Iron Bound is not to be copied, altered and republished, or redistributed in any way without the permission of Jesse Dedman.

Do not copy material from this published document without the permission of its owner(s) and author(s).

Introduction

For nearly a year now, drought and famine ran rampant through the lands of Iron Bound. Our warriors, though numerous and many, struggled behind impervious fortifications to a threat they couldn't prepare for. The days of fruitful promise were shortly followed by the neglectful hand of nature, leaving us to the mercy of an angry god that deemed our actions necessary for a bombardment of ice and snow. In the harsh cold, where nothing grew and no flame could spark, we waited impatiently and hungrily for a moment of mercy.

That moment has arrived. Though our mead halls do not comfort as much as they once did, the drink manages to flow just enough to fuel our brave warriors through their campaigns. The harsh winter dwindled our numbers down to only a small fraction, but they now march into other lands with our banners held high in a bold campaign to regain our strength and rejuvenate our blessed lands of Iron Bound. Coin, food, and wine pours into our capital, along with stories of quest and bravery.

The light of June not only brings lands pregnant with food, it bares tales of racial persecution led by humans, a quest for treasure, a clash of sword and sorcery, shady alchemy, a demonic encounter, and more. Michael Conrad's tale of a night of fire, despair, and baseless persecution will remind us how easily cultures can clash. K. A. Masters reports of unclaimed treasure somewhere in the ruins of an old mill. Jonathan Kirkwood, a champion more gifted in words than at sword, returned with food and mead acquired from an alliance after granting a general a moment of his time.

But I do not intend to keep you from reading into the tales any longer. Please, treat yourself to a glass of our finest mead and enjoy seven unique tales of our brave champions.

Thank you,

Sir Dedman

Introduction.....	3
Chronicle of the Green Reign: Bella, Bloody Bella.....	4
Jesse Dedman.....	4
Birthright.....	13
Michael Conrad.....	13
The Baldric.....	25
K. A. Masters.....	25
ARCANE SUPREMACY.....	38
Jonathan Kirkwood.....	38
LE BEL HOMME SANS CONFIANCE.....	47
K. W. Taylor.....	47
The Ravenblood Company.....	50
Christopher Copeland.....	50
Rise of Arwen.....	61
Keith Latch.....	61
STYMPHALIAN MELODIES.....	85
<i>Cincinnatus Carvain</i>	85
The Silent Siren.....	90
Madeline Dyer.....	90
Closing.....	98

Chronicle of the Green Reign: Bella, Bloody Bella

Jesse Dedman

The strong, overbearing scent of spilt blood chased a hint of morning dew as Sir Helmon’s most skillful warrior received a fatal blow. Fallen, the heavily wounded combatant bled profusely from his severed arm, but he kept back the cowardly screams. He seethed in agonizing torment, while refusing to reveal any sign of weakness. Never would he give his enemy the pleasure of ridiculing his defeat. Instead, he cursed quietly under his dying breath as specks of blood decked his reptilian mouth. He searched within for a way to cease the pain, while he gripped the handle of his sword with all the power he could muster. The throbbing sensation pulled on him as he rose with the help of his own undying courage. With the blade embedded into the blood stained earth, Sir Ruthra pried himself from off the grass and gave his commander one final look. Knowing that his future held only the promise of death, delivered by the kiss of his rival’s claws, the warrior’s gaze needed no affirmation. Instead, the soldier ordered, with silence, the commander to allow for his reach for glory. Confirmation received regardless of acceptance, and Sir Ruthra, a champion of the Lemorian army, lunged for the bristly savage that so boldly shouted victory towards his kin. The provoking taunts infuriated other Lemorians, while they anxiously waited for their duelist to strike back.

The Grizkin champion lavishly poured on the sweet honeyed words of an easy triumph, rubbing in the souring taste of defeat in the face of their enemy. Standing on his

hind legs, the bear-beast towered over his people as they knelt with due respect. All of them acted as one unit without the slightest deviation. Thus, they failed to spot the charging assailant in time. The sword struck. Violently, the long worn blade stabbed through the Grizkin's back, stopping midway. The source for their moment of worship plunged into a destructive frenzy, and they quickly retreated for safety. The one-armed Lemorian drove the beast to flail madly as it tried to reach behind. One at a time, the creature stretched out its arms with claws at maximum length. The grizzly beast foamed heavily at the mouth as it whirled around in a futile effort to shake off the nagging reptile, but the Lemorian managed with his fading strength to keep with the pace. Weak from blood loss, however, Sir Ruthra's command functioned on depleting spirits, rendering his hand strained and pale before releasing. The razor sharp claws of the furious beast punctured through the reptile's kidney in a single brutal jab.

The Grizkin swatted the reptilian insect, but his fury remained as hot as ever. His blood burned as it pumped rapidly through his veins, sending waves of violently rendered chemicals to saturate his muscles until reason became impossible. The beast charged at the clustered Lemorians as they stood on the sidelines with weapons ready. As bold as their commander sounded, the importance of safety outweighed his command. The mass darted out from the Grizkin's path, but the creature plowed into the slowest of the bunch, shattering their shields during their last minute reaction. The unfortunate few folded like putty to the beast's forceful charge. With an unsatisfied rage, he sought out for those whose lungs were filled with the air of vengeance. His thick skin deflected the haphazard attacks, but where one or two were deflect many more struck blood. The Lemorians poured in to the fray, swarming around the beast with overpowering numbers.

Terrified, the Grizkins approached out from their cover with tearful eyes. The horrific, brutal slaughter of their chosen duelist branded pure, irreversible anger onto the flesh of their hearts, causing the warriors to race to the scene in outrage. Falling on all fours, the beastly savages pounded the ground, tearing their extended claws through the soil as they neared. With a bold leap, the first of the pack pummeled a few Lemorian knights like how a pack of honey beavers treat a cornered snake. The reptiles caught in their path stood not a single chance, slain before they could squeeze the handle of their swords. Blood sprayed, staining the grey and brown fur of the Grizkin warriors like sticky jam, and the scent urged them further. They pounced with blood red eyes, and continued to shred through the Lemorian forces until the archers arrived.

Safely guarded behind armored knights with tower shields, the Lemorian marksmen stormed the killing field with jagged, barbed arrows. The streams pierced through the flesh of the attacking Grizkins, but they refused to back away for cover. The beasts bolted for the knights as arrows embedded deep into their flesh, maiming a few to a sudden, fatal stumble. Three pushed too close and too fast, but the more daring one received a deathly deliverance by an upward swing of Sir Helmon's sword. The lifeless corpse collapsed backwards, catching the other two by surprise. The two growled, flinging saliva from their mouths.

“You will return to your land,” said Sir Helmon, as he pointed the tip of his blade at the larger, more dominate one.

The Grizkin roared, arms stretched out with hands ready for blood as its head arched back.

“I believe you lost, which is a shame. All that boasting of victory when your chosen decided it was fair to attack us. Now, I want you to return to your kind and leave. Never, ever, should you return,” said the Lemorian Commander, a grin faintly emerging from his snarl.

The Grizkin threatened with a lunging bite, but pulled back just in time to dodge the Lemorian commander’s sword.

“You should be so thankful that I’m even giving you a chance to live. Your savage kind could never co-exist with us. Your brutal, animalistic nature would spit on our heritage and customs.”

A raspy growl emanated from behind the two Grizkins, calling for the both to return to their fold. They obeyed like loyal dogs, but not without flinching to the regret as they paced towards their chieftain. Taller than the others, fur grey with black stripes, and dressed in decorative armor crafted from thick stone, the chief took a few steps towards the Lemorian commander.

“Go on and obey your master,” said Sir Helmon, failing to hide his laughter.

“You don’t understand,” said the chieftain, voice troubled by the tragic loss. “Our lands are dead. The water has dried up, the soil has cracked, and the plants have died. There is nothing for us there.”

“Of course your lands are dying, you savages breed like rabbits. Do you think we want that strain to destroy this beautiful place? Hurry and leave my sight before I decide to kill you all where you stand.”

“Please, we can arrange something, I’m sure of it,” said the chieftain, as he dared an approach.

“There will never be an arrangement, not of any kind,” said Sir Helmon, enjoying the sound of his words.

“Our gods spoke of this place; they gifted our seer with a vision that we would create from this place a new home. I’m sure that means we would need to work together.” The chieftain raised his chin as he approached, stepping over a rivulet of blood. “Our gods don’t deceive.”

“Then your seer has,” said Sir Helmon. “This land is now territory of the Lemorian Empire, we will not just give this to you, and we will not collaborate with disgusting savages such as yourselves. You have until nightfall to leave this area. You all leave, or you all die.”

The Grizkins gathered at the end of the clearing, resting in the shade of the trees near the mouth of a thick forest. The loss of one of their own opened a wound that time wouldn't properly heal. Sadder hearts, mourning cries, and resentful thoughts lingered in the air, suffocating the bear humanoids with potent sorrow. But while members of the tribe held their grudge for useless bickering, the warriors circled around their chieftain. The worshiped and respected seer stood upright in a symbolic gesture: legs closed together, chest outward with pride, and arms reaching out. Long bead necklaces draped from her relaxed grasps with a relic that produced a faint ominous glow.

“We can't allow them to deny us,” said Mulzul, still upset that his commander intercepted him.

With a raised hand, the chieftain gestured for his blood-thirsty warrior to calm. “Relax, Mulz. We would lose so much by fighting them.”

“But they would surely lose the battle. How many did it take to slay Shilon,” grunted Mulzul.

“They were unprepared. But now they stand ready with archers waiting for command.”

“Chieftain, surely you don't suggest that we simply return. No one would stand for that. Look at the tribe, broken, desolate, and in need of hope.”

“Don't think I haven't noticed,” barked the chieftain, as he turned around in anger. The hairs on his back rose, his breath grew thick and heavy, but he refrained from lashing out. Instead, he gripped his fists and glanced at the seer. “Lila, have you found anything yet?”

The seer's eyes illuminated for merely a second before returning to their natural blue. Confused by something only she envisioned, Lila stood as if locked in place. Her head swayed, slowly. Warm breath emanated from her opened mouth as she flinched to the sight of Mulzul's approach.

“What did you see,” asked Mulzul, as he peered for a better angle of her face.

Lila stepped back, raised a single finger, and finally set her judging eyes on the warrior. “We're to make peace with these people,” she said, stern words delivered on a soft tongue. “If we wage a war, we will all die. You will lead us to a battle that will destroy all of us.”

Mulzul spun around with a careless but intimidating swing that grazed the arm of another warrior. “You can’t expect us to simply leave,” roared the enraged beast. He pointed his claws at the chieftain. “Are we to simply leave this place and forget about their betrayal?”

The otherwise collected chieftain forced Mulzul’s disrespectful arm down with his own and seized it with a bruising grip. “It isn’t about you and your honor. It is about the people of our tribe. Think of them and tell me it is worth it.”

Mulzul attempted to pry his arm out from the chief’s grip, but the effort only caused further strain. “But the gods spoke of this place. They brought us here for a reason. Even if we have to sacrifice a few, this land would sustain us for years, allowing us to grow even further.”

“The gods brought us here to settle, but they didn’t bring us here to drown in our own blood. We either make peace with these people or move further north.” The chief reacted to Mulzul’s snap, and shoved the vengeful warrior into his kind.

“I think our enemy has made it very clear that they intend on killing us. They won’t allow for our presence, and I doubt they would trust our word of heading north. You’ve commanded us since I was a cub, and I’ve even had the honor of fighting along your side, but this is not something I can tolerate,” Mulzul muttered, seething as the urge to break into a frenzy pressed on his shoulders. The warrior leaped out from the support of his peers and shot the chieftain a dividing gesture. With the point of his claws, with the thirst for blood in his eyes, and the ancient words spewing from his mouth, Mulzul severed his allegiance with the tribe.

The chieftain withdrew his tolerance. He stomped towards Mulzul with hands ready to deflect and maim within a single second. The loathsome, disobedient warrior retreated from the fight before it even started, finding that his peers agreed with his call.

“By our gods, put him down. Now!”

The warriors remained as they were, refusing to abide by a commander they lost all faith in. Mulzul snapped at the chief before leaving with the pack for the trees.

The sound of approach caused the chief to flinch with a deadly claw. He swooped as he turned and nearly dealt Lila a mortal wound. She receded for a moment, but returned with a kind-hearted hand on his shoulder.

“He could get himself killed,” she said.

“I don’t blame him though,” said the chief, masking the words with another retort. “What about us? What happens now?”

“We wait for them to join,” she said in confidence. “Until then, we pray that the gods have not forsaken us.”

Sir Helmon’s legion, staffed with a few royal guards, a dozen seasoned knights, and wave of infantry approached from their position. In tight formation they marched, stomping with heavy feet across the landscape. Their numbers appeared to multiply along the horizon, while the middle column divided so that Sir Helmon could ride out on his giant armored komodo and take the lead. The archers at the rear cast a brief warning sprinkle, forcing the begrudging Grizkins to fall into compliance. In clusters, the members of the bear tribe rose from their spots, many holding each other out of fear, dreading the possible erroneous choice that they could possibly make. To flee or to fight, the end result was the same, and the Lemorians didn’t hesitate to remind them of their dominance. Their order, according to Sir Helmon, trumped the advice and council of the Grizkin’s chieftain. He bowed before them, expressing the need of collaboration and compromise with a pleading tongue. The appeal for peace, even temporary, without the sharing of resources was denied with another dose of disrespect. Then the grizzly chieftain pleaded for extra time so that his people could head north, but the mere thought of the savages pacing across their newly acquired land caused Sir Helmon to strike the chief in the face with his gauntlet.

“Unless you want your fur to line my floor, I suggest you begin walking,” said Sir Helmon, amused by the chief’s cowardly reaction.

“You defy our gods with such arrogance,” growled the chief, as he rubbed his jaw. “You will pay for this.”

“I’ll be sure to answer to them when they arrive,” remarked Sir Helmon, as he directed the chief with a rigid finger. The tribe ventured into the dense woods at a lethargic pace while bearing the curse of unyielding sorrow. Defeat decayed upon their tongues, staining with a taste of coal, as misery began to set in. As if plagued with a damning virus, the Grizkins continued their death march while they rot internally. Their land dried from a drought brought upon them by an aging world. Branching trenches of caked mud tore through the mountainous valleys. Heaps of dried timber stood ready to ignite from the scorching rays of the sun, while the stench of death lingered where game had once been so plentiful. Every step further into the forest reminded them of their destroyed home, but every moment of hesitation gave the Lemorian army the chance to punish. And punish they most certainly did. The royal guards roughed the slowest of the bear-kin with the pointed boss of their shields. The infantry, eager to test their training, rushed through the woods and injured those that dared to succumb to their hatred.

Tormented cries surrounded the chief, squeezing the principles of his ordinance, the dedication to the word of their gods, thus calling out his mocking doubt. The gods directed them to this land with the promise of settlement, but surely not from the expense of war. The chief choked on his words as he attempted to council his people during this terrible time. Hateful tears ran down his face as the strain of failure flung him to the verge of sinking his claws into the flesh of his oppressors. But Lila reminded him with a grave

expression to not attack. The envision must be trusted, otherwise their efforts might fail. Never has the seer been wrong. Never have the gods deceived them for their own pleasure, and this painful trial held a promise no different than the others. Their complete devotion will be repaid.

With his troops squeezing the Grizkins into a tight cluster, Sir Helmon ordered his men to stop, thus preventing any further movement by the threat of death. The infantry bashed their swords against their shields and shouted at their fearful prey.

“This is the end of the line for your kind,” shouted Sir Helmon, as he adjusted the tightness of his gauntlet. “I expected a fight from you, but you didn’t give it. I expected resistance, but you refrained. I even expected you to become a martyr, but you resisted the symbolic spotlight. How pitiful you must really be if you willingly subject your people to this type of treatment. Have you no honor? Have you no pride?”

The tired chief held back the rage as he sluggishly turned around. He gave the Lemorian commander a long steady gaze, while blood dripped from his upper lip.

“Do you even have the courage to speak,” said Sir Helmon, checking around for any sign of amusement produced by his taunt.

The chief growled, revealing his ivory fangs. “How dare you speak of courage when you force us away on a flimsy stance of prejudice? You insignificant, narrow-minded view will earn you your due. You can count my words on that.”

“Then I was correct to assume you would still hold a grudge against Lemora,” said Sir Helmon, as he glanced through the grizzly mass. “It would be against Lemora’s best wishes to let you all go if you plan on holding onto the hate. What sort of commander would I be if I allowed enemies of the empire to have a chance to attack?”

“Lemora,” muttered the chief. “Lemora will fall!”

The chief released a furious growl that shook branches as it pressed forth like a violent wind. The bloody roar called those within the mass to arms, absorbing the complete, undivided attention of the Lemorian army. The huddled mass lashed outward to receive a controlled and fatal reaction from their guarded enemy. But out from the bushes, out from the vast thickness of the woods, did those allied with Mulzul charge. Drunk from the smell of blood, empowered by the bottled rage, the Grizkin warriors caught the Lemorian’s by their blindside and slaughtered. Swords, gripped tightly, flailed flimsily as the beasts dropped the soldiers, ripping into their chests in an unchecked fury. Shields bashed the tips of the claws, deflecting mortal blows, while another bristly savage delivers the kill. Arrows, useless by the dense forest overgrowth, sprayed around with the majority missing. The ones that pierced did so with nagging bites, driving the infuriated beasts further into madness as they charged at the archers.

The sudden ambush stormed through like Hell-fire, consuming the lives of all the Lemorians that crossed its path. Under the thickening smoke, under the blood saturated air, were those that lost sight of their glorious position. The pompous high, the liquor of arrogance, was all but depleted as the remnants of the Sir Helmon's platoon fled for the clearing. Bloody cries hollered through the dense hollows, as the retreating met with unrelenting resistance. For the honor of their gods, for the honor of their fallen brethren, or for the prospect of more prosperous days, the Grizkin warriors, backed by the other members of the tribe, released all their hate onto their enemy. Fleeing reptilians, crying for mercy, were flung into the air with catapult force, while others were torn limb-by-limb where they stood.

Sir Helmon, guided by the speed of his armored mount, spurred for the fleet of archers, but their hailstorm was too little, too late. The grizzly beasts, stuffed with arrows like an overly used pincushion, floored the archers. They only stopped to ensure that all were defeated.

The Lemorian commander was furious by the devastation of his forces. With wrecked nerves he paced back and forth before his remnants shouting bold statements of inspiration, trying hard to channel the Hell bent fury he felt into their hearts, but the savagery snuffed the spouting weeds of morale. The infantry swallowed with lumps as big as the boss on their shields. They wanted to flee for the hills, but their knees wouldn't allow for it. They wanted to voice reason, but the words never stood a chance to form as their minds were still trying to fathom the dreadful massacre.

"These savages have pushed us back far enough. This is our land, this is our property. You will treat this fall as if they were invading your home. You will fight to your last breath," shouted the commander, eyes as ivory pearls rimmed with blood, nostrils inflated with hate. "You will all serve as you promised. When you joined the Lemorian core, you vowed to sacrifice your lives to uphold the freedoms our kingdom. Even now, as we face an impossible enemy, we must do everything we can to protect our honor." The commander paced around the rank, while catching a glimpse of the Grizkin approach. "If we die here, our story will be lost in the carnage. So it is imperative that we buy our messengers enough time to reach home with the news of our struggle." The commander gestured for the group of scouts to head off for Lemora before returning to the ungodly sight of the incoming mass. "Don't dread the fear, embrace it, and wield it so that every move you make will be guided by keen senses." The commander's booming voice fought against the rumbling earth as he insisted in boosting his troops' morale. But the trembling ground warned him just before the Grizkins stormed on to their grounds.

Drawing blood with his spurs, the Lemorian commander led a symbolic charge as a sovereign and commendable and formable titan. Smooth and tempered, he removed his long, broad blade from its sheath, and without a moment spared, he countered the hastened pounce of his grizzly foe with a quick but powerful slice that tore through the creature's face. The bloody mess fell on its own accord while others tested their luck. Grouped as two, the bear-kin warriors lunged for the commander's throat, but not once did he flinch. Sir Helmon charged onward while carving through as if impossible to be

touched. With an upward swing, he deflected another near-fatal attempt with the return of severed limbs, while an even blow decapitated the few that remained in his way.

Blood sprayed from all around, raining from the sky, splotching his armor with dark, running slicks. The taste of combat watered his tongue, as his lungs breathed the saturated air. Hungry for slaughter, Sir Helmon refrained from prying his sword out from the stubborn heap. Instead, he dismounted from his armored komodo with a bold leap, placing him before the chieftain.

“You’re surrounded,” said the Grizkin elder, as the savages enclosed. The war-bred komodo screeched from behind, as the grizzly horde piled on like vultures on fresh carcass.

Sir Helmon knelt as he recovered from his leap. A faint smirk stretched along his reptilian face. He removed his plate helmet, tossing it at his opponent’s feet while rising.

“Do you surrender,” asked the chief.

“My helm is at your feet, isn’t it?”

“Why, then, do you smile?”

The Lemorian bit his tongue.

“Our seer told me you wouldn’t give up. That you wouldn’t throw down your sword,” the chieftain paced around the Lemorian. “She described that our settlements would burn as long as you lived.”

“I think your oracle is confusing you. She spoke of promises without death, and now she speaks of death with promise. I think your makeshift settlement will burn from within. Serves you right; you loathsome savage.” Sir Helmon spat at the ground and looked the chief in the eyes.

“We’ve entrusted our lives to the word and advice of our sacred guardians, only when we dared to do otherwise have we suffered greater loss. You would never understand.”

Sir Helmon adjusted his gauntlets, retrieved a hidden dagger. Working quickly, he grasped the fur on the chief’s shoulder while driving the dagger to the kill. Struck at the wrist, the blade only dabbled at the skin, leaving the prideful Lemorian to be swallowed by a sudden, torturous death.

The huddled Grizkins, with Mulzul as their leader, stepped away from their target, allowing the lifeless collection of mutilated flesh to collapse in a pool of blood. The chief thanked the warrior, and after they set camp he honored him for his strength and loyalty. For even though he disobeyed, calling for a division within the tribe, he unknowingly

served as the seer envisioned. Plagued with the sorrow of loss, the bear-kin tread through the night with only modest celebration. The gruesome strife took its toll, devouring hundreds of lives, but their effort was not in vain. Their outlook grew as they began to rejoice in the lush lands of Bella. Under the glow of burning torches they cried and laughed, sharing stories of the past, while wishing for the future.

To be continued...

Birthright

Michael Conrad

The young girl sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Usually it would take minutes before her eyes adjusted to the darkness, but a gentle glow from outside her window illuminated the room. Climbing out of bed, she went to investigate. Down the road from her house, in the distance, the soft radiance of numerous small fires broke through the darkness of the night. She pressed her face as close to the glass as her two small horns would allow, trying to get a closer look. It might have been her imagination, but the little lights seemed to be getting closer.

Behind her, the door opened and her father stepped in, ducking to avoid hitting his head on the threshold. He had the build of a human, but stood eight feet tall and easily weighed five hundred pounds of solid muscle. Dark brown hair covered all of his body except parts of his face and his long snout. If his maw and clawed fingers weren't sufficient weapons, he had a large crossbow strapped across his bare back.

"Daddy, do you see the lights?" the little girl asked innocently. Her grin showed two canine teeth that were easily twice the size of any of her other teeth.

"I see it, Kari," her father replied grimly.

“What do you think they are?” she asked, brushing some of her short, brown hair out of her face.

Her father stood silently for a moment watching the dancing lights. He knew all too well what they were, but he also knew that he couldn't tell his daughter. “We're going to go on a little trip,” he said suddenly, changing the subject.

“Where to?”

“It's a surprise. Just me, you, and your mother.”

“Alright, when do we leave?”

“Right now.”

Confusion spread across her face. “Shouldn't we wait until morning?”

“It'll be morning soon. Go meet your mother in the kitchen.”

“Okay,” she said, puzzled.

Kari ran the back of her fuzzy hand across her face as she walked out of the room, a sign that she was nervous. The father had tried to keep the edge out of his voice, but clearly it had shown through. Looking out the window one last time at the approaching lights, he hid away his rage for the sake of his daughter and followed her out of the room.

They left their small cottage a few minutes later. Kari and her mother headed away from the light to the nearby forest while the father slipped off on his own.

“Where's daddy going?” Kari asked, beginning to realize something was truly amiss. “I thought he was coming with us.”

“He has to do something first,” her human mother, Fidela, told her. She had fair skin, tantalizing green eyes, and long, blonde hair that almost fell to her waist.

They reached the edge of the forest and pushed their way in. Dead leaves crackled under their feet and wind rustled through the trees. The predawn light was faint, but bright enough for Fidela to lead the way. Behind them, they could hear the shouts of humans and the barking of dogs.

“What are they doing back there?” Kari asked, old enough to realize that the noise was coming from their cottage. A bright light had flared up behind them and a plume of smoke began to billow through the air.

“Just keep walking,” Fidela replied, not even trying to keep the fear out her voice.

The father had been running for almost half an hour before he reached a small town nestled between two large hills. He went straight to the largest building, a two story mansion surrounded by a short stone wall on the outskirts of the town. Without knocking, he barreled through the front door into a large, open foyer. There were doors on both sides and a staircase that snaked up to a second floor balcony that overlooked the foyer.

“McAlpin!” he shouted, heading for the stairs.

He was only a few steps up when a boy and a tall, hulking man appeared at the top of the landing. The boy had shaggy brown hair and blue eyes filled with excitement while the man had black hair and the hardened look of experience etched into his face.

“It’s too late, Ehren,” the boy said. “Things are already in motion and you couldn’t stop it if you tried.”

Ehren glanced back over his shoulder at the boy before heading down the stairs. He made eye contact with the father, but swept past him without saying a word.

“I need help. Where’s McAlpin?” the father asked the boy, ignoring Ehren.

“You mean *my* father?” the boy snapped back.

“Yeah, McAlpin,” he said, not realizing the boy might have the same surname as his father.

“He’s out hunting,” the boy replied with a devious grin.

“When will he be back?” The father didn’t get the cruel joke, ignorant to human sarcasm and misdirection.

“When he finds out you’re here,” the boy said venomously.

The father didn’t get that remark at first either, but he was beginning to catch on. “What’s he out hunting?”

“The Shepherd family was found murdered last night. He and some men are out hunting the monster that killed them.”

“Does he know who did it?”

The boy laughed hysterically, thrilled that the father didn’t get it. Suddenly, he drew out a flintlock pistol that had been tucked in the back of his pants. Without saying a word, he aimed it at the father and cocked back the hammer.

Although not adept at word games, the beast was no stranger to combat. He sprung into action, bounding over the railing of the stairs and leaping towards the balcony. The boy fired a second too late, his pistol launching the bullet through the air where the beast had just been.

Grabbing the bottom edge of the balcony, the beast had to use little effort to propel himself up and over the railing. The boy had pulled out another pistol and was drawing back the hammer when the beast reached him. He used one hand to slap the

pistol from the boy's grasps and the other to grab the front of his tunic. With a grunt, he sent the boy sailing over the balcony railing and into a heap by the front door.

Gathering the second pistol, the beast tucked it into the back on his pants and leapt over the balcony railing, landing less than a foot from the boy. The boy's cocky grin had been replaced with a mask of dread. The father could have killed him, but he was a father, not a monster. He stepped over the boy and out the front door.

After what seemed like forever, Kari and Fidela arrived at the edge of a chirping brook and large cairn of rocks that formed a cave. It was still early morning, but the sun provided enough light to uncover the beauty of the autumn forest. Red and yellow leaves blanketed the ground and the trees above them. The myriad of colors glistened from the light bouncing of the dew, giving the entire forest a romantic appeal.

Kari washed her face in the brook while Fidela peered warily into the cave. She had only been here once before, when she'd first met Kari's father, and it had the same eerie appeal that she remembered. She had been lost in the woods and had wandered by her husband-to-be, not far from the cave. At first, she was terrified, petrified by the sight of a monster. Only moments later did her mind register just what the monster was doing. He was kneeling on the ground, freeing a small wolf's paw from a hunter's snare. Once the wolf had scampered off, Fidela mustered up her courage and went out to talk to the beast.

That was Kari's favorite bedtime story.

"Did you hear that, mommy?" Kira asked from the brook, pulling Fidela out of her thoughts.

“Hear what?” Fidela asked, scouring the woods.

They both listened for a long while. The only noise was the brook splashing across the rocks.

“It’s nothing,” Fidela said, turning back to the cave as a man carrying a flintlock rifle, complete with a bayonet, emerged from behind a tree. The hammer cocked back and three more men emerged from cover, all holding rifles and one leading two leashed dogs.

“Grab your abomination and get moving,” the man with the dogs growled, indicating with his gun. Fidela thought of resisting, but she didn’t want Kira to get hurt. Grudgingly, she took her daughters hand and followed them men into the woods.

One man took the lead, while another followed right behind Kira and Fidela, the dogs nipping at their heels. The two other men disappeared into the forest on either side, but Fidela could still sense them close by. All four of the men traversed the woods silently, explaining how they had snuck up on Kira and Fidela so easily.

They walked in silence for ten minutes before Kira finally mustered her courage. Without warning, she suddenly bolted to the right and disappeared amongst the trees.

“I’ll get her,” the invisible voice of one of the men in the forest called.

Kira heard the voice and it only motivated her to run faster. She ran for a minute without hearing any noise from her pursuer, but out of the corner of her eye she saw a shadow flash out from behind a tree. The butt of the man’s gun slammed into her forehead and sent her sprawling onto the leaf-covered ground. She groaned and tried to sit up, tears and blood dripping down her face.

“Two of you are too much trouble,” the man growled. “We’ll just need your mother to bring the beast out of hiding.”

He raised his gun, lining it up with the sobbing girl’s head. The hammer clicked back and he lowered one eye down to the iron sight.

Expecting the worse, Kira started crying harder, not even looking up at her assailant. She waited several second, expecting to hear an explosion of gunpowder. Instead, she heard a thump and then the crackling of leaves.

Finally summoning the courage to look through her tears, she saw the man’s body lying face first in the leaves. Blood dripped out of the back of his head, pooling on the ground. A huge crossbow bolt was buried deep in his skull.

The beast emerged from seemingly nowhere, the large crossbow tipped up against his shoulder. He walked over to the man’s body and tugged out the bolt, breaking in half. Tossing down the wasted ammunition, he slung the crossbow over his shoulder and recovered the man’s rifle. Then the father crouched down next to his daughter and draped his arm across her shoulder. The blood on her face caused him pain, but her tears consumed him with despair.

“It’s going to be alright,” he said as calmly as he could. “Where’s your mother?”

Kari kept crying, but she managed to look over at the body.

“Go find somewhere to hide and don’t come out unless you hear my voice.”

She slowly climbed to her wobbling feet and stumbled towards a cocoon of roots at the base of a large tree.

Forcing himself to look away, the father sprinted off through the woods, back tracking his daughter's path. After a few minutes, he came upon the other three men. They were clumped together, prodding Fidela on ahead of them.

"Where the hell is he? It was just one girl," one man grumbled.

"It's not a girl, it's a monster," the man with the dogs snarled.

The third man was about to say something, but he suddenly jerked backwards and collapsed in a heap with a crossbow bolt buried in his chest. Fidela screamed and dived to the ground while the other two men scrambled to find cover, setting both of the dogs loose.

One dog began to sniff the ground, but the other went barreling through the forest, determined to find the beast. It almost ran right past him, spinning around just in time to catch the bullet from the boy's pistol between its eyes.

The dog died instantly, but the gunshot alerted the two men to the beast's location. They both fired their rifles at the same time, neither man sure where the beast really was.

"I'm getting the woman out of here," one man snarled, reloading his rifle. The other man nodded and watched his companion push Fidela away at the point of a bayonet.

The beast heard the man too, but he couldn't do anything about it. He had climbed up a tree and was now ten feet above the ground, watching the second dog sniff where he had just been. He could easily get the drop on the mongrel and kill it, but he was afraid the other man would be waiting, using the dog as bait.

Hearing his wife's distant scream prodded him into action. Using the rifle he picked from his first kill, he used it as a javelin, sending it flying towards the ground with a flick of his wrist. The dog was skewered instantly, but before it could die, a bullet whizzed by, splitting the wooden stock of the gun in half.

As soon as he heard the gunpowder explode, the beast dropped from the tree, knowing the man would have to take a significant amount of time to reload. He found the man instantly kneeling down next to a fallen log ramming another bullet into his gun.

With acceleration that seemed impossible, the beast rushed the man, who had just enough time to level his bayonet at the five hundred pounds of muscles. The beast swatted the gun aside before it could be fired and shattered his empty crossbow on the man's head. Then, with paranormal speed, he buried his teeth into the man's neck and used his claws to tear open the man's stomach.

The beast stood up and wiped the blood from his mouth. He discarded the remains of his crossbow and took the man's rifle before running off to follow the last man and his wife.

The forest around him fell silent as he ran. The wind had stopped blowing and the only noise was the soft crunching of leaves beneath his feet.

"There's no winning," a familiar voice called out, echoing off the trees.

The father took a few more steps, coming into a clearing in a small depression. The man was on the far side with his rifle pointed at the back of Fidela's head.

"Don't come any closer," the man warned, using Fidela as a shield.

“What happened, McAlpin?” the father asked, genuinely confused that the fourth man was the only other human that he trusted besides his wife. “I thought we were friends.”

“You’re a monster. We can never be friends.”

“You don’t understand. I didn’t kill the Shepherds.”

“I know. I did,” McAlpin said.

“Why?” the father asked, genuinely surprised.

“The whole town was warming up to you. In a few more years, you would have been just like any other human in town. I couldn’t sit and watch them all believe your deception; believe that you were just like them. So I killed the Shepherds. They were getting old and had no family, a worthy sacrifice to create an excuse to cleanse you and that abomination from the world. All I had to do was have my boy tell the townsfolk that he had seen you leaving their house last night. If I had waited another year, perhaps people would have wanted to see more proof, but like I said, they were only just beginning warm up to you.”

The father just stood there, unsure of what to say. “I saw your son earlier this morning,” he said at last, trying to bait McAlpin into doing something rash.

Anger flashed across the man’s face, but he quickly masked it. “I do hope he’s alright.”

“A little beat up when I left him. I’m not sure he’ll be able to walk for awhile.”

McAlpin flashed a knowing smile, his eyes darting away from the father, but only for a second. “I think he’ll be fine.”

The father followed McAlpin's eyes and immediately saw what the man had looked at. The boy was kneeling in the open at the top of the short hill lining up a shot with a rifle.

The beast reacted instantly and sprawled to the ground as McAlpin's son fired. The bullet soared harmlessly through the air and the boy made the fatal mistake of trying to watch its flight. Before he even realized he had missed, the beast was up in a kneeling position, looking down the sights of his own rifle. The rifle discharged, its lethal cargo spiraling through the air and into the boy's chest, killing him instantly.

McAlpin screamed in rage, pointing his rifle at the beast. As he shot, Fidela rammed her shoulder into the rifle, sending the bullet ricocheting off into the woods.

The beast dropped down to all four legs and sprinted towards McAlpin, leaving the discharged rifle behind. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a dark figure emerge from the forest by the boy's body, but he ignored it, consumed by his hatred for McAlpin.

McAlpin, once again hiding behind Fidela, waited for the beast to close the distance. At the last second, he stepped out from behind her, a pistol in hand. Without hesitating, he fired at point blank range, sending the bullet tearing into the beast's chest. Five hundred pounds of muscles and fur crashed down onto the ground next McAlpin, the bullet not even slowing the beast's momentum.

"I did it," McAlpin shouted, laughing hysterically. He stopped when he saw the same dark figure standing over his son's body that the beast had seen seconds earlier.

"Who are you?" McAlpin asked, squinting to see who it was.

In a blur, the figure leveled a pistol at McAlpin and sent a bullet soaring through the lingering air. McAlpin shuttered once before collapsing to the ground. The figure lowered his gun and walked towards the body of the father and his mourning wife.

Fidela had locked up and tears welled in her eyes. The figure, Ehren, stood by, watching her, but taking no aggressive action, appreciating her bereavement. She didn't recognize him, but she took solace in his presence anyway.

"I saw McAlpin leaving the Shepherds' house last night," Ehren said, unsure if Fidela was even listening. "I tried to convince everybody that your husband didn't do it, but by the time I said something they were too riled up. Then I saw him at McAlpin's house earlier today and followed him here, hoping to find McAlpin and convince him to call off the manhunt."

Fidela didn't say anything to indicate she had even heard Ehren, but he was still comforted by saying it aloud. After another minute, Ehren left returning ten minutes after that with Kari in his arms. She had fallen unconscious when Ehren had wrapped a bandage around the wound on her head, but she came to as he laid her down next to the body of her father.

"Daddy," she said softly, renewing her crying. She quietly grabbed one of his hands and pulled it close to her face. Miraculously, the father's finger closed over hers.

The Baldric

K. A. Masters

“Pardon my cowardice, milord, but I don’t think we should meddle with the ruins of the Old Mill.”

Arpad looked at his companion Pollos with an annoyed grunt, but kept on his quest.

“Milord,” he began again, “The land is cursed. Even the Old Ones avoid it. There is no growth, no sound of birds. . .it’s as though Nature herself realizes the ground holds naught but death.”

“If you are so worried, you may leave, dear friend. But I will not be swayed. There’s treasure in the ruin and I’ll not stop until I’ve enough gold to buy fair Teresa’s hand.”

“But,” Pollos began, but let his reprimand die on his lips. “As you wish, milord,” he sighed, bowing his uneven shoulders and continuing to follow his friend with his shuffling gait.

Arpad continued for a few more paces then stopped, waiting for his companion to catch up. “I’m sorry,” he began, “Forgive me, friend, I didn’t think. Is the path too hard? The ground too uneven?” His determination melted with concern.

Pollos blushed. “No, lord. Your pace is considerate--I only wish. . .” his voice faltered, “My own selfishness and cowardice hinders you, and for that, I apologize. But I have no one, no friends, no hope, if you are taken from me.”

“Pollos,” the young lord sighed, “I do not intend to be taken from you. But I need that treasure. Think on it, friend, an adventure—like the old tales! Fighting dragons,

rescuing damsels, finding treasure, except with no danger. We are merely seeking treasure from an old ruin.”

“Why are you so eager to prove yourself on this quest, milord? The Lady Teresa loves you well enough.”

“Simply put, she loves me because I am the eldest son of a lord. I want to prove myself in her eyes.”

“And stop calling me ‘milord,’” he continued, “My name is Arpad, and we are friends. Besides, there is no one around to hear how you address me. Call me by name, friend, I beg you.”

Pollos nodded, then continued to shuffle beside Arpad in silence. He never left Arpad’s side. The poor youth was exposed as a child after his misshapen form was deduced by Church and folk alike as a killcrop. It was only the child Arpad’s pity that rescued Pollos from his fate, and Pollos never forgot it.

They reached the ruin in uncomfortable silence. True to Pollos’ word, there was no sound from bird or bug; only crackling of underbrush was heard as they trudged towards the ruin of the Old Mill.

The mill had been used a century before to grind flour, but not long after a gold-sniffing griffin gave his blessing on the land, it had mysteriously burned to the ground. It was rumored that a treasure—albeit a cursed one—still remained among the ruins. Over the years, people braved the rumored ghosts and griffins that haunted the land in futile quests, but the only result of previous searches for gold were tired and dusty limbs.

Like the previous treasure-hunters, Arpad was determined to find the ruin’s secret.

“Where do we look, milord Arpad?” Pollos asked.

“The Cellars,” he suggested. “Treasures are often hidden in the ground.”

“Will the structure hold?” the youth inquired, shivering. He had been locked in a trunk for a few days once—at the hands of those who teased him—and since then, darkness terrified him.

“I am uneasy in the dark, too, friend,” Arpad replied. He spied the narrow hall that led to the bowels of the stone structure, and added, “This appears too narrow for two. You should stay outside, to aid me in case I call.”

“Don’t leave,” Pollos began, then relented, “You’ll call out, every twenty paces, right?”

“Of course,” Arpad reassured him. The youth lit a lantern and descended to the Cellars.

In spite of the charred remains of ancient foodstuffs and storage, the hallways and rooms remained reasonably clear. The young adventurer found little difficulty in the early stages of his quest.

Suddenly Arpad cursed as his knee knocked into the half-charred remains of a barrel.

“Milord? Milord?!” his friend’s voice called behind him. Hearing his master’s distress call, Pollos was now braving the dark to rescue him. Before Arpad could call to stop him, Pollos had stumbled into his master’s side. Both tumbled together, falling over a century’s rubbish. Unlucky Pollos fell through a trapdoor.

“Pollos? Pollos, are you hurt?” Arpad called, using the meager light of a lantern to find his friend.

The youth groaned in pain as he tried to right himself. “I cannot rise, milord—you—leave me here. . .”

“Nonsense,” Arpad said, “Take my arm.”

“It isn’t safe—I fell through the floor.”

“You fell through a trapdoor,” Arpad explained, examining its edges. “It seems stable enough for me to approach. Here, reach for my arm. . .”

“I am not strong enough to pull myself out. . .”

“Nonsense! Try!”

Arpad heard a yelp as Pollos redoubled his efforts. He scrambled to free himself, clutching his friend’s arms as both heaved the useless weight of Pollos’ crooked limbs out of the pit.

After another awkward shuffle the errant youth was free, sprawled over his rescuer’s chest. For the second of contact, pulse to pulse, Arpad could feel his friend’s panic.

“What new fright have you gained?” Arpad laughed, “I would not have left you in the cellar to rot!”

“I never doubted you, milord,” the youth said through chattering teeth, “I felt a beast within the darkness.”

“A beast? Or a beastly cobweb?” he teased lightly, trying to use humor to calm his friend.

“There is a beast within. Milord, please, we must be away from this place. Please—there is a monster—I hope it sleeps, or is dead—but it is beneath us.”

“And you felt it? In truth? Let me see. . .”

“No, Please!” Pollos cried.

“Hold my ankles, let me look,” he insisted, using the lantern to peer into the darkness of the under cellar.

Instantly Arpad’s mouth went dry. In the lantern light he could see the dark shape of a griffin prone upon the ground. Although covered in scales, feathers, and fur, it was clothed with what was once a leather belt and linen kilt. Lain across its loins and chest were a baldric and the blade of a battle ax. A gem of enormous size was clutched between its talons.

The gem was the largest that Arpad had ever seen. It twinkled in the dim light but he could not yet discern its color. With a grunt he pried it from the creature’s claws, trying to touch it as little as possible.

“It’s dead, it’s dead, it has to be dead,” he muttered to himself nervously as he pocketed the gem.

As his hand skimmed over the golden baldric, he hesitated; it, too, glimmered in the lamplight and its shine reminded him of his mythology. It was dishonorable to strip the dead of their armor—baldrics especially—and this particular act of dishonor always led to tragedy.

“What did you find, milord?” he heard Pollos say over his shoulder, reminding him of Pallas’ belt. He knew he had to leave the thing behind, but something beckoned him to act. . .

He used the creature’s shape to convince his conscience and appease his guilt.

“This is no enemy,” he thought, “This is a monster without soul or reason. Long dead, its form guards a treasure left by long dead people--not it.”

He struggled with the weight of the armor, but awkwardly was able to free the prize. As he handled it, slinging it over his shoulder, a sense of urgency embraced him as well.

“Pollos,” he declared, “we must leave.”

“Did you find success?” his companion breathed.

“Yes, but we must hurry. I dislike being burdened by this treasure in these ruins-- especially now that we have taken the creature’s gold.”

“Gold? Did you say gold?” Pollos asked, his eyes widening as he saw his master’s form weighted down with treasure.

“Master!” he cried in disbelief, “You’ve found the treasure of the Old Mill!”

“And you have found its monster. Thanks to you, this is all thanks to you.” Arpad said heartily as they stumbled back into the sunlight.

“Milord, no,” he spluttered. “I am not responsible; I take no credit for this. My cowardice hindered you. . .”

“Nonsense,” the youth scoffed, “and when I go to the goldsmith, I shall give you half of the gold when they melt it down. But let us hurry.”

“Of course,” Pollos nodded, and they hobbled back to town.

The jeweler and goldsmith worked together in town next to the stables and the blacksmith’s forge. Although knowledgeable in the arts of all kinds of gems, Bastian the Goldsmith and Percival the Jeweler could not identify the makeup of their lord’s treasure.

“The gem is nothing like I have ever seen,” Percival said rapaciously. His eyes sparkled like the object he clutched in his hands. “It glitters with an inner light that moves as if it lives within.”

“It is a bride gift. I will give it to my Teresa as soon as you can set it. . .” Arpad boasted.

“Of course.”

“It is too big for a ring—how about a belt? To match the one you found?”

“No,” Arpad replied, “Bastian, I’d like for you to melt it down. I wish to share my find with Pollos. . .”

“I must insist not. I need no reward, milord,” his companion interjected bashfully.

“I, too, must insist,” Bastian replied, “It is so intricately woven and beautifully designed. And. . .” he added, “I fear I am unsure on how to undo it. And I hesitate to destroy the beauty of the artwork.”

“But I was going to use the gold to pay for Percival’s services,” Arpad huffed, now unsure of the outcome of his plan.

“Milord, I have a solution,” he offered, “I will need to make at least a few facets to bring out the true beauty of the gem. If I may have the scraps, I can put them in baubles and sell them for trinkets for other ladies of the town.”

He nodded, relieved. “That sounds wise. Thank you. How soon can you have it done?”

“A few days, perhaps?”

“I’d rather have it tonight. If you can, I wish to propose as soon as I may.”

“Aye, then. I will have it to you by nightfall.”

“Thank you, sir,” Arpad bowed.

“I will wait here until it’s ready, milord,” Pollos volunteered, “You’d best bathe the soot out of your hair and prepare for a wedding feast.”

“Thank you, dear friend,” Arpad bowed, then left.

* * *

The wedding feast was lively with cheerful music and happy hosts. Teresa hung upon her new husband’s neck, dangling like the gemstone pendant that he had hung upon her breast at the betrothal ceremony a few hours before.

Arpad wore the baldric proudly, boisterously displaying both his treasure and his bride. He was glad that his quest could show what lay in his heart; his feelings for her could not be hidden, and it was clear that she reciprocated his affection. She even danced a turn with Pollos to please her new husband, even if he could not keep rhythm with his deformed limbs and cobwebs still clung behind his ear.

In the midst of the gaiety, they heard over the music an inhuman roar of rage. The music stopped, the guests looked around in panic, and only resumed their festivities with the elder Lord Arpad’s quick urging.

At midnight the crowd dispersed, and Arpad and his lady settled in to enjoy the first night of their marriage. Pollos slept in the main hall, too tired to seek his own quarters.

* * *

“Milord,” Pollos called, frantically shuffling to rejoin his friend, “Milord, you must listen! There is news, terrible, terrible news!”

“What’s wrong?” Arpad asked, kissing his wife’s hand as he dismissed her from the room to protect her ears from the horrific tale.

“Something has happened at the goldsmith’s forge last night. Bastian and Percival have been slain.”

“What? How?”

“Their bodies have been ripped open. A beast must have come in the night and killed them. Their workshop is destroyed as well. The whole place is in ruins. There’s gold splattered on the floor, gems were scattered like chickenfeed. . .”

“So it was no robbery?”

“Not that the guard could tell. And,” Pollos gulped, “humans don’t slaughter other humans that way. These were like the battlefield dead we saw last year. But this was worse. There is no battle rage, no bloodlust that spurred this on. It was a scene of pure and inhuman carnage.”

“We should pay our respects,” Arpad suggested.

“Milord, I have no desire to see that again,” Pollos grimaced, “But I will join you.”

They hobbled to the forge and saw a scene of utter chaos. The Queen’s Pikemen were standing guard as the churchmen took the bodies away, chanting last rites over cloth-covered bodies before they moved them for burial.

Pollos remained at the door as Arpad entered to examine the carnage. As he glanced back to his friend he noticed the damage of the broken door. Two sets of claw marks crisscrossed the wood, shredding it to splinters. Instantly it reminded Arpad of the talons of the creature he had seen the day before; like Pollos, he shuddered involuntarily

in recollection. Then realization struck him, as he thought first of the talons, then of the contents of the monster's hands.

"Pollos, friend," Arpad called, "the cuttings. . .the gem fragments, where did Percival put them? You saw, didn't you, as you waited to deliver my wedding gift?"

"The gem cutter placed them in his strongbox under his bench. Why did you ask, milord?"

Arpad walked to the opposite side of the room to where the strongbox lie ripped open, its contents scattered. But the young lord found no gem fragments from his treasure.

"Why did you ask, milord? What's wrong?"

"The roar we heard last night, the claw marks, the gem cutter's dead, the gem pieces gone. . .God, friend, what have I done?"

"Is it. . .?" Pollos asked in horror.

"I have brought this to our town," Arpad admitted, laden with guilt, "I woke the Beast and incited its rage. And I fear that it will return for me tonight."

* * *

Arpad, Teresa, Pollos, and the entire household prepared to sleep in the main hall that night. Teresa clung to her new husband's side, anxious for his safety.

Arpad slung the baldric over his shoulder, afraid that he had condemned those he cared about to die for his foolishness. He held his sword by his side, ready to give his life in defense of his new wife.

After nightfall, their wait was over. Again their nervous silence was broken with an inhuman roar of rage.

Pollos flinched. Arpad sighed in resignation as he freed his sword from its sheath.

“Was that from the main door?” Pollos gulped, his eyes wide with alarm.

A groan of hinges creaked as the creature outside pounded the wooden door. The hall resounded with shrieks, drowning the sound of claws scraping deep grooves into the wood. Very soon the creature would be inside and then—death would be upon them.

“I freed him. Now I must free him from this life,” Arpad whispered with determination.

“How?” Pollos asked.

“The servants’ entrance!” he huffed, “We can sneak out from the side and make a stand before it gets within.”

“Aye, milord,” Pollos cried, feigning bravery.

Arpad hastened outside through the hidden doorway, but every scrape, blow, and roar made him queasy. As he neared the corner of his home, he could see the shape of its assailant and it confirmed his worst fear.

It was the Old Mill’s cellar griffin. The creature that Arpad had once supposed was long dead was now at his door. The beast’s beak and feathers snarled in rage as he pounded his aged talons against the wood. The steel battle ax lay tucked into his holster at his belt as he stood upright, intelligent, deliberate, and lethal.

Before he spurred himself into action, he heard a whisper behind his ear. “I will not fail you, milord,” Pollos declared, and rushed to attack.

Armed only with his walking stick, Pollos defended his master’s keep with fixed intent. The youth let out a battle cry, alerting the creature to his presence. Before he could

blink the creature wielded his ax with an instinct-driven swoop. Pollos fell to the ground with a groan, his chest split open.

“No,” Arpad groaned, forgetting his battle training. He rushed to aid his dying friend, leaving his sword in the brush beside him. As he cradled Pollos to his chest, giving comfort to his friend in his last moments, the creature cleaned his blade on the grass and waited.

“My friend,” he whispered, then turned to address the creature, “You have killed my friend.”

“I am sorry about that, human,” the griffin admitted, “But he attacked and I reacted. I did not realize that he was broken until after he struck.”

“What is your purpose, creature? Why are you killing those that freed you?”

“I am grateful for the rescue,” the creature ceded with a respectful but brief bow of the head. As he did, the snaky hair tendrils that hung behind his jackal ears clattered in movement. “But I am after my mate, and vengeance for anyone who hurt or kept me from her.”

“Your mate?” Arpad asked in horror, rising to his feet, preparing to stop the monster.

The griffin nodded, then took his battle ax to the front door, splitting it open. “The gem,” he sensed.

Chaos and movement filled the main hall as people scattered, ran to arms, or froze in fear. The griffin merely swatted away those that attacked him and headed straight for Teresa, who clutched the pendant at her throat.

“My mate,” he repeated, holding the maiden’s trembling hands in his talons.

Teresa, eye to eye to a creature much larger than herself, fainted into the arms of her husband. As her hands went limp, the griffin grabbed the pendant at her neck—not to strangle her, but to take the gem. With a quick jerk he snapped the gold chain to free the gem and cradled it in his talons.

Continuing to ignore the people around him, the griffin held the gemstone and its fragments tenderly in his talons. Holding them to his chest, he explained, “My mate passed on to the After many years ago. But she left her memories behind to comfort me. Now that it is whole, and back near my heart, I shall go.” He bowed respectfully, then turned to leave.

Four paces later, he stopped and turned. “The belt.”

Arpad cringed and with a fumble removed the baldric with his one free hand.

“The belt is poison. It was made to keep me captive, and it will poison you if you continue to wear it. Only a fire of intense heat can kill its venom. Throw it on your hearth fire with your doors and windows open. Once the fire dies, the gold and silver should be safe to use.”

“Many thanks for the warning,” Arpad spluttered.

“It is small consolation for the loss of your friend,” the griffin countered, “but I thank you for my freedom.” He bowed, tucked his ax into his belt, and flew away.

Arpad, arms still clinging to the prone form of his wife, his shirt and hands still bloodied with his best friend’s gore, gave a prayer of thanksgiving that the curse was overcome.

ARCANE SUPREMACY

Jonathan Kirkwood

Many Tiberian scholars have chosen of late to write of the Tiberian-Valtanic War, how the legions of the Emperor Imperius I Arcturus conquered the Valtanic Union. Nothing could be further from the truth. I served as the commanding Valtanic general, and I tell you it was not your Empire's legions that crushed my nation. Our defeat came about due to our reliance on the arcane arts—magic.

I will state it again for emphasis: we lost the war because of our reliance on magic.

I was born in Tepland to a prosperous merchant family. I never held commerce in high regard so I pursued a military career as an officer, with my father's permission of course. By the age of twenty-five, I was made a general after my leadership and gallantry during the Gersenda Wars earned the attention of Lord General Everard Covonel, then our ranking general. I later married his middle daughter. When I write of why the Valtanic Union lost the war, I write with authority. Let none be so foolish as to doubt my words.

We had every reason to be confident in success over the Tiberian Empire. Our population was four times that of its. Any invasion by it was guaranteed to rely heavily on garrisons to check civil unrest. Because of our larger population, we possessed a larger military. A typical division in our army was composed of twenty thousand men. The typical Tiberian legion had only eighty-two hundred present. We had proven tactics through the combination of knights and the infantry phalanx. Again, a larger population also meant greater wealth. We were the economic center of the known world. All gold, even Tiberian, flowed into our coffers. If it could be bought, then we bought it. Our wealth and majesty had long cowed would be enemies into allies. We counted Elves, Dwarves, Orcs, even Goblins at times, as allies. Lastly, was our use of magic. We were led by Mages, capable of casting any number of spells, though only a select few had the experience and power to cast immense spells capable of affecting entire armies. Most could cast a spell

affecting an area of one hundred feet, but we had proof it was enough from previous battles. The Tiberians did not use magic within their military structure. Given all this, we were confident, some now say overconfident. I will not deny that I may have been among those ranks, but you must understand that given our perceived supremacy, especially in the realm of the arcane arts, how could you not feel the same?

I will not go into the origins of the war. They are already well-known and written of by scholars. I will begin this history with the Battle of Jevic. It was there that one of our divisions, the Thirteenth, met a Tiberian legion and was massacred. Even Mages attached to the division failed to withstand them. Survivors described the Tiberians using their infantry and cavalry with perfection. Their infantry outmaneuvered around our phalanxes and their version of heavy cavalry, called cataphracts, worked with horse archers to neutralize our knights. In retrospect, we should have expected horse archers, given that the Tiberians had faced nomadic barbarians on their western borders for generations.

A summit held in Palatania, our capital, determined how we would prosecute the remainder of the war. Lord General Covonel had personally interviewed survivors of the battle and determined what remedies we needed. He informed the First Council of Mages, our leaders, that the Tiberians had used superior tactics and would continue to as long as we refused to adapt ourselves to better resist them. He argued for a complete restructuring of our army, especially in regard to formations and tactics. While our forces retrained, he suggested we provision our cities and fortresses as best we could against sieges and blockades. Small cavalry units could perform hit-and-run attacks on Tiberian logistical lines, forcing them back to give up on the sieges.

Above all else, Covonel needed time to make the reforms happen.

And then the Minister of Arcane Research spoke. His name was Vaxter, and he deconstructed Covonel's arguments on the spot. He argued that as the military was a conservative organization to begin with, it would be resistant to change no matter how respected Covonel was. Furthermore, the Tiberians had already proven themselves highly mobile with their smaller

legions, which acted as self-contained armies, capable to handling their own logistics. Magic was the key to our success. Vaxter's predecessor, Meridan, had focused on spells that affected a small area because Mages could wield them easily and effectively. The spells required little trouble with research and development and had a proven reputation of being free of flaws. Vaxter wanted us to go big and create powerful spells. He was adamant we could reach the next step and went as far as to say the spells would help us march on Arctura Dara, the Tiberian capital, with clean victories along the way. As the First Council was composed of Mages, it was easily swayed and voted to head in this direction. I've no doubt that the lure of bloodless victories also affected their decision.

Vaxter had a spell in mind. He called it the Arcane Shield. He explained how it worked in simple terms. Its purpose was to place a protective force field around a division to fend off attacks. A team of Mages would join their powers together to create what he called a section. Sections existed because the length of a division in battle order would strain any team of Mages to the breaking point in deploying the entire Shield. Each section was merged to one on its left and right, allowing for a stronger Shield. Our soldiers could stand behind the Shield and loose arrows, hurl javelins, and fire artillery through it. Even spears and swords could be thrust through it, so long as they were Valtanic ones. The Tiberians would never pierce it.

Vaxter said he needed six months to get the spell ready. He took nine. The reason for this was due to energy needed to cast and maintain it. The Mages charged with creating the sections failed to hold them up for long; the process being very taxing. Three months of special training was given to them. We knew this was not the best training we could have offered, but tests had shown the Shield could withstand a barrage from two hundred catapults at once. How could we turn this spell down on account a few Mages failed to measure up?

Another defect was discovered during field maneuvers. If one part of a division pushed ahead of the rest, then its section broke free, creating a gap. This meant our divisions and armies

had to march very slowly during battle. This did not concern us either because the Shield was already proven to be impenetrable.

The Tiberians were active in the intervening nine months. Our divisions were kept from the field, but we sent our barbarian allies in the hope they might bleed the Tiberians a little. We should have known better. The disciplined Tiberian legions swept them aside and sacked several towns, two fortresses, and the cities of Baravia, Laster, and Protero. The loss of Protero was especially bad because the city was our main trade link with the city-states of the Tharissan Archipelago, who we held in tribute. Its loss meant the loss of much revenue. We never expected the Tiberians to have the daring to attack Protero. Some of my colleagues, including Covonel, used this to reinforce their arguments that military reforms were still needed, as the Tiberians had again proven their penchant for unpredictability. Their pleas fell on deaf ears.

At the end of those nine months, the Shield was declared ready. We decided to field it at Furing, which was besieged by three legions. Tiberian cavalry and infantry piled against the shield to no avail. We peppered the survivors with arrows and artillery, routing them. Elation filled our ranks. We had a spell that could evict the Tiberians from the Union with few losses, just as Vaxter had promised. Even Covonel seemed pleased, or he just feigned it. Several towns fell back to us in short order. The Tiberians left their garrisons to defend them, which were unusually small and fought to the death without thought of surrender. We discovered why they were so small: the inhabitants of those towns had either been killed or enslaved.

Enrage, we continued our advance into Tiberian-occupied territory and met a combined force of legions at Atria. The Tiberians adopted an unusual order, spreading out their legions into individual companies and battalions. We stayed behind the Shield. Neither side moved until midday when the Mages complained of growing weary from holding up the Shield. Unwilling to yield the field, we advanced and sought to engage them with our own companies and battalions. That was a mistake and we paid dearly for it. We tried to maintain order, but Tiberians appeared to allow their company and battalion commanders to do as they pleased. We were slow to adapt

and they danced around us, much like they did at Jevic. Their troops seemed to fight even better in small formations. Our surviving units, whether still in formation or routed, retreated behind the Shield. It was a demoralizing defeat and we had outnumbered them.

The Tiberians followed up their victory by capturing the cities of Caddom and Elarein. Refugees claimed the populaces of both cities were slaughtered or enslaved. When they couldn't force the Elves of Hawkwood to yield, the Tiberians put the entire forest to the torch. We sought to bring them to battle again, to face the Shield, but they refused pitched battles. They either withdrew or ambushed us on the march or at night in our camps.

Covonel laid the blame for our reversals on Vaxter's shoulders. I expected the Minister to respond that Covonel had failed to deploy the Shield properly, especially at Autria, but instead he apologized for failing to see through other defects of the Shield. He accepted complete responsibility. I couldn't believe it. He even offered his resignation, but the First Council refused to accept it, and seemed to hold sympathy for him. Then he proposed a spell to work in conjunction with the Shield. He called it the Lightning Storm. It was designed to cope with the Tiberian scatter tactics that had plagued us of late. A Mage strong in magic, that was the major requirement, would create a swirling black cloud above a Tiberian unit. Then lightning would rain from the cloud and destroy the unit. Testing showed that the lightning was powerful enough to create craters twenty feet deep and fifty feet across.

Accolades for this spell disappeared once its defects became known. It took a Mage several minutes to create a cloud. The cloud could not move, meaning that once a Tiberian unit moved, the Mage had to stop creating the cloud and start over elsewhere. I do not recall any Tiberian being killed with this spell. They continued to refuse battle and relied on ambushes and raids. By then our casualties from these were adding up. We quickly abandoned the Arcane Shield and the Lightning Storm. Both had been more harmful to us than our Tiberian adversaries.

Intense criticism fell upon Vaxter, but this time he chose to fight than surrender. He accused Covonel of improperly using both spells, saying the general never developed proper

tactics for their joint use. No one could fault that, even me. Covonel fell into disfavor, though he retained his command. This only served to make his subordinates more loyal to him, and some to speak against Vaxter, sometimes publicly. We lost several good officers who spoke out publicly.

The next spell proposed by Vaxter was called Battle Sense. What this spell did, through a series of complicated incantations, was allow a Mage to read another person's mind, such as a Tiberian general's. High hopes were placed on this spell, but the defects should have led us to abandon it immediately. Only the most powerful Mages could cast it. Three were chosen after a lengthy selection and training process. However, each one needed the assistance of a thousand lesser Mages to lend their powers to help cast it. These assistants needed to be trained to very specific standards. That process was expensive and time consuming. I believe we could have recruited fifty thousand men instead. Just over two thousand were ready in the end. That was just as well because one of the three casting Mages went mad during training and committed suicide. An investigation determined that casting the spell placed enormous stress on the mind. Therefore, the surviving two were put on special diets and relegated to stress-free environments as much as possible.

We used Battle Sense to wipe out two Tiberian legions at Welander. Several cities and fortresses fell back into our hands with light casualties in return. As with our victories following the Battle of Furing, we encountered similar scenes of destruction and slaughter. The Tiberians were so methodical and specific about who they killed and what they razed. It seemed as if some larger plan was at work.

The Tiberians had certainly suffered at the hands of Battle Sense, but like with the Arcane Shield and the Lightning Storm they sought counters. Again, they refused battle, relying on raids and ambushes. The abrupt change in tactics on our part must have tipped them off and led their intelligence network to search for answers. I can find no other possible explanation. Assassins claimed one of the Battle Sense Mages. Every assassin was killed, but not before their daggers reached his throat. We doubled the guard around the remaining one. Then the Tiberians

gathered a large army in the province of Deccan. Naturally, we rushed to meet them. What fools we were. The Mage casted Battle Sense and read one thing only from the Tiberian general's mind: "Get the Mage." The Tiberians swarmed our lines with complete disregard for tactics and losses. I swear ten fell for each one of ours. In spite of our valor, they reached the Mage and ran her through with their blades and spears. The battle degenerated into a general melee, for which we were again unsuited. Covonel withdrew the army as best he could.

We were further wounded when we learned that a picked force of Tiberians had captured several fortresses to the rear of our army. We had stripped their garrisons to fill the ranks with experienced soldiers. The Tiberians were too few to launch meaningful raids, but they did keep supplies from us and made our soldiers starve as we retreated. I wanted badly to retake the fortresses, but I knew our men were too weak from starvation to fight well at all. Even the crush of superior numbers would have failed.

The fallout is almost indescribable for me, but I will for your sake. Covonel raged day and night to me and other trusted officers. He said the war could be turned around with Vaxter's dismissal and the recruitment of new soldiers in place of his spells. His denigrations continued and the First Council became aware. When confronted, Covonel ranted for an hour and then announced he would initiate the military reforms he had called for without the Council's approval.

He was arrested on charges of treason and sedition that very night.

I and my fellow officers who were closest to Covonel schemed to release him so he could see his reforms realized. I informed him during a visit to his cell, and he told me this: "It will cause civil war when we can least afford it. We must remain united. What I said and was prepared to do has led to this. Stop this madness for the sake of the Union!" And he made me swear to uphold the Union at all costs. He was executed while I was in the field. Then, I was made Lord General.

The Tiberians regained lost ground and more. Their depredations continued unabated. I received disturbing reports that they now had a large mobile force available, one that outnumbered our army. I narrowed this to two reasons: one, we had not been recruiting aggressively because much revenue was being allocated to Vaxter's projects, and two, the Tiberians retained light garrisons by killing the population of a city or town once they captured it.

The First Council saw little choice but to continue relying on Vaxter. They seemed to blame him for the Battle Sense debacle, but saw no one else who could throw back the Tiberians. Recent experiences with Covonel might have influenced them.

The spell he presented next was called the Field Cloak. To sum it up in short, the Field Cloak shrouded an army in a field of invisibility. That's all I cared to know about it because I didn't think it would work. Knowing his position was in danger, Vaxter personally oversaw all testing. To his credit, he did correct several flaws, except for a very damning one that was revealed at the worst possible moment.

We met the Tiberians at Sabir and deployed the Field Cloak. Before their very eyes our army disappeared. And ours. We could not see each other. I believe this arose from the manner in which Vaxter casted it in testing compared to the Mage who casted it on the battlefield. Shouts arose and armor clanged together as men sought to find their comrades. Having grown used to our tricks, the Tiberians simply charged. Some of our men attacked, others stood their ground, and some fled. No army can do all three at once and expect to win the field. The Valtanic Union was stripped of its best remaining soldiers.

Faithful to my oath, I overthrew the First Council and imprisoned Vaxter. I became the sole leadership of the Union.

I made attempts at the military reforms Covonel had wanted done, but when your best officers are long dead and raw recruits form entire divisions, only little can be done. I won a few victories, but none that changed things for the better. More massacres followed as the Tiberians swept across what remained of the Union. Even Tepland was not spared, nor my family. I wept

for days. The Tharissan city-states switched sides without warning, but the Tiberians attacked them nonetheless. The Orcs of the Five Siblings Peaks were driven into their caves and sealed in to starve. The Dwarves of Mount Stenion fell in their mountain halls. Refugees crowded cities in search of relief. All they found were starvation and disease. Things were so awful that I had people volunteering for military service just to die than face one more day of waiting for the Tiberians to come. Others surrendered in the hope of being enslaved, but were killed regardless.

I made our last stand at Palatania. We fought them, from wall to wall, house to house, street to street, and block to block. We killed many, but they never stopped. After several days of being besieged within the city's keep, I was asked to surrender by Imperius himself.

I agreed.

The population of Palatania was perhaps over a million at the time, not counting refugees. Imperius had every one of them murdered. Vaxter and his family were tortured and impaled. By his grace and mercy, he spared my wife and children and me.

He and I dined some time after. I asked about the massacres in relation to the light garrisons. He said that was one reason, but there was another. He wanted a powerful enemy permanently removed and to make the Tiberian Empire the economic center of the known world. That is the reason he massacred our people.

I live now in the region of Lateria, just across the Golden Strait from Arctura Dara. I can see the city's white walls and towers glow orange every morning when I rise. My family is allowed to live with me and I am glad for that. I may seem a man at peace, but I am not. That my home fell because of its reliance on magic haunts me when I am awake and when I dream of days long past.

LE BEL HOMME SANS CONFIANCE

K.W. Taylor

“No one’s seen one in years,” the alchemist told the midwife. “If they ever existed anyway, that is.”

Morfyd chuckled. She wore her hair bound up beneath a peaked wimple, which she now untied from beneath her chin. Shaking her hair loose, it fell in damp waves down past her shoulders, a silvery gossamer curtain that made her look both young and old at the same time.

“Ah, Walter,” she sighed. Her accent was coarser than his. “Doin’ magic is like ridin’ a horse. ‘Tis not a skill you forget, no matter how long you’ve been off your steed.”

Walter raised one steel-grey eyebrow. “What you ask is not mere alchemy,” he pointed out. “It is practically surgical. What if I fail? I would have no wish to ruin the mother’s life.”

The midwife laughed more heartily now and sat down on the floor beside the hearth. She leaned against a footstool and blinked huge green eyes up at him. Walter could not help but find the cant of her head somewhat comely, though he’d die before admitting such a thing. She was everything he loathed in country folk, even if her figure was blessed with appealing curves and her laugh made of music.

“Walter,” Morfyd said, “this lass lost her husband ‘cause of this accident of nature. I tried to tell ‘er weren’t no great a sorrow in the long run. That man was no good. But she ain’t like me, this wee Aurora. She’s skittish, leapin’ at shadows and what all. Can you imagine such a fearful girl tryin’ to raise up one o’ them?”

Walter sat in a chair across from Morfyd. He leaned over his knees and buried his face in his hands. He felt the calluses against his cheeks, the fingerprints long since

roughened away by years of work with herbs and chemicals. “Are you sure you saw what you think you saw?” he asked, his voice muffled and deep.

“Bloody right I did!” Morfyd cried. “Saw it, felt it, and I know you think I ain’t no high society lady, but I’ve got me sanity, ‘least. And I’m good at what I do, ain’t I?”

Walter peered at her over the tops of his fingers. “The women of the village do indeed trust you.”

“I’m good at what I do,” she repeated, straightening her shoulders. “And I know what I saw.”

The alchemist leaned back in his chair. “I suppose there’s nothing to do but try.”

“It’s all she asked,” Morfyd said, “that I help her try.”

“She cannot expect a miracle, however.”

Morfyd laughed that throaty laugh once more, and Walter shivered. “Heavens, man, poor girl’s had a miracle already. She’s through with those. Wants some honest science now, I s’pect!”

Walter nodded curtly and went to his desk, all the while cursing himself for wishing Morfyd would follow and watch him. Mixing things, grinding things to a fine paste . . . this was what he was good at; he hated that he wanted her to appreciate his talents.

He gathered a few supplies: verbena to ward off dark elements, mistletoe to combat the influence of poison, and nutmeg for a calmative effect. He also packed his mortar and pestle and several potions he’d already prepared, some of which fought pain of the body and others which fought pain of the spirit.

Satisfied he had what he needed, he let Morfyd lead him to Aurora’s cottage. A sign near the footpath announced that it was the workplace of a “sewer of fine ladies’ gowns.”

Morfyd did not knock but merely strolled inside. The outer room was lit with a fire nearly spent, but Walter could see well enough to make out the sleeping form of a

young woman in a high trundle bed. A dark doorway stood empty directly across from the footboard.

It was through here that Morfyd led the alchemist. He hung back in the outer room until the midwife had an oil lamp lit. Once he could see, it was clear the space was not as ominous as it first appeared. Heaps of fabrics were strewn on shabby settees and chairs. Sewing materials covered every inch of shelving. And on a table in the center of the room sat a drawer pulled from the sideboard.

Morfyd pointed at the drawer. “There she be,” the midwife announced. “Sweet little thing. Her ma ain’t inclined to name ‘er just yet, lest your magic don’t work, but I been callin’ her Cecilia. Just sounded right for one o’ them, don’t it? All refined like.”

Walter swallowed hard before approaching the drawer. What lay inside looked like a loaf of bread covered with a towel, until it started to squirm. A tinkling giggle escaped the fabric of its makeshift blankets, and two tiny hands maneuvered themselves out into the open. Then a cornflower blue eye peeked out, as did a tuft of golden curls.

Walter heaved a sigh of relief. “Woman, you’re mad,” he muttered bitterly. “You’ve brought me here to look upon a perfectly normal--”

The baby further extricated her head and shoulders from the towel and struggled into a position that revealed two small yellow wings, covered with downy fluff, sprouting from her tiny shoulder blades. They were but nubby things, barely big enough to support a newborn chick, but they twitched up and down in a feeble semblance of flight. The baby giggled again, and her toothless mouth spread into a contented smile.

Morfyd rested a hand on Walter’s arm. “Before you begin, you want to reconsider whether I’m mad or not?”

Walter exhaled, his breath coming out as a low whistle. An eerie calm descended upon him. “Well, you haven’t wasted my time after all, madam.”

The Ravenblood Company

Christopher Copeland

Priestess bustled through the packed streets of Laedelar, grumbling to herself as she caught a glance of a robed man. Tome in hand, he read out prophecies of downfall and destruction to all who would hear him.

“Look around you! The fish are dead, disease ridden! Carrion Birds harass us and take shelter on our roofs by the hundreds. They even steal the homes of the noble eagles! The air chills, just like that of a fresh corpse! We have betrayed the Light, our Sun, Lior! We are taking the Path of Shadow! The Path of the wicked Shadow Aspect! The Path of the *Forsaken!*”

A few people in the crowd gasped, the Priest paused, smirking in his triumph before continuing,

“Think! These are the months of Shadows Fall! The great Northern lands were once purged from the demons, but they once again walk *our* streets, recruiting for *our* downfall! And don’t think it hasn’t already begun! There have been reports of a demon within the darker alleys and crevices of the city that appears to be nothing but an empty robe and hood. But more than one demon is present in our city! Criminals and whores walk our streets as well now, spreading like a disease upon the beacon of Light that is our city of Laedelar. Eternal Night and Darkness approaches! We must follow the path of the Light, the path of Lior!”

The Priestess scoffed at her prophet colleague, making her way to the Bazaar. She glanced about for a moment, searching for a familiar violet pigment on an oak sign. Upon

sighting *Magical Reagents Emporium*, the Priestess stepped inside, swiftly laying out a few gold coins on the counter. She brushed a few stray strands of pale blonde hair from her eyes before putting the aesthetic nuisance up into a ponytail. Delicate hands smoothed her robes as she glanced about the shop, mumbling as she searched the store. Potions and freshly made concoctions littered the dusty shelves. Amplifiers, stones with runes carved into them were behind the counter. Each amplifier increased the magnitude of each type of magic, whether it were destructive flames or a healing light. Pills, herbs, and other substances were stranded about the shop shelves.

“Where is that so called shop kee-”

A man slid from the back of the shop and grinned at his impatient customer. He was a bit pudgy at the waist and clothed in loose fitting robes, stained with a variety of concoctions. Messy tangled hair threatened to obscure his russet eyes. Freckles dotted across his cheeks and narrow nose. He lifted a thick finger up for a moment. The shopkeeper set a floating vial on the counter and lit a small flame from under it, by guiding the flame from a candle to his right to underneath the glass. His eyes rose from the boiling brew to the Priestess, the grin still present.

“Evenin’ Vel. Lookin’ gorgeous as ever.”

“Spare me, Kalven. I’m married and have a child.” Vel’s irritated emerald stare met the shopkeeper’s. A chant echoed from the Bazaar into the building soon after the Priestess scolded him. The Priestess continued, “The usual.”

“What’re they screaming about now?” Kalven muttered as he leaned to the left to peer out the doorway. He scooped up the coins from the counter after sating his curiosity and placed a few pills and magic amplifiers on the counter.

“Some of the Priests are claiming that Laedelar is falling to the shadows. They also say a demon with no face is lurking the streets, recruiting for the Forsaken,” the Priestess snorted. “Light help them all.”

Kalven grunted before speaking up. “Why aren’t you out there with ‘em?” A grin touched the man’s lips.

“I have patients and a child to look over, Kalven.” The Priestess pocketed the goods into a satchel resting on her hip. “Besides, I’m not some crazy yelling in the streets. I can barely allow my child to play outside these days because of them and their chaos.”

The shopkeeper nodded and glanced outside again before looking back to Vel. “Well, good luck out there.”

The Priestess turned and grumbled. “Light help me. And thank you.”

A child, no older than the age of seven, quickly turned a corner, heading down the mainstreet.

"Don't dawdle, Argider!" a voice called after him.

"Yeah, mommy!" the boy automatically responded as he skipped along. He hummed a tune his mother had often serenaded him to sleep with when he was only an infant. The boy's hair was a thick auburn that cascaded down the nape of his neck. He wore a silk shirt with gold embroidery. His pants did not cling to his legs but properly fit, made from a tender weave from the local tailors. Covering the soles of his soft feet were linen sandals and around his neck hung a golden chain, a red phoenix resting near the center of his chest. While he strolled through the streets he fidgeted with a coin purse,

silver coins bumping against each other with a pleasant jingle. He grinned softly as he savored his freedom, just as he would savor the goods from the local bakery.

His mother was a mender of the sick and wounded, a Priestess of the Light. His father, too, practiced the beliefs of the Light, but he was a warrior, a Paladin.

Argider rounded a corner into an alley that lessened the time to get to the bakery. The blunt end of a blade rammed into the boy's throat, momentarily crushing his windpipe. The blade flipped, teeth raking up Argider's throat and leaving shallow parallel cuts. The boy's eyes widened at the pain, and rolled up to stare into the face of a man, a product from the developing slums. Stubble littered his jaw. His greasy black hair fell over his forehead and partially over his left eye like a glossy shadow consuming the upper half of his head. His garb was nothing more than rags, branded by the stench of rotted fish. It was discolored by stains of the blood of innocents and the fluid proof that some poor whore out in the streets was trying to make a living. The thug's lips pulled up into a wide grin, exposing dull, yellow teeth, some half rotted and blackening. Others were simply missing, leaving gaps in his mouth.

He spoke, his voice slurred and primitive, "Well looky here, we caught us one of them rich little shits, eh, Darend?"

Another figure took three steps from the cover shadows of the alleyway. Darend had a darker complexion, though his face held no emotion. He was bald, a tattoo marred his head. The ink formed a handle that stretched from the crown on the man's head to the head of a scythe, the elongated blade hooking under his right eye.

"Give him here, Kordy," Darend commanded.

The man with the knife, Kordy, released the pressure of the from Argider's neck. The boy gasped, realizing he had not been breathing. Kordy shoved the boy toward the one in the shadows and grinned, lifting his blade to eye level, captivated by the droplets of life that trickled from it.

Darend caught Argider and held the boy tightly, his grasp similar to iron, "Whose son are you?" Darend questioned shortly, quietly.

"I – I – uhm," the boy stammered. He shook violently. Tears rolled down his cheeks and he made a few sobbing gasps after speaking, as if each time he spoke the air was robbed from his body.

He was different. His eyes held a cold stare. His voice was like the whisper of death. Darend studied Argider for a long moment, his hold relaxing. Argider feebly held out his coin purse.

"H-here. You can have it all, s-sir. Just don't hurt me. Please, sir." The boy trembled still. Fresh tears wetting his cheeks.

Darend lashed out and struck the coins from Argider's hands, causing the purse to hit the ground. The silver coins spilled across the alleyway. Darend watched, disgusted as his companion dropped to the ground and scooped them up like a mother would come to her child's rescue. His eyes returned to Argider and he ripped the pendant from the child's neck, lifting the phoenix to eye level.

"The Va'han family crest," he noted softly and returned the icy stare to the boy, a calloused finger lifting to touch the tattoo under his eye.

"You know what this is, boy? It's the brand of the Forsaken. Did you know your father was the one of the men who nearly had us exterminated? Now we ain't got shit.

Now we're being reduced to the likes of *him*," Darend glanced to Kordy, who counted the coins, then paused and eyed them blankly. He began counting over again.

"So," Darend breathed, "I think it'd only be fair to kill his son."

Argider shuddered violently and let out a choked sob as Kordy squealed with joy. The serrated teeth were placed against the boy's neck. Innocent tears splashed against the steel blade. The man with the knife let out a jittery giggle. The blade whipped out, the steel reflecting off the rays of sunlight not obscured by ominous clouds. A scream filled the dank air of the alley. Then, silence.

Argider breathed heavily and grasped his throat. The sound of blood boiling within a man's maw. The low thud of a body hitting the ground. But Argider was standing. And he was alive. Shallow cuts stung his throat and some blood to his silk shirt. Kordy lay on the ground, his throat cut viciously. The shrillness of his gurgling faded at the same rate of his life as blood poured from this throat. It was a slow process. His eyes moved every which way until finally settling on the blood soaked serrated dagger in his hand.

Kordy's arm twitched, and he smoldered in protest. He fought, blood escaping his mouth and throat as he tried to reason with his arm that raised stiffly. He moved every other part of his body frantically, kicking and screaming as best he could. Still, his arm reached up slowly. He fought desperately, but he was not the victor. The blood covered serrations pressed against his paling skin. The knife pressed down and cut through his jugular artery. Another pitiful drowned wail escaped him. He fell silent. The crimson life pooled below him, his jaw soon locking itself open as his distant eyes rolled into their sockets.

Darend shuddered and backed away at the sight of Kordy's gruesome death. Argider couldn't look away either. Darend looked down to the back of the boy's head, his mouth opening and closing for a few moments the man being temporarily mute from fear of the boy possibly possessing such powers. Finally, he spat out a few words, "H-how did yo-"

"It wasn't the boy, my friend," the voice of a young male remarked coolly in a strange accent.

"Where are you?" Darend almost pleaded. His icy personality melted away, exposing a soft, weak man.

The corpse's jaw rigidly moved, more blood spilling from his maw as he mouthed the words of the unfamiliar voice that whispered teasingly, "Behind you."

Darend turned and faced a hood that didn't have a face inside it. Connected to the hood was a robe that covered the strange man's body. The sleeve of the robe expanded and shrank as the hooded man's fingers twitched within it. Each time the sleeve expanded, Kordy's maw opened. When it shrank, Kordy's jaw clamped shut. Fear consumed Darend's features – his darker face creasing as a whole, though his eyes widened. His mouth opened, but once again nothing came out and he stumbled back. The man trembled pathetically. Argider was transfixed upon the corpse before Darend stumbled, causing the boy to turn and gape in horror.

The hooded man leaned to the side, focusing on the corpse. "Sorry I missed the first time, buddy. Been a while since I've took over someone's body."

The corpse nodded in understanding as it was manipulated.

The hooded man turned back to Darend, “Oops. Did I scare you?” he teased. He lifted a sleeve to Darend’s chest. A gloved finger came lightly in contact with the rags that covered the man’s breast. The rags began to shift slowly into the snakes from the southern jungles. The moss green beasts were fifteen to twenty feet and length, and easily six inches wide – some were as wide as a foot. Screams of terror overshadowed the hooded man's faint chuckles. Argider once again could not turn away, consumed by fascinated horror. A serpent soon silenced Darend, slithering within the man’s mouth and clamping down on his tongue. The larger snakes coiled around the man’s neck. They squeezed. And they kept squeezing as muffled screams echoed from within him. He writhed in pain, his hands frantically grabbing at the beasts. But his fate was decided. Cracks resonated from Darend's neck broke and splintered under the stress. He collapsed dead as the serpents turned to ash and blew away into the wind.

Argider stared down at Darend’s fresh corpse. He shook violently and gingerly touched the cuts on his neck that were beginning to clot. His mind could not comprehend the fact that he still stood, alive. His eyes wandered to the robed man, who had crouched down to inspect the corpse. The hooded man made a gesture and the phoenix pendant lifted from Darend’s fingers and floated over to Argider. The pendant hovered as the boy continued to stare blankly.

“Forsaken,” Argider breathed quietly. “Forsaken!” He screamed and turned to run, his feet pounding against the cobblestones of the alleyway, trying to escape the monster behind him. He only managed to get a few footfalls away before ramming into the hooded man.

“Relax, kid. I just *saved* you, I won’t kill y-” the man was cut off as Argider’s small fist harmlessly pounded into his chest.

“Forsaken! Forsaken!” Argider cried as he made useless attempts to cause harm to the man.

The sound of someone snapping his fingers came from one of the sleeves of the robe. Argider blinked as if someone had poured ice water on him. His blind rage was sated. He was calm.

“Glad I have your attention, you little twit, and m’name’s Frostflayer, thank you.” the robe grumbled before continuing, “What the hell does a kid like you know about the Forsaken, anyways?” Frostflayer fidgeted with the phoenix pendant as he questioned Argider.

“Mommy and Daddy said they were bad people who hurt other peo-”

“*Bad* people who *hurt* other people? Basically you don’t know jack-shit, huh, kid?”

“No! I know that one time they were our friends. Then something happened-”

“Yes, yes, at one time most of the Northerners were united under the religious beliefs of their shiny holy Light and their Sun, Lior. The Eight Aspects, the sorcerers that controlled the elements, or aspects that created this world, Elandrai, kept order. The Eight Aspects were Flame, Water, Wind, Shadow, Light, Earth, and Lightning, and Thunder.”

Frostflayer groused quietly before continuing,

“That is, until that sonofabitch Shadowcatch, the Shadow Aspect, decided to go and create and open the Ebon Gate with his little posse,” Frostflayer folded his arms, “The Gate connected the Shadowlands and our world, and allowed demons and all kinds

of other shit to roam through this world. And because of Shadowcatch being a betraying asshole, the Eight Aspects were reduced to Seven Aspects. The Seven sided with your Light Worshiper's Grand Crusader Darion and in a series of three wars. The Shadowlanders were slowly pushed back. In the third – my favorite – named Shadows Fall, Darion and the Seven pushed Shadowcatch and all his bastards and demons back into Shadowlands," as he described the war he made a pushing motion with both arms, "During Shadow's Fall they decided to be creative and renamed themselves the Forsaken, and now we associate everything evil as such," Frostflayer paused after finishing, looking to Argider for comprehension. He was met with a blank stare.

"Damn kids – don't know shit," he fussed before simplifying, "We were all friends until an evil sorcerer let monsters in our world. We beat the bad monsters and put them back where they came from. Those monsters are called the Forsaken. Get it?" Frostflayer's tone was dull and exasperated.

"Uhm – kinda."

Frostflayer sighed, "People are saying the monsters are coming back. Mostly crazy people, but don't be surprised if I find you and take you into the Ravenblood Company sometime in the future."

Argider blinked and cocked his head to the left. "The Ravenblood Company? Who're they?"

"I work for 'em. You owe me now for your life – maybe you'll return the favor later or somethin'. When you're all grown up."

"Er – okay?" Argider paused and fidgeted, "I forgot earlier, but thank you." His voice was mixed with admiration, fascination, and a small fraction of fear.

Frostflayer paused for a moment before nodding, “Yeah, no problem, kid – by the way, how’s that cut?”

Frostflayer bent as the waist and inspected the wound. The cut was clotted but still stung. A pale finger left the sleeve of the robe and lightly touched the wound. It stung Argider and he fidgeted. Frostflayer’s touch was gentle, almost the touch of a mother, except the chill of death was present. He was unnaturally cold. A faint emerald green glow emitted from the finger and the cut was stitched slowly by invisible suture. All that was left was a somewhat jagged line of pale skin across the boy’s neck. Frostflayer looked through a satchel that rested at his waist.

“Sorry, kid, can’t fix the scarring – and clean yourself up.”

The Robe tossed Argider a rag. He barely caught it. Both his body and mind were exhausted. He slowly wiped away the blood from his neck but paused and looked down as he reached his shirt. There would be no way of removing the stain.

“Here’s your stuff, kid,” Frostflayer made a motion within his sleeve while speaking. The pendant lifted from the satchel, floating. Unopposed by gravity, the pendant flew directly to Argider, who grabbed it from the air and put it back around his neck. The cool metal against Argider’s warm skin wakened him. Frostflayer made another motion. A finely made dagger lifted from Darend’s belt and floated around Frostflayer’s eye level.

“Nice – *very* nice, wonder who he stole this off of. Either way, it’ll probably go for quite a few coins.” Frostflayer’s gaze shifted to Argider, then to Darend. He continued, “Don’t worry, he won’t miss it.”

Argider almost smiled, but the stench of death was beginning to fill the air of the alleyway. The boy vomited and moaned miserably.

The Robe looked over Argider slowly and placed a cool hand on his shoulder. "We should probably get you home, huh?"

Rise of Arwen

Keith Latch

This is a story of a bygone race, told in a dead language. Once, in the time of yore, their kind was many, their adventures, the makings of lore. In the time when mortals worshipped the moon instead of the sun, they were great. They, among the elves, of the dwarves, of the hobbits, and of the trolls, reigned supreme. King Manassas, considered by the sages to be the wisest of all rulers, controlled, sternly but kindly, Toria.

When the dark days came and Mother Moon no longer blessed Toria with her beams and the angry god of day left them with only shadow, the Torans prepared for battle. Young men joined their fathers in crafting, honing and taking up arms. Women, girls, and the younger boys raised defenses against attack. Even the most timid of the women was learned in the ways of war. The citizens thought the capitol village of Miranda to be secure as we did our beloved home of their lord, Castle Fordjen.

After twelve sleeps, they thought themselves ready for any adversary. As man, woman, and child slept, as beasts of burden rested and ate their fill, as the embers of meal

fires fluttered on the wind, the enemy came. It was an enemy no one could prepare for. To the dismay of my people we were not, as we thought, ready.

There were sentries. Yes, of course, the wise Torans thought of that. Why they did not glimpse the approach and sound the alarm bringing our formidable warriors awake, I cannot reveal. I am merely a scribe and can only recount that which I know to be true. Slain where they stood, only the sharpest lookouts and most skilled swordsmen serving as our sentinels, gave not so much as a whimper into the smoky air of the evernight.

One young Toran, barely more than a child, lay dreaming. Given the name Arwen to honor an ancestor, the young lad had only just reached his sixteenth four-seasons. As most young ones of his age, he dreamt not of victory in battle, or of a great hunt, or of plundering great wealth for his king, but of a young woman.

Jalynn was not only the most beautiful maiden Arwen's eyes had ever had the blessing to gaze upon, but also possessed the sharpest wit, most supreme voice, and the best archer the village could boast. Most likely, the whole realm could boast, Arwen would argue. But Arwen's family was not a wealthy one, nor did any noble blood through his veins. As the orders of the king stood, he would admire the princess only, and forever, from afar.

Arwen woke with his head upon a bear pelt outside his family's small cottage, his eyes swimming through the darkness above as his mind displayed to him representation upon representation of his beloved. What changed, what actually woke him, he wasn't quite sure. It could have been the wind, save there had been none and none did come. Perhaps a shadow, but there was no light to shift. I, blessed as a scribe of the Torans, who no one saw but saw all, could not even be sure of what brought young Arwen from his

reverie. Nevertheless, disturbed from his fantasy, Arwen looked about. Meager torchlight revealed little. With the warmth of the season, no had thought to leave fires alight.

Seeing nothing, Arwen's interest, or suspicion, whichever you prefer, was piqued. Toran's are—forgive my grammar as I transcribe—*were* a tall, powerful breed, the smallest at least the size of large humans. Arwen, even in his youth, was no exception. Standing five inches over six feet tall, shoulders large and square, dirty blonde hair thin and straight reached his shoulders, Arwen was dressed only slightly better than a pauper. Truth be told—as I attempt to do here in this telling—a proper gentleman wouldn't have given two schillings for young Arwen in his dusty breeches, scuffed boots and stained cotton shirt. Born as natural warriors to be called upon in their king's need, Torans lived their entire lives training for engagement on the battlefield. Yet, Arwen was no soldier, no mighty fighter. There had been no need of the Toran army for many four-seasons and farm work, hunting and trapping had slowly replaced their fighting exercises.

Arwen did not even possess an adequate sword. Instead, a dagger hung at his hip. Its edge sharp but its hilt was plain iron and unaccustomed to his hand. Also at his hip a hand-me-down broadswordthemed for chopping underbrush while older men and the more skilled hunter followed in stealth. Yet, when he stepped from the dooryard of his cottage, it was these pitiful armaments he pulled free. The broadsword held tightly in his favored, hand, the dagger in the other.

Arwen was of the notion that he could be quite an accomplished swordsman if ever his father gave him the chance. The two blades felt awkward and insubstantial in his hands. There was no movement. Embers no longer floated from burning wood. Still, the young Toran held tight to his weapons. I, as a scribe have never had the distasteful task of

warring, but I was proud of the young man, proud and frightened for him in equal measure, albeit.

While the torchlight was paltry, Arwen stepped out from him, cloaking himself in further darkness. His senses alert, his night vision reaching the very farthest reaches of its limits. Arwen stepped to the corner of his cottage and made his way to the outer perimeter. There was not far to go. Villages of this time were devised in circular, concentric plans, each ring of dwellings separated by small roads, the innermost, the most affluent, graced with cobblestone, each ring growing outward increasingly less wealthy than the last, proved not only by the homes and shops themselves but also by the roads. For Arwen's clan there was barely dusty enough to tell where the road was. There were three main routes that bisected the circular streets and buildings. One to the east, one to the west and one to the south. All three fed into the center of the village into a cobbled square. From that square with its large fountain and statue of the king and very wide but very short swath of cobble led to the gates of Castle Fordjen.

Arwen, son of Lowren, was no fool. The young man moved through the cottages towards the outer rim of the village, keeping well off any main road. Not a soul stirred. This in itself felt odd to Arwen. Thin wisps of fog, white in the darkness, raised ankle high everywhere he could see. The mist drifted in homes and into the streets. Arwen moved like a panther between the houses, making him quite a hard target should anyone be watching.

He made it to the edge of the village without discovery and without discovering anything amiss. Just beyond the last cottages, more huts really, and the wooden fence that kept grazing animals from straying into the village proper, sentries stood their post just as

they should. Arwen could see one guard far to his right, the other far to his left. They faced away from Miranda; a torch was set down from each almost twenty feet, light enough if they needed it but not close enough to give away their location and to not hamper their night vision. Beyond Miranda, on all sides even beyond the castle, was the forest Black Hamp. Thick, wild, and treacherous, the roads the king had built were no guarantee of safe passage and no one knew what kind of traveller would emerge from one day to the next. There had been circus companies to dignitaries to bandits arrive unannounced. It was the duty of the sentries, however, to not only protect from the bandits and scoundrels that found their way but to aid any well-meaning soul that had the unfortunate circumstance to become lost in the wood. Armed well with sword and sling, they also carried beside their iron, large trumpets in order to alert the king's private guards of any trouble.

Perhaps speaking to the sentry would ease Arwen's mind. Miranda was not a large hamlet yet it was not uncommon for it to be, if not lively at least less silent, this time of evening. Even in times of war, Torans would be Torans and even as they prepared for the inevitable battle the loss of the moon signaled there would be business at the pub, arguments in the streets after too much ale. There was nothing this night but a deep, numbing quiet. Arwen found himself wishing for wind, for the rustle of the grazing grass just beyond him, for the crying of an infant with an empty belly. Arwen slowly made his way over to his right.

"Guard," he said loudly. His voice sounded strange as it broke the silence. He expected the dark sky to come crashing down upon him. Nonetheless, he repeated, "Guard." No matter his desperation he was not about to startle a sentry. To be struck

down by the startled watchman would not benefit him in the least. Perhaps this sentry was someone he knew, or a friend of his father's. Perhaps Gangan, their former neighbor was at post tonight. Gangan lived beside them for years until earning his new post thereby moving further towards the castle into a nicer cottage.

Arwen was at him now. The guard never moved. Surely, the man was not sleeping. Should the captain of the guard find him in such a state, the consequences would be both grim and swift. Arwen knew men could sleep standing. Lowren, his own father was able to do so, though not for very long periods. This man was neither his former neighbor Gangan nor a stranger sleeping.

Even as I watched, I, a simple instrument of historical fact, yearned to reach out and help young Arwen. I was unable, of course, lest I break the very charm that sustained me. Attentive to each minute detail, I took note of the goings on even as my flesh shivered for this mere boy faced with such tragedy.

The man crumpled at Arwen's touch. In the weak rays that reached him, Arwen saw the man's face. Ashen, grey shriveled. His hand tightened on the hilt of his broadsword pulling it from its roughhewn scabbard. A poor weapon but a weapon nonetheless. Fear like a slithering serpent wound up Arwen's spine flicking its forked tongue at his young, malleable mind.

Arwen turned. Sure the other sentry was no doubt in the same hellish condition, he ran back into the thick of the cottages. Flashes of horrible scenes real and imagined raced through his mind. He knew the situation warranted slyness but he could not will himself to take the precious time to conceal himself. Instead, he hammered his legs, his

feet pounding the hard dirt of the thoroughfare. The mist rose. Arwen cut through it as if he were running through clouds, the fog pluming in his wake.

Without conscious effort, he scurried in the direction of home. If he would have stopped to think, which by the way, he was quite unable to do, Arwen might have saved himself heartache. At the stoop of his parents' cottage, just beyond where he lay only moments ago, the son of Lowren stopped short. Lowren sat in his usual position at the head of the wooden table, his pipe and tobacco close at hand.

There had been days in Arwen's youth when he could remember his father's sword always at his side. One time, in particular, he'd asked his father if *Vondemuir*—why fighting men felt the need to name their weapons was a question beyond knowing—grew from his hip like a boil. Lowren gave out the hearty laugh he was known. Bending at the knee he was still too tall to look his son directly in the eye, "My son, there are many things you will learn in this life, but one more than the others. 'Tis better seen by Odin's own eye committing the ultimate sin with a sure hand than to be caught without your iron even as peace rules the land."

The saying must've sounded as odd to Lowren as it did to his son, as he relegated *Vondemuir* to a dusty corner as he spent less time away and began his share of work in the fields. Even with the loss of Mother Moon, the once mighty and still very proud Lowren could not fall back into bygone habits.

It wasn't as if the rather crude looking but deadly blade could have saved him from...Arwen didn't even know what had done this.

Here in the candlelight he could see clearly. Like the sentry, his father's face and arms—and he suspected the rest of him—was an ashy grey color. His cheeks were

sunken in as if he were sucking fresh honey right from the comb. To Arwen it looked as if his father's very life force had been drawn from him. It was a terrible sight to behold. The agony of it etched the image across his mind's eye.

He dared go no closer. It was a plague of some kind. It had to be. This was not an honorable death. It was a sickness. There was no other explanation.

Arwen's mother, his beautiful, kind, hard working mother, Sonja, or more precisely her body, lay over the pot on the fire. Steam rose up where her body didn't completely cover the top. Arwen thanked all his gods she was facedown. The love of a son for his mother knows no bounds and Arwen loved his mother just a little more than most. His heart broke in that moment, snapping like a dried twig.

With sorrow and rage he could not contain, Arwen turned. There was emptiness in his heart that somehow seemed to weigh him down. On the table dried meat lay, meant for the stew Sonja was beginning to prepare. Sonja's was good stew, the finest he'd ever tasted. No longer would fragrant meals of stew, breads and confections fill the small cottage. His family was far from wealthy, but as far back as he could recall there'd always been plenty to eat, that a wealth in itself.

In a village the size of Miranda, family was important. "Like the waters of the great river Thüringen, family blood flows eternal," Lowren would often say when Sonja was in a particularly foul mood with him about something or other, as if that explained why he sat and took the yelling and cursing. As Arwen grew a bit older and a wee bit wiser, he decided it explained it perfectly. Now, because of this plague, this disease, this curse, his family blood no longer flowed through anyone, save he.

As Arwen walked towards the door, he stopped and looked to the corner where Vondemuir sat propped. The blade sharpened by his father's own hand, the golden hilt, the only precious metal his family could boast, rubbed to a shine with Lowren's loving strokes. Little good could even such a magnificent weapon hope to accomplish against the woes of this village. Yet, even as Arwen slung the sword over his shoulder, its weight resting down the center of his back, he felt he was no longer alone in the darkness. It was the only item he left with, the only thing he could bring himself to touch.

Outside he took a torch from a sconce. Made of sulfur mixed with lime, it would burn if rain began to fall.

It took scant few moments to examine the homes neighboring his. Every Toran he found was in the same condition as his parents. Husks of familiar faces, empty shells scavenged of life. There were Torans sitting around the table or at their hearth. Women suspended in the act of rolling dough and men cleaning their weapons. Arwen considered for as long as it took what remained of their bodies to turn to dust, they would, if the sun ever did rise, be a haunting sight.

The night was thick like spilled ink, eerily quiet. Dark as pitch, dark as midnight. If not for the faint glow of his flame, he would be able to see nothing. The fog was waist high and its cottony coolness raised gooseflesh on Arwen. In the middle of the village, at the intersection, near the fountain, Arwen knelt to the ground, submerging himself in the mist and wept.

Arwen, son of Lowren, last of your race, come forth. Words from a voice unknown.

The young man stood. He looked about, shining all nearby in the glow of his torch. No one stepped from the mist, but the wind finally came. Soft and gentle but it carried the stench of the dead.

Up, in the distance above the turreted walls, firelight glowed in the towers of Castle Fordjen. Did his king still live? Was it possible that royal blood was immune to the dark infection? He had never heard the king speak, so he would not recognize his voice. Arwen knew that royals possessed some magic, but no mere peasant knew to what extent they could command the ways of sorcery. It was possible that the king had protected himself and now, realizing that Arwen was the only soul alive in the village had called out to him. Was Jalynn up there somewhere? Was she awaiting a knight in armor to arrive and rescue her?

Why hadn't he placed a charm of protection over his knights, or his sentries or his armies? Had his alchemy not been that stout?

It was his duty to investigate and render an aid to the king or his court. While fear still inhabited Arwen, it did not rule him. The weight of Vondemuir was great and getting greater. He adjusted the strap of the sheath and checked his torch. There was still cloth to burn yet so he made his way slowly but bravely towards the mighty walls of Fordjen.

No moat surrounded King Manassas's castle. Such precautions were not traditional here in the Toran realm as they were in the realms of human men. Brads composed songs of the might of Fordjen but as Arwen stepped up to the lowered drawbridge, he wondered just how sound the defenses could be. As he made his way across the heavy wooden bridge, he pulled Vondemuir from its sheath. The weapon took all his strength to manage; the torch was tossed in favor of defense. He would not need

his light. Lit sconces adorned either side of his path through the *barbican*, the barracks of the castle guards. What he wouldn't have gave for a captain of the guard to stagger out to meet him demanding just where he thought he might be going. No one met Arwen as he moved from the barbican onto the bailey. The wide courtyard of the castle was dim, and deserted. The stench of the wind was less here, but still the stink scourged him. Arwen stopped in the middle of the bailey. He could proceed either into the main building, the home of the king, or into the tower, the site he first noticed fireglow. For one brief instant, he thought of sprinting to the stables in hopes of finding a steed. He'd mount and flee this cursed place. It was not bravery that kept him from doing so, for he feared the darkness of the Black Hamp more so than the quiet of the kingdom. Even more, he had no idea to where he would travel. Had the entire realm been infected? Had the great villages to the east suffered the same fate? What of Kalimar and Vaden? Was theirs the same fate?

The son of Lowren relaxed his grip on the hefty sword. He realized the white fog had not drifted inside the castle walls. Could that perhaps be proof of the king's protective magic? Before he could ponder the question, everything changed.

Not for the better I might add. I still yearned to reach out and help the boy, mind you. I am not cold, heartless. There was nothing I could have done except to tell the young one to take heart that he was not truly alone in creation, and I almost did just that. I must admit, however, in the scared ink of my own quill, what happened next chilled me to the very bone. I, the great scribe Kenyon, who has walked all realms for all of time, was, yes, I must tell you, frightened for my very existence.

From the dark sky, they descended. From black, ashy smoke, they formed. The Horde was a despicable race. Half breed ogres and men and something else, something much darker. As great contrast to the glorious songs of Fordjen and its benevolent king and people, darker, less tuneful songs were written of the Horde. Let a parent catch their child even beginning a verse of such a foul song and they wouldn't sit well for a time. Half a dozen of the Horde surrounded Arwen, all adorned in dark metal and carrying deadly weapons. Taller than even the Toran, the still possessed the strength of the ogre, the hate of man and the blood lust of their more evil ancestry.

Now Arwen understood. Now, it all made sense. It was no pestilence that had taken the lives of his village, but something much, much worse. From the very fires of hell, or so the story went, the sins of all realms gave birth to Monok, the father of all Horde. With the worst notions of the worst creatures, he walked forth, singular. Such was his might that he plundered villages, pillaged the land, and raped all fair maidens his clawed hands could reach. Bastards were born, hideous and vile, taking up the call to follow their father until the last of days.

There was a power greater than Monok and his offspring. It existed in the elven realm of Woodsdail. The elder elves and their allies: Toran, fairy, scribes and even man joined forces to drive the Horde from the realms into a place out of being.

I know, I was there, a much younger scribe but active in the struggle. Now the elven elders are gone. The fairy kingdom in turmoil and men, let them not even discuss the tragedy of that race. My own brethren, the scribes are a race torn asunder. I count none as a supporter.

Now, because the realms were no longer unified, Monok had found a way back, it would seem. While only half a dozen of them surrounded Arwen, one of the Horde was a match for a handful of well-trained men.

For his part, Arwen displayed bravery not common for a farm boy. He lifted his sword in defiance as the Horde moved towards him. Retched creatures that even in the murk appeared monstrous with their pale grey flesh and sharp, but stunted yellowed teeth. Their pronounced brows resembled that of an ape. Their arms thick as sides of beef and their chests as thick as ale barrels.

“Child,” one hissed. “You have not fallen to our destruction.”

“I know not who you are. I care not. Only that you be gone from this place.”

Arwen raised the sword. It strained his arms to do so. To swing the blade in anger would be no easy task. Nonetheless, he was ready.

He was not ready for the laughter. The Horde engaged in laughter. It was not jovial. It was not pleasant. “Valiant words from an adolescent.” It was the same member who spoke. Arwen took him, or it, to be the group’s leader. “No matter that our lord’s spellcast missed you. The bite of my blade will not, child.”

From where his courage came, Arwen knew not. “I grow tired, creature, of you calling me a child. As I also grow tired of the stench of your breath!” Arwen swung Vondemuir with all his might as he charged for the leader of the Horde. It would have been a devastating strike, Horde’s thick skin or not.

The iron’s edge never struck the Horde-leader. One moment, all stood, the Horde and Arwen, ready to make war, the next, they were smoke rising skyward.

I knew to whence they went. If not sworn to my occupation for all time, I would have left that dark castle yard and never thought of these times again. Never let it be said that Kenyon, the greatest of all scribes, failed to carry out his oath of office. Summoning what courage I had, I pulled a potion from a pouch on my side. The green fluid inside the glass vial gave off a light of its own, such was its power. I drank half, taking care to leave the other remaining half for my return, if I still lived to do so when the time came.

The Horde transported Arwen to a place out of time, beyond the known realms. A world beyond darkness, where even midnight was too bright. A desolate place, a land of rock and black sand. No sun or moon lit the sky. Only stars speckled the canopy above, more as a taunt of light than a deliverance of it. Fires burned intermittently here and there. A great spired structure reached towards the heavens.

This was the abode of the Horde. Cursed by elder council to pass eternity in the company of only one another. As the elders had fallen, the curse had weakened but still this place, Amaranth, thrived in vile splendor.

Arwen, as he transformed from smoke back to physical form, was caught off-balance in mid-swing and stumbled. Vondemuir skittered across the ground, just beyond his reach. He recovered quickly, but not quite quickly enough.

One of the monsters plucked Arwen from the ground by the scruff of his collar. As his feet left the ground, he just then began to understand the true brute strength of the Horde. Without the sword, he was left to fight, kick and struggle, all to no avail.

Thrown forward, the skin of Arwen's knees burst as he smacked the ground.
"Where is this place? What have you done?"

“Hold your tongue, boy.” The voice came from a beggar to the side of Arwen. Chained down so that he could only rise to his elbows and knees, the man was filthy and grungy. Long gray hair hung tossed and wrecked. His face covered in grime and blood and other, less speakable things. Dressed in rags, the vagabond looked to have been rutting around the floor of this awful place an entire eternity.

Arwen did not have the luxury of time to pity the man. If he did not take swift action, he would find himself in the same predicament or worse. A huge chandelier suspended from the ceiling far above lit the large room. Crimson candles in iron spikes cast the room in a dark blood-like color. He took in the expansive room. Realizing where he was, his heart almost stopped. While it looked like a dungeon, this was actually an anteroom. Beyond, where the blood light gave way once again to shadow, sat a throne of bone and leathered flesh. A skull sat supreme at the top of the backrest, shining purple orbs of magical gems served as eyes. No one sat upon the throne, but it mattered little. Arwen knew where he was and shivers ran up and down his spine like angry spiders.

“Monok.” The name barely escaped his lips. The vagrant beside him caught it however.

“Yes, young one. You are brighter than I first thought.” Each word came like the hiss of a serpent.

The Horde surrounded him and Arwen came to his feet. All he had to defend himself were his battered broadsword and dagger, completely insufficient.

“Leave him be, demons,” the vagrant said. The leader said nothing only growled at the foul man. The filthy vagrant blanched and scuttled back.

Spidery shivers continued up and down his back, but Arwen, perhaps too young and naïve to properly understand the weight of his circumstance was not so easily quieted. “On whose command do you bring me to this place?”

The Horde, collectively, laughed, or rather their rough equivalent of it.

“Quiet yourself, boy. You know not what wrath you may incur.”

“We’re dead already, old man. For what cause shall I stand here and plea for mercy. None was shown to my village, to my family, to my king.”

“King, boy?” A voice that filled the chamber asked. It came from everywhere yet nowhere at once. An ancient voice that carried power and sorcery upon its timbre. “What of your great king? Does he appear royal to you now? Does he resemble the exalted Toran that you worship and hold exalted?”

At first, Arwen didn’t understand. He looked to the beggar for answers but saw the man had dropped his head as if...as if in shame. Arwen knew in that moment.

He rushed to his king’s side, dropping to his knees. “Your highness,” Arwen offered, “I had no idea.” Several times in his young life, he had been close enough to the great king to see him well. Underneath the grime, Arwen could now see the regal lines of his face. How he’d missed it before, he could only say the fright of being whisked off to this place preoccupied him.

“To your feet, young Toran. You can be of no aid to me unless you stand.” Arwen had started to wrestle his king’s bindings but found the shackles unyielding. “You must leave this place, by whatever means necessary. Escape and do not cast eyes upon the master of this realm.” He stood at his king’s command. His eyes found his father’s great sword. He dashed for it.

Smoke shot from the floor, separating him from Vondemuir. Swirling dark black smoke, illuminated from within by embers of fire, stank of sulfur. The twirling smoke and flame produced a hellish wind. Arwen was only barely able to keep his stance. The flaming smoke exploded outwards covering the room in ash.

The hulking figure that now stood in its stead was frightening beyond compare. Monok, father of the Horde, was a nightmare brought to being. Larger than any Horde, great ivory spikes protruded from his shoulders, a helm of bleached bone sat atop his head, already twice the size of that of a horse. His was the body of a mighty warrior. Strong, thick, and scarred. His scars, war wounds, sat white and sick above his grey flesh. In his hand, he held a staff. Long, wooden, the top piece was an onyx orb wrapped by the talons of a great bird. A smile grew across the evil lord's awful lips. Despite all things, he couldn't help but find Monok regal in his manner.

“Young Toran, you have survived my curse. Even as I took the life of your kind, save for that of your king. You have lived. Why?”

The voice of the monstrosity caused Arwen's skin to crawl. It took a moment for him to realize that he'd been asked a question. A question to which he had no answer.

Monok moved closer to Arwen. The young boy could not move, though he wanted nothing more than to flee from the dark master. The father of evil peered through yellow eyes at the son of Lowren, examining him. Monok raised his staff, the orb began to glow a deep purple color. Monok craned an ear to the orb as if listening to something.

“You have no royal blood. There is no magic within you. Yet, you live when all others do not.”

Arwen's mouth was dry, his heart erratic. Sweat broke out across his brow.

Monok looked to King Manassas. “What are your thoughts, oh great king,” The questions was asked in a snarl. “Why have you protected this farm boy above all others, even above your own daughter?” Though scorn-filled, Monok’s voice was near mesmerizing.

The king spoke nothing. Instead, he met Monok’s considerable gaze.

“A proud man until your end.” Monok thrust the staff forward. A small bolt of lightning arced from the orb to the king. The result was not good. The magic made the king to spasm violently and then fall, face first to the ground. Rancid smoke tendrils rose from his still form.

“Now, boy. You are the last of your kind. The last of the Toran.” Monok waved a hand and Vondemuir flew from the ground towards Arwen at an impossible speed. Arwen, seeing everything, attempted to grab the flying sword. To his amazement, he caught it easily enough, the weight forgotten as exhilaration flowed through him. If he were to die this day, he would make his kind proud and die a warrior.

It was quite odd. With nothing left to live for, fear released the grasp it had held on him since waking from his nap into a true hell.

“Since my curse spared you, Toran, I will now take your life with iron.” Monok clicked the staff against the ground and it shimmered and then vanished. Replacing it was a sword longer than Arwen had ever seen. The blade was black as obsidian and the hilt bejeweled with red gemstones.

“This is Arganok. The one true sword of darkness. Forged in the heart of hell, its gems filled with the blood of innocents. It has taken many lives before yours, Arwen, son of Lowren. It will take many more.” Monok swung with the power and fury one would

expect of a supernatural being. How Arwen brought Vondemuir up to block the attack, he had no idea. He only knew that he did so.

Sparks flew from the two clashing blades. The song of metal upon metal cried out. The Horde surround the two on all sides, more having entered the chamber. Instead of cheering for their master and jeering Arwen, they stood silent, simply watching, entranced.

Arwen successfully parried three more attacks. Keeping his balance, he raised the sword and swung at the monster's head. He missed. The momentum of the move wound him away, his back facing his opponent and the tip of Vondemuir banging, uselessly, against the ground. Monok saw his opening and went for it. He brought Arganok up high overhead and sliced the air straight down. Arwen hear the whistle of air and spun away, his grip on his own sword never wavering. He landed, hard, on the ground. All he could do was bring Vondemuir up to catch the strike of Monok's blade. The clang of metal sang out once again.

"You handle a sword better than any farmer I have yet to see, Toran. But even Toran luck runs dry in the presence of Monok!" Graceful swordplay forgotten, Monok raised the sword high, his back arcing and slammed down with all his might. If Arwen had still been there, it would have been a deathblow. Thank the gods for the little training Lowren had bestowed upon his son.

On his feet, sword held tightly, Arwen spoke, "If I am the last of my kind, Monok, let me fight with the strength and courage of them all."

Arganok bit into Arwen's flesh, ripping into his stomach. Though not deep, the wound burned like fire and wept tears of blood.

“I see you do. Yet, I fail to see what a race of weaklings and cowards could do for you in battle. Your race is vanquished, your realm a decaying corpse, lacking a funeral pyre in which to fade into nothingness.”

Rage enveloped Arwen and he began to swing the mighty sword wildly and haphazardly. Monok defended. Arganok was a fit companion for the beast. In one fell blow, Arwen took blood from Monok’s strong arm. The master of the realm howled like an incredible beast.

Unable to savor the small win for long, Monok struck back with all his considerable strength. This time when the blades of Toran and hell met, the Toran iron shattered to pieces.

Left with a sword no longer than a dagger, defeat became a tangible possibility for Arwen. He had fought as well as he could, but he was no match for a creature of Monok’s power.

The sick grin of Monok grew wider as he sprinted forward, the blade of his awful weapon ready for attack. Arwen did the only thing left to do.

Monok stopped abruptly. Stunned surprise replaced his wicked smile. Arganok dropped from his grasp, clattering on the floor at his feet. The great demon’s eyes burned red. Vile, black blood oozed from his mouth. Arwen had a hard time breathing. It was like all the air was sucked from the throne room.

The Great Monok fell to his knees. His weight caused tremors throughout the stone floor. On his knees, Arwen was able to look him eye to eye. What lived beyond his eyes was awful, terrible, and the boy would never forget it. It made him cold. Not cold

like the first snowfall but shiver deep down inside where a part of him would never be warm again.

Then the most curious thing happened. Monok smiled. His lips, that looked like calf liver parted, yellow teeth, covered in his own black blood, shone through. And then he laughed once. He said something Arwen couldn't quite make out but sounded oddly like "Thank you." Monok crumpled to the floor. At the moment of impact, his body lost substance and transformed into that awful, fiery smoke once again. This time, the smoke slowly drifted upward towards the dark ceiling until Arwen could no longer see it.

Remembering the Horde, Arwen pulled his broadsword with his free hand. Armed with his crude weapons he turned in every direction. They were all gone. He was alone save for his fallen king. He slid both dagger and sword back into their sheaths and ran to his king. Despite the death he'd seen this night, victory and pride began to swell up inside him.

There was still a heartbeat as the young boy cradled the old man's head into his lap. Slowly, the King Manassas opened his eyes. They were unfocused for a moment, but soon sharpened. "He...is...gone? You have...defeated him?" The words came weakly and Arwen knew the king was not long for life.

"Yes, your highness. The evil has been conquered." Arwen hoped for the great king to smile at the news. He did not.

"That is...unfortunate."

Confused, he urged the king onward. "My king?"

Tears began to flow from Manassas's eyes. "I cannot blame you, young one, you could not know." A coughing fit seized the royal. Still in Arwen's arms, the young one

could feel the fierceness of the fit. “You have freed him. Banished to this realm he could never leave. While...,” the king’s eyes and fluttered and Arwen believed him gone but he carried on, “...his servants could enter other realms, he was forced to wait out the end of all days in this prison. Now, the death of his physical being has allowed him to travel all the realms, as he desires. To cause sickness, famine, war and death.”

The sorrow in his king’s words touched Arwen, and he knew them to be true.

“He knew you would be spared, deigned it in fact. He knew your young heart would seek revenge, would seek retribution. He is the great falsehood, the great manipulator. His plan was carried out perfectly. Our kind is now gone, but others are sure to follow. Destruction is his only companion. It travels well with him.”

“I will follow him, my lord. I will take his life as he’s taken the lives of all those I care for.” His words were brave and honest but there was no one there to hear them. The king had breathed his last breath.

Carefully, Arwen placed the head of his ruler on the ground. Gingerly, he ran two fingers over his eyes, closing them to the horrors of the afterlife. The skin of Manassas was already growing cold. Oh, how he wished for coins so he could properly weight the lids.

Arwen stood and walked, but fell to his knees only a few short steps away. Tears flowed freely, more than they had done so since his childhood. He wept for the lives of all the Torans that had ever been and the ones that will never be. He wept for his mother, his father, for Jalyynn, a love never allowed to blossom.

When Arwen finally opened his eyes, the light in the chamber had changed. He looked up to the dark ceiling, but no longer was it dark. It was open to the night sky, to

the stars that shone like true diamonds as he was in a field on a clear night in Miranda. A golden light, brighter than all the others, descended towards him.

Arwen felt no fear as the moon goddess came to him. He was past that now; there was nothing in any realm known to him left to fear. The golden light dropped further and further until a slim figure, bathed in pure beautiful light stood before him. It was a woman with skin as bright white as moonbeams. She wore a cloak flecked with gold and silver. She was so bright Arwen had to shield his eyes at first.

“Arwen,” she spoke, her voice light and tender. “You are the last of the Toran, the last of a great race and the only survivor of your world. Is it not so.”

“Mother Moon, it is my fault Monok has been freed.”

“Hush, child. I know what has happened. He is to blame, not you, my child. Nonetheless, you are the lone survivor of a proud, powerful people. The Torans have prayed to me since the beginning of all, I was bound by the dark magic of the underworld not to interfere. With Monok gone I appear to you now.”

“What am I to do, my holiness?”

“Child, fate has brought heavy burdens to you. As the last of your people, you will possess the strength and power of all the Toran souls that have ever walked the land of your fathers and the magic of the ones never born.

“Kneel before me, Arwen, last of the Torans, throw off your mortal bonds.”

Something happened then to Arwen. Something extraordinary. He began to glow as Mother Moon. He saw beyond the walls of Monok’s castle. He knew things he should never know. He knew strength unequalled in a mortal Toran. The torn flesh of his knees healed, as if they had always been so.

Mother moon raised a hand and Arwen stood. “Rise, Arwen, God of Night.”

He could feel the power inside him, like lightning caged. He knew what he must do even as Mother Moon spoke. “You will leave this place; your realm is gone to you now. You will traverse the known realms in pursuit of Monok. Until he is banished back into the hell into which he came, your power will never wane, so say I, Mother Moon, Queen of Dreams, and the God of Day, and of all Time and Space.”

I must tell you, it was a sight to behold. Never in my years had I, Kenyon, had the fortune to behold the birth of a god, the ascension of a mortal to the dominion of the divine.

Then she ascended. Back to her rightful place in the heavens. Soon she was gone.

Arwen was alone, but now, transformed into a deity, exalted to the station of a supreme being, he had a war to bring to Monok. He did not understand what magic he yet wielded, but he would learn. He would cause Monok to cry out for mercy, but there would be no mercy for him or his Horde.

Arwen took a deep breath of the acrid air of Amaranth turned his eyes skyward and shot from that place in a beam of light so fast, so powerful, propelling him far, far away into a another realm. Already his journey had begun and it would continue for all eternity until Monok, the Destroyer of All, fell.

I watched in utter amazement. My quill floated from my belt, a piece of parchment unfurled and the writing of these events began. I continued watching as the last shimmer of light that was Arwen, the Night God, faded into oblivion. He’d embarked on a majestic journey, which would no doubt change the fates of countless beings throughout millennia. It started here, this very night, right before my eyes.

Travel well, Arwen, for you carry the hearts of your race upon your shoulders.

STYMPHALIAN MELODIES

Cincinnatus Carvain

Silence slowly drowns out dreamt birdsong and he wakes. He doesn't move from his spot, under a fleece, huddled in a small burrow at the base of a great tree (its bark, like its brothers, bare until a great height where limbs flow bounteously). Far above him, higher than the maze of branches, the interlocking foliage blocks out any indication of night or day. The luminescent moss sprawled across the odd trunk remains unchanged, still lighting the forest with its dull yellow glow. He closes his eyes and tries to remember the sounds of his sleep, but can't. Defeated, he stands, breaks the bothersome silence with a groan as he stretches, then walks around the large circumference of wood. Silence is again broken as he empties his bladder, gazing about his sleepy surroundings.

Branches to his right (south? east?) shake with sudden movement. Stopping mid-stream he darts down the slope in the rustling direction, scanning the complex sky for a revealing shape or glimpse of colour. The movement is erratic, jumping from place to place faster than his tired eye can follow. Suddenly it stops, and in the stillness he is lost; unsure where to look. He waits, envisioning the dropping of a leaf, a pinecone (a silver feather!), but no such signals are given. Lids drooping and spleen pulsing he finds his tree and walks back up towards it, stopping halfway to finish his urinary business.

Awakened, irises attuned to the perpetually aurean light, he returns to his nook and folds his fleece. Brushing the forest floor (glaring at the empty bread cloth) with his foot reveals a small pot, which he cleans of soil and places in the folds of green. Another layer of duff yields his bow and modest quiver, filled with slightly dirtied arrows; strapping the latter on, he tucks the fleece securely under its belt then sets off in the direction of his failed sighting, using his bow as a comforting cane. As he follows the gentle hills he

begins to whistle. No answer comes from the trees but a soft echo. His short notes lengthen, flowing over the ground as airy melodies of the huts of the plain, smelling of sweetgrass and approaching rain. An imagined chorus joins in, softly working the forgotten tongue, singing in ignorance. He listens to their words, understanding what they cannot as a trickling beat joins the song. The melody and voices quieten at its entrance; the forest does not echo his sudden silence. Cresting a hill, the trickling strengthens. He runs to the left, stops, strains his ears, then runs the other way. A dark aberration of terrain appears ahead as the sound becomes crystal clear. Winding towards it in a bouncing jog, his laugh is submerged in the flow. He arrives and kneels before the outcropping of glistening stone, bowing to kiss the lightly rippling pool spawned from its cracks.

After quenching his thirst he stays kneeling, examining the ground; an area of mutilation from his boots and knees, smooth mud, a few rocks. His eyes lock onto patterns on the curve of the small shore. Standing and stepping gingerly back onto dry ground, the markings define as he nears. Several tracks sit alone, pattering a small area before leading to a cross-stitched mess where they exit into the duff and disappear. The marks are shallow, flat lines with clean holes at 7 of the points. He mutters to them, imagining armouries.

Still entertaining such images he bends and digs a hefty looking stone from the muck then cleans it in the water. After finding and bathing its twin, bow slung 'round his back, he wanders up a slope to a small plateau to the right of the spring. Placing his quiver, fleece, and rocks at the base of a tree, he clears a spot in the middle of the flatness down to soil, then breaks the earth with the end of his bow. After digging out a small pit he selects a few handfuls of flame-worthy duff, places them in a neat pile at the bottom, then looks for wood. A quick survey of his immediate area reveals no sticks, twigs, branches, boughs or tree-limbs of any sort; awareness of their absence jogs his memory and he looks to the spring and beyond. Failing recollection of any such lumber throughout his foray into the forest, he looks to the sky; tangles of branches mocking him in their unreachable stillness. He gives the spring a weary look then retrieves his quiver.

The 3 remaining arrowheads gleam and flicker in the warm light as he plays with them, lying on his fleece. His eyes rest on the intended tea-pot, (rendered a bulky canteen by the lack of ground-level greenery), then close. Crackling and trickling keep the pestering silence at bay 'til the wind begins to howl. Opening the door he steps into the town-square, lit hellishly by the rolling red storm above. In the centre of the grassy space sits a creaking, whistling gallows; a featureless, black-faced group of figures are gathered on it, swaying with the wind. As he approaches a shrill shriek pierces his ear. He winces and the faceless erupt into a chaotic chorus of disjointed birdsong, every incomplete head tilting or thrashing with the voice of a different bird. The wind screams to compete with its new challenger but the song flies heavily, unaffected. Hands on his ears he makes a run for the nearest building. Long before he reaches it a thundering voice falls from the sky, speaking the language of the old songs. Following its command he drops to his hands and knees and listens through the wind and demented choir as the voice gives its instructions. During the rant he watches a shadow grow from the ground in front of him, starting as a small winged shape then forming a head, beak, and a single strangely constructed and pointed foot as it balloons. The voice strengthens as its shadow grows, drowning out wind and birdsong when it envelops him. Obscured in its darkness and feeling the presence above his back, the rant ends, and he wakes. The fire has gone silent and little smoke rises from the remaining embers. He lies still (aside from pumping chest, shrinking stomach and dripping brow), and closes his eyes again. His ears ring, dueting with the spring, then drown in it as his body calms. Unwilling to dream again, he stirs, stands, walks to the edge of his plateau then urinates defiantly in the stillness. Finishing, shaking, and listening to his stomach growl, he walks down to the spring and drinks from cupped hands. He does so quietly, eyeing the faded tracks. Stomach filled (and fooled) he returns to his camp and stomps out the remaining embers. Leaving the fleece and pot alone he collects the arrows from their sleeping places near his own and places them in the quiver. Belting the quiver on, he finds his bow then walks into the forest, keeping his weapon up and clean.

#

Once again he turns back and heads towards the spring, legs dragging evermore with the failure of another direction; lacking landmarks, movement and worthiness of the

compass-point. His bow grows heavier and he decides to rest at one particularly large tree, sitting and gazing up at its labyrinthine limbs. The silence rests his eyes until a rustle opens them. He fights off the urge to jump as he scans the low sky. A leaf falls in a slow-motion dive-bomb not far in front of his tree, branches above it shuddering. A large, black eyed, silver coated and poignantly beaked head pops out, gives the area two jerking glances, then retreats. He stares blankly as the branches shake again, but follows when the tremors move from their epicentre, rippling through the sky towards and then beyond him. He stands and gives calm, quiet chase, eyes never leaving his seemingly epileptic goal. His face melts from its calm neutrality into a smile as the faint but wonderful trickling appears.

The trees pass slowly but eventually the spring appears ahead, his camp just beyond it. No branches shake but the head drops out again, just above the great stone. He slips behind a trunk unseen, then waits. A tangle of rustles fall, followed by several large flaps. Peering around his cover he watches the bird land. Its size takes his breath (from a chest its head is level with), elegant neck, sprouted from a thick, gleaming body, first twitching with caution then bending to the spring. It drinks and jumps around a little on its menacing foot, beginning to sing in a resonant, melodious voice as it does.

Nocking an arrow and breathing deeply he leaves the safety of his tree. The bird is singing, swaying its neck, dark beak pointed to the stone. He moves in a slow arc to his right, positioning behind it. At a hearse-pace he approaches, stopping and preparing to dive to the side as the bird's head rises, wings outstretch, and it sustains a high. He calms himself and draws the string. The note fades and the song slows; he gains his last few steps. Lowering its neck and wings, the bird goes silent. He fires his shot. It sinks deep into the flesh in the direct middle of the silver back. A horrible airy sound escapes its beat as the bird falls forwards and slaps the water. He watches it float for awhile, his breath returning to normal, then wades a few feet into the spring, grabs the monstrous foot and hauls the corpse onto land. Deep red traces follow their exit. He whistles quietly as he examines the body, but his notes are out of tune and he stops.

#

A wind begins to blow so he opens his eyes to quell it. Silence has killed the trickling but he does not notice, taken instead with the image of the still spring and silver heap.

Blackness swells and air howls and he opens his eyes forcefully, standing and discarding his fleece. He walks heavily down to the spring and kneels beside the (former) bird then drinks the crimson-tinged water. He washes his face in it, cleaning out his troublesome eyes, then stands and grabs the now dulling corpse by its horrible foot and drags it with him. He gets no further than a few metres before he stops and runs up to the plateau. The bow slung around his shoulder, the fleece folded, and the quiver strapped on, he picks up the twin remaining arrows. He examines them momentarily, then drops them in the pit. He finds his rocks and hurls them down, enjoying the crack of wood.

Grabbing the pot he returns to the spring and fills it. He closes it and slides it into his empty quiver and, enjoying its weight, walks back to his feathered friend and hauls him along. Together they move at a brisk pace through the forest, ignoring his stomach's protests. The first hill does not slow them, though his breath deepens by its top. His legs defy him during a speedy descent of the gentle slope, and so they slow their pace a tad, but the trees still avoid his gaze, warily ducking out of his path. Many of them pass and hunger and windy dreams hang on his ankles but he pays them no mind; focusing on pulling his bloody weight and staring down each coming incline and tree. As they crest a notably high knoll the horizon suddenly changes; darkness spills in between the trees. Excited by the lack of light, he begins to run, bird thumping behind him. His legs scream at the exertion and he yells back at them. Their exchange echoes but once before it is stamped out by seemingly furious trees. The gnarled sky shakes, all manner of twigs and leaves rain down on him in the sudden quake, but he does not stop. As the edge nears he can make out moonlit fields, smell air without the stagnant, mossy glow.

The trembling follows him as he runs down the final slope, not stopping as the duff turns to grass. The trees end and he stops just beyond them, looking up. A calm night greets him, both moons shining bright amongst the stars, but his relief is interrupted by a burst of gleaming shapes from the treetops. Collected wings beating loudly (underling a slow-falling, symphonic chorus), they fly out into the plain while he gawks at the steady stream. Eventually it ends and he watches the stragglers follow the mass, light bouncing with their flaps, then changes his grip on the foot and walks in their wake.

After ascending a small ridge he drops the foot and turns back, attempting to relieve himself down the incline. His stomach turns as he does and nothing falls but a curse. He

waits awhile but his body refuses. A breeze begins to blow, whistling softly in his ear. Walking back to his friend, he tries to join but his tune still comes out harsh. A mocking gust buffets him and his run catches up to him. He opts to sit on the corpse to rest. The wind calms and lights appear on the horizon, likely awakened by the birds. He tries to whistle once more but can't. He grabs the pot and drinks, watching the orange flickers grow nearer and nearer. Lips wetted he tries (in vain) a final time, to evoke those ancient songs, then laughs angrily. He watches the lights for awhile, then rests his head in his hands. His eyes close and the wind strengthens. The door opens and a group of people shuffle into the room, surrounding his chair. He raises his eyes and every head (bald, blond, browned, cropped, ponytailed and braided alike), turns toward him, staring at him with their stark facelessness.

The Silent Siren

Madeline Dyer

Iya crawled through the water, each stroke using up more of her valuable, diminishing supply of energy. Every movement was a struggle for the siren; she had known she had to find food soon. But Iya knew it was useless, she was going to die of starvation. For God's sake, she was a Siren! A beautiful, compelling creature capable of tricking men into believing that she was the most beautiful thing in the world, should they hear her sing; but Iya knew that would never happen. Never in her whole life would any creature hear her beautiful voice. Never had she uttered a single word. Never would she be able to sing. She was mute. Quite a problem if you're a siren.

When Iya was little she had lived with her mother, who had done all the hunting. But once sirens reach the legal hunting age of sixteen, they can only consume prey that they themselves have enchanted, for any humans caught by other sirens wouldn't be attuned correctly for them, and having reached the 'hunting age', such food would risk making

the siren ill or even causing death. It was one of the strangest digestive systems Iya had ever learnt about. The last meal she had eaten was caught by her mother, some months ago, just before she turned sixteen, when her body was still able to cope with food marked by other sirens. Now, though, was a different matter, and with Iya unable to sing she was sure she'd never be able to make a catch herself. The poor siren knew she was doomed right from the start...

Today the sea was rising, only by a few raindrops a second, but Iya could still feel it. Even in her hunger weakened state all her senses were just as sharp - they had to be for her race's survival.

Iya coughed, spluttering mucus in the water about her. She wrinkled her nose. The hunger burnt inside, clawing its way through her body, trying to rip her organs apart. She wrapped her arms around her rib cage, as if trying to physically stop herself falling apart. She was getting thinner, starving to death. She brought her hand up to her face, her paper-thin skin rippling, and gasped. Her hand was a drab grey in colour, she was already losing her lovely creamy pallor.

She sighed, and felt like crying, but forced herself not to knowing it would use up her valuable energy supply. She brushed her hands through her red hair trying to think rationally. The longer she thought about it the more hopeless her situation seemed. The longer she went without food the harder it would be to catch anything - she was rapidly losing her allure, and no man would be attracted to an ugly siren. And even if they were, she had no way to call them. It was a loose-loose situation.

But Iya was determined to keep going, to find food, to find a solution to her problem. She thought of her mother, as she often did; the kind, beautiful siren with bright red hair

who had raised her ever since the siren Queen had given her a new life to bring up. Iya was sure her mother wouldn't give up in the same situation, so why should she? After all her mother hadn't given up on teaching her daughter about their race, the way to their house, despite her snooty friends telling her it was useless and that the Queen had given her a 'dud'. Iya smiled to herself, her mother had always had faith in her, she'd known that her daughter may be limited in some ways, but over-compensated for them in others. She'd known that her daughter could understand and think just as well as everyone else. She'd even used the word 'intelligent' in association with Iya once - that was one of her favourite memories.

For several more hours the silent siren dragged herself painfully through the watery realms. And just when she was thinking that she'd never find anything, she saw something...

Right at the top of the sea, several hundred leagues above her, a small dark mass floated, blocking out the light. But Iya knew immediately what it was. The smell of a near-life source was intoxicating.

With newly-found energy, Iya dived up to the surface, her arms pushing the water away from her. She grabbed the limp mass and pulled the body down roughly with her long arms, desperate to get it to the depths of the ocean before any more of the crucial human life-source drained away, lost forever.

Only once she had the body near the bottom, did Iya look at her catch. A drowned female not looking her best. The human had died naturally, a water death, no siren had marked or called her, she should be safe to eat. The dead woman's body wasn't a pleasant sight. Matted hair floated around the waxy face. Her body was a grey colour, similar to

Iya's own. And the dead woman's abdomen was huge - totally out of proportion with the rest of her body. Iya wondered if this was what pregnancy looked like in humans. Iya had never seen a pregnant human-form before, for siren babies just 'appear' in the Queen's kingdom. No one knew how sirens were created, or when they'd be allocated a 'mother'. But perhaps the most wanted thing to know was where the babies came from. Yet Iya's mother had said she had known when her daughter would make an appearance. For a second Iya wondered if she'd ever have a baby to look after, to bring up, and then decided it was very unlikely, after all she couldn't even look after herself properly.

Iya dismissed her thoughts and pressed her index fingers on the dead woman's temples. After a few seconds she felt the human's life force and energy begin to trickle into her own body, running through her veins, driving away the immediate hunger, killing some of the pain.

And all too soon it was over. Iya let go of the body, silently saying a prayer for the dead woman and her unborn child as she did so.

The siren stretched out in the shape of a star, yes, she did feel better.

Over the next few days Iya felt stronger and happier but on the morning of her fifth day after her meal the ripping hunger returned. It wasn't good. How likely was it that she'd be able to find another body untouched by other sirens. She was back to square one...

It had been purely by chance she'd found her first meal, after all, she was in the middle of the sea, there weren't going to be many humans around here. But there would be by the beaches, and the cliffs and the coasts, Iya realised. She'd just have to swim

inland. She wasn't really that far off the Scottish coast - what would it be? A matter of two or three hours swimming to reach the islands around the Scottish coast?

Decidedly, Iya set off, hoping she'd have enough energy to reach her destination, and that there would be people there.

Luckily, it turned out there were, for seven long hours later a tired and bedraggled, mute siren reached the shore of the Isle of Skye. And it seemed to be occupied by humans too. It wasn't the first Island that Iya reached but it looked like the best. She reached Loch Greshornish absolutely shattered. She stayed just beneath the surface of the water. It was a hot day and the water was warm. Her excellent hearing could pick up the sounds of a pick-nicking family not far off. They were on the beach, the parents sitting next to a wind breaker and three excitable young children were playing with a ball. Iya waited patiently for it to go in the water, near her, just near enough...

She sat there, as still and silent as ever, waiting for the right time to pounce. But they didn't come near enough. If only she could speak, she would be able to sing and entice them into the water, and then do the deed. She opened her mouth and sang silently, the words benefitting no one's ears. Not a soul heard it. It was a beautiful song too, if only she and others could listen to it.

And then the smallest child, a boy of about three years old, came nearer. He fell over in the soggy sand just as the water lapped further up the shore, soaking his chubby feet. The toddler cried out, lost his balance slightly, then regained his footing and turned confused towards the open water. He walked out a few feet, into the deep depths. The water was now up to his waist. The siren blew carefully, creating a slight current, strong enough to capture the boy and he came nearer, swept up by the strong momentum. And

Iya seized the moment. The child was about ten feet away but she could move fast. And suddenly she was there: her hand reached out, her long twig fingers wrapped around the boy's fleshy ankle. She squeezed it viciously as she pulled him nearer. His cries of alarm drowned in the water as she dragged him under. He turned and she saw his face. A look of utter terror. Pure horror. His eyes were wide open, frozen in anxiety and fear, the water was stinging his eyes but he couldn't stop staring. Even his three wise years told him that she was the most beautiful creature alive...

And then he was gone. Taken from her arms. Snatched away. Above the water she could hear his cries of relief as his parents held him.

Iya reared up, her head breaking the water's surface for the first time ever. Her long red hair matted against her face, the cool summer's breeze caressed her shoulders.

"Mermaid!" An excited cry escaped a child's lips.

And then Iya choked. Choked on the air that filled her lungs, clogging them up, forcing the wonderful water out. Pain struck her body, like an electric wire wrapping around her body. Squeezing her. Blinding light flashed in her eyes as she fell down, down, down...

Iya opened her eyes about half an hour later. She was lying at the bottom of the rocky beach's coven, stones digging painfully into her back. And, oh the pain! It was overwhelming. There was so much of it; in her throat, her back, her arms, her stomach, her head - especially her head.

She felt dead.

Several days later the weak siren was still lying there, barely conscious. Her mind was floating here and there. Nothing made sense. No one came. She called for her mother who wouldn't hear her. She called for food that wouldn't come. She called for help that would never arrive.

The water felt cold, colder than normal. She shivered, jolting herself back to life. Groggily, she sat up, letting the water support her. The water was unsettled, stormy, and it carried her far. She didn't care where she was going. For eight days she traveled like this, knowing her time would soon be up. It was a depressing thought. A tear rolled down her cheek and mixed in with the surrounding water, hiding the evidence; soon she'd all be gone.

Fish never came her way. Jellyfish altered their journey so as not to cross paths. Even the crabs hid from her.

And on the ninth day she caught the scent of a siren. A strong, sweet smell of honey filled her nostrils. Iya crawled along, desperate to find the siren. Maybe there was a chance of getting help after all?

Iya turned the corner around a submerged rocky ledge. The most beautiful siren sat there. A female with long flowing chestnut hair that curled and floated like a veil in the water. Her face was a dark tanned colour, in which sequin eyes sparkled and ruby lips sat perfectly. Her long arms were slender and the colour of caramel. She was wearing a long tunic-dress studded with tiny pearls making intricate patterns. But the most beautiful thing about her was the human body she cradled in her arms.

The silent siren could not wait, her hunger drove her, powered her, fueled her, gave her only one choice. And one choice only.

Iya ploughed forward, not caring that the food was marked by another siren. Not caring that it would make her ill, or even kill her; there was a very likely chance she'd die anyway. What difference would this make?

And then the Scottish siren looked at Iya and turned deadly, guarding her prey. Her eyes turned red as she bared her sharp teeth, snarling at the intruder. The stronger siren leapt towards the weaker, putting herself in front of the body. But it did not deter Iya.

They collided. Fingernails tore skin. Venom burnt bare flesh. Shrieks were swallowed by the ocean. Iya was thrown backwards, screaming silently, as she crashed into the rocky realms. Her head connected with hardness and blood splurged out, congealing in the water. Iya carried on screaming screams that couldn't be heard.

And only then did her opponent realise; she came closer, an air of tenderness about her. Her arms snaked out towards Iya who lay dying against the rocks.

"You're a silent," the siren whispered. "Oh my god, I'm so sorry."

Iya couldn't answer.

The beautiful siren danced back to her kill and held it out to the near lifeless siren in front of her.

"Here. Have it, it's yours," she whispered.

Iya tried to lift her hands, but she couldn't. Her body was already setting into the stone. Soon she'd be gone.

"No!" The chestnut-haired siren sobbed, "No! I should've realised you were one of The Silent. The Queen's Chosen. One of her favourites. No! Don't die."

Iya looked up at her, her eyelids frozen away from her eyes.

“Why are you on your own? Where’s your protector? Why aren’t you with the Queen or the wise mother you must have been allocated?,” she cried out in distress looking at the mute sire, “Why weren’t you with the Queen? She cares for you lot,” she carried on hysterically. “You... you should-” she broke off crying. “I’m so sorry, I was hungry, but I should've immediately given up my catch for a Silent. No! Oh, I'm so sorry-”

Iya stared at her, her eyes no longer seeing as her spirit drifted away.

Closing

It is clear as day that our warriors have gift at reciting their remarkable adventures. Their triumph return rewards our lands with gains beyond our wildest dreams, but there are many more traveling brave souls out there in the midst of completing our righteous campaign. On their return, we will gather around the fire and spare ear for their tales.

Thank you,

Sir Dedman