

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

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Editorial

The Ever-Expanding Magazine That Exists at the Centre of the Universe

You'll have to excuse the long title – it helped to balance up the contents page!

I'm so glad to welcome you to another issue of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* – the rock just won't stop! It's been such a thrill for me to publish every issue of this magazine – especially the ones containing my own writings, of course! This issue, however, contains nothing I have written except this editorial and a single page of reviews. Even the news items this time around were produced by my marvellous co-editor, John Greenwood, who also took care of the illustrative duties. On one hand, I feel a bit sad – this is my domain, and all these authors are trespassers! On the other hand, I'm happy, because my little magazine is starting to grow up. Before long, I'm going to find it hard to justify including my own novels and stories, and will probably be forced to launch a new magazine. Maybe I could call it something like *Theaker's Own*. That sounds pretty good...

Anyway, there are a lot of stories to run through, so let's get going. The issue kicks off with our lead story, the excellent "Ananke", by Jeff Crook. It's fantasy in the high style, and so very precisely what I was asking for when I asked for submissions along the lines of a Conan, Elric or Gotrek and Felix novella that it's hard to believe Jeff isn't looking to gain some kind of leverage over me.

"Winter's Warm Blood" by Mark E Deloy is a horror story with an unusually warm, feminine side. In this story, success isn't destroying the enemy, it's protecting the child of a fellow woman, regardless of her species.

In contrast, "Live to Be Hunted" by Sean & Craig Davis is 100% masculine, a bruising tale of a bruiser being tailed. Who's on his tail? Will he get any (tail)?

Michael McNichols takes us to "Glimmerick", where he tells a delicate and eccentric story of a survivor waiting for disaster to strike once more. Should he run, or face it with his new friends? Perhaps he should consult the magical tree of god for advice on the matter! That's definitely what I would do!

Everyone has gone pirate-crazy these last few years, and Benjamin Spurduto is no exception. "La Tierra de la Sangre" takes us into a world where the evil, repressive English Navy uses sorcery to pursue pure-hearted pirates across the high seas. I'm not sure Benjamin realised TQF is an English magazine – and a law-abiding one at that! I'm rooting for the Navy!

In "The Tragical History of Weebly Pumrod, Witch Hunter", Bruce Hesselbach delivers a cross-section of his world of Yxning, a world where magic leads to wonderment and annoyance in equal measure!

The After All of Michael Wyndham Thomas returns for its antepenultimate engagement. Try not to misread the sub-title!

At the end, I get very excited about the Transformers movie, but just before that, Newton Braddell continues his merry adventures with his maudlin friends! – *SWT*

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(Frankly, subscribing is quite pricy: the best thing is to download each issue for free and then buy the annual bound volumes, which are only about £6.99.)

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News

For She Is the Anointed One!

The Church of England is reported to be in a state of uproar after Benedictine monks from the Diocese of York discovered the future Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, born just ten days ago in a Maternity Hospital in Durham.

The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams confirmed the news in an announcement made on his personal blog, and was quick to dispel any doubts. When shown a pipe belonging to the late Harold McMillan, he revealed, the baby girl was seen to point and smile. On the issue of the notorious birthmark, however, he was silent, leading to speculation in some quarters that a second, rival heir may yet emerge before the next new moon.

In a press conference the parents of Molly Hutchinson, infant leader-in-waiting, said that they were very proud, but friends of the family have reported that the celebrations have been tinged with regret, as the anointed child will be taken from the family home in five years time, to be raised by monks in Westminster Abbey until the death of Gordon Brown, currently forecast for the Autumn of 2048.

Middle-Aged Scientists Come to Middle-Aged Conclusions!

Middle-aged scientists working for the University of Manchester are worried about the growing number of children and young people who have little or no taste in music. Professor Brian

Todd undertook statistical studies of records reaching the top forty over the last five decades. His research, published in the latest issue of *Nature*, show a significant and steady decline in what has been dubbed the “Quality Quotient”, since its peak in 1968.

Educationalists and youth workers have used these findings to argue that urgent intervention is necessary if this worrying trend of juvenile bad taste is to be stemmed, and called on the Government to increase funding for initiatives aimed at both educating teenagers about the dangers of mediocre music, and promoting healthier alternatives, such as folk and jazz.

But with so-called “pop”, flooding into the country from abroad, it seems there are few easy answers.

Carrier Bag Decision Made by Birmingham Family at Wit’s End

A family in Birmingham have decided to stop keeping plastic carrier bags under their sink because they claim they just have too many.

“At first it seemed like a good idea to hold on to the carrier bags, just in case they ever came in handy for lining wastepaper baskets, that sort of thing,” said Eileen Wisbech of Perry Barr.

“And obviously we are trying to cut down on the number of bags we use anyway, because of the environment. But we always ended up accumulating more, despite ourselves. Anyway, we’ve now come to a decision, and we’re just going to throw them all away. Because they’re taking over our lives. Quite literally, in fact. The other day some of them came to life and started ordering us about, and telling us terrible secrets. But we’ll soon put a stop to that.”

Ananke

Jeff Crook



Chapter 1

At Caya's feet steamed a corkscrew heap of tarry black dung, spiked with shards of yellow bone. Claw prints crisscrossed the trail she'd been following through the snow for the last hour. She scrutinised the cloudy, forest-clad slopes of the mountain, her grey eyes studious, too old for her young face. Her breath hung about her in the bitter air, tinged with silver by the faint starlight reflecting off the snow. The mountain night hung still as a frozen sheet, hushed by the surrounding forest of dark, snow-laden firs.

"*Esa*, I think you had better see this," Teke said. He dropped from the branch of a tree, arm membranes spread to slow his fall, and clapped softly onto the side of her boot. He scrambled up her leg, claws pinking the threads of her homespun britches.

"What is it, Teke?" Caya asked without looking at him. She knelt in the snow beside the blasted trunk of a fir tree, peeled off a chunk of charred bark, and sniffed it thoughtfully. A line of similar trunks, scored and blackened by an old fire, stretched away down the mountainside.

"*Esa* Caya, I think you had better see," Teke said as he settled on her shoulder. "I think *Day* is coming."

She stood, leather creaking, boots crunching in the snow. Her vest of close ring mail nearly swallowed her, the too-large quiver of red-feathered arrows jounced on her hip as she walked. Her bow, slung crosswise over her shoulder, was nearly as long as she, and the baldric of her scabbarded short sword knocked about her knees. Teke clung to her neck and peered out from beneath her chin.

A faint blush had appeared on the snowy slopes above her, prinking the boughs of the trees with salmon hues. Turning east, Caya squinted into the unaccustomed light as gold-limned clouds parted to reveal the scarlet-flushed horizon. The valley below slowly shook off the shadows that had veiled it since she was a girl hiding beneath her mother's bed. Her village, nestled in the woods beside a frozen river, was surrounded by a vast ruin almost buried

beneath snow-quilted forest. The old castle bailey, half in ruins, rose up from among the trees and slate rooftops. A few tendrils of blue smoke twisted up from chimneys, then spread out in a haze over the village. Soldiers guarding the west gate had gathered in the road to stare at the mantling sky.

"I suppose that's it," Caya sighed. "This is the end, Teke. We'd better find Mother." She turned and raced up the game trail, hurdling fallen trees, spronking from boulder to boulder, holding her quiver against her hip as she ran to prevent it from slapping. She picked a path along the tumbled, forested slopes as though born to the mountain woods.

"Will I see this sun, do you think, *Esa*?" Teke asked as he clung to her shoulder. His bushy, ringed tail wrapped itself around the beam of her long bow.

"Maybe," she huffed. Though not yet winded, she conserved her breath for the climbing.

"I have never seen this sun rise," Teke said. "Of course, I am only two years old. Triminshae had already fallen before I climbed from my mother's pouch."

"Be quiet, Teke," Caya said between strides. "Be my ears and listen for me. I can't hear when I run." Teke was a hogwari, an arboreal creature about the size of one of Caya's shoes, with large, moist eyes and a sharp, inquisitive nose. His furry prehensile tail was nearly as long as his body and ringed with alternating stripes of white and royal indigo. His slate-blue fur was thick to protect him from the cold, but the thinner fur covering his face and paws was glossy white. Her mother had bought Teke from a wandering witch two years ago, to celebrate Caya's thirteenth birthday. She had bound the hogwari to Caya using wood witch's magic.

Teke was Caya's companion. He kept her warm and watched her back and remembered things for her. He was the closest thing she had to a friend, because there weren't many children in the village and Caya spent most of her time in the woods. She loved to track and hunt. She could shoot a bow better than any boy her age, she knew weather signs and how to read snow drifts and navigate by stars and cloud move-



ments and air currents and the wind in the trees. She could build a fire even in white-fall, or from tinder buried under snow pack, and she knew how to dig a snow shelter when caught outside in a storm. She knew animals and their ways, what mosses to eat and what barks could be brewed for headaches or fevers as well as which ones brought visions. She also knew how to fight akhar devils – one of Maedra's minions. She knew where to shoot to kill and where to shoot to cripple, but most importantly, she knew when not to shoot at all.

Her mother had taught her these things. Her mother was a powerful and revered wood witch. She could make fire without fuel, speak with animals and bind them to her will or the will of another, and she could take the form of animals and elements familiar to her. But what made her truly revered, even among her fellow witches, was her ability to cause seeds to grow without sunlight. Without wood witches like her mother, the people of Fallweather would have starved years ago, when Maedra the wife of immortal Death swallowed the sun.

But now it seemed that Maedra's darkness had lifted, perhaps for the last time. Day had arrived. The sun, vomited up by Maedra, shone on slopes that had not known its warmth for years. Caya could feel the land stir at the warm touch of the sun's rays. She heard the woods creak with hope of renewal. But Caya knew this for a false hope. Her mother had warned her of this day. This was the end, the Time of Ananke – the fate to which even the gods are bound. The darkness was lifting because Maedra no longer needed it. She desired the bright light of day to guide her armies in the last battle, to destroy the last freehold of humankind. The sun would set this day on the end of their world, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. Maedra commanded a legion of akhar devils for every sword in her village. And the akhar were only one knuckle of the black fist poised to crush them. There were other minions that Caya had never seen, creatures her mother had never told her about but that other witches described to frighten her in the night. Bashar devils by the thousands to command her legions, plagues of pell demons, and

dhashow wights with claws and eyes as blue as glacial ice.

Caya ducked between a pair of fir trees and entered a long snow-choked lane bordered on either side by a hedge of evergreens. The snow here had drifted almost to the top of the windward hedge, while the ground beneath the leeward hedge was nearly barren, swept clean by the mountain wind. She didn't need to see Maedra's army to know it was there. She could hear them well enough. She knew what the bashars would do to her if they caught her.

Her golden hair and grey eyes were common enough features in her village, but her face was narrow and proud and forward-leaning, so that even when still, she gave the impression of movement, of being on the verge of doing. She was lithe and agile, while most of the women in her village were sturdy, stocky-hipped peasant folk. Some folks said that her mother had bred with a forest sprite or satyr.

But Caya's father had been a ranger. It was his sword that she wore. He was ambushed eight years ago by akhar devils, not long after the fall of Triminshae. Caya didn't grieve for him – he had died in battle and was assured a seat in Verkendhall. Instead, she grieved for the women and children her father had died to protect. They had had no chance to die in battle, and were instead driven off to Maedra's slave pits. Their souls would find no reward in Verkendhall, a heaven reserved for the souls of heroes. When they died of hunger or exposure or torture or despair, they would only exchange one torment for a colder, darker hell, where grim Death, the husband of Maedra, ruled.

Caya had lived with the foreknowledge of this day of Ananke for so long, she didn't even pause to wonder why the armies of Maedra were marching on her tiny, insignificant village. Fallweather had once been the heart of the realm of Rholand, but not for hundreds of years. The throne had been moved to Silverbay over three centuries ago, and Silverbay had fallen to Maedra forty years before Caya was born. Caya had known since before she could fit an arrow to a string that one day Maedra would turn her eye

toward Fallweather, here at the roots of Mount Erlang, which was also known as Heroes Hall.

Why Maedra had spared them until now, no one knew. They had to go on with their lives and counted each day a blessing. Some dared to hope that they would be spared, but for the people of Fallweather hope was no virtue. Still, they had plodded through the dark years when the sun failed to rise, living relentlessly, unable to give up and die, not even when death was inevitable. Their village was crowded with ghosts.

It was this heritage of perseverance that drove Caya up the mountainside in search of her mother even as waves of pell demons broke upon Fallweather. She came to the end of the hedges and paused. The cold air was noticeably thinner, the trees grim and spindly. Where the hedges ran out, a long meadow of boulders and loose palings of grey rock stretched across the face of the mountain.

"*Esa* Caya," Teke said in her ear. "I think this is a bear I see."

Caya turned and scanned the forested slopes below. It was a few moments before she could make out the dark, shaggy form loping through the trees. Her eyes were not used to the new daylight. She had almost forgotten how bright the sun could be, even at dawn. She shielded her eyes with her hand and blinked away the spots swimming in her vision.

"I think this bear has seen us, *Esa*," Teke said with a frightened yawn. The sun was making him sleepy. Teke was a nocturnal creature, and even the magic that bound him to Caya and gave him human speech could not alter his instinct to sleep when the sun rose. His jaws cracked wide and his long pink tongue lolled out. He closed his mouth and shook himself, trying to stay awake.

Caya crept to the edge of the boulder field, where a few thin trees grew, though these promised poor refuge. She unslung her bow and fixed an arrow to the string while she hid behind a tree and held herself very still. She would first see if the bear would pass her. Her arrows would not stop a bear's charge, and her ring mail offered little protection against its teeth. A well-placed shot from a significant distance might give her

the time she needed to climb a tree. Then she could wait for the bear to bleed to death. Provided she could place her shot. Such accuracy demanded a calm heart and a steady hand. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"This bear is coming," Teke whispered.

Caya opened her eyes. The bear had slowed and was now picking its way among the boulders, snuffing the ground, then rearing up on its hind legs. Her choice was made for her. She stepped out and drew back the string of her bow.

Seeing her, the bear loosed a bellowing roar and charged. But Caya dropped the bow to her side, relaxing the string. Teke squeaked into her ear, "I think this would be a good time to shoot, *Esa*."

"Don't be stupid, Teke," Caya said as she returned the arrow to its quiver. "It's only Mother."

The bear was close enough now for Caya to see the braids in her thick fur, carefully woven into a beautiful and bewildering pattern of knots and loops. As she stood up on her hind legs and waddled the last few steps toward Caya, her yellow claws receded into paws that took on the shape of human hands. Her huge barrel chest shrank into buxom female outlines, and her snout drew back into a strong, aquiline nose set proudly between a pair of fierce grey eyes. The last of her shaggy brown fur settled into a mane of bushy chestnut locks bound by a leather thong.

"Caya Leigh!" her mother roared in a voice as rough as the bear's. "I should be defending the village, but here I am chasing you all over the mountainside." Despite the harshness in her words, she swiftly folded her daughter into her arms and held her protectively. The screams of the dying and the harsh shouts of the attackers sounded distant and faint. Caya was thankful that the smoke from the burning hid the village from their sight. She welcomed this last moment, relishing the opportunity to be a little girl one more time, huddled in the shelter of her mother's powerful, protective arms. She drank in the bracing scent of her mother's unwashed flesh, the strong pith of her sweat, the bitter-sweet perfume of well worn leather. For a

moment, she was able to forget her own responsibilities, to let someone larger and stronger and wiser make the decisions.

"I'm sorry, Mama," she said into her mother's bosom.

"I'm glad I found you," her mother said softly as she unfolded her arms. There was no more time for comforting. Caya stepped back, gathering around her once more the tough veneer of the hunter of the woods, a role she played well. As she looked into her mother's worried face, she felt the last remnants of childhood drop away from her like a discarded doll. Her fist tightened around her long bow.

"Is this the end?" Caya asked. "Really, the end?"

"No," her mother said. "We'll make a life for ourselves somewhere, deep in the woods, far away from Maedra. It won't be easy, but we'll manage. Maybe we'll even find other people like ourselves, if only we can get away from here. The woods are full of Maedra's devils."

"What about Fallweather?" Caya asked as she glanced back toward the village, hidden behind a pall of smoke.

"We can't help them now," her mother said. "We have to help ourselves."

Chapter 2

Caya's mother smiled at the lines of grim determination settling into her young daughter's face. Caya squinted into the light of the sun rising above the crest of the eastern mountains, then glanced at the small creature curled up on her shoulder, snoring lightly with his cold nose tucked under one paw. "Teke's asleep," she said. "He didn't get to see the sun after all."

"Give him to me," her mother said. "He can sleep in my pouch."

Gently, Caya detached the little creature's claws from her mail and unwound his tail from her neck. Grunting in complaint, the hogwari curled himself into a tighter ball. She handed him to her mother, who slid him into a large,

expanding pouch, which she then clipped to her belt.

"We ought to leave him in the woods," Caya said quietly. "He doesn't need to go where we're going."

"He's bound to you, Caya," her mother said. "He'd only wake up and follow you. He can feel you, just like you can feel him wherever he is. He can even see what you see, but only in his dreams, just as you sometimes see what he sees when you sleep." Caya smiled as she remembered some of the strange impressions she'd gotten from Teke through her dreams.

"You have your bow and your father's sword," her mother said. "Have you tried any of the spells I taught you?"

"Some," Caya sighed. "I tried to transform, but nothing happened. I'm not any good at it."

"You haven't found your spirit guide. You need a spirit guide to transform."

"But how do I find her?" asked Caya.

"She will find you. You'll know her when you see her. Mine is a great she-bear. When I shape-shift, I take her form." She glanced up the mountain, where storm clouds had begun to gather. "There's no more time for lessons. You must do what you know best and trust to your luck. If your spirit guide finds you before the end, so much the better."

The two set off at a good pace up the rock-strewn slope, picking their way among the boulders. Their trail led them into the clouds. The trees closed around and the close-hanging clouds drew in. Sounds became muffled and sinister. The wind muttered in the treetops, and the cracking stones barked insults back and forth through the fog. Their own footfalls echoed back a hundredfold, as though an army were moving just out of sight.

They slowed their pace as the uncanny sounds grew louder and more frequent. Caya fitted an arrow to the string of her longbow. She tried to be brave, but her hands trembled so that the shaft of the arrow knocked like a woodpecker against her bow. Her mother turned at the noise, then laughed under her breath. Caya shrugged and lowered her bow.

Caya's mother eased a few steps ahead,

crouching, nose thrust forward as though she were using it as much, or more, than her eyes. They heard a distant approaching thunder. Caya and her mother took refuge behind a tree as a boulder flew whizzing over their heads and went cracking off through the trees.

Then, with a confused flutter of grey-barred wings, a small hawk lit upon Caya's upraised arm. Its talons raked against the hardened-leather bracer protecting her forearm. It settled itself and glared at them with its fierce yellow eyes. It opened its hook-shaped beak as though about to bite, but then its head swivelled around, owl-like, to glare back up the slope.

Caya's mother stared at it in surprise for a few moments. It turned its head to watch her menacingly, its beak open, its black tongue panting.

"It's a mousehawk," Caya whispered. The tiny bird flapped its wings angrily while still clinging to her bracer.

"I know," her mother said. "Strange."

"Perhaps she is my spirit guide," Caya said.

"Perhaps," was all her mother would say.

Suddenly, the mousehawk uttered a piercing cry and leaped into the air. She flew a few yards and landed on the ground, then turned and looked back at Caya and her mother. She cried again, and flapping heavily, flew into the fog.

"Maybe we should follow her," Caya said.

"It chose you," her mother said. "Lead on."

They soon left the clouds and spotted the mousehawk circling overhead. Caya followed it far up the mountainside, past the last trees. Thick snow quilted on the uneven slopes. The fog settled in again and grew brighter, almost blindingly white, as the air became thinner and more difficult to breathe. Soon, Caya was sucking air, trying to fill lungs that seemed too large for her chest. Her grip on her bow slipped, and she dropped her arrow and stepped on it before she could recover. Her mother glared, angry at her for wasting an arrow. "I hope you don't need that one later," she said. Caya cringed, feeling helplessly incompetent. Her mother was strong and powerful, confident and determined despite the difficulties. Caya wondered how much longer she could keep up, and it occurred to her that perhaps she wasn't keeping up at all, that she

was slowing her mother down. This thought hardened her will, and she resolved to make no more mistakes.

A brisk wind picked up from the west and began to shred the clouds. Occasionally, they caught glimpses of barren, sun-streaked slopes. It had been some time since they last saw the mousehawk, but they could still hear her shrill cries, sometimes ahead of them, sometimes behind, and now high above, lost in the light. The sun stabbed through the clouds like a sword.

Caya shaded her eyes with her hand and blinked at the brilliant blue sky. A tiny spot of darkness wheeled and turned.

"It's the mousehawk," her mother said. "Follow her."

The momentary halt had not been enough to restore Caya's strength, and now with every breath she filled her lungs with the smells of burning and death. As they clambered for a path among the stones, the smoke parted, granting them a glimpse of their village far below. The banks of the River Tyel were black with Maedra's armies. They thronged about the walls of her village.

As Caya gazed down upon her besieged home, she felt all emotion drain out of her – fear, hatred, love, loathing, pity... even pity. The villagers would fight valiantly and die. Their battle was hopeless, yet they clotted the air with their arrows and the dead of their enemy lay heaped about their walls. But eventually they must fall, and there was nothing to be done about it. There were no heroes riding headlong to save the day, no mighty sorcerer-king to succour his people at their uttermost need. There were only a few hopeless defenders atop a crumbling stone rampart surrounding an insignificant forest village; there was only a girl and her mother alone on a mountainside.

Her mother gripped her arm, a deep growl stirring in her chest. Caya followed her mother's gaze across the slope of the mountain and saw a pack of black hounds, man-high at the shoulder, with eyes like two burning gledes in the furnace black of their faces. Fire hissed from their jowls as they ran. One threw back its great head and unthroated a howl that froze her bones. At the



sound, five more beasts appeared from the burning forests below and raced upslope.

Caya raised her bow and fired, wasting another arrow. Her mother turned on her angrily. She grabbed her by the elbow and turned her so that both were facing upslope. "Do you see that?" her mother said, pointing up the mountainside.

Caya nodded. Toppled columns, cracked and pitted by the years, littered the slope. Nearby, a crumbled wall rose forlornly from the surrounding snow, and farther away she spotted the shell of a dome still standing impossibly atop a few slender marble pillars.

Beyond the ruins, the mountain rose up again in a sheer cliff, from the base of which was carved a monumental edifice in stone. It was like the entrance to an ancient temple she had seen depicted in an old tapestry stored in the village library.

The temple was said to be the entrance to heaven. Though fallen into ruins, its beauty was unmistakable; though weathered by the centuries, it still held a grim majesty.

"Hide there!" Caya's mother shouted, still pointing.

"You need my help," Caya cried.

"Don't argue. Go to the temple. It is a tomb of kings. Find weapons. Break open the tombs if you have to. I'll meet you there, and we'll make our last stand, together."

"Can you stop them?" Caya asked.

In answer, her mother smiled. Her lips drew back to reveal long yellow fangs emerging from her jaws. She stooped to the ground as brown fur burst out of her back. With a roar that shook the mountainside, she was once more the bear. She spun and charged away, crossing down slope to cut off the hounds that had emerged from the forest.

Caya needed no further goading. Though the outer edges of the ruins lay closer by the direct route, the slope was steep and deep with snow. Another, longer path presented itself, perhaps the remnants of an ancient road. It dipped down slope and south before rising in a series of switchbacks to the cliff face where the tomb of kings lay.

Slinging her bow across her back, Caya set off at a run.

Chapter 3

By the time Caya reached the tomb, she had lost sight of both her mother and the demonic hounds. She scanned the sky for the mousehawk, but thick clouds of reeking smoke had risen up from the valley to cover the sky. The steps at the entrance to the tomb were swept clean of snow by the ceaseless mountain wind. She searched for footprints outside the tomb, but there was no sand or soil to hold a print, and nothing grew here, not even lichen, nothing to betray the scuff of a passing foot.

Yet the door of the tomb had recently been opened, judging by the mound of dust ploughed up behind it. The thick stone door stood wide, and the wind off the mountain fingered dust that had lain undisturbed for centuries. Caya found carved into the door heraldic symbols that she recognised only because she had seen similar carvings in the ruins surrounding her village. Most had not been used in over three hundred years. Beyond the door lay an echoing darkness that seemed to resent her intrusion, and the wan light of the obscured sun hinted at larger shapes lurking in the tomb's shadows. An ornate seal, carved into the granite floor and half-obscured by dust, lay just within the open doorway. She saw no footprints crossing it. Yet someone had opened the door.

Caya looked back. Smoke stung her eyes, and the airless cold of the mountain robbed her of strength. The valley where her village lay was lost in a thick cloud of smoky mist. The only sound was the howling of the wind, which grew fiercer by the moment. It seemed to push her toward the dark yawning door of the tomb. Icy needles of sleet pricked at her exposed flesh. Her bowstring sang in the wind.

She staggered up the steps, half-blinded. Her mother had told her to go inside and search the tomb for weapons. But now that seemed a fool-

ish quest. If there were treasure swords here, the tombs would have been raided long ago. She thought perhaps her mother had sent her here to get her out of danger, but what was the use of hiding now that the end had come?

The hand of the wind seemed to push her across the seal of the tomb. As she entered, she drew her father's sword and gripped it trembling before her. She felt unwelcome here, as though something resented her intrusion.

Though the light from the open door only spread a few feet into the tomb, Caya knew by the echoes of her shuffling footsteps that the chamber was huge. The tomb was oval-shaped, its roof a hewn dome supported by half-columns emerging from the solid walls. Dust lay inches deep in the corners and around the feet of the tombs and crypts. Many of these were towering constructions, displaying some of the finest stonework she had ever seen. Marble carved in delicate vine-like traceries that appeared as thin as lace, heroic figures struck from glittering granite. Even in the dim light, gold gleamed a little and gems winked from beneath the accumulation of centuries. She saw crests and names carved in stone that resounded through the histories Caya had been taught as a child – Dragan and Aldrick and Merrus the Bold, the eagle-blazoned shield of Falco IV, and the prancing unicorns of Queen Selandra. These were the tombs of the greatest rulers of ancient Rholand. The spaces between the larger sarcophagi were crowded with carven death statues stretched upon the floor. Beneath them lay the bodies of Rholand's lesser kings, as well as rulers and heroes from the very first days of the old empire – Leonardus the Wise, Tenket Elfstan, Glorian Goldenhand, and Petriarch the First.

Loose bones littered the floor, half-buried in the dust, huge horned skulls of mountain rams, tiny finger-like leg bones of alpine hares that crunched under her boots like gravel. Many of the larger bones were broken in half or had their knobs chewed off. Next to the tomb of a minor king she found a shoulder blade as big as a shield, with a hole in it wide enough to put her hand through. She wondered what kind of monster could have bitten through such thick bone.

At the back of the chamber she found the largest and grandest sarcophagi in the tomb centred before a false archway into the mountain. Within the arch, the wall was carved to resemble a double-row of columns vanishing into the distance of some mythical temple of giants. Atop the sarcophagus sat the skull of a huge cave lion, with fangs like curved daggers as long as her forearm. Her mother used to draw simple pictures of them in the sandy floor of their hovel. The cave lion could disembowel a horse with a single bite, and its fangs could punch through the finest plate steel armour. But there hadn't been a cave lion seen in these mountains in almost three hundred years.

Caya found no weapons lying about the tomb. She didn't relish the thought of disturbing these ancient kings in their rest, but her mother was counting on her. She wondered which one to open first. The largest tomb would likely hold the best treasures, she thought as she returned to the sarcophagus before the false arch. The skull of the cave lion seemed to watch her as she approached it, and she wondered who had placed it there. She felt a strange desire to touch it, to test the points of its sabre teeth to see if they were still sharp.

She picked it up. The skull felt warm, and was heavier than it looked. The palate and lower parts of the skull had rotted away long ago. With a little padding, this would make a fine helm, she thought as she placed the huge skull over her own head.

She was surprised to find that it fit snugly. Her head seemed to nestle into the hollows of the lion's skull. Its huge fangs guarded her cheeks. And by tilting the skull down to the bridge of her nose, she could even look out through the eye holes. She wished she had a mirror to see herself, and she laughed aloud to think what she must look like.

"I'm a fierce warrior on a desperate quest," she said to the darkness, no longer afraid of it or of the terrors that lay outside the tomb. "Give up your treasures!"

Her heart galloped into her throat when she heard a voice answer – a wordless muttering lost amid the diminishing echoes of her own foolish



demand, followed by a chorus roar of male laughter. Perhaps some of the villagers had escaped and made their way here, she thought. Perhaps they were the ones who had opened the door.

The wind groaned through the hollow places of the tomb as Caya circled the huge sarcophagus. She paused before the archway, which now opened into a long passage flanked by two rows of towering marble columns. At the far end of the hall, a warm yellow light glimmered on the wall from around some corner, but the recesses behind the columns were home to restless, watching shadows. Even with the helm of the cave lion on her head, she felt a dim fear. She was sure that the arch had been merely ornament. What if those were minions of Maedra she'd heard laughing? And what if this arch was a gateway to Maedra's realm? The Queen of Death had things far worse than akhar devils in her service. The shadows made her think of dhashow wights – cruel creatures of darkness that killed with frozen claws and deadly eyes.

Warily, Caya stepped beneath the arch into the much warmer, almost uncomfortably warm chamber beyond, almost as though she had come out of the cold into some musty roadside tavern. She smelled roasting meat and torchsmoke and, strangely enough, the wet reek of stale beer. A great swell of laughter echoed down the hall and, afraid she'd been seen, she ducked back to the tomb, only to smash into solid wall. The archway had sealed itself again, trapping her inside.

She rubbed her bruised shoulder and noticed that the other walls were decorated with huge, faded tapestries of battles and victories and coronations, marriages, births, city foundings and heroic deaths. The floor lay ankle deep in rich carpets and furs in places, but down the centre of the hall ran a clear path of strange, rainbow-hued stone that glowed from deep within, like candlelight shining behind a frosted pane of glass.

The far end of the hall spilled into a broad arena several hundred yards across, floored with hard-packed dirt and surrounded by a wooden balustrade painted bright red and hung with shields. She saw dozens of warriors within the

arena, everything from knights in mail to gladiators wearing little more than a visored helm and buckler. They milled about, their voices a murmuring drone that hinted at thousands of people, as though an entire coliseum lay beyond that arched opening.

As she neared the entry, a fanfare of trumpets blared out a flurry of regal measures fit for the appearance of an emperor. Caya covered her ears and shrank against the wall. Never in her life had she heard such careless noise. Her mother had taught her to live quietly. They didn't even sing outdoors.

Even before the last notes of the fanfare died, an inhuman roar shook her to her bones. It was as though all the akhar devils ever spawned were about to pour out. Instead, the knights and warriors in the arena suddenly began killing one another. The din of battle deafened her. Swords flashed in blood-streaked arcs, men and women screamed in rage and pain as limbs were axed from bodies and heads bounced from shoulders. The slaughter was horrific, blood pooled on the floor and began to run into the hall, swirling past Caya's feet, soaking the carpets and furs.

Within moments only a few still lived. One blood-spattered knight exchanged weary sword strokes with another warrior as they strove among the fallen, struggling for footing on a floor that had been churned into a bloody morass. Several half-dead warriors stalked among the bodies, murdering the more seriously wounded where they lay.

Caya watched in stunned silence, but then she staggered into a pillar and heaved the contents of her stomach onto a carpet that might have been older than Rholand itself. The futility and senseless waste sickened her. An entire army, valiant warriors who might have saved her village from destruction, cut down in pointless slaughter. While her mother fought alone in the snow, these warriors had been thrown away for no purpose.

Belly hollow and aching, Caya scrubbed her lips with her knuckles and lurched through the archway into the arena. She found two warriors still alive. All the others were dead. The warriors circled one another in grim silence. One fought

with a magnificent longsword dripping with gore, the other with a stout spear and a shield decorated with the golden eagle of Rholand – symbol of the ancient kings. The warrior with the spear was the older and shorter of the two – his grey hair cropped close to his head, and his round, blood-spattered face vaguely familiar. He wore a magnificent silver horn that hung by a cloth-of-gold baldric from his belt. The other warrior was young and hale, his hair black and curling, his bearded face painfully handsome and, again, disturbingly familiar. His armour was more modern than that of his opponent, and it was then that Caya noticed his breastplate also bore the golden eagle of the kings of Rholand.

These men were allies, Caya realised in shock. A black rage smothered any further thought. She drew her father's sword and staggered toward them, determined to stop this madness even if she died trying. But before she'd taken a dozen steps across the grisly carpet of dead, she stumbled and fell, her arms sinking up to the elbows in gore. She retched again, barrenly, a dry forlorn groan. Her lion skull helm slid off her head, its front teeth scraping down the length of her nose.

The two warriors turned at the sound. Seeing her struggling to her feet, the younger warrior started towards her. "How did I miss this one?" he laughed.

The older warrior put a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Wait, Dragan," he said. "She's not one of us."

"Not one of us?" the younger warrior laughed. "What do you mean, not one of us?"

"Look at her," the older man said as he leaned on his spear.

Blinded by tears and blood, Caya lurched toward them. Lifting her sword above her head, she swung it blindly at the younger warrior. He stepped aside and let her tumble past him. The older warrior caught her wrist before she fell on her face, and twisted the blade from her fingers, tossing it aside before she realised it had left her grasp. He then jerked her upright and stood her on her feet.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"My name is Caya," she answered.

"What are you doing here?"

"Hiding. From the minions of Maedra."

"Maedra!" the younger warrior snorted. "Maedra's dead. I killed her with this sword." He tossed his blade high in the air and caught it behind his back. "I was King Dragan of Rholand, Eleventh ruler of the Third Dynasty of Rholand, slayer of the First Mother – Maedra – wife of Death. I was killed in battle on the fifth day of the month of planting in the seventh year of my reign by the dragon Cylranfrost."

Caya hesitantly touched his blood-spattered armour, then jerked her hand back as though stung.

The young king laughed, tossing back his crowning mane of curly black hair. "I'm no phantom," he said, grabbing her by the back of the neck and pulling her near. "By my rotting bones, you'd be comely thing after a good scrubbing. And warm flesh, too. You've not tasted death!" He shoved her away.

Caya trembled, cowering away from the two dead kings, nearly tripping over a corpse in the process. As she stumbled, she felt the corpse stir, and she recoiled in terror.

A tall handsome woman slowly stood up beside her. The woman's head had been cloven to the teeth by an axe stroke, but as Caya watched, the wound vanished, leaving the woman's smiling face as unblemished as though the wound had never been. Even the blood staining her shirt of chain mail disappeared.

"Dear Phoenix," the older warrior smiled. "Always first to rise."

"King Aldrick, always last to fall," the woman answered with a slight bow. She slammed her long sword into the empty sheath hanging from her belt. Then she turned to Caya. "Who is this?" she asked. "A new soul? How long has it been?"

"A day? An age? Who can tell?" the older man said. "But this one's not dead."

The woman started and stared hard at Caya. "How did she get here?"

"That's what I'd like to know," King Dragan said.

"I don't know," Caya whimpered, terrified. All around her, the dead had begun to stagger,

groaning and cursing like hungover drunks, to their feet. "I don't even know where I am."

"Oh, come now. You must know where you are," the woman laughed. "This is Verkendhall, last home of those slain in battle. I am called Phoenix, because these uncouth barbarians could never pronounce my true name. I was slain in the Battle of Twelve Mountains in the ninth year of the reign of my lord, King Aldrick, whom you see here before you."

The older man nodded regally. Caya performed a bow without thinking, while the meaning of Phoenix's words clanged her mind's bell. If this was indeed Verkendhall, then her father, who had died in battle against akhar devils, must be here. She ached to see him once more.

The dead had begun to gather around, curiously eyeing the young, living girl that had entered their heavenly demesne. Caya searched their faces, her desire to find her father overcoming her fear and horror.

King Dragan said, "By what magic have you come here? The living have never set foot in this holy place, and... what the devil are you looking for, you stupid girl? Attend my words!" he finished in growing annoyance.

"Is my father here?" Caya asked. Rising on her toes to try to see over the sea of heads, she called out, "Has anyone seen my father?"

Caya waited expectantly, but no one answered. The arena grew uncomfortably silent. Eventually, she turned to the older king, her lip trembling.

"Are you certain your father died in battle?" King Aldrick asked.

She nodded. "When I was a little girl, he was killed battling akhar devils," she added in a husky voice.

Phoenix put an arm around Caya's shoulders and pulled her close. "Sometimes we are not told the truth about the deaths of those we love, especially if we are very young when they die," she said sympathetically.

But Caya pulled away. "My father was a hero," she said. "There were witnesses to the battle and to his death. His name is carved in the old cenotaph in the ruins of Rholand."

At her words, an uncomfortable silence

enveloped the arena. Someone behind her asked, "*Ruins of Rholand?*"

Caya continued, "A song was written about him. He died in battle in the year 6773."

The gathered dead erupted in angry shouts. King Aldrick hammered his spear against his shield, trying to bring the assemblage to order, while Dragan brandished his sword and threatened to lop off the head of anyone who didn't shut his teeth. Slowly, the gathered dead grew quiet, though their restlessness only increased. Meanwhile, a man wearing long black robes approached from the rear.

Caya studied him as he walked solemnly toward her. His power was evident by the lane opened to him by the angry, sullen dead. His perfectly oval, bald head sat like a pale egg atop the folds of his black robe. His nose was long and proud, his eyes deep beneath heavy brows, and his jaw sharply angular, as though cut from stone. He walked with his hands folded in the billowing sleeves of his robes.

He stopped before Caya and leaned his merciless gaze upon her. She felt as though he could see right through her armour, clothes, flesh – to the frightened child who huddled in the shadows of her heart. She squirmed beneath his awful scrutiny, trying desperately to be brave.

Finally, he blinked, and his eyes softened somewhat. "Tell me, what is the year?"

She thought for a moment, then answered, "It is in the second summer month of the year 6781."

Caya was secretly pleased to see the robed figure blink, her words breaking through his inscrutable features for a flicker of a moment.

"It is difficult to tell if it is really summer," she continued, "for it is always winter these days."

The robed man only glanced at her in annoyance before turning to King Aldrick. "The last of us died in the year 6501, my lord. If this girl is to be believed, no heroes have died in battle in 280 years."

"And why should we believe her?" King Dragan shouted before Aldrick could respond. "She comes here, *alive*, where no living person has ever walked! What magic brought her here, and for what purpose?"

The gathered warriors murmured their agreement, their faces hardening with suspicion. Caya glanced toward the robed man, then to the warrior Phoenix, seeking reassurance in her eyes. Phoenix smiled encouragement, but didn't offer to defend her. She turned to King Aldrick, who appeared thoughtful. After a few moments, he asked, "You say it is always winter, now. Why is that?"

"Because, until today, the sun has not risen in eight years," she said.

"Why has the sun not risen in eight years?" Aldrick asked.

"Because Maedra devoured it," Caya said.

Dragan lifted her chin with the tip of his sword. "You know what I think? I think you are a messenger of evil, sent by evil wizards to spread lies. And even if Maedra is still alive, Rholand is too strong to succumb to the queen of Death."

To this, Caya said bitterly, "Rholand is dead!"

Dragan pressed the tip of his sword against her throat, witch-fire burning in his coal-black eyes. Caya backed into Phoenix, who wrapped a protective arm around her shoulder and faced Dragan's fury defiantly. The young king's knuckles whitened around the hilt of his sword.

"Allow her to speak," King Aldrick said as he gently pushed Dragan's sword aside. He turned to Caya, his face kindly but concerned. "How did Rholand fall?" he asked.

"It was abandoned," she answered. "After a hundred years of peace, a new capital, called Silverbay, was established on the Illying Coast, as a centre of trade. When Maedra returned, the new capital fell to her armies in the first hour of the attack, because it was built by merchants. She devoured the rest of the empire piece by piece. The merchants who ruled the empire would not join together to fight against her. Each one made peace with her, and she consumed them one by one. The last city to fall was Trim-inshae."

"Trim-inshae!" Dragan laughed. "That's little more than a hamlet – pig farmers, as I recall."

"It was the strongest city in the empire. It held out the longest. It took Maedra three assaults

over the course of twenty years to take it," Caya said. "Yet it fell at last, to treachery, they say."

"What is left?" King Aldrick asked gravely.

"My village, Fallweather. We live among the ruins of old Rholand," she answered.

"A single village?" Aldrick said. "Are there no others...?"

Dragan interrupted, no longer able to contain his incredulity. "I slew Maedra!" he roared. "I killed her with this sword. I drove it through her black heart!"

He turned and pushed his way through the crowd of warriors until he reached the wooden fence decorated with shields that surrounded the arena. He climbed atop it so that everyone could see him and hear his words. "Out of all the heroes gathered here, many of whom fought Maedra valiantly time and again across the centuries, I alone had the power and the strength to kill her. I drove this very sword," he shouted, lifting the blade high, "though the heart of the First Mother and shoved her desiccated husk into the grave long meant to hold her. And now this girl comes here with her tale of Maedra returned and devouring the world! How can we possibly believe her?"

Some in the crowd nodded in agreement, but others remained unconvinced. Dragan continued, "Each of us fought Maedra or her followers in our times, and though she was often enough strong and powerful, the gods always sent a hero or a king to drive her back, to save the world from darkness. If this girl's tale be true, why didn't the gods send a hero to save her people?"

Caya answered him, her voice little more than a croak at first, but growing stronger with each word, "If you killed Maedra in battle, where is she? Why isn't she in Verkendhall?"

Dragan began to answer, but stopped. His brow broke into thoughtful furrows.

Caya continued, "My mother says that the gods abandoned us. She says that, in ancient days, the gods answered prayers. But they don't answer prayers anymore, so there aren't any heroes, either. We who were left behind do the best we can to survive. We never had any real hope. We only wanted to live out our lives before the Time of Ananke came, before the end

of days when even the gods must die. But that day has come at last. The world is lost. My mother sent me here to hide. She said I should search the tombs and find a weapon..."

Dragan shouted, "She's a tomb robber, then!"

"I came here," Caya continued defiantly, "because my village is besieged by the armies of Maedra. It cannot stand against her. I came here because there is nowhere else to go."

Dragan glared and sheathed his sword.

"I don't know how I got here," Caya softly said. "But I am here now. If I lie, then I am a lie."

"Your words are wise for one so young," King Aldrick said, ending the silence of the dead. "Yet I see that you are not so young as you first appeared. There are years of sorrow in your eyes."

She bowed her head, unable to stop the tears dribbling down her cheeks.

"But now that you are here, what would you have of us?" he asked.

"Can't you help us?" Caya asked.

The old king bowed his head sadly. "I stand before you alive, with undying flesh, but my bones lie rotting in a tomb. This spear I hold lies beside me there. For this is heaven, this is Verkendhall, the Hall of Heroes. Those who die in battle find their reward here, to drink mead and eat hot, smoking meat, to retell the tales of our lives and to battle one another to the death, time and again, only to arise reborn to more drinking and feasting and battle."

For one describing heaven, Caya thought the old king's voice sounded strangely sad. He went on, "I have been here longer than some, not so long as others. In my lifetime, I was considered the greatest and wisest king of Rholand, and I am told that people look back on my reign as the golden age of the empire. For that reason, I am king here as well. These warriors, some of them mighty kings in their own right, and heroes all, recognise me as their leader.

"Yet in all that time, no one has ever left this place. Though I am king here, I cannot unravel the knots that seal our tombs, I cannot recross the frosty bridge of death. I doubt even Samir, my sorcerer and counsellor of old, ever had the power to open the gates of heaven," he said, ges-

turing to the man in the black robes. For a moment, the wizard's stony visage softened and he smiled.

King Aldrick continued, "So even if we wanted to return to the living world, we could not."

"Return?" Dragan shouted in horror. "Who said anything about returning, Aldrick?" He leaped down from the fence and crossed the arena to stand in front of the older king.

"We have all already fought our battles. The world is no longer our concern. We are in Verkendhall, our reward promised us by the gods themselves. I say let the world save itself. We have saved it enough times to last an eternity."

There were many in the crowd who voiced their approval. Even King Aldrick was forced to acknowledge the truth of Dragan's words. "Still..." He hesitated, waiting for the others to grow quiet. "Can no one here honestly say you never wondered if this is all there is to heaven? To eat and drink and battle and die, only to be reborn to do it all over again?"

"So we have heard you ask many times before, Aldrick," Dragan groaned. "You were a gloomy king, so the tales tell us. But I ask you, I ask everyone here, would you rather be in hell? Would you rather wander the cold grey halls of Death's realm, a bodiless spirit, bereft of purpose, lamenting your former life? Always seeking and never finding? Here there is hot meat and drink a-plenty, worthy comrades, and deathless battle in which to win new glories and new fame. In hell, there is only endless wandering, endless waiting."

King Aldrick answered, "Dragan, you were a mighty man at arms and a wise enough king in your time. You could sway men to your cause by your matchless courage and by the wit of your tongue. You led the empire to its greatest glory, it is true. Yet I am accounted the greatest of its kings. Why? Not because I was a greater leader of men, nor particularly wise or courageous or valiant. No, it is because I held the empire together when it was on the verge of crumbling. I did this by facing reality even when it would have been easier to linger in the dreams of a glorious past. Some called me gloomy for that.

“But I say to you all that we can no longer remain in the dreamworld that is Verkendhall, not if what this girl says is true. She has come here, perhaps sent here, to bring tidings we cannot ignore – Maedra stands poised to devour the world, despite our most valiant efforts to defeat her” – he raised his hand to silence Dragan’s protests, then continued – “and for three centuries no hero has joined us in the heaven promised to those who die in battle. Something has gone wrong, not only in the world of mortals, but also in heaven. The girl’s arrival in Verkendhall is no accident. It may be this is a last effort by the gods to avert the Time of Ananke, when Fate overtakes even the gods.”

Some in the crowd laughed nervously; others stared at the ground in quiet meditation. A few gazed at Caya with renewed interest, perhaps even respect. She tried to read the thoughts hidden behind their silent visages, but she might as well have been looking at stone. King Aldrick appeared sad as he returned her questioning look. Phoenix seemed lost in thought. Dragan fumed, while the arch-wizard Samir, counsellor to Aldrick, showed no expression whatsoever. Caya wondered if he had even been listening.

It all seemed so futile to her. This was heaven, after all. What difference would it make if they believed her? How could warriors dead these many centuries help? If time really meant nothing here, perhaps her village had already been destroyed, perhaps Maedra had already won...

And perhaps her mother was already dead.

She turned and tried to force a way through the press of bodies. “What’s wrong?” Phoenix asked.

“I’ve got find my mother. I left her on the mountainside, battling a pack of Maedra’s hell hounds. I’m not supposed to be here,” Caya said, growing suddenly frantic. “Let me out!” she wailed.

As though in answer, the ground beneath her feet opened with a sound like a ripping sailcloth. Phoenix pulled Caya aside just as she began to topple into the widening abyss. The warriors on either side parted, jostling backwards as they stared at the strange rift.

Out from the crack welled a black fog, and in

it were eyes such as few of them had ever seen. But Caya, youngest of them all, knew them, for she had lived through darker days than most. She knew by rote the description of nearly every minion of Maedra, from the akhar devils with their blood-red scales and spines and the bashars with their great vulture wings and axes of ice, to the black-furred, steel-clawed pell demons whose numbers rivaled the stars.

But the creatures of darkness that crawled from the crack in the foundation of Verkendhall were perhaps the most feared of Maedra’s minions – dhashow wights. Born of living darkness and burning with an unholy light, these creatures’ most terrible weapon was the fear that flowed from them the way cold flows from ice. One glance of their glacial blue eyes filled a man with despair so great that many had killed themselves rather than face these monsters. But the dhashow could also claw and rend, and when they slew, they sucked the soul from the body of their victim, consigning him to oblivion.

No army had ever withstood an assault of dhashow wights. Caya knew this. The warriors of Verkendhall did not. They formed into ordered ranks, directed by the sharp commands of their kings, and Caya was swept rearward, while those in the front ranks eagerly readied themselves for battle against this new and dangerous foe.

Caya tried to make them understand the danger, but Phoenix had joined Aldrick and Dragan in the front. The others were more interested in getting to the front of the battle before all the fun was over. No one would listen to her. “What can they do to us?” one warrior asked Caya as he shoved her toward the back. A broad, toothy grin split his black beard. “We’re already dead!”

King Aldrick eyed the creatures grimly as they swarmed up from the widening crevice. Dragan sang as he tossed his sword in the air, daring the creatures to come closer. “This is the blade that slew your queen,” he shouted in challenge. “I daresay she found it keen.”

But Aldrick was not so eager. As readied his spear, he asked, “Has Maedra grown so strong she can assault heaven itself?”

Dragan opened his mouth for a witty

response, but slowly the smile faded from his handsome face. He noticed that the crack was still widening, that it had crept up the walls and was even then spreading across the domed roof of heaven itself.

"It would seem so," he said at last, all joy gone from his voice. He turned to Phoenix. "Protect the girl," he ordered.

Chapter 4

The warriors charged into the dark cloud of the dhashow wights, shouting their battle cries. But soon their roared challenges became screams of terror. At the rear of the battle, pushed against the wall near the arch she'd entered by, Caya couldn't see the slaughter, but she knew. She'd heard those screams in her nightmares and in the tales of old warriors – they were the shrill shrieks of those falling before the scythe-like claws of dhashow wights. Even the dead, it seemed, could feel pain and fear, even the dead were not immune to terror.

Their orderly ranks broke in the first moments of the battle. Caya heard Dragan and Aldrick urging them to stand and fight. But as their front ranks were decimated by the wights, as they watched once-invincible warriors dragged screaming into the dark cracks of heaven, they turned and fled, as had so many mortal armies before them.

Caya was almost overwhelmed in the retreat. They shoved her aside, crushed her against the crumbling walls of Verkendhall. She fell, and their boots trampled the breath from her lungs.

Suddenly, strong hands dragged her to her feet. She fought back blindly, gasping for air, but Phoenix grasped Caya by the hair and forced her to look into her face, forced her to listen. "You know what these creatures are? How do we fight them?" she demanded.

Caya shook her head, blinking through her tears. "You can't fight them," she cried.

Phoenix stepped back, torn by indecision. The army of heroes was routed. Many had fled the

arena to hide within the infinite pillared chambers of Verkendhall. A small band remained, fighting in retreat. Led by Aldrick and Dragan, they held the wights at bay while the others escaped. It seemed their heroic weapons had some kind of magical power over the wights. King Aldrick's spear shot out, impaling one of the shadowy monsters. Its body shredded into smoky tatters and dissolved with a scream. The others fell back a pace, claws clattering in anger. Rarely had one of their kind felt the sting of such a weapon as Aldrick's spear – Fellthorn. Its magic could sever the bonds that held their black souls to the mortal plane.

King Dragan's sword, Makar, was no lesser weapon. Its presence alone held the dhashow at bay. But there were too many of them, and more were climbing through the rift. Soon enough, the wights regained their courage and drove against the dead heroes with a terrible cry.

Phoenix clapped Caya's cave lion helm over her head and pushed her into the sleeping hall. Caya stumbled among the rich carpets and furs strewn over the strange, rainbow-hued stone floor. At the far end of the hall, she saw the arch leading to the tomb. It stood open once more, the cold silver light of the mountainside glimmering like water in a well of darkness.

She looked back. Phoenix stood shoulder to shoulder with the remaining kings and heroes. Swords and axes rose and fell, cleaving shadow flesh, spears thrust, slicing through immortal sinew, but for each dhashow that vanished shrieking into smoky tatters, three more rushed in. More heroes fell, their immortal souls shredded by dhashow claws, the line of defenders thinned and drew together, falling back, losing more ground. The floor buckled beneath their feet, and the walls began to crumble, opening holes through which Caya glimpsed absolute blackness, a darkness that was not so much the lack of light as the presence of nothing. Nothingness incarnate, nothingness alive and filled with hate and vile longing and malicious intent.

She fled, shielding her face from the horror of the darkness. Escape lay beyond the arch, which opened on a dead world, a world already conquered by Maedra. Escape to what? To where?

She stumbled to a stop. There was no escape. Better to die here, to draw her father's sword and stand beside the heroes of Rholand in the last moments of the world. She reached for the sword at her belt, only to find it missing. Aldrick had taken it from her. It still lay on the floor of the arena – her father's sword, and she'd lost it.

She'd failed. But what had she come here to do, anyway? What had she hoped to find? Fate, or the act of some forgotten god, had led her here, and for what? To die in heaven? To flee to hell?

She looked back at the arch leading into the tomb. In that chamber lay their bones, yet here they lived, struggled out their last moments in this existence, at the very end of time, sweating, battling, hurling curses at themselves and their enemies and the gods who had abandoned them and the crumbling walls of heaven itself.

And then she knew what to do.

"Follow me!" she cried.

"We can't!" King Aldrick shouted over his shoulder as he thrust his spear through the chest of a lunging dhashow. It vanished with a scream. They had all passed beneath that arch on their journey from the tomb to eternal glory. "The way is barred!"

"The way is open!" Caya shouted. She ran for the arch.

Phoenix tried to break off from the battle to stop her. But as she withdrew, a dhashow lunged at her, its claws slashing through the sinews of her right leg. King Aldrick drove off the evil creature with his spear while Phoenix crawled free of the battle. She saw Caya run through the arch. She saw beyond it the tomb of kings, the crypts and the open door and the snow outside.

"The way is open!" she shouted. "The way is open to the world."

Dragan swept aside an attacking dhashow, then turned briefly to look. He saw the open tomb and nearly dropped his sword. Without waiting for the others, he broke and ran. Aldrick spun, trying to catch him.

"Fool!" Dragan shouted, pointing. "Look for yourself. The way is open!" The dhashow swarmed into the hole Dragan left in their lines and it was all Aldrick could do to stave them off.

Phoenix continued to crawl toward the open arch. "Hold the way open for us, Dragan!" she shouted. "Don't let it close."

A blast of frigid mountain air rushed through the arch, tousling the tapestries lining the crumbling walls of the hall of heroes. Caya slid to a stop against the sarcophagus of King Dragan. She turned quickly, ready to help the others through the arch, but found it sealed once more. The carved wall depicted the hall she'd just fled, empty and lifeless, a corridor to nowhere. Only the sound of her own laboured breathing stirred the centuries-old silence of the tomb. The lion skull slipped down and cut her nose again. She tore it off and threw it against the wall.

After what seemed hours, when she could no longer croak out the useless names of those she'd left behind in heaven, she stumbled out of the tomb. Hair caked with dust, lips cracked and bleeding, her only thought was to find some snow to quench her aching thirst. She staggered down the steps and collapsed into a drift. Her mother had taught her never to eat snow, but she had no vessel to melt the snow in, and no fire to melt it. She only took a bit and let it melt in her mouth before swallowing.

Where was her mother now? Darkness had returned to the mountains as the sun set behind them, perhaps never to be seen again. Above her, the cold stars wheeled across the black sky. Clouds shrouded the lower slopes of the mountain, underlit by a fierce red glow. Her mother was lost, probably dead, killed by the hounds. For all Caya knew, she was utterly alone, the last free soul in the world. The mountain's wind cut through her like bashar arrows. She stomped her feet to warm them, then set out to find her mother.

Casting about the stony slope, she soon found a set of bearish prints in the snow. She followed them until they became lost in a jagged morass of bloody ice and frozen mud. Dead hounds lay strewn about the slope, but of her mother she could find no further sign. No footprints led away from the scene of battle. The lower slope had been scoured by a strong wind, erasing any trail that might once have existed.

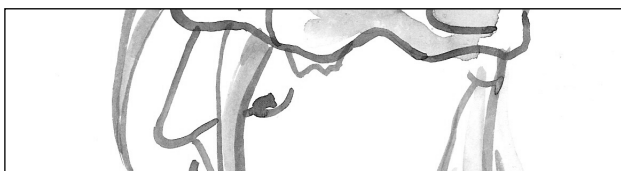
As she had been taught, Caya closed her eyes

and tried to bring up a vision of her mother. She stood in the snow by a crumbled wall, her cheeks aching and numb in the cold, each inhalation of icy mountain air stinging her nose. Her mother had taught her this simple bit of woods magic, useful for finding lost objects. She thought of her mother, but tried not to let any memory or desire intrude and ruin the vision. Her mother had said to be open to whatever visions she received, and not to discount even those that seemed improbable or extraordinary. She'd used it on numerous occasions to find a lost arrow or to hunt down a rabbit she had wounded, and it had always seemed to work.

But this time, no image appeared in her mind. When she closed her eyes, all she saw was the horrible nothingness that she'd glimpsed through the cracks in the walls of Verkendhall. She opened her eyes with a start. It was like a nightmare that returned each time she closed her eyes. She didn't know what this meant, if her mother were dead already, her soul carried away by Maedra's minions to the empty halls of death, or if she were merely beyond the range of her simple magic.

She closed her eyes and tried again. The darkness was the same, but this time she felt a tugging on her heart strings. "Teke!" she said. She felt her bond to Teke and remembered that he was still in her mother's pouch. Teke was alive, awake now, confused and frightened but alive; she could feel him, and because Teke was with her mother, Caya knew that she, too, was still alive. But even as she communed with the hogwari, she felt their bond stretched further and further, as though he were moving quickly away. She didn't know what this meant, but it gave her some comfort that her mother was still alive.

Caya was not entirely alone in the world. A freshening wind stirred her hair. She looked up at the stars and found them in their old, accustomed patterns. By their positions, she knew that the hour of dawn was near.



Chapter 5

Caya had lost both her bow and her father's sword in Verkendhall. In the crypt of kings, there were mighty weapons aplenty, if only she could open their tombs. King Aldrick's tomb lay near the door, and inside that dusty sarcophagus still lay, she hoped, Aldrick's spear, Fellthorn, with its staff of ash and head of dragon-forged steel. King Dragan's sword – Makar – was an even greater weapon. Caya had never fought with a spear, but in her heart she longed to hold the legendary sword of Rholand's last great hero-king.

As the last of the night stars arched over the mountain's peak and the first day stars edged above the eastern horizon, Caya climbed back to the tomb. The dim starlight reflecting off the snow outside the door of the tomb was enough to illuminate the chamber. Caya made her way past the graves of heroes and lesser kings – each marked by a marble slab carved in the likeness of the king in repose. Some had their legs crossed, indicating they had died in battle on foreign soil, while others lay with one fist clenched at his side to show that he had passed his crown to an heir.

Caya returned to Dragan's tomb near the archway. The lid of his granite sarcophagus was carved in bas-relief, dragons surrounding a great, double-edged sword. But when she pressed her hands against the edge of the lid, she realised that she didn't have the strength to move it. It would take four strong men to move that massive slab of granite. She needed a pry bar of some sort, but all she had was a small skinning knife. She searched the shadows for anything that could help her, a weapon, a spear haft, anything at all – but there was nothing, only cold marble and old bones.

Finally, her eyes came to rest on the lion skull lying beside Dragan's crypt. She picked it up and blew the dust from its eye holes, then set it on her head. As before, her fear and doubt seemed to drop away like an old cloak. If only she were as strong as a cave lion, she wouldn't need any help. She could move the lid herself.

She put her shoulder against the side of the sarcophagus and gave a small shove.

To her surprise, the lid shifted. No more than the width of a finger, but she had moved it. She gave another shove. It slid a hand's-breadth further, silently, as though gliding on warm wax. With a final shove, the massive slab slid off, crashed to the floor, and broke in half.

Awestruck by what she had done, Caya peered into the sarcophagus. Expecting to see ancient bones swimming in dust, she was startled to find Dragan's uncorrupted body resting within. His rugged cheeks seemed flushed with life, his lips full, and his dark hair lustrous as it lay upon the pillow. His great sword rested upon his breast, clutched in strong hands that seemed to pulse with vitality. Despite her awe, Caya leaned over and touched his hands to feel if they were cold. Her fingertips brushed the heavy knuckles, and she felt an electric thrill jolt her to the shoulder.

At her touch, Dragan's eyes sprang open. He snatched her arm before she could pull away. Eyes bulging in confused terror, teeth gritted, tendons starting out like cords on his neck, he caught her by the throat and began to squeeze. Caya fought uselessly to free herself. "Dragan!" she croaked, clawing at the iron sinews of his arm.

A flicker of recognition penetrated the glaze of terror in his eyes. He let go and she stumbled back, slamming into one of the smaller sarcophagi.

"By my mother's dugs," Dragan said as he stood up in his tomb and shook the dust from his hair. "I thought I was dead. I *was* dead! I don't know how you did it, girl, but you did it!"

Chapter 6

Dragan turned and eyed the shadows, which had begun to stir with life. Caya half expected to see dhashow wights emerge from the dark corners. But instead, grim-faced men appeared. Many wore jewelled crowns on their heads and carried in their fists ancient swords and jewelled maces,

gleaming spears and heavy-bladed war axes. Several bowed or nodded to Dragan, others stared at Caya in obvious distrust.

Dragan turned to Caya. "What manner of witch are you, to raise us all from the dust this way? Not even the black wizards of Qamir had such power. You came to us in Verkendhall itself, a being of flesh in the realm of spirits. Now we who are dead walk again in the mortal world. What other powers do you command? Have you summoned us here for good or evil?"

Caya gaped at these questions. Summoned? She stammered a moment, then said, "I came to find a weapon to fight the minions of Maedra and defend my people."

With each word, her voice seemed to grow stronger. She stood before them, unafraid of the dour visages turned upon her. "I didn't summon you from your graves, or open the way to Verkendhall. I only prayed for a weapon, prayed to gods whose names I do not know. I am neither witch nor sorceress, my lord. I am only a ranger."

"Where is Aldrick?" one of the kings asked. Caya's heart fell, but no one noticed her. Dragan's face became dark, but the others soon took up the question, each telling where he had last seen their greatest king. Some had seen him battling the evil creatures of shadow, others last saw him dragging Phoenix from the fight. No one had seen him fall. They began to search the crypt.

They discovered that a great many tombs in the crypt remained unopened. They tore the lids from these and found them filled with dust or old bones, a few rusting bits of metal or a scattering of semi-precious stones. Slowly, it dawned on them that those who had not arisen were those who had fallen against the dhashow wights. Those who had been dragged into the shadows had not returned to the mortal world with their fellows. And with this realisation, their search for Aldrick became more desperate.

Dragan still stood in his sarcophagus, his arms folded over his mailed breast, and his dark eyes smouldering with anger, while the others struggled to lift the burdensome granite lid from Aldrick tomb.

With a shout, Dragan leaped across the chamber and bounded atop Aldrick's sarcophagus, slamming the lid down even as the others struggled to lift it up. "What's the matter with you?" he shouted, beating his breast with his mailed fist. "Am I not worthy to lead you? Didn't I slay Maedra? Why do you always turn to Aldrick?"

An old king stepped forward at Dragan's challenge, and the others made room for him to pass. He stopped at Dragan's feet and stared up, his beard bristling out like a clump of old roots, and his head was as bald as a peeled turnip. At his side hung an ax of truly ancient design, fashioned of copper, and his hauberk and mail were forged of bronze. He was Rholand's first king, and he was the first to be buried in this tomb of kings. His name was Rho Stonehand. When he spoke, the others, even Dragan, grew quiet, for he was revered among all kings and heroes. He had died in battle with barbarians at the age of 89, the sire of 23 famous princes, the youngest of whom was two when his father was slain.

"You are indeed worthy, young Dragan," the old king said. "There are none here more valiant, and your feats are greater than all the kings of Rholand. If what this girl says is true, we shall need you to lead the fight.

"But in all your days, you never led men on the field of battle. You never commanded armies of warriors, though you led many a charge in your father's wars. As a prince, you slew Maedra, and became the hero of all free peoples. But you wore the crown in years of peace, and you died in single combat with a dragon. We shall need your valiant sword, it is true, but King Aldrick is accounted the greatest among us because he was the greatest king. His deeds of peace were equalled by his victories in war. He led armies of alliance, bringing together all free peoples to war against Maedra and her minions.

"We need you, Dragan, to lead us in battle, to lead the charge against the ranks of the foe. But we need Aldrick, if he lives, to be our king. You are no lesser man than he, but you are, as are we all, lesser kings." And with these words, Rho Stonehand held up his wrinkled old paw to Dragan. Bowing his head, Dragan took it and stepped down from the tomb. The others roused

a cheer for him that shook the mountain to its marrow. Tears started from Caya's eyes to see the love showered on Dragan by his fellow kings.

Suddenly moved by Dragan's nobility and his dark beauty, Caya knelt before him. "My lord," she said. "I have no sword to lay at your feet. But if I may serve you by deed or word, I shall, if you will have me."

Touched by her gesture, Dragan put his hand on her shoulder and urged her to rise. "What is your name, girl?" he asked.

"Caya Leigh," she answered.

"Then Caya Leigh, I accept your offer of service. You shall be my shieldmaiden for the hours that remain to us."

Meanwhile, the other kings bent their backs to raising the lid of Aldrick's tomb. Muscles popped and sweat stood out on their foreheads despite the cold, and it seemed as though this sarcophagus was reluctant to give up its secrets.

Finally, with a gasp of fetid air, the lid popped loose. They slid it grinding to the side and let it fall to the floor with a reverberating boom that seemed to shake the crypt to its roots. When they looked into the deep interior of the tomb, many recoiled in horror, for inside swirled a darkness that they knew too well. It was a living darkness, coiling and seething like some huge serpent, and the air shivered like dry leaves rattling in the wind.

"Where is his body?" someone whispered. The words cut through the hissing of the uncanny wind like a sword stroke. Dragan strode forward, his hand gripping the sword at his belt, while Caya peered cautiously from behind him.

Suddenly, a white hand shot up from the cloud of shadow filling Aldrick's sarcophagus. On its ring finger, it wore the heavy gold signet of the kings of Rholand. It seemed to strain upward, like the hand of a drowning man, clawing at the air. Slowly, it began to sink back down into the darkness. Dragan jumped and caught it in his own iron grip. "It's Aldrick! Help me!" he barked at the others.

A half dozen of the strongest kings caught Dragan by the wrist and forearm or helped to brace him against the side of the sarcophagus.

Yet even with so many valiant warriors pulling together, they were only able to stay the hand's descent. They struggled, groaning, biting curses between clenched jaws.

"Caya!" Dragan snarled. "Take my sword. Stab it into the darkness."

Rising on her toes, Caya drew the mighty weapon from its jewelled scabbard. She was surprised by how light it felt, despite its size. She rushed to the head of the sarcophagus and climbed up, then held the sword poised above the darkness.

"What if I strike the king?" she asked.

"Just strike!" Dragan cursed. "Hurry!" His jaw muscles stood out like cables. "He's slipping."

Gritting her teeth, she stabbed downwards with all her might. But rather than jar against the granite bottom of the sarcophagus, the point of the blade passed through the coiling shadow and into an empty, shrieking void of utter darkness. She almost tumbled into it, but King Rho pulled her back by her belt.

The shadows drew back, revealing a howling black pit. King Aldrick dangled over it, his hand clutched desperately by Dragan and the other kings. But the darkness was not entirely empty. A half-dozen ice-eyed dhashow wights clung to his legs and clawed at his back, trying to drag him into their infinite void. Dragan's grip continued to slip as the monsters tore at Aldrick's flesh and wrenched at his limbs. The old king still had his spear, but he could not bring its point to bear against those clinging to him, and even as Caya watched in horror, one of the dhashow grappled with Aldrick's arm, trying to reach his weapon.

Without thinking, she lashed out with Dragan's sword. It passed through the creature's back, tearing its insubstantial body to shadowy tatters. At its death scream, the other dhashow loosed their holds and dropped away into the darkness. Dragan heaved the old king up and dragged him from the sarcophagus, and the two collapsed in a pile on the dusty floor. In moments, they were on their feet, Aldrick with his spear at the ready. Dragan snatched his blade

from Caya's hand and turned to face the dhashow.

But the bottom of the sarcophagus was dusty stone.

Aldrick stepped back and planted the butt of his spear on the floor. He looked at those gathered around him as though counting, and his lips drew into a grim line, like a slash across his face. Then, without saying a word, he turned and strode to the door of the crypt. He hesitated only a moment, staring at the strange morning-dark sky riotous with stars, before stepping out onto the wind-swept mountain for the first time in over three thousand years. "The world has not changed much," he said, speaking at last.

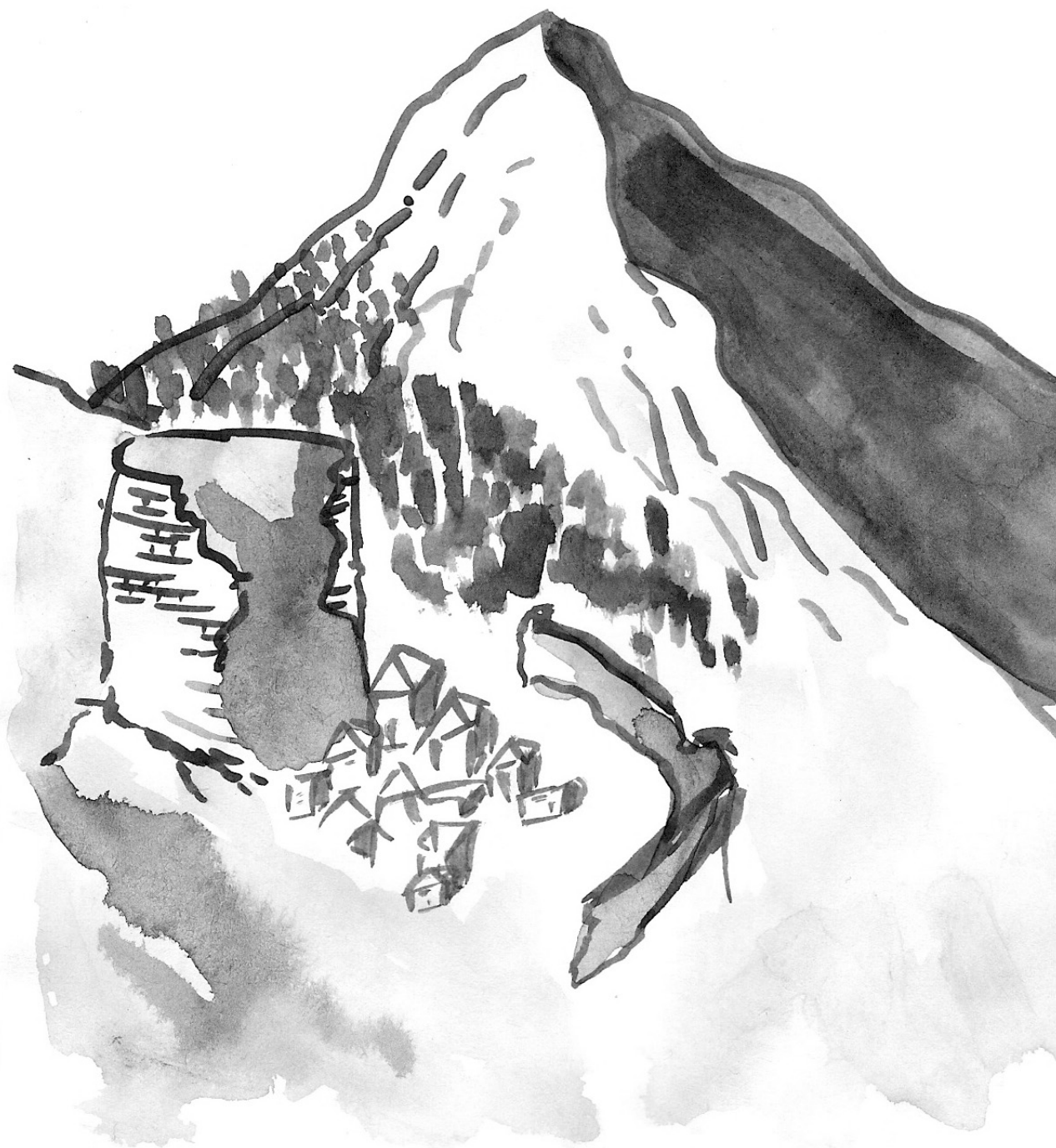
The others filed out behind him and then spread to either hand, their boots crunching softly in the snow. "It's cold," someone noted in a shivery voice. Caya laughed, despite herself, and her laughter set the others to laughing. Their laughter rolled down the mountain like a peal of thunder.

King Aldrick stared down at the ruined necropolis built upon the slope leading up to the Tomb of Kings. He pointed, sweeping the mountainside with his gesture, saying, "There are many heroes buried there, as well as in the mounds and cairns outside the gates of Old Rholand. Great warriors, and war-wizards of legend. There lies our army, waiting to be wakened. There's not much time."

Even as he said this, the wind drew aside the mantle of clouds obscuring the lower slopes of the mountain. Far below, they saw the village of Fallweather burning amid the trees. Down its flame-lit streets marched companies of dark, winged figures, herding before them strings of smaller cowering forms. The village gates were thrown down, the walls breached and crawling with figures like small black ants on the carcass of some dead beast. Only those defending the old castle walls still fought, the ancient flag of Rholand hanging limp above its crumbling parapets.

Caya buried her face in Dragan's back. He growled deep in his chest, like an old bear, reminding her of her mother.

Near the gates, a great black tent had been set



up, and it was ringed by torches set on tall poles. Between the torches stood other poles bearing more grisly ornaments, and pyramids of small round objects were heaped about the gate. A standard had been raised over the tent, but it was too far away to discern any devices upon the whipping sable pennant.

In a voice that carried to everyone on the mountainside, Aldrick said, "Even as we speak, heaven crumbles. You pulled me from oblivion

at the last moment. We must set the others free before it is too late."

Dragan sneered. "It would take weeks to dig them up. We should attack now."

But Aldrick ignored the younger king's advice. Lifting to his lips a great silver horn, he blew a mighty peal. The beauty of it set their hearts galloping, stiffened their backs and set the lust of battle burning in the hearts of many a warrior. At the same time, the frozen ground

about the entrance to the tomb ruptured. From the shattered stones rose, rearing and neighing fiercely, more than a score of mighty horses of all the breeds and races ever devised by man, from the small shaggy ponies first tamed to warfare by the early kings, to the fearless chargers bred to carry armoured knights into battle. Each king recognised his own steed, buried here when its master was entombed, and they greeted their old friends with cries of fierce joy and wonder. The horses' breath filled the frozen air with hot smoking clouds.

Aldrick mounted his own horse, Alfdane – a tall, nimble grey with a proudly arching neck and tail like a streamer of snow blown from a mountain's peak. Dragan's black warhorse, Sieghard, greeted him with a thunderous neigh that shook the snow from the rocks. He climbed up into the saddle with a great shout, then reached down to Caya.

"Climb up behind me, girl," he said with a fierce grin. "We'll ride to glory together." He vaulted her onto the horse's back and she settled herself onto the horse's broad withers, clutching the young king about his mailed waist.

Dragan laughed to feel her lithe arms. "Gods!" he roared. "I'd forgotten how it feels to be a living man."

"We shall need every warrior the gods see fit to grant us – sword, lance and copper axe," Aldrick shouted as he wheeled his steed, sawing at the reins. He lifted his spear, starlight glinting off its keen point. Dragan drew his sword and tossed it into the air as his warhorse stamped the ice and snorted fiercely. Caya held onto the young king's waist as tightly as she could, pressing her cheek against the cold rings of his mail shirt.

Aldrick lifted the horn to his lips once more and blew a blast that broke the mountainside. Ruins toppled and the ground heaved. Knights reared up from the roiling earth astride horses, dirt and snow cascading from them as they lifted swords and lances in salute to their kings. Warriors rushed out of monolithic cairns, clad in little but furs and wielding stone clubs, berserk foam flecking their beards. War wizards strode from ruined towers and temples, or rode discs of

light or flew upon magical wings, and lightning splintered from their staves as they shouted spells forgotten before Rholand fell into ruin. Out from a grove of firs galloped a figure of wonder and fierce beauty – the warrior Phoenix. She rode without saddle or rein atop a huge bull elk with antlers like the spreading branches of a brindled oak. He bugled fiercely as he galloped across the snow, head thrown back in the pride of his elemental power, and her long sword was like a shaft of sunlight in her upraised fist. She greeted Caya with a toothy smile, the braids of her yellow hair flying in the wind of her speed.

As Aldrick loosed a third note from his horn, his horse seemed almost to leap into the air. At the same moment, Dragan's steed reared, then shot off in pursuit. With a concerted roar, the others joined them in a mad, reckless charge down the mountainside. Their voices and the thunder of their horses' hooves were like a gathering storm. Through dark mountain forest and across icy wastes they charged, their numbers growing as they went. Even in her terror at their headlong speed, Caya glanced over her shoulder and cried out, for behind them came a host as great as the greatest army Maedra had ever shown on any field. Dragan's horse snorted and seemed to double its speed, and then it was all she could do to hold her seat. Boulder, tree and cloud flew past her, and the wind brought to her nostrils the smell of burning and death.

Chapter 7

The headlong plunge of Dragan's horse lessened somewhat as they reached the lower slopes of the mountain. Around them rose the bleak mounds known as the Barrow Hills, where it was said many an ancient warrior had been laid to rest in the earliest days of the kingdom, when men had fought with copper axes and stone-tipped arrows to carve a civilised land from the untamed forests.

Now, as they rode through the shadows of this valley, King Aldrick once more lifted his horn

and blew a tremendous note. And like a lightning stroke, the hills burst open, spilling their dead. Where before, the two kings had ridden at the head of an army, they now led a legion of warriors representing six thousand years of Rholand's chivalry. Caya's heart thrilled to see them – knights, foot soldiers, archers, war wizards, blue-painted barbarians, kings and warrior queens, prince-regents and daughters-in-arms, all massing for battle.

Then, topping a rise, they paused. Below them, Fallweather burned among the ruins of Rholand. Tears stung Caya's eyes, but even as she wept, she felt Dragan's mighty frame tremble. A choked cry wracked him. "My people!" he groaned. And they watched as wave after wave of bashar devils rose from the smoke, carrying away slaves for Maedra's pits – women, warriors, screaming children, and they laughed as they passed overhead. No one dared loose an arrow or spell at them. They watched, horrified and helpless, as dozens of villagers were carried screaming over the mountain and beyond their aid. They turned their eyes to Fallweather once more, and there was no more laughter, no more songs of battle. A grim silence descended on them, and steam rose from their horses' lathered necks.

Now, out from the ruins of the village poured a surging mass of darkness. Like a fog, it spilled along the ground, swallowing hill, rick and fence, parting, reforming, but drawing ever nearer. Dragan lifted his blade and pointed it at the darkness. It sparkled like witchfire in the snowy starlight.

Caya clutched at his harness in terror as his horse plunged and leapt over the last mile of hilly, broken farmland lying at the edge of the forest between the village and the frozen river. Into this narrowing gore of land Dragan led the charge. A wiser general might have seen that this was a death trap designed by the original builders of Rholand – trapped between the walls and the water, any army foolish enough to attack the western gate would be slaughtered, unable to bring their full force to bear because of the narrowness of the land. But Dragan urged his horse recklessly along this path, desperate to come to

blows with the armies of darkness surging from the ruined gate. His horse neighed in terror but raced on, obeying its master, into the thick of ten thousand battle-mad pell demons.

Black as the hells that spawned them, with eyes like fire and claws of steel, they surged around Dragan's horse like the tide around a castle of sand. Dragan's headlong dash broke against their mass and stalled, and in an instant dozens of clawed hands were dragging at Caya's cloak, tearing it from her neck, and shredding her leather armour into tatters. She clung as tightly as she could to the fierce young king as he laid about him with his blade, felling demons by the score. But he could not attend to her and she felt her hold slipping as the demons pulled her from the plunging horse's back.

Scrabbling to maintain her hold, her hands closed about a pair of daggers tucked into Dragan's belt. She jerked them free and slashed blindly to left and right, feeling the keen edges of the twin blades bite through flesh and grate against horned skulls and hell-forged bone. Dragan's horse rose up, boxing with iron-shod hooves, and felled two demons clutching at its harness. For a moment, the demons retreated snarling and spitting, stumbling over their dead and nursing wounds of dagger, sword, hoof and tooth. Momentarily exhilarated, Caya shook the black demon blood from her blades.

"Good work, girl!" Dragan shouted over his shoulder. "We were almost done for, but we'll make a warrior of you yet!"

"What I wouldn't give for a bow and a sheaf of arrows," she said.

The demons surged in again. Dragan wheeled his horse about and drove for the frozen river, smashing a way through. Caya clung to his back and gripped the horse's flanks with her heels. The land dipped down and in moments they were on the ice, skittering and sliding. The pell demons hesitated at the river's bank, howling in frustration.

"There must be running water beneath us," Dragan said. "They fear it." Caya had never seen water flow between the river's wide banks. She had a vague memory of her uncle cutting a hole

in the ice to fish, but the ice had grown too thick for fishing years ago.

Suddenly, a troop of Bashar devils drove into the rear of the pell demons, whipping them toward Dragan. Their clawed feet were next to useless on the ice and they fell in a writhing mass. Dragan and Caya dismounted, for their horse was no more steady on its feet than the demons.

Meanwhile, the main body of Aldrick's warriors smashed into the demons' front. The din of battle became deafening. Men newly risen from the grave were torn apart by demon claws, but still they charged, heedless of the danger. They had tasted death and no longer feared it, and they were only too happy to be facing foes that could be felled by ordinary steel.

Dragan inched cautiously toward the nearest demon, sword dripping, to try to strike a blow, while Caya held his horse's head to keep it from panicking. It continued to paw and slip, and once it nearly fell on her.

Maedra's forces had never before faced such reckless enemies. Men with mortal wounds, fallen at the fore of the battle, continued to bite and hack at the feet of those trampling them. More and more of the demons were driven onto the ice.

Dragan swung his sword with such force that he clove a pell demon from shoulder to hip. His sword bit deeply into the ice, and brown water welled up around his blade. The ice broke under the weight of the masses of demons. Dragan retreated from a crack that followed him like a living thing. Caya pulled his horse toward the far bank, while the demons, panicking, clawed and tore at one another in their frenzy to escape the living water.

With a terrible rending crash the ice suddenly gave way in mass. The army of pell demons sank into a plunging icy morass that seemed to boil with arms and claws and screams. Caya was close enough to the bank that by clinging to the mane of Dragan's surging horse she was dragged to shore, dripping and half-frozen. Dragan disappeared into the icy soup. She saw his head briefly as he struggled amidst the flowing chunks of ice, and then he was gone.

She spotted him again, a hundred yards downstream; he held his sword above the water, a gleam of silver in the chaos of brown water and pitching white ice. She raced to catch up, stumbling through the underbrush lining the river. Several times, she lost sight of the river altogether, but she was never lost; she'd been exploring these woods all her life.

She stumbled into a clearing and into three akhar devils moiling over the body of a dead warrior. His mangled corpse lay steaming in a pond of pink slush, his arms eaten down to stubs, half his face chewed off. Mouths dripping with blood, they lunged at her even as she drew the daggers from her belt. One of the akhar pinned her arms while another wrenched her weapons away. The third stepped toward her, its claws caked with gore as it reached for her throat.

Suddenly, it staggered back as a huge female cave lion slammed into it, roaring furiously. The two akhar holding Caya let go and fled into the woods, wings flapping, while the third tumbled over the body of the slain warrior. In a flash, the cave lion was on top of it. Her sabre fangs stabbed through its arm and shoulder, her claws ripped gashes in its groin and thighs. Caya watched in mute horror, frozen, unable to scream, unable to move. She felt outside herself, removed, a mere spectator.

She tasted bitter blood in her mouth. She looked at her hands, and they were broad paws covered in tawny fur, with claws like sickles, wet with black akhar blood. The lion's roar was in her ears and her throat, its fangs in her mouth. *She* was the cave lion. She felt its heart beating in her chest, felt the power of its limbs, the courage of its soul. The nightmare tore away in a moment of blinding clarity. She heard the battle at the gates of the city and found herself able to pick out the screams of each dying man or demon. She smelled the smoke and the blood and the death mingled with the flinty smell of the mountain, the wet rot of the woods, the musk of the river. She saw Dragan, still struggling in the crushing flow, clinging to a huge chunk of ice, wet, frozen, dying. She saw the rising sun beyond the smoke, and a smouldering ember

falling like a leaf, down, down, until it touched the snow with a hiss and went cold.

And all the while, the akhar struggled beneath her, bleating in terror. Its screams revolted her. She only wanted to silence it, so she bit down instinctively. Her arm-long fangs clashed together in the demon's brain.

She extracted her fangs from its skull and sniffed its limp, bat-like wing, then turned and looked at the dead warrior. She could smell his blood, and the smell made her ill. She felt her stomach heave, a wrenching of muscles, a moment of unbearable agony, and then she was Caya again, on her hands and knees in the snow, retching, lost and terrified of herself.

A cry from the river penetrated the haze of her fear. She looked up to see Dragan being dragged from the water by an akhar devil. It gripped him through the shoulders by its clawed feet, while its wings beat the air. He rose, dripping and limp, but his sword still hung from his hand, he still had strength enough to hold it. Caya felt powerless. Even if she could turn into the cave lion again, which she doubted (she wasn't sure how she had done it in the first place), what good would it do? She couldn't fly, while the akhar rose ever higher with its helpless prey.

Caya desperately searched the ground around her. The akhar she had killed was useless – with their claws, they needed no weapons. Then she noticed that the warrior lay atop a quiver of arrows. Frantically, she rolled him over. Dragan was almost directly overhead. She dumped the quiver out and found one unbroken arrow, but there was no sign of the warrior's bow.

A thud startled her. She turned to find Dragan's sword quivering in the ground next to her foot. He gazed down at her and lifted his hand weakly, in farewell or despair, she didn't know.

She grabbed his sword and tried to tear it from the ground, wrenching it back and forth, tears of frustration blinding her, but it was solidly imbedded in the stone half way to its hilt. With a last futile tug, she fell face down in the bloody snow. She clawed blindly, insane with grief, feeling that everything was lost, her people, her world, everything, it had all been for nothing. Then, her hand closed over something solid, a

stick, buried in the snow. It was the dead warrior's short bow, lying under his legs. She pulled it free.

As Caya grabbed the arrow and fitted it to the string, she heard her father's voice, just behind her, speaking calmly in a voice just above a whisper, just as he had done the first time he'd taken her rabbit hunting. "Don't hurry. If you hurry, you'll miss. Better to lose a shot than lose an arrow."

She looked up, drawing back the bow. Dragan was almost behind the far treetops. Now, it was her mother who spoke. "To disable the akhar, shoot its wing. In the air, it has the advantage over you. Bring it down and fight it on the ground, where you have the advantage."

She loosed the arrow. She didn't even feel the string slap her unprotected wrist. Instead, the whole of her thought and being followed the arrow rising in the smooth arc, its white head caught the sun and flashed red for a moment before it tore through the akhar's wing joint. With a squawk, it turned over in the air and spiralled to earth, vanishing behind the trees.

Before it hit the ground, Caya was racing through the woods. She followed the sound of the akhar's thrashing and found it flopping helplessly on an outcropping of granite, its back broken by the fall. She grabbed a jagged stone the size of a loaf of bread and bashed its head to a meaty pulp.

She was still bashing, her own fingers bleeding and smashed, when she heard a groan and remembered Dragan. She found him in a snow bank, half dead, his hair and beard caked with ice. The ragged claw wounds in his shoulder had frozen; he might have bled to death otherwise. Caya lifted him onto her back like a deer and began to walk back to the village. She no longer cared what she might find there. She only wanted to find a warm place to lay Dragan down, so that she might go and die with her people.

Instead, as she emerged from the woods, she saw the flag of the old kings of Rholand rippling above the walls of Fallweather.

Chapter 8

Seven days after the battle, they were still burning the dead. Maedra's darkness had returned and the land remained shrouded in snow and ice, but the river ran free. Caya had spent the last two days helping to shovel ash piles into its swift waters. The stink of burning demon flesh clung to everything and followed them everywhere, even into their homes and their dreams, bestowing upon the survivors of Fallweather new and horrible nightmares.

But there was one place where the smell did not follow – the meadow where Dragan's sword still stood, embedded in the ground. The snow had melted around it and for half a mile into the surrounding woods. The trees lining the meadow had burst into buds, the meadow was flushed with green and dotted with new spring flowers pale white beneath the stars. Colourful songbirds not seen in a dozen years returned, their voices filling the dark woods so that during the day the people working the funerary fires of Fallweather could hear their songs echoing across the river. The meadow became a place of quiet pilgrimage for the survivors. Sitting on the grass beneath the stars, they found such peace and rest as they had not known for more years than many could remember.

On the seventh day after the battle, Caya found her mother there. She had sensed Teke's nearness during the night and followed her bond to the small creature until she found her mother asleep beneath a budding oak deep in the forest, not far from the spring meadow. Her heavy clothing hung in stiff tatters from her emaciated limbs. Though her wounds were largely healed, Caya couldn't wake her. She carried her mother back to the village and to the healers who were still working through the night to tend the wounded.

King Aldrick and Phoenix visited Caya at her mother's bed, which was beside King Dragan's. Though still weak, his shoulder swathed in bandages, Dragan sat up in bed to greet their visitors. Teke lay curled on Caya's shoulder, quietly grooming his bushy tale. Aldrick marvelled as

Caya told them how her mother had fought with Maedra's hellish hounds, explaining that her mother could take the form of a bear in battle. She also told of her experience with the cave lion, how it had saved her.

"It is my spirit guide. Like my mother, I can take its shape in battle," she said as she thoughtfully turned the lion's skull in her hands.

"That was you, then," Dragan sad. "I saw the lion as I was lifted from the river. When next I looked, the lion was gone and you were bending over the dead akhar's body."

"I remember such monsters," Phoenix said. "They haunted the valleys of my homeland and killed many who dared to hunt them. I would not like to meet you on a forest path."

"It frightens me, too," Caya said. "My mother's bear-form is frightening enough, but inside she was still my mother. When I was the lion, I didn't remember being me at all. All I knew was killing."

"You will learn to control it," Caya's mother muttered. She stirred and opened one bloodshot eye, peering weakly at her daughter. "You must learn. You will need such strength when Maedra returns."

"Mother!" Caya cried.

"It is good to see you well," King Aldrick said to Caya's mother. "Your daughter is to be commended. She saved your village."

"And she saved my life," Dragan added. "If she were ever to dress like a girl and not some barbarian scout, I'd marry her."

"Who said I'd marry you?" Caya laughed. "You're too old for me."

"Is this a hospital or a tavern? Leave me alone," her mother growled wearily. "Can't you see I'm tired?"

"But Mother!" Caya said. "The kings of Rholand have returned! They are here now."

"Good. I will see them in the morning," her mother said as she rolled onto her side. TOP



Winter's Warm Blood

Mark E
Deloy

Caroline navigated through the snowy roads of Massena. It had been two years since she'd seen Mia, and she was looking forward to spending a few days in the country with her little sister.

Mia said on the phone that they'd just gotten a foot of snow, and were expecting six more inches by nightfall. It looked as if they were going to be spending some time indoors.

It will give us more time to catch up on old times, Caroline thought, as she pulled up the long, gravel driveway.

Mia had also said that she was having problems on the ranch lately. When Caroline asked her what the problems were, Mia changed the subject.

The three-storey house stood dead centre between two fields of undisturbed snow. Caroline was glad to see smoke rising from the chimney and plenty of chopped wood on the front

porch. It was going to be a cold weekend, and she was glad that her little sister was prepared.

There was a sun-bleached barn, wedged in drifts, thirty yards from the house. The loft looked full of hay, but the stalls near the open doors looked empty.

She parked behind Mia's Suburban and stepped out into the frigid January air. The radio said that it was fifteen degrees outside, but the wind chill brought the temps down to negative ten. She watched her breath vaporise, and then disappear in front of her. The snow was falling steadily now and it clung to her clothes and hair.

She saw a flash of movement out of the corner of her eye, near the barn. When she turned to look, there was nothing there. She kept staring, waiting for whatever it was to move again, but, apart from the falling snow, the wintry landscape was still.

Mia's front door opened, turning Caroline's attention back to the house. Mia came running

down the steps and gave her sister a bone-crushing hug.

"It's so good to see you Caroline."

"You too. How have you been?"

"I've been OK, C'mon, let's get inside. It's freezing out here."

Caroline got her suitcase out of the trunk and followed Mia up onto the porch and into the warm, welcoming house. She noticed that before Mia shut the door she scanned the yard warily and was then sure to deadbolt the door. She decided not to ask her sister any questions just yet. If Mia had become a little jumpy living in the country, then that was her business.

Mia made them both some tea and they sat at the small kitchen table catching up with each other. They talked about their old boyfriends, Caroline's ex-husband, and their parents who now lived in Florida. Only when Caroline caught Mia looking out the kitchen window with a scowl on her face did she ask her about the trouble that she'd been having with the ranch.

Taking a deep breath then letting it out, Mia dropped her head then took another sip of her tea. Caroline could see that her sister's hands were shaking and took one of them in her own. Mia gave her a troubled smile.

"It's wolves, Caroline."

"Wolves? In Massena?" Caroline knew that there must be wolves that lived in upstate New York, but she had never heard of any this close to town.

"I talked to the Sheriff yesterday. He thinks that they came across the frozen St Lawrence River. They killed all but one of my horses, and all but three of my herd of cattle. I had ten head of each Caroline. All gone within a month."

"Wolves killed nine of your horses and seven of your cows? What kind of animals are these? God, sis', how many of them are there?"

"At least a dozen. Apparently I'm the only one around here who's actually seen them, but Mr Miller next door has had four of his horses taken too. I read in the paper that livestock has been killed in the same way all over the North Country."

"What do you mean, the same way?"

"They don't eat the livestock."

Caroline raised her eyebrows. "They just kill them for sport?"

"No, for their blood. These aren't regular wolves, Caroline. The vet in town said that all of the livestock that he's examined had no blood left in their bodies. Exsanguinated was what he called it."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, here. Let me show you something." Mia opened a drawer and pulled out some photographs. "I've got a telephoto lens on my camera. I took these the last time that they attacked one of my animals."

Caroline looked at the photo. It was grainy, but it showed five very large red-eyed snarling wolves crouched around a horse. Their mouths were clamped onto the animal's neck and flanks. The horse had its head raised, foaming at the mouth as the creatures sucked the life out of it.

"That's horrible."

"That horse was examined later that day by the vet. There wasn't a drop of blood left in it. Its skin was hardly broken. There were just huge puncture wounds from their teeth."

"What's being done about it? Have they called a biologist, or someone who specialises in wolves?"

"The sheriff thinks that he and his men can take care of the problem themselves. Tomorrow he's got 40 volunteers that are gonna try to hunt them down."

"Do you have a gun, Mia?"

"Just Dad's old shotgun and three or four shells. I've been meaning to go to town and buy a rifle, but I'm not a big fan of guns. You know that."

"Well you should at least buy some more shells. You're up here alone."

"I know. Maybe we can make a run into town later. I've gotta get some things anyway. My last horse is about to foal and I need to swing by the vet's office and let him know."

"Will he come out here if you call him?"

"It depends on the weather. These wolves have got him pretty spooked too. He's a pretty good guy, though. I don't think that he'd let me down, if I really needed him."

"Well let's hope not. I've never helped give

birth to anything but my cat, and that was gross enough. Where's the horse?"

"She's locked in a separate room in the barn. She's been in there this whole month. It's probably the only reason that she's still alive. There's no way that the wolves can get in there. Only problem is: if she foals, we'd have to move her into the open barn. That little room is too crowded. If she got rowdy, she'd kick the crap out of both of us."

"Great."

★★★

Caroline and Mia travelled into town in Mia's Suburban over bumpy, country roads. The heater was on full blast and it was still blowing only lukewarm air into the cab. They finally reached Massena's small town centre and pulled up in front of the vet's office.

"You wanna come in?"

"No, I'll stay in the car if you're not gonna be too long."

"I'll just be a sec'."

Mia walked inside. Caroline could see dark storm clouds forming to the north. A storm was coming down from Canada, and, by the looks of it, it was going to be a big one, a northeaster if the weatherman was right. The clouds were an ashen grey colour. They layered upon themselves into boiling, purple, thunderheads. Lightning spread yellow and white flashes through the layers, illuminating up the heavens. The low rumble of thunder echoed off the nearby mountains.

Mia came out holding a small box of horse vitamins, and got in the truck.

"Looks like we're in for a blizzard," she said.

"It's coming from the north. Turn on the radio and let's see if we can get an updated forecast."

The radio came to life and the weather was just coming on. The forecast was for heavy snow, wind, and possible freezing rain. Everyone was advised to stay off the roads unless absolutely necessary.

"Well so much for the vet coming out tonight," Caroline said.

"He's got four wheel drive, but I'm not even sure that she's going to foal tonight."

"Are we still going to Wal-Mart?"

"Yeah. I think that it'd be a good idea to get some more shells for the gun," Mia said. "And we'd better get some extra food, just in case we get snowed in for a couple of days."

"Can that happen?"

"Anything is possible. During the ice storm of 1999, we lost power for 26 days. You should have seen it. Power lines were stretched right down to the ground. A lot of the poles snapped right in half."

"Terrific."

"You sure you wanna stay?"

"Yes I'm sure. I'm just a little bit spoiled. It would take a nuke to bring New York City to a halt."

★★★

They got their supplies at Wal-Mart and headed back to the house. Mia bought two boxes of twelve gauge shells, steaks, hamburger meat, vegetables, and a case of Corona.

"I think we're ready for anything now," Caroline said.

"I feel much better having you here. Thanks for not wimping out on me."

"Not a problem. That's what big sisters are for."

They got back to the house just as the storm really started up. By the time they got the bags in the house their clothes and hair were covered in white, wet, snow.

"Wow. It's really coming down now."

"Wait till it really gets going"

They unpacked the food and Mia plugged in the George Foreman grill.

"You still like your steaks bloody?"

"Yeah. You need some help?"

"No, relax. Sorry about no TV. I gave it up when I realised how much time I wasted in front of it."

"That's OK. You care if I play on your computer?"

"No, go ahead. It's slow though. I still have dial-up."

Caroline sat at the computer desk in the den, and waited as the modem buzzed and beeped. She glanced out the window.



Just inches from the glass was the biggest wolf that she had ever seen. It was standing on the cellar bulkhead watching her. It was snow white, like a phantom in the storm. Caroline watched, mesmerised, as it bared its teeth. She was unable to move or speak, as if the wolf had hypnotised her. The wolf's canines were longer than they should have been, and its eyes gave off their own red ghostly light. She heard its low growl even with the wind howling outside.

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, it was gone. Caroline had only blinked once, but the white wolf had disappeared completely.

It must have faded back into the storm, she thought. Wolves are fast, and it's snowing pretty hard.

She yelled for Mia, and wished that she could have found her voice while the wolf was still at the window.

"Yeah, what's up?" Mia said, walking into the room.

"I saw one of them, a big white one. He was standing on your bulkhead right outside the window."

"Holy shit, Caroline. Are you OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It just startled me. He was so big."

"I know. They're huge. Did you get a good look at his eyes?"

"Yeah. They glowed. They were red, and his teeth were long and pointed. Needle-like."

"I thought that I was going crazy."

"No, You're not crazy. What the hell are we dealing with here, Mia?"

"I don't know, sis', but I don't like it."



They ate their steaks and washed them down with Mexican beer. The tender, salty meat tasted amazing and the beer added just the right little something.

The storm was intensifying outside, and they watched the big flakes fall in long lazy paths to the frozen ground.

"Do you have any binoculars?" Caroline asked.

"Yeah, I'll go get them. Why?"

"I thought that I saw something out at that tree line."

Mia gave Caroline a wary look, but said nothing, and went to get the binoculars. She retrieved them from the hall closet and handed them to Caroline, who focused on the trees.

"Here," Caroline said, handing the binoculars to Mia and pointing towards the big elms. "Look just to the left of that rock wall."

Mia took them, put them to her eyes and adjusted the focus.

"I don't see anything. Wait, there's something. God, there's a whole pack of 'em."

The wolves were roaming just inside of the forest. They paced as if they were waiting for dinner. Their colouring ranged from the pure snow white, like the one that Caroline had seen earlier, to one that was as black as the forest behind him.

"I counted eight, but there's probably more."

"Shit! What do they want?"

"You're the country girl."

"My guess is, they can smell the mare in the barn and they know that she's getting ready to foal."

"Great. So don't tell me that we're going out there if she does."

Mia looked at her in the way she had when they were kids and she wanted something. "She's a thousand dollar mare, sis', and she's the last horse that I've got left. If she has trouble I've got to go out there. You can stay in here if you want."

"Now you know me better than that."

"Great. I knew that I could count on you. I've got a baby monitor in the barn with the mare. If she has complications she'll let us know."

"Do you think that the wolves will come around?"

"Wolves are usually scared of humans. I think that the mare has a better chance if we're out there with her."



The night crept through the snow and turned the world into a frigid black-and-white wonderland. The temperature dropped even further, freezing

life, and sending anything weak running for cover.

Mia and Caroline made some popcorn and leafed through old photo albums. They laughed at photos of themselves as children, and let memories take them back to a warmer, safer place.

Mia turned the baby monitor's volume on high and they could hear the mare's movements in the barn. Around eleven o'clock heavy huffing and snorts came from the speaker. They could hear the horse moving around, trying to get comfortable.

"I think that it's almost time."

"Should we go out now?"

"No, I think that she'll be alright by herself for a bit. If she starts braying or really gets to breathing hard, then we'll see."

"What if you've got to do a C-section? Are you equipped for that?"

"No, I'd have to call the vet for that. Speaking of, I'd better give him a call before it gets too late."

Mia picked up the phone, punched a button, hung the phone up, and then picked it up and listened again. "Shit!"

"What is it?"

"The stupid phone is dead. The storm must've knocked it out. Do you have your cell with you?"

"Yeah. It's in my bag." Caroline got up, pulled it out of her bag, and handed it to Mia.

She tried to dial, looked at the screen, and then handed it back to Caroline.

"No bars?"

"Not a one. I figured as much. That's why I don't have one out here."

"So now what?"

"Well. I guess we're on our own."



Through the night they sat watching the snow and listening to the monitor. Mia paced back and forth in front of the front window, searching the woods for movement. Every few minutes she would glance nervously at the baby monitor, which had grown silent over the last hour. She

hoped that the mare had gone to sleep and would give birth tomorrow in the safety of daylight.

Caroline kept watch with the binoculars. A few times she thought that she saw a flash of motion in the nearby fields, like a ghost in the mist, but mostly there was just the falling snow. She thought, once, that she could see the vapour from a wolf's breath floating among the trees.

The rock wall past the treeline was now covered in snow. Caroline felt that the big animals were using it for cover while they planned their attack. It made her think in terms of war and barricades, and she wondered if the house would be enough, if the animals really wanted to get in.

The baby monitor suddenly erupted into sound. They both jumped; Mia spilled the beer that she was drinking. Loud brays and chuffing came from the small white box. Then they heard a series of loud knocks come out of the speaker.

"What was that?" Caroline asked.

"She's kicking the walls. She can smell the wolves nearby, and she's freaking out."

"Are you ready?"

"I'll get the shotgun," Caroline said, and put ten more shells in her jacket pocket. The braying on the monitor was getting louder and more panicked. The big mare was now kicking the walls every few minutes.

"We've got to move her now or she's gonna hurt herself."

They rushed out of the house and down the slippery snow-buried front steps. The snow was up to their knees and they waded through it as if it were water. Caroline had brought the binoculars and a large knife that she snatched out of the kitchen on their way out the door.

The wind made it hard to catch their breath and impossible to speak. It cut into their exposed skin and blew under their heavy coats, chilling them to the bone.

They finally made it to the barn and realised that the big doors were blocked with almost three feet of snow. Mia tugged at the door trying to free it, but it was no use. She grabbed her big snow shovel from where she left it leaning against the side of the barn and started shovelling frantically, while Caroline kept a lookout.

Soon Mia had cleared enough of the snow for them to get the door open about a foot.

They squeezed inside, then slammed and bolted the door. The inside of the barn was chilly, but blissfully warm compared to outside. It smelled of fresh hay, old manure, and new blood. They could hear the horse slamming her hooves against the walls. The sealed room was at the other end of the barn, but the mare's pain came through loud and clear.

"She's going ballistic," Mia said. "I'm gonna see if I can get her to come out here where there's a little more room." She walked to a door at the end of the barn, unlocked it, and slowly opened it. Caroline could hear her talking to the mare in soothing comforting tones. Mia finally squeezed inside the small room, and Caroline heard the mare quiet down a little. After a minute Mia walked out, holding the mare's bridle as she led her into the empty barn.

The large Appaloosa was bloated and soaked with sweat. Mia was stroking her nose and kept talking to her, gradually getting the animal to calm down.

"Boy, am I impressed," Caroline said.

Mia shrugged. "I've had her since she was a foal herself. She trusts me. Her name is Shadow."

"She's beautiful."

"Thanks. Her foal should be really pretty. She was mated with a stallion out of Malone."

"Have you got any names picked out?"

"I'll know what it will be when I see him."

They watched the mare for an hour. She would pace, then lie down, then get up and begin the whole ritual over again. Finally she started to breathe heavily again, and her water broke. Caroline cringed.

"Not like your cat?"

"Nothing like my cat."

Mia got some rope off a hook on the wall.

"What's that for?"

"We might have to pull the foal out."

"You're shittin' me?"

"Nope. Sometimes they get stuck."

Caroline made a face like she just ate a bug.

"It goes faster if you help."

Caroline sighed. "Just tell me what to do."

A few minutes later, the mare grew even more agitated. Her ears were pulled back and she was baring her teeth. Her eyes were wild and bulging. It looked to Caroline as if the horse had gone mad.

"Is she gonna be alright?"

"I hope so. Her contractions are getting stronger. Get ready."

Suddenly there was a large crash against the front doors.

"What the hell was that?"

"I hope that it's not what I think it is."

"Oh shit! Mia, look!" The barn had small slits between some of the boards where light from the front porch shone through. Something was moving just beyond the barn wall. Something big.

"Get the shotgun, take the safety off, and pump a shell into the chamber. I'll try and hurry her up. The wolves are circling the barn, looking for a way in."

"Oh God. There's no way in here, is there?"

"I don't know. There's always a way in anywhere."

"Well, I'm not going back out there!"

"OK, so we'll stay in here until they go away, either way Shadow is gonna have this foal tonight!"

★★★

The wolves were rounding the barn licking their muzzles. Their breath floated around them like a deadly fog. It was the hot fetid breath of killers. They could smell new blood in the air and it was making them mad with hunger. It was the sweetest kind of blood, and could restore even the oldest and sickest of their kind. Their alpha male was growing old and sick. He needed the blood of a newborn soon, or he would be lost.

The big male had escaped from a Canadian lab long ago. He had been genetically produced for experiments on blood diseases. Since then he'd sired many more wolves, each with the same insatiable lust for blood. The pack moved across Canada and had recently made their way into the US, searching for the new life blood that they instinctively knew would make their leader whole again. They hunted as they roamed, creating new myths and legends across the land.

The alpha hung back by the trees as his sons and daughters went to retrieve the one thing that might make him strong again. His coat had been black when he was young, but now it was a faded grey. Mange had taken hold, exposing raw, red skin to the elements. Lately he had not gone on the hunts. He stayed behind and waited for his children to return with mouthfuls of blood for him. He would lap the blood off their tongues and lips, drink what they regurgitated, and it would make him strong again.

He tried to make himself comfortable behind the shelter of the rock wall, but the wind cut through his fur like a knife, agitating his arthritis. He whined into the storm. This was something that he wouldn't have done in front of the others, but he was alone, and he was sick. He tried to keep warm as he waited for his cubs to return from their special hunt.



Caroline levelled the shotgun at the dark figures moving outside. She knew that there was no way that they could get inside, but that didn't keep her from being scared to death.

The mare was in a frenzy now. Her back legs were shaking violently. Her face was a mask of pain and her mouth was foaming. Mia was trying to calm her down, but the mare kept trying to buck and kick. She wanted to run somewhere safe, somewhere without wolves.

"How far apart are her contractions?"

"She's almost fully dilated now. It should be in the next fifteen minutes."

There was another loud crash against the doors. Caroline could hear the wolves growling outside. Then a bloodcurdling howl split the night, and then another joined it, then a third. Soon the howls were echoing all around the barn. The mare bucked and pulled the bridle out of Mia's hands and slammed herself into one of the stalls, roaring in pain and panic.

"Help me get control of her!"

Caroline dropped the shotgun and rushed to help her sister. She tried to get hold of the bridle, but missed. Tried again, grabbed it, and wrapped

the leather around her hand. She pulled down, trying to get the frenzied animal to lie down. Blood poured out of the mare in a gushing spray and foam gathered on her open mouth. As she spun around they could see the foal's head and front leg poking out of her slit. The foal squirmed and wriggled, trying to get free of his mad mother.

The wolves began scratching against the walls. They were growling and snarling over the roar of the winter wind. Caroline heard another kind of scratching from the wall to their right.

"They're digging under the walls!" Caroline said, not sure what to do. She handed the bridle to Mia, and picked the shotgun back up. They could see the dirt moving where the boards met the ground.

"If they come under, just shoot 'em! I've had enough of this."

There were more sounds of digging coming from all over now. Huge paws were sliding under the boards, ripping chunks of frozen ground and rotted wood loose. Snarling, snapping muzzles appeared in the holes, testing their size. Caroline levelled the shotgun and fired. One wolf's paw disintegrated into a spray of blood and dirt.

The noise was deafening in the enclosed space. The smell of cordite mixed with blood was nauseating and made the barn smell like a gangland massacre. The mare bucked and grunted. Finally, the small blood covered foal spurted out. He had been birthed into chaos and he seemed to know it. He stood up quickly, stumbled once, and then stood his ground.

The other wolves paid no attention to the shotgun blast. They knew that one of their brothers had been wounded, and saw him limp off to lick the stump where his paw had been, but they kept digging. The good of the many outweighed the good of the one.

A large black male slammed his head into the rotten boards, breaking one free. Another wolf wriggled through the hole that his brother had made, and was now inside the barn. Caroline had been watching another male on the opposite side, and didn't see the other until Mia screamed.

Caroline only got the shotgun halfway around before the wolf crashed into her. All she saw was a black monster full of teeth and claws. She fell to her back and the shotgun went clattering into one of the stalls. She quickly pulled the kitchen knife out of her jacket pocket, but dropped it in the hay. Instead of attacking Caroline further, the wolf turned, and set its sights on the blood-covered foal.

Mia rushed to check on Caroline, as two more wolves burst through the walls. She hadn't been bitten, but the wolf had knocked the wind out of her. Mia helped her up.

The other wolves joined their brother who was snarling at the foal, ready to strike. They formed a rough semi-circle between the women and the newborn.

Just as they moved to attack, Shadow kicked one of the wolves across the barn. It yelped once, but was dead before it hit the ground, nearly cut in two. Then the mare positioned herself between the other killers and her foal. She lowered her head and stared down her death.

The wolves looked uncertain at first, but then remembered why they were here. They leapt at the mare. She turned and kicked out with her strong back legs, catching one of the wolves squarely in the face breaking the bones with an audible crunch. The others jumped on her back and sunk their long, pointed teeth deep into her hide. Mia was able to pull the terrified foal over to where they were, while the wolves were busy with its mother.

The big horse bucked and reared up, trying to shake her attackers loose. One of the wolves fell off, but another jumped on to take its place. More creatures were flooding into the barn, fuelled by their bloodlust. They piled on the mare and finally dragged her to the ground. Three of them latched onto her neck where the blood flowed freely.

Caroline and Mia could hear the wolves sucking and slurping as the mare's blood was being drained from her body. All that they could do was watch in horror. One of the smaller wolves was guarding them as his brothers fed, snarling, and daring them to move.

When the wolves were finished, they started howling to celebrate their kill. The sound was incredibly loud inside of the barn. The women covered their ears and the foal cowered behind them.

Mia realised that this was her only chance, and she dove towards the shotgun. She wrapped her hands around it, just as the other wolves turned on Caroline and the foal.

They snarled, and their haunches came up as they lowered their bodies for the attack. The large black male that had knocked Caroline down lunged for her again. He meant to get her head in his jaws and crush it like a melon. Before he could reach her though, he was blasted sideways. He landed inches from Caroline, with a ragged bloody hole in his side. Then another wolf lunged at the foal, and Mia fired twice. The blasts caught the big wolf in the rear flank, turning it to mush.

The other wolves bolted, squeezing beneath the boards. Two of them whined softly and ran in circles, not knowing where to go. Mia shot one of them in the head, splattering brains and fur against the far wall. Finally they were all gone. They had fled back into the storm like forgotten nightmares.

Mia sat down beside Caroline and started to cry. Caroline took her in her arms and told her that it was going to be all right. They sat crying in the blood-spattered barn, listening to the wind, and clutching the new foal that had come so close to death.

"I can't believe we made it," Caroline said. "Are they really all gone?"

"I think so. Are you OK?"

"Yeah, I'm just a little shaken up. How's the foal?"

"I think he's fine. He looks like a tough little guy, but his mother is gone," Mia said and turned away from the slaughtered mare.

"So what are you going to name him," Caroline said.

Mia forced herself to look back at the mare and then rubbed the newborn's head.

"I think I'll name him Van Helsing."

LIVE TO BE HUNTED

Sean & Craig Davis

Tony Mazono felt the impact of the left hook to the side of his face like a gloved hammer. Successive jabs kept him reeling backwards until his left eye was a watery red blur. He raised both arms to defend his face but just as many blows careened into his meaty torso.

The screaming press of the crowd was a living ring that kept the fight close and bloody.

Pidgin yelled, “You gonna let this old timer knock you down? Close it up, Tony!”

At the same time, bets were shouted back and forth, predicting who would drop to the pavement first.

Blocking the brunt of a right-left-right combo, he launched a right of his own, but Ole Man McCurley leaned out of reach.

Tony rallied by pulling inside with bare-fisted

strikes to McCurley's lean body, each answering grunt music to his ears. When McCurley retreated a step, Tony stomped down and pinned his opponent's foot. *Good thing there aren't any rules here.* McCurley swayed off balance with his guard raised, and Tony landed an upper cut that whipped McCurley's head up with a snap of his bottom jaw. He followed it up with a haymaker to McCurley's temple that hammered the boxer into the ground. The older man's eyes dimmed and he tumbled to a floor painted in painful shades of red.

Tony panted and raised his arms in triumph to the crowd. He could barely hear their screaming over the excited pounding of his own heart. Pidgin entered the ring. "Guys settle your bets. We have a winner!" Lars the "mole-man" settled bets in the mob, examined the wad of cash through kaleidoscopically thick glasses, then handed Pidgin a sheaf of bills.

Pidgin slapped a towel around Tony's neck and pulled him toward the warehouse exit. "Wipe the blood off your face. Don't want any cops getting curious." In the parking lot, Pidgin opened the sliding door of his silver van.

"Don't bleed on my seat," said Pidgin, counting out the night's winnings, "or a big chunk of this will be mine."

Tony climbed in the van and grinned, tonguing the empty gap where his right front tooth used to be. "I won't." He raised a thick eyebrow. "Whooped McCurley's ass tonight, didn't I?"

Pidgin nodded slowly, his stern face highlighting his one-eighth Cherokee heritage. "Didn't look to go that way at first though. Shit, why do you do this to yourself every week, Tony? Four hundred fifty dollars is chump change."

Tony probed his bulbous nose gently and decided it wasn't broken. "Maybe you should get better paying fights then."

Pidgin shook his head in disbelief. "You dumb mook. More money equals more pounding, and I wasn't sure you were going to walk away from this last fight. There are a few deadly shitkickers in this circuit, Tony, and guess what: you aren't one of them. Yeah, you can take a beating, but up the ladder that won't keep you out of a hospital."

"I hear ya, man. I'll cut down, I promise."

Tony reached into his gym bag and withdrew his cell phone. He'd better call his ex-wife if he wanted Tabitha ready tomorrow for Pendragon Park. Last week he'd come for his scheduled visitation only to find Tabitha was at Charlene's grandmother's house.

Charlene's nasal buzz filled the receiver. "Detrow residence, whom is this?"

"Hi Charlene—"

"Oh, it's you. What do you want?"

"I just called to make sure Tabitha would be ready tomorrow."

He could hear Charlene on the other side of the line gritting her teeth. "Yeah, just don't bring her back any later than seven o'clock."

He chewed on his tongue and asked himself why he'd ever married Charlene nine years ago. To be fair, he'd done his share of yelling back then. Thank god, his temper was more on an even keel now. In order to see his daughter, he had to soak up Charlene's venom every week, a holdover from their failed marriage.

"Alright. Let me speak to her."

"Hold on."

A few minutes later, Tabitha's dulcet voice crossed the phone line. "Daddy? I'm sorry I wasn't there last Friday; grandma took me to her house."

"Forget about it, sweetie. You're ready to slum it with your dad tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Can we go to eat at Foojeyumas afterward, Daddy? I wanna watch 'em juggle the knives. My friend Sarah went with her parents, and she said it was cool."

Although he detested Japanese food, he couldn't help but smile. "Sure, and we can get egg rolls and fortune cookies too."

"That's Chinese, not Japanese, daddy."

"I was just testing ya, Tabbie. Fujiyamas it is. I'll see you tomorrow, hon."

Pidgin watched him put his cell phone back in his pocket. "How are you going to explain that evil red eye?"

Tony pointed to the burst blood vessel in his right eye and shrugged. "Daddy tripped into a mean old troll's fist?"

Pulling into Tony's driveway, Pidgin spat out of the open window. "Dumb mook!"

“See you tomorrow, Pidgin. You’re opening at nine, right? Don’t let Monte add any more to his tab. I’m not floating his liver anymore on credit.”

Pidgin saluted. “Got it, captain! Anything else?”

“Nah, just call my cell if there are any problems.”

He trudged up his walkway to the door of his two-bedroom hutch. The paint on the porch was flaking and two broken slats on the dull-red window shutters really needed fixing. He spat a blood-flecked lugee onto the grass – maybe tomorrow.

Slipping his key card through the reader, he heard the phone ringing. Inside he reached over his couch, and picked up the receiver. He accepted the call and the cellular video screen on his phone displayed his brother’s strained face. *Christ, what favour did Ralph want this time?* Tony spoke first. “Ralph, what is it?”

“Tony, I’m in trouble! Yeah, I know that’s nothing new, but I got a shark fingering me as owing them some money.”

Tony rubbed his temple and looked down at a small bloodstain on his work boots. “Well then, pay them what you owe them. Ralph, did you snort up another loan?”

His sibling’s surprisingly clear blue eyes met his. “No, I’m clean. I’ve been drug free for over a month.”

He squinted. “You have? – Like the thirteenth time is the charm? Bullshit, Ralph!”

“Don’t believe me. I understand. I probably would be getting wasted, if I wasn’t worried some knee-busters would be breaking down my door.”

He wearily considered his brother. “So what are you wantin’ from me?”

“Could you rig an alarm in the house to wake me up if someone breaks in?”

His bruised ribs ached for the softness of his mattress. He glanced at his watch: eleven-thirty.

“Dammit, Ralph, I’m dead tired.” But Ralph did look rattled. “I’ll be there in fifteen or so. Don’t expect me to stay long though.”

Ralph gave him a grateful smile. *Damn, that actually appeared genuine.*

He went to his living room closet and pulled out his toolbox. He walked out to his parked 2016 Subaru and got in. He patted the dashboard fondly and ignored the small crack in the windshield. The nanite-tech cars were faster and had better gas mileage but he liked antique cars. They were real with moving parts you could see.

He drove at about ten under the speed limit, since his Subaru tended to shimmy over ninety, up until he took the 210 off ramp. Ten minutes later he pulled into Ralph’s driveway, beside his brother’s blue ‘41 Dupree. He scanned Ralph’s two-bedroom flat; all the lights were out. A big clown-like figurine sat in the middle of Ralph’s front yard, a memento of a popular restaurant chain that was all the rage forty years ago, McDonalds. His brother had taste for crap.

He knocked on the door twice and Ralph pulled him inside. Ralph, worried, peered through the open door. “A black sedan drove by twice so I cut off all the lights.”

Tony snorted. “How much did these guys say you owed them, Ralph? You sure you aren’t getting paranoid?”

“They wouldn’t say. They just kept repeating I better pay Mongreeve what I owe him, whoever that is.”

“You didn’t ask?”

“Bro’, I was being jacked up by a bald slab of muscle. I didn’t say squat.”

Tony remained sceptical, but he also wanted to get home to bed. He opened his toolbox. “Get me some empty tin cans. Pour out your canned goods; yeah, it’s cheesy but it works.”

He had done a stint in the security consulting biz for nine years prior to buying his bar. He’d picked up a few things about bolstering (and breaching) security. He laid a few trip wires across the doorways and a few windows.

He noticed a treadmill and set of barbells in the adjacent room. “Ralph, you working out now? I thought that was against your religion.”

“I’ve been trying to get in shape in case I got to run for my life.”

“These boys really got you spooked.”

“Tony, you didn’t see these two goons. Both were creepy intense.”

Tony rose from kneeling and patted Ralph on the shoulder. "Now when they—"

The window nearby shattered with three short bursts of gunfire, and shards of glass peppered Tony's short-cropped hair.

He lunged to the floor, getting flat on his belly. "Ralph get down!" Ralph cringed in the doorway to his kitchen, the sound of automatic gunfire sputtering. Tony crawled toward Ralph when he noted the small points of light coming through the ceiling and high back wall. *Bloody amazing that his brother was still standing!*

Finally, Ralph dropped to the floor. "What do we do?"

"Got any weapons?"

Ralph blushed. "Pepper spray."

He blew up; he just couldn't help it. "Fuckin' kidding me, bro'? They got full auto out there!"

Ralph's voice lowered to normal levels as the gunfire died down. "I don't know anyone that deals in hardware." He shrugged. "I only dealt with recreational drugs."

Tony's broad features crinkled in distaste, but he accepted the pepper spray. "We need to get out of here, but they might be covering the back. Let's see if we can sneak out a side window on the east side. Follow me."

He crawled toward the back bedroom and peeked out of the window. The coast was clear: no sedan or goons. He edged the window up and squeezed through the tight opening with his brother following.

He landed on a holly bush with a grunt, then padded to the corner. In the front yard, Ralph's ornamental lawn figure, Ronald McDonald, was riddled with holes and dings. *Better Ronald than us*, he thought.

Go for the car or sneak away in the brush? He went with his gut. "I'm going to sprint to the car. If I don't make it, get away as quietly as you can. If I don't get shot, I'll drive across the yard and we burn rubber."

"Ya know tyres aren't made of—"

He rapped his knuckles once between Ralph's eyes. "Shut up! It's better than 'let's burn bisulphide guantidine.'"

He gulped a deep breath. It had been a long time since he'd felt so juiced and scared all at the

same time. He launched himself over the yard to his Subaru. Gasping, he regretted every beer packed into his thick waist.

Finally, he reached his car and vaulted over the front end. He jumped inside and gunned the engine, fishtailing across the front yard. Ralph sprinted to the passenger door and hopped in. Gunfire still chased as he took off onto the main road.

Nestled behind a row of mulberry bushes two houses down the street, a black sedan hid from view. "Chase them?" asked a man with a finely groomed moustache.

A bald man with a face untouched by laughter or smiles answered. "No. We're done for tonight. We'll hunt for him another night."

★★★

The next morning Tony catalogued his aches and pains while the chemical stream of the shower soothed his protesting muscles. It was a freaking miracle his car didn't have any bullet holes in it. He'd dropped his brother off at an apartment somewhere in downtown Shitsville owned by some chick named Susie Q. His brother said he'd be safe there. From the chick's name she was probably a hooker, but who was he to judge? Better Ralph get a piece and not a fix. If Ralph was really trying to clean up his act this time, he hoped it would last.

★★★

He stepped into his bar and waved to Pidgin, stowing imported beer under the counter. "Everything kosher?" The joint was empty except for the two regulars Ted and Jambo.

"At this hour? Everything is fine. Hey, I got a lead on a mainline fight for next week with Carlos Benez. You up for it?"

Tony rubbed his brow over his still throbbing left eye. "I think I'm going to take a break for awhile like you said. Getting hammered again doesn't sound real appealing right now."

Pidgin did an exaggerated double take. "Whoa, the schmuck is learning! Let me check the firmament to make sure it's not falling!"

He laughed. "Screw you, Pidgin."

“With a battered puss like yours, that ain’t happening. I hold out for lookers.”

He shook his head, amused. In the background the wall-mounted television droned out the news: another twelve prisons had closed this year thanks to the steady drop in crime. The two hundred prison personnel out of work would be absorbed into various federal “rehabilitation” programs. He blotted out the rest, nothing new. The government had been kicking crime’s butt for the last ten years. Just dumb luck he hadn’t been caught doing illegal fights, he guessed.

He picked up a broom from the storage closet and began sweeping behind the bar. Jambo chattered as always to Ted, who never failed to agree with, “Yep, ain’t it the truth.”

The pudgy Jambo said, “When those pictures of me and Lisa playing naked Twister arrived in the mail, I shit a brick. Thank God my Margaret didn’t get to the mailbox first.” He didn’t even pause to breathe. “She would’ve stormed out the door and took me for every last penny I’m worth – right down to my gold fillings.”

Ted sipped his beer. “Yep, ain’t that the truth.”

“So every morning at five-thirty I rush to the mailbox now. I don’t know how they took those photos, but I’m sure I’ll get a blackmail note soon. Damn voyeurs can’t leave an old man alone to enjoy a little tang on the side in peace. I even stopped skimming off the company accounts at work. Too damn afraid I’m being watched.”

Ted laughed. “They’re pulling you by the short and curlies?”

Jambo grunted and took a swig of his beer.

Serves the bastard right, Tony thought. He put up the broom and nodded at Pidgin. “I’ll be back this evening.” Pidgin just made little motions with his hands to brush him out the door when he left to pick up his daughter.



Tabitha sat on the front porch in a pink T-shirt and blue jean shorts held up with suspenders. How such an angelic face came from him he’d never understand, but he was grateful. She skipped into the car and buckled up her seatbelt.

“All right, Tabbie, let’s hit it!”

Arriving at the Pendragon Park at eleven o’clock, he strolled with his daughter’s hand in his towards her favourite spot, the duck pond. He sat on the wooden bench while Tabitha fed the ducks at the water’s edge.

A breeze riffled through his hair, carrying the moist smell of the pond, and the filtered sunlight danced through the trees to warm his skin.

The bench creaked every time he removed some stale bread from a bag. The hungry, flap-footed ducks immediately jostled forward, and Tabitha chucked breadcrumbs happily this way and that. “Duckies! Come here little duckies!”

He took a deep breath of fresh air. Life is funny. Sitting on this bench by himself he’d be a lonely guy feeding the ducks, but with Tabbie there, it was magic.

The cherry on top came when a slender woman in a blue-and-white jump suit came running down the walking trail. Except, her eyes kept flitting nervously over her shoulder. Tony saw a young man with coal black shades round the corner, jogging about a hundred yards behind.

He sat up rigid with the scent of danger tickling his senses. The blonde woman’s panicked eyes found his, and she split off from the path toward him. He had to get Tabbie away. “Tabbie, stay here darling.” She nodded without turning from the pond, and Tony dashed towards the woman.

The woman begged, “Please help me!”

He felt his pulse accelerating in response to the approaching threat. “Behind me.”

The man put a hand to his ear and slowed. Tony could see the man was lean but well muscled.

The man started forward again with his lips set in a tight line. Tony went into a crouch with his hands by his side until his opponent got close. Two quick steps to close the distance were followed by two rabbit punches to the face, and the fight was on. Neither jab landed, but he hadn’t intended them to.

He launched downwards and spearheaded the man’s knees, catching the back of the right calf.

His attacker's knees snapped back and the man's head struck the blacktop path like unripe fruit.

He'd thought the fight was over, so he was surprised by two elbow strikes to his collarbone. The painful crunch sent small shooting pains down both arms. The man rained a host of short punches down upon his face and head, until he rolled to the side in defence. The speed of the man's attacks was blindingly fast, requiring him to roll on the ground to protect his groin and face.

He palmed Ralph's pepper spray in his pocket and when the man tried to plant a kick in his kidneys, Tony sprayed a mist of cayenne pepper directly up into his opponent's face. The man dived backwards, clenching his fists and pressing them to his eyes. Tony prepared to finish off his enemy but a loud crack sounded at his feet.

Two hundred yards away, a glint of metal pointed at him from some bushes. *Holy crap, a sniper!*

He sprinted back to the pond and scooped up Tabitha, running as fast as his thick legs would carry him. The woman kept pace beside him, but he didn't much care at that point. Reaching the parking lot, he unlocked the door. He thrust Tabitha inside and took off on Portswaine Road headed south.

He checked the rear-view mirror, but there was no pursuit yet. He turned his eyes to the woman in his backseat. "We're safe for the moment. Tabbie, you alright?"

"Yes, Daddy. Why'd that man hit you? Do you think he'll hurt the ducks?"

He smiled. *Thank God for the resilience of children.* "He won't touch the ducks, sweetie. Let's not tell your mother about this, ok?" One mention of this incident to Charlene, and he would never see Tabitha again.

"Alright, Daddy."

He turned his attention to his "damsel in distress", who at this moment looked a good bit less attractive than before.

"What is your name, ma'am?"

"Melissa Kelton, but I go by Mel. That guy has popped up twice on me since he..."

He squinted. "Since he what?"

Melissa shrugged. "Last month a security

guard caught me lifting a dress. He gave me a break, but the creep keeps showing up everywhere."

He chewed the side of his lip. Hard to believe he had been involved with two attacks in two days. "What do you do, Melissa?"

"I'm a Nanite Engineer. I design and program nanites."

He knew what nanites were: tiny computer bugs used in "intelligent" gadgets and gizmos for the last decade. They first appeared in automobiles around 2030. He had even heard they were being used in bleeding edge technology in medicine, household appliances, and even clothing design. He'd seen a Victoria's Secret commercial just last week showing how nanites could make clothing change colour, shorten in the neckline, and even change shape.

"Why the hell were you stealing a dress you could've paid for?"

Melissa's face flushed with embarrassment. "I do not know, I... I just do it. I feel bad about the theft afterwards."

"Ok, so you lifted a dress. That doesn't explain why this guy had a sniper for backup."

Melissa's voice cracked. "I don't know what is going on. I'm telling you the truth. I'm sorry I put you in danger."

Patting his pocket, he discovered his cell phone was missing. "Melissa, do you have a phone? I lost mine in the fight." She held out her cellular.

"If you had a phone why didn't you call the police? Hell, why didn't you call the police the first time he threatened you?"

Melissa leaned back in her seat and sighed. "He didn't do anything much at first. He told me he had video footage from the store security cameras. I didn't want my friends and family to hear about it."

He put the phone to his ear. "He and his buddy were ready for action today, not to watch. I need to drop off my daughter at her mother's house, then you and I are going to the police."

"Isn't there any way we can get around that? I really do appreciate you rescuing me..."

The uplifted tone towards the end of her sentence suggested a pleasing compensation for

keeping his mouth shut. He wasn't feeling very frisky right now; the safety of his daughter had been threatened today.

"Melissa, I like excitement as much as the next man, but this is serious. We're going to the cops."

Driving in silence, he arrived at Charlene's home. He walked his upset daughter to the door. "But what about Foojiyamas? You said we could go."

He cajoled his daughter. "I know, Tabbie, but that woman in the car is in trouble. I need to make sure she's going to be okay. We'll go next time, scout's honour."

Tabitha scuffed her little white shoe into the pavement. "I guess that's okay, Daddy, but remember you promised."

He wrapped his burly arms around Tabitha, smelling the strawberry scent from her golden curls. He kissed her on the brow then nudged her into the house.

At the car, he motioned for Melissa to slide into the front passenger seat. He drove toward the nearest police station on DeSoto Street, roughly fifteen minutes away. Turning the corner onto Rose Boulevard, a black sedan blocked the road. The Subaru suddenly sputtered twice then died.

Three men in dress shirts and slacks left the vehicle. "Crap! Those are the same fellas from last night. What a bad time for the car to die!"

Melissa said, "It didn't just happen. That was an EMP pulse meant to disable the car."

Tony nodded. "I'll try talking first. If that fails, I go in swinging and you take off."

The three men strode closer until he stepped out of the car. "Hey, whatever you're looking for, I'm, I'll—"

One of the men extended a rod, and a projectile struck his chest. His entire body seized, muscles contracting spasmodically. His vision greyed out. *Fuck me!*

★★★

He woke up groggy like he'd been on the receiving end of a knockout punch. Fuzzy outlines came together until he made out a rugged face

sitting nose-to-nose with him.

"Mr Mazone, sorry for the rough handling. Stun guns are never pleasant. However, you are skilled with your fists so we found it expedient."

Tony was in a car, probably the black sedan. A gentleman with greying hair sat beside him, an enigmatic smile on his lips. Tony could tell the man was a seasoned fighter, but not old.

"What do you want? Where is Melissa? If my brother Ralph owes—"

"The only thing your brother owes me is his redemption, Mr Mazone. The young woman awoke to find you gone; she is unharmed. You're confused, as you should be. My name is Agent Wendall. For my own reasons, and I admit my own entertainment is one of them, I'll explain. Your brother and Melissa Kelton are both cases of mine."

He silently wondered if this outflow of information was going to end with him in cement galoshes. Always did on old time TV shows anyway.

Reading his mind, the man's Mako white teeth opened up into a grin. "I'm a government bureaucrat but one that goes out on 'field trips'. I work within the Department of Redemption. Pithy, don't you think?"

Tony frowned.

"Thirty years ago society was on the brink of dissolution with crime totally out of control. My department was given carte blanche to solve the crisis."

"So what's that got to do with me?"

Agent Wendall held a finger to his lips. "Through research we exposed a major flaw within each human being. Like sharks on a vegetarian diet, most people can't flourish without struggle. If we aren't forced to fight for our lives, it often starts a cycle of self destructive behaviours." He waved his hand at the car's plush interior. "Modern society wraps us in a suffocating blanket of security, so basic instincts make us create our own threats.

"My department artificially inserts that threat, or as one of my agents is fond of saying: we put the fear of God into them."

Groggily he asked, "Where do you get the manpower?"

"The cost is less than one tenth of the judicial costs required to imprison the citizens as inmates. We make a difference, Tony, by preventing the destruction of lives – of families." Agent Wendall smirked. "Case in point. Your brother is shaping up isn't he?"

He responded, "You're terrorists! Don't people get hurt?"

"Yes, it happens, but we work under an acceptable margin of error." Agent Wendall nodded his head philosophically. "Errant children need a spanking sometimes. If the child is truly rotten, they don't grow up..."

On the edge of the forest, Tony noticed the black sedan had slowed to a stop. "So what is to become of me?"

Agent Wendall gripped his shoulder and laughed. "Why I want to redeem you, Tony. Haven't you guessed?"

He stammered, "What do you mean? I'm not a criminal."

"Technically you are. Those unsanctioned fights are illegal and self-destructive. Where do you think your temper comes from, Tony?" The man chuckled. "Personally, I can't blame you – your wife is a grade A bitch. But we have the police record six years ago when Charlene called the police with bruises all over the left side of her face. You are a southpaw aren't you, Tony?"

He stuttered, "I – I did hit her that once, but I never did it again."

The bald agent pulled him out of the car and unlocked the handcuffs. Agent Wendall strolled to the back of the sedan and unlocked the trunk.

"Tony, put on your running shoes because soon you are going to be hunted. Hold no hopes I won't shoot you; we are well within our budget of acceptable fatalities this year." Agent Wendall drew forth a scoped rifle from the trunk and lovingly wiped it with a handkerchief.

Tony felt his adrenaline surging. "Let's be fair. Don't I get a knife or something?"

Agent Wendall began doing some knee bends. "I'm sorry. I like my florid speeches on these little jaunts. I'm only allowed a hunt every three months or so as part of *my* rehabilitation." Agent Wendall brushed some lint off his shirt. "What to

do with the unsalvageable killers – those we can't redeem? We put them to work doing what they do best..."

Agent Wendall began counting. "100... 99..."

Tony sprinted to the nearest copse of trees. After running full out for the next three minutes, he heard an excited shout. "Here I come!"

Tony wound his way around trees, pushed through tearing bushes, and traced a stream for a quarter mile. Gasping in burning lungfuls of air, he rested behind a fallen tree trunk.

He felt every scratch and bruise from his frantic flight through the forest, and his heart was doing a double foxtrot right now. Every pore in his skin stank of sweaty fear – *yet he felt so damn alive!*

A gunshot rang out and wood splinters gouged furrows across his cheek. "Shit! He found me." He took off again, finding cover where he could, deep in the forest.

★★★

He wiped down the bar with circular strokes. A bottle of brandy in hand, Pidgin grinned. "So how is the new woman in your life, Tony?"

"Melissa is fine. Tabitha seems cool with her too."

Pidgin crossed his arms. "You lucky dog, Melissa is hot. I'm just glad she convinced you to stop doing those weekly fights. I was afraid I was going to be bringing you home in a casket one night."

The lines around Tony's eyes crinkled as he laughed. "Actually, it was an acquaintance that convinced me to change my ways."

Pidgin filled a shot glass for a customer. "Oh really? I want to meet him. What's his name?"

Tony put down the wet rag. "Wendall. He doesn't come by very often – only once every three months."

"When's his next visit?"

He stopped wiping the bar and looked down near his feet. "I'm never sure exactly when." Longingly, he gazed at the antique Winchester rifle nestled under the bar.

"But when he does, I give him a hunter's welcome."

Glimmerick

Michael
McNichols

“Flames snaked up the great tree and it collapsed down on top of the fiery mess that had once been the city. Blood flooded the streets, red tinged with silver.”

Coronalis snapped awake. Sweat dripped off his forehead and he breathed in and out. He climbed out of bed and wandered over to his little window.

Stars hung and glittered like jewellery in the night sky. Coronalis sat down on the edge of his bed, shut his eyes, and concentrated. Dust swirled in front of him and formed into a lantern.

Outside, the white roads ran past glass storefronts that twinkled in the moonlight. In the distance, the House of High Government loomed. Towering above that, the leaves of the Quercus Metatron, the great tree, glowed eerily red. Coronalis set out toward it.

He again thought of how similar Glimmerick was to his home. He hadn't believed that any city, especially one built by humans, could be as large. Back in Estar, they had built towers out of magic, not glass. Even now, he still couldn't believe that it had all burned.

The city's citizens had been the silver-blooded, all descended from the union of a man and a star that fell from heaven. They looked human, but lived longer and had mastered their own system of magic. In fact, they claimed to be the greatest sorcerers in this world.

Then Ludgate, a mere human fire sorcerer, came.

The Quercus Metatron, the incarnation of the great tree given to Estar as one was given to every race, warned them to flee, but the silver-blooded decided to fight.

Twenty years old, tall and thin with short white hair, Coronalis needed another twenty years to master Estar's magic. The defence service still drafted him into duty along with every

other able-bodied youth. They lined up in mass and rushed through Estar's gates to meet Ludgate as he stalked toward their home.

Positioned in the middle of the army, Coronalis saw blue and red flashes outside the city as the fire sorcerer cut through the front ranks. When he smelled the burning flesh, he fell behind and vomited against the city's walls. He tried to stand back up, but he shook uncontrollably.

Heat wavered in the air and more red and blue flashed through the afternoon sky. Coronalis climbed over the walls and fled back through the city and out of it. When he looked back, Estar smoked and burned in the distance. Only towers of flame still stood.

Coronalis often wondered if he was the only one smart enough to flee. While he had never been close to his family, he had hoped that one of them had also escaped the fire. For the next two years, he searched every city and town he wandered into for his parents, an aunt, an uncle, or anyone else who might have survived Estar's fall. He found no one.

A year ago, he found Glimmerick and rented a room above a little glass shop. Hob, the owner, blew glass down in his basement workshop and his young daughter Lind sold the vases, bowls, cups, and figurines he created in the store above. While the guilds never hired Hob for a large construction project, with his shop and Coronalis's rent he made enough for him and his daughter to get by.

When Lind started to spit up thick, red phlegm and couldn't leave her bed, Coronalis stopped

doing odds jobs around Glimmerick to run the shop for Hob.

Lind's hacking coughs echoed down from her bedroom into the shop as he worked. He tired of it quickly, but worried whenever it stopped.

Treading through Glimmerick's streets, he wished he could help Lind. If his training were complete, he might be able to cure her. The most he could do now was create small objects, like the lantern, but they lasted just hours at best, and only if he concentrated hard enough.

The street sloped downward. Coronalis followed it down the three steps to the sacred dirt that the Quercus Metatron grew out of. The great tree's trunk ran the width of three buildings put together, and soared higher than the city skyline.

Off to the side, Coronalis noticed the long ladder the gardeners, the wise men of the tree, used to climb up and down it. Supposedly, they had also carved it out of the wood of the great tree. He set his lantern down near it and approached the tree trunk.

Though his hand trembled, he forced it against the bark.

"A firestorm ripped through the city, slashing the great tree apart as with fiery claws. It swept up the people below into it, burning them to death, their flesh dripping down off them onto a growing pool of melted glass."

Coronalis jerked his hand away. It was painfully singed. Wincing, he returned to the stairs and sat down on the top one. A small fire broke out, twirling in the air before him. It changed from red to blue to red again and again as his mind raced with a vision of Glimmerick burning.

A hand touched his shoulder.

"Coronalis?"

The fire dissolved into smoke, and he looked back. Hob, a wide, powerful man with large, callused hands, stared down at him. He set his lantern down on the step and then sat down next to Coronalis.

"What was that?" Hob blew out his lantern's light. "I just saw this fire floating in front of you."

Coronalis glanced at Hob's extinguished lantern, then at his, still burning brightly a short

distance away. "You shouldn't have put that out. We might need it."

"No point wasting the oil," Hob said. "Now don't tell me you didn't see that fire."

"Maybe it was a will o' the wisp?" Coronalis said. "I don't know. Strange things happen near the great tree."

"I've heard stories." Hob took Coronalis's burned hand and lightly traced his fingers over it. "And you should have heard them by now too. Or at least enough of them to know not to touch that tree."

Coronalis sighed. "Did you follow me out here?"

"I heard you leave," Hob said. "I haven't slept well since Lind got sick. What made you come here?"

"A nightmare," Coronalis said.

Hob nodded toward the great tree. "You think the tree sent it?"

"No, it was an old nightmare. I went for a walk to clear my head and ended up here. Before I knew it, I was touching the tree. I didn't even think about it."

"What was it like?"

"Like having another nightmare while I was awake."

"I know what that's like," Hob said. "Don't need some great mystical tree for that."

"The tree has power, Hob. I felt it."

"There's something to the tree, no doubt," Hob said, "but there's a lot of things in this world I'll never understand. They work anyway. I just don't like saying God is speaking to us through it. What gives the gardeners the right to say that?"

"They tend the great tree." Coronalis gazed down at his burned palm. "And when it speaks, it's mostly through them."

"They're around the tree more than anyone else," Hob said, "of course it'd speak through them more often than not. And the tree didn't choose them to tend it. Their fathers did, like their fathers chose them. Besides, how do we know they're telling us what the tree really said?"

"I don't think the great tree would let them lie."



"Maybe," Hob said. "I'd ask you to lie about something now to test that, but you're not the lying type. You just don't talk about things. Where you're from and what's going on here. You like keeping things mysterious."

Coronalis looked at him. The light then flickered out as his lantern dissolved into dust near the ladder. Hob cursed in the red-tinted darkness under the leaves of the great tree.

"Told you," Coronalis said.

Hob relit his lantern. "There. So, you going to explain how your lantern just vanished or are we just going to say it's because of the tree? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. A man's allowed his secrets."

"Don't you want to know?" Coronalis asked.

"Sure," he replied, "but you never know who else is listening."

Hob nodded toward the great tree and, from around its side, a gardener appeared. He removed the hood of his green robe, revealing a wrinkled bald head and slanted brown eyes.

"Pardon me, friends. I thought I heard voices."

"You thought you heard voices?" Hob asked. "Or you've been listening to us the whole time?"

"And if so?" The gardener stepped closer. "The area around the Quercus Metatron is the domain of the gardeners."

"But the great tree speaks to whomever it chooses." Coronalis held up his burned hand for the gardener to see.

The gardener nodded. "Then you know."

"Know what?" Hob asked, his eyebrows scrunched in confusion. "Is something bad going to happen? If it is, I should know. Everyone should!"

"Everyone will soon enough," the gardener said. He closed his eyes momentarily. "However, if you must know now, Glimmerick will be destroyed."

"What?" Hob shot up to his feet.

Coronalis touched Hob's knee. "It's true. The destroyer is two nights away from here."

Hob looked from Coronalis to the gardener. "What are you two talking about?"

"The Tree Voice of God warned us only hours ago," the gardener said. "Our destroyer goes by

the name of Ludgate, an Apollyon of the Chakra, an order of human sorcerers who practice annihilation and fire magic. An Apollyon alone is said to be able to burn away entire armies. We've already sent riders to neighbouring cities for help."

"But why us?" Hob asked. "Why now?"

"Ludgate only recently came to this part of the world," Coronalis said. "We're probably just the first city in his way. He's a fanatic. It's all a sacrifice to the Earth itself. He thinks he's burning away the parts that no longer work."

"And we weren't the first city in his way," the gardener said.

Coronalis and Hob stared at him.

"Summermore burned yesterday morning," he said. "The elves are gone."

"Any survivors?" Coronalis asked.

"Our riders are looking, but haven't found any yet."

Hob shook his head. "All these lives. God, how could that happen so quickly? Didn't they try to fight?"

"They did," the gardener said.

"Well, maybe they helped wear this destroyer down a little," Hob said. "We have to start waking people up and telling them. We've got to form up our army and everyone's got to fight in it. This is our city and we can't just let one man end us."

"If the elves couldn't defeat Ludgate," the gardener said, "I doubt we can."

"But we'll get help," Hob said. "Other cities will send their armies. And you gardeners can touch the tree and ask it what to do."

"The great tree already has," Coronalis said. "It wants us all to run while we still have time. Ludgate can burn down an empty city."

"As we speak," the gardener said, "the High Government is debating evacuations and battle strategy. A defence of some kind will be mounted, even if it's only to buy time for the evacuees."

"It's been years since Glimmerick's been at war," Hob said, "but I served my time then and I'm willing to now. If this sorcerer is as bad as you say, we're going to need everyone we can get on the front line."

“Hob,” Coronalis said, “you need to take Lind out of the city.”

“She couldn’t make it out of the city on her own and I don’t know if I can move her! Besides, I can’t just leave my shop behind. That’s my whole life there!”

“Who’ll watch Lind if you sign up with the army?”

“You will, or we’ll find someone else if you sign up too.”

“It’s suicide, Hob.”

“He already torched one city, Coronalis. Do you really want to just let him torch ours without a fight?”

Hob reminded Coronalis of the people of Estar that last day. The defence service had given every man, woman, and child a job, even if it was only to work in the kitchens. An entire city united should have beaten back one man. Before the battle, Coronalis had certainly thought that they would. He knew better now.

“I’m sorry, Hob,” he said, “but I’ll be gone by morning. I’ll help with Lind if you two come with.”

“And when this destroyer shows up at the next city,” Hob said, “are we going to run away again?”

“That wouldn’t be unwise,” the gardener said. “If you’ll excuse me, friends, I have other people to speak with.” He quietly strode around to the other side of the great tree.

Hob ran his hands through his hair.

“How’s a man supposed to know what to do in a time like this?”

Coronalis put his hand on Hob’s shoulder, but the older man pulled away.

“I have to get back to Lind,” he said. “I shouldn’t have left her alone for so long.”

He dashed up the three stairs back into the city. Coronalis thought about trying to catch up to Hob, but he had already vanished up ahead.



Two nights later, soldiers filled the forests around Glimmerick. As Coronalis snuck through the ranks, he listened to the chatter about the Quercus Metatron’s miraculous aid.

A few hours earlier, everyone’s armour had suddenly grown spikes, then become bulkier, yet also lighter. Their swords and spears became longer, sharper. They also found additional ammunition for the catapults, enough to bury more than a few small towns.

With his helmet on, no one could see Coronalis’s eyes bleeding red and silver. He didn’t know how long he could keep up this much magic, having never tried anything on this scale before.

He found Hob near the city walls.

“Coronalis?” Hob took off his helmet to see him better. “Is that you?”

Coronalis nodded. “Where’s Lind?”

“She’s with the gardeners. They said they’d look after her. They made up this wagon for her. If things go bad, they’ll take her along with the other evacuees.”

Hob put his helmet back on, its visor wider now, making it easier for him to see. He paused, noticing the difference.

A battle cry sounded. The troops began to move out.

Hob told Coronalis, “I’m glad you’re here.”

Unsheathing his sword, Coronalis followed him into the front line.

Ahead, he saw a single figure approaching the army, a red shadow dragging a pulsing blue star the size of a small house. The grass withered as he came, and the forests caught fire. The air sweltered and hot sweat dripped off Coronalis’s brow.

He couldn’t believe that was actually a man. The mere sight made his knees shake and he held in a mouthful of vomit. He wanted to run away like he had done at Estar and like he had tried to do here two nights ago.

Coronalis had then realised he couldn’t just leave Hob and Lind behind, but he couldn’t drag them along after him. Wherever he went, it wouldn’t be their home.

And he didn’t want to run forever. Everyone had to stop somewhere, and it might as well be a place they could call home. And he knew that, if he truly wanted to belong somewhere, he had to fight for it.

He led Glimmerick’s charge at their enemy. TOF

La Tierra de la Sangre

Benjamin Sperduto

The cannonball sailed over the bow of the French merchant ship, narrowly missing main deck where sailors were diving for cover. From his vantage point several hundred yards away, Julian Singer watched the ship's sails, waiting for the Frenchmen to have the good sense to take them in and surrender without making trouble. But the ship sailed onward, its sails full with wind and the sailors no doubt full with false hopes of escape.

"Rutger?" Singer said.

"Aye, Captain?"

"Bring one of her masts down."

"Aye, sir!" The big Dutchman relayed the order and ranges to the men below deck and soon the air trembled from the discharge of cannons. Singer watched the main sail of the French ship rip apart and its mast shred under a hail of cannon fire. The mast wavered for a moment before it fell, nearly tipping the ship on its side as it tumbled into the choppy sea. The French sailors scrambled to cut the rigging loose from the sinking mast. As they worked, a well-dressed Frenchman leaned over the side of the ship and

waved a tattered piece of white sail to signal their surrender.

Singer turned to the Chinese woman at his side. "Song, have the men ready hooks and prepare to board."

"Aye, Captain."

"Bring us up alongside her!"

The *Wraith* glided across the water towards the French ship with astounding speed for a ship its size. There was no vessel like it in the Caribbean, at least none Singer knew of. It was of Chinese design and manufacture, rigged with massive junk sails instead of European-style square rigs. Singer had yet to meet its match for speed and manoeuvrability in all the Caribbean.

Song had readied the boarding party long before the *Wraith* manoeuvred abreast of the French ship. When they were close enough, they threw their hooks over and pulled the ships against one another. The French sailors held their hands up as Singer's men swarmed on board, swords and muskets at the ready. Singer crossed over as the sailors were being rounded up and asked one of them a question in French, which he spoke fluently.

He saw confusion on the sailor's face and knew then that something was wrong.

"Captain!" Song said. "Sails to port!"

Singer turned and saw two frigates flying British colours bearing down on them from the east. He wondered that he hadn't seen them moments ago in that vast expanse of water. Then the air around them shimmered and three more frigates of the Royal Navy appeared out of thin air.

"It's a trap!" Singer said. "Get back to the *Wraith*! Now!"

Just as the pirates made to retreat, British soldiers burst forth from the doors and hatches that led below the deck of the French ship, each carrying a loaded musket. Singer drew his pistol and fired a shot from each barrel. The bullets scarcely found their marks before his men followed his lead and opened fire. But these soldiers were British regulars, not the cowardly washouts that normally protected merchant vessels. They didn't panic or retreat, instead diligently forming ranks and firing as one to cut down Singer's men in bunches. Less than half of them made it back to the *Wraith* as it pushed off from the decoy ship. A few of the British soldiers leapt across the growing gap between the two ships but were met in the air by a volley of musket fire.

"Rutger!" Singer said, calling out over the cacophony of gunfire.

"Aye, Captain!" Rutger said, coming to his captain's side. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Ready the guns and sink that damned ship!"

"Already done, Captain!"

The big Dutchman cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted to the men manning the *Wraith's* cannons below deck.

"Fire!"

The starboard side of the targeted ship exploded as the *Wraith's* heavy guns fired, sending a thick cloud of splintered wood into the air. Only a few of Singer's men were injured from the explosion, but the decoy had nearly capsized, with much of its starboard side now floating in a thin layer of pulverised wood upon the surface of the water.

"Bring her about," Singer said, making his way back to the helm. "And get those cannons reloaded!"

When he reached the stern of the ship, he got a better view of the pursuing British frigates. They were closing in quickly, much faster than they should have been considering the strength of the wind. He fetched his looking glass for a closer look at them. Song joined him just as he brought the ships into focus.

"Anyone we know, Captain?"

"I can't make out the names, but they don't look familiar. Must be some new foolhardy captain the British called in to stir things up."

"Moving a bit fast for this wind, aren't they?"

Singer didn't answer; he was too busy inspecting the ships' sails. At first he thought it was a trick of the sunlight reflecting off the water that made them appear to shimmer, but he quickly realised it was a sign of something far more ominous.

"They've bewitched the sails," he said.

"What? Since when does the high and holy Royal Navy employ sorcerers?"

"Since now, apparently," Singer said. "That would explain how they appeared right out of thin air as well."

"Can we outrun them?"

Singer looked at the *Wraith's* junk sails. There was enough wind in them to escape a common frigate, but there was no way of knowing how much their pursuers' speed would be aided by sorcery. His eyes turned back to the British ships.

They were closing far too fast. Two of the ships were already breaking off from the others to hem them in and prevent their escape into the open sea to the east, where Singer guessed they would be able to outrun them, enchanted sails or not. Soon they would turn and open up with their cannons from an angle that would prevent the *Wraith* from returning fire. Some distance to the west, he knew, were the northernmost islands of the Gulf of Honduras. If they could reach those islands, Singer thought, the *Wraith's* superior manoeuvrability gave them a chance of escape, however small.

"We can't make it around them," he said.

"Our only chance is to head west for the islands. We might be able to lose them in there."

"Captain... you realise that takes us terribly close to Mexico, don't you?"

"Right now it's the best chance we've got. If we're lucky, they won't want to risk their ships in the shallows; and if they've got any sense, they won't follow us any closer to the mainland."

Song said nothing for a moment, then sighed and nodded. "What are your orders, Captain?"

"Change our heading; make for those islands as fast as possible."

"Aye, Captain."

The crew adjusted the *Wraith's* massive sails and it nimbly swung westward. It gained speed as it straightened out and closed in on the distant islands swiftly. The British ships continued to gain on them, but not so quickly as before. Singer saw that they would make it to the shallow waters around the islands well ahead of the frigates.

The little relief he felt was short-lived, however, for just as the *Wraith* passed the small, outermost island, the British ships became blurry, waved in the wind like smoke, then disappeared.

"They've vanished again!" Singer said. "Every man keep a sharp eye! Song, get up here!"

His first mate quickly answered her captain's call. "Aye, Captain?"

"Get a man up in the lookout baskets and post spotters all around the ship. I don't want those bastards sneaking up on us again. Tell them to keep their eyes on the water for wake; it's the only part of the ship that sorcery can't hide – unless they have a very, very powerful sorcerer on board. And make sure they know to keep a watch out for... anything else that could be in these waters."

"Understood, Captain."

As Song left, Singer shouted down to Rutger, who continued to bark orders at anyone who got in his way or looked even slightly unproductive. "Rutger!"

"Aye, Captain?"

"I want those guns ready to fire at a moment's notice, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"And break the rest of the muskets and pistols out of storage; we might be needing them soon."

"Aye, Captain!"

The ship's crew fell unusually quiet. It was as if they feared that the slightest noise might cause the British ships to appear right alongside them at any moment. Singer knew the real reason for their unease, however. Every league they traversed brought them closer to the coast of Mexico, the one place in all the Caribbean that no sailor wished to visit under any circumstances. The lure of gold still brought many foolish opportunists to its shores, but few of them ever returned to a European settlement. Although maps identified it as Mexico, most people found the name used by Spanish sailors to be more appropriate: La Tierra de la Sangre, The Land of Blood.

After over an hour of weaving through the islands, Singer went down to the main deck to speak with Song. He found her at the bow of the ship, her sharp eyes scanning the path before them intently.

"Any sign?" he said.

"None."

"It could be we've lost them in here. We'll wait another few hours and then make a run for it if we're still clear. Even if they spot us, those enchantments aren't going to hold out forever. If they've got a sorcerer on board, I doubt he can keep channelling that kind of power all day long. Even a warlock has to sleep."

"How many do you think they have?"

"Well, even with five ships they could probably get by with only one if he was powerful enough. Besides, I can't imagine they've managed to get any more than one or two just to hunt down a band of pirates."

"Didn't the British outlaw sorcery on the high seas?"

"Unsanctioned sorcery is against British law and punishable by death, yes. But there's no law stating that the British can't employ one like any other sailor. Typical British hypocrisy."

"Do you think this is something we should start expecting from every British ship?"

"I would doubt it," Singer said. "Sorcerers are

too bloody unpredictable for those elitists in the Royal Navy.”

“And for other Englishman as well, it would seem,” Song said.

“Wait, you’re not saying that...?”

“It just would have been nice to have someone on board able to spot those British frigates before they appeared out of thin air, or to know that what looked like a French merchant ship had a hold filled with British regulars.”

“It’s frightfully bad luck bringing a sorcerer aboard, Song. You should know better than anyone that they all go crazy sooner or later. Remember what Delamarcus did to that customs official in Havana? Or what Zedain did to the governor of Santo Domingo after that game of chess? There was a reason your father wouldn’t even allow a sorcerer to set foot on his ship.”

Song nodded. “I know, Captain, you’re right. It’s just that I wish we could have been a little more prepared this afternoon. Have you considered...?”

The two pirates felt the *Wraith* shift strangely and they both looked back to the main body of the ship. Its sails hung limply from their rigging.

“That’s odd,” Singer said, “the wind just died. I wonder what...”

His eyes widened when he realised what had happened, and suddenly even the threat of the British frigates became a secondary concern.

“Sails to port! Sails to port!”

The warning calls were quickly consumed by the thunder of cannon fire from the British frigate that appeared suddenly alongside the *Wraith*. Cannon balls ripped into the *Wraith*’s port side as its guns returned fire. Although Singer’s ship had the frigate outgunned, two more of them appeared off to the starboard and immediately opened fire. Boxed in by islands and her enemies and without the aid of a strong wind, the *Wraith* was exposed and vulnerable in the narrow shallows. By the time the final two frigates appeared in the already crowded waters, one at the bow and one at the stern, Singer’s ship was being torn apart as the British pounded its hull and deck with sheets of cannon and musket fire.

After several minutes, the British ceased their

bombardment. Singer picked himself up off the deck and surveyed the destruction. It appeared that at least half his men were dead or wounded. The *Wraith*’s hull, damaged as it was, didn’t seem to be breached, but it was possible that there was a slow leak or two he couldn’t see below the water level. Amazingly, the ship’s masts and sails looked to be undamaged, though without any wind they were all but useless.

“Ahoy, there! I wish to speak to the captain of the *Wraith*!”

Singer turned towards the voice and saw a British officer standing importantly along the railing of the frigate to their port side. For a moment, he seriously considered shooting the man.

“Aye, this is Captain Singer!” he said.

“Captain, I sincerely hope that you are willing to discuss the terms of your surrender? It would be a shame to send that fine ship of yours to the bottom of the ocean when we can settle this like civilised men. Surrender now and our guns will remain stilled. Otherwise, we shall resume our bombardment until your ship has been reduced to pulp. What say you, Captain Singer?”

Singer looked over to Song, who had already drawn her sword and pistol. For a moment, he considered joining her in a last, futile stand against the countrymen he so despised. Then he looked down at the men who remained on the deck of the *Wraith*. Many of them were severely wounded and would die soon if they didn’t receive some kind of attention. He knew that not all of them would be condemned to death if they were taken into custody, whereas resisting the British would certainly mean death for each and every one of them.

“Name your terms,” Singer said, letting his pistol drop to the floor. His men followed his lead, though Song hesitated. Nothing was said between them; they knew each other well enough to make conversation all but superfluous. After several minutes, she too laid down her sword and pistol.

There was still no wind between the islands so the British got into their lifeboats and rowed over to the pirate ship. When enough soldiers were on hand, the British commander joined

them. While the British disarmed the pirates, he walked over to Singer, who was under heavy guard.

"Julian Singer," he said, "I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to meet you, especially under the circumstances. Allow me to introduce myself; my name is Captain Christopher Hayward. You'll be pleased to know that I've gone to considerable trouble to spring this little trap for you."

"I'm touched," Singer said.

"I expect we'll be finding quite a haul of the crown's property today, eh?" Hayward said.

"A pity, that," Singer said. "Afraid we spent it all on women and drink when we last made port."

"I see. You disappoint me, Singer. I'd expected more from an Englishman. At least some measure of civilised behaviour or restraint with respect to such vices, you understand? Well, I suppose your ship will have to stand in place of your ill-gotten gains for the time being. Come along then."

The British soldiers tied up Singer's crew with lengths of rope. Hayward had Song and Rutger bound securely and brought over to stand alongside their captain.

"So this would be the fearsome Song Jin, I presume?" Hayward said, eyeing her slender, muscular frame lustily. "Yet another mark of barbarism, I'm afraid. Where else but among pirates could a woman hope to win a place as first mate? That must be some influence you have with your captain, my dear." He reached out to caress her cheek but something in her expression made him reconsider and he retracted his hand.

Hayward turned then to Rutger, who was nearly a full head taller than everyone around him.

"Ah, Mister Brachoven, isn't it? Certainly the mountain of a man I'd been led to expect. A pity you never sought work with the Royal Navy; we could have offered a great deal more to a man of your talents than this lot of brigands."

Rutger spat in Hayward's face and snarled something foul in Dutch. Hayward wiped his face clean and smiled.

"Private," he said, gesturing to the soldier standing behind Rutger. The soldier slammed the stock of his musket against the Dutchman's skull and sent him tumbling to his knees.

"You'll have plenty of time to learn proper manners before your engagement with the hangman, Mister Brachoven," Hayward said. "At least do your race the honour of dying like a civilised man and not like some brutish thug."

Singer tuned out the captain's voice and glanced up at the sails of the British ships. They were as still as the *Wraith's*. None of their captors seemed to be concerned by it. He guessed that they were no more than ten miles from the coast of Mexico; too close for the lack of wind to be a coincidence.

"You've never sailed these waters, have you, Captain?" Singer said.

Hayward walked back over to him and smirked. "If I had, I can assure you that you'd have been hanged long ago."

"Just in from Europe, then?"

"I helped to stamp out piracy in the Mediterranean if you must know, Mister Singer. Although I'm afraid the scoundrels there offered more of a challenge than your little band of miscreants. I had expected more from a man of your reputation and blood."

Singer nodded, then glanced back up to the *Wraith's* sails. "The air's a bit still, don't you think, Captain?"

Hayward's smile lost a bit of its arrogance as he turned his eyes to the sails. "An inconvenience," he said. "I've a man who can call upon a wind if one doesn't present itself."

"Oh, of course," Singer said. "Perhaps you should look in on that?"

"I'll be the judge of what needs looking in on, Mister Singer. Or have you forgotten your place so quickly?"

Singer shrugged.

"Merely a suggestion. Do whatever you like."

British soldiers herded the pirates into the lifeboats and rowed them over to Captain Hayward's ship. There the captives were lined up on the deck so they could be counted and their arrests recorded in the ship's logbook. The British left the *Wraith* unattended.

Singer, Song, and Rutger kept their eyes on the horizon, watching for signs of movement as they were pushed into line on the frigate's deck. Captain Hayward accompanied them and summoned to his side a thin man who was not dressed in the uniform of a British soldier or sailor. His clothing was of finely woven silk and winding, serpentine tattoos covered much of his exposed skin. Singer had little doubt of the man's expertise and trade.

There weren't many sorcerers willing to leave the cloistered confines of their libraries for the open seas and Singer made a point of knowing what flags those few sailed under. He knew the major sorcerers of the Caribbean on sight, but this man was unfamiliar. It took a great deal of power and focus to completely conceal five frigates, along with their wake, from the human eye and Singer found it difficult to believe that he'd never encountered this sorcerer before. Perhaps Hayward had brought him over from Europe, he thought, an associate from his days in the Mediterranean.

Singer was too far away to hear their conversation, but it was quite tense and Hayward was clearly angered by what the sorcerer had to say. He stormed over to them and barked orders to the soldiers standing guard.

"Get this rabble below deck! Now!"

"Problem with calling up that wind of yours, Captain?" Singer said.

Hayward's eyes fixed on Singer and he grasped the pirate by his shirt.

"If you have something to say, pirate, then out with it! Otherwise, we have nothing to discuss until your day at the gallows."

"Does this ship have oars?"

"What?"

"Oars, you know, the sort you row with?"

Hayward's face darkened at Singer's comment; then he drew back his fist and punched him. The pirate fell to the deck, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. Hayward loomed over him, hand upon his rapier. All traces of civility had vanished from his demeanour and Singer recognised the pitiless eyes of a killer.

"Try my patience again, Singer, and I'll have you shot where you stand."

Singer spat blood onto the deck as he got to his feet. "Do what you want, Hayward. If you don't have any way of moving this ship without the wind, we're all going to die anyway."

"What are you...?"

"Captain Hayward!" The cry came from a British sailor positioned in the lookout nest atop the frigate's mast. "Look there! Off the starboard bow!"

Everyone on deck turned to look in the indicated direction and a dread silence overtook them all. There, about four hundred yards out, was a small island, and sailing around it was what looked like nothing so much as a floating city. The vessel was massive, dwarfing even the great Chinese treasure ships that plied the waters of the South Pacific. Dozens of parapets and towers reached skyward from its immense base and in the centre there rose a tiered pyramid that rose easily twice as high as the masts of the *Wraith*. Hundreds of oars protruded from its base, rowing rhythmically to the steady beat of drums that emanated from somewhere deep within the stone behemoth.

"What in God's name is that?" Hayward said, his voice little more than a whisper.

"That, my dear Captain Hayward," Singer said, "is an Aztec dreadnaught."

Singer could have explained to Hayward how such an amazing sight was possible, that the great stone ship was kept afloat by foul heathen magic, that after their defeat of Cortes and his Conquistadors almost two centuries earlier they forged an immense land empire that kept the European powers out of Central America, and that their invincible dreadnaughts now threatened to carry their might into the Caribbean. He could have revealed even more, such as how the vessel's dark magic negated the winds for nearly half a mile around it, but Hayward appeared to be in such a state of shock that there would be little point in wasting his breath.

The dreadnaught's forward cannons opened fire and one of the British frigates was torn in half and erupted in flame. Most of the British sailors stared in disbelief of the flaming wreckage, but a few ran screaming to take cover below deck or throw themselves overboard. They all

but ignored their newly won captives and the pirates worked to free themselves from their bonds.

Hayward looked to his sorcerous companion, but the warlock ignored him. Instead he began to chant a series of incantations and waved his arms like man caught up in quicksand. Singer knew enough to avert his eyes before a flash of light consumed the sorcerer. When he looked again, the strange man was gone. Hayward stood oblivious to the confusion that consumed his ship, his eyes fixed dumbly at the space previously occupied by his hired warlock.

Singer took advantage of the Englishman's distress and threw himself forward to knock Hayward to the deck. By the time he rolled away, Song managed to free herself and retrieve a sword. She cut first his bonds and then Rutger's as Hayward fled out of sight. The three companions then made their way through the mob of panicked sailors and down to the main deck where most of the pirates had already freed themselves and gathered their weapons.

"Get back to the *Wraith!*" Singer said, shouting over the chaos that continued to erupt around them. The Aztecs fired a second volley from their heavy cannons and another frigate burst into flames. As the dreadnaught drew closer, it opened fire with its smaller cannons, raining shot down upon the British ships.

Most of the pirates jumped overboard and swam the short distance to the *Wraith*. A few took the time to find a boat, but most of them were capsized by stray cannon shot and flaming debris. Singer, Song, and Rutger swam the distance and climbed up the broken sides of the *Wraith's* hull to reach the deck. They hurried to cast ropes over the sides so that the rest of their fleeing crew could get aboard more easily.

"Run out the sweeps!" Singer said after about a dozen of his men climbed up to the deck. Some of them were still in a state of shock, but Rutger quickly got their attention with his thundering voice.

"You heard the Captain! Get below deck and man the oars, you dogs!"

"Song," Singer said, "we need to ditch weight. See that anything we can do without is lost."

"Aye, Captain," she said and quickly picked out a handful of wet pirates to help her toss overboard most anything that wasn't nailed down.

Singer ran to the stern of the ship to man the helm and rudder. Rutger and the men below deck deployed the racks of oars stowed in the bottom of the ship and got the *Wraith* moving again. Looking back, Singer saw that the Aztecs were less than two hundred yards away. The dreadnaught's guns were silent, but now a horde of Aztec warriors swarmed down from its stone walls to overwhelm the surviving British sailors with musket fire and steel. Only two of the British frigates remained relatively intact, but both of them had been boarded and would soon join the others at the bottom of the sea.

The *Wraith* picked up speed as more crewmen went below deck to man the sweeps and more cargo was dumped overboard. Singer dared to hope that the Aztecs wouldn't give chase; that they would be satisfied with the destruction of the five British ships that had encroached on their shores. The distance between them continued to grow and Singer soon had to resort to using his looking glass to check for any indication of pursuit. There was none; the Aztecs were too busy rounding up their captives and taking them aboard their massive vessel. Then a slight breeze whipped across the deck of the ship and the *Wraith's* sails fluttered to life.

"The wind is back! We're out of range!"

A roar of cheers sounded from the men on deck as they moved quickly to tend to the ship's rigging.

"Song," Singer said, "tell Rutger to stow the sweeps and get those men back..."

"Captain," one of the pirates said, "the wind!"

Singer's eyes snapped back to the *Wraith's* sails in time to see them go limp. He spun around and reached for his looking glass, but he didn't need it to see that the Aztec dreadnaught was bearing down on them with uncanny speed. Song came up from the main deck to see what held her captain's attention.

"It's not possible," she said. "I've never seen one move so fast before!"

Singer grunted and brought the stone ship into focus in his looking glass. Its oars were stowed



in a fixed, upright position and yet it still barrelled towards them with the speed of a sailed ship. He looked more closely, focusing on signs of activity atop the pyramid that rose from the dreadnaught's centre, where an unspeakably horrible ritual was being performed by one of the dreaded Aztec sorcerer priests. The whole peak of the pyramid pulsed with a faint, red light.

"They're working some kind of sorcery," Singer said.

He lowered the looking glass.

"How far away do you suppose they are?"

"Eight, nine hundred yards, maybe," Song said.

"Take the helm. And keep an eye on them, we're probably in range of their forward guns."

Song took the rudder controls as Singer bounded down to the main deck and made for his cabin. The British hadn't had an opportunity to rummage through the ship when they were captured and he found everything as he left it. He reached under his bunk and pulled out a large case, which he opened to reveal an exquisitely crafted musket. The musket's metal parts were plated with polished gold and the intricate dragon patterns carved into the wood were filled with gold as well. He took the gun and a handful of the bullets from a small compartment in the case.

Before Singer made it out of the cabin door, he heard the familiar booming of the Aztec forward mounted cannons. The *Wraith* pitched to and fro as the sea heaved violently; the first volley hadn't missed them by much.

Singer ran back out to the deck and joined Song at the stern of the ship. The Aztec dreadnaught was much closer now, no more than four hundred yards.

"Song, give me your powder."

"Is that Zhi Si Long?" Song said as she handed over the small bag of gunpowder that hung from her belt.

Singer's musket was well named: Deadly Dragon. He had received it as a gift from an old friend during his years of piracy in Asia. Much like the *Wraith*, he had never seen its equal. Its

long barrel was rifled, allowing him to shoot farther and straighter than he could with an ordinary musket.

"I've got to kill that priest," he said, loading powder and bullet into the musket, "whatever he's doing up there is making them move faster. Keep us weaving to and fro; they've likely got the cannons reloaded by now."

As if to confirm his hunch, the dreadnaught's forward guns thundered to life again. The cannonballs missed their mark, but they were close enough for Singer to hear them whistling by.

"Alright," Singer said, "I'm loaded, hold her steady, now!"

Singer flipped the musket's sights into place and took aim at the peak of the dreadnaught's central pyramid. It was a difficult shot: a distance of nearly four hundred yards complicated by the pitching and yawing of two seaborne vessels. He took aim for several seconds and fired.

The bullet sailed wide of its mark, missing the priest by more than a yard to his left. He didn't even appear to notice he'd been shot at.

"Damn!"

"What happened?" Song said.

"I bloody missed him, that's what!"

Singer reloaded quickly, but not before another volley of cannon fire shot towards them. This time, one of the cannonballs found its mark and ripped through a section of the upper deck. The *Wraith* shuddered but continued its steady forward progress. Crewmen scrambled to douse the fire left behind by the shot before it had a chance to spread.

By the time Singer was ready to fire again, the dreadnaught was just under three hundred yards away. He knew that if he missed a second time, he might not get another chance.

"Keep her levelled out, Song," he said, raising the musket to take aim. The shorter distance made the shot a little less daunting, but there was no way to compensate for the movement of the two ships. Singer aimed, took a deep breath, and pulled the trigger.

A true marksman is never in doubt. Singer could see in his mind the priest thrown backwards by the force of the bullet punching through his chest before his eyes watched it hap-

pen. What he didn't expect was the explosion of fire and smoke that erupted from the top of the pyramid and made the whole dreadnaught shudder. For a moment, it seemed ready to sink, the waves lashing up its steep walls like some ravenous sea monster, but then the oars lowered and the ship stabilised. Its speed declined noticeably until it seemed to be standing completely still. When the smoke around the pyramid cleared, there was only a charred ruin in place of the peak.

"What happened?" Song said. "Did you hit him?"

"Aye, I hit him. Killing him must have set loose whatever magic he was trying to channel. Blasted the whole top of the ship away."

"Are they still following us?"

"No, it looks like they've stopped."

Singer took up his looking glass and watched them intently for signs of pursuit, but the ship didn't move. After a few minutes passed, the winds picked up again and the *Wraith* accelerated quickly across the choppy water. Singer watched the Aztec ship until it finally disappeared over the horizon. He needn't have bothered, for after the *Wraith* reached top speed in the open sea, the Aztecs would never catch them, even with the aid of their bloody sorcery.

When the sails were properly positioned, Singer took over at the helm and sent Song below deck to tell Rutger to stow the sweeps. She was gone for some time, leaving him to ponder their next move. He still had to find out how badly the British frigates had damaged the *Wraith's* hull as well as take an inventory of everything they'd tossed overboard in their desperate escape. For the time being, however, he was too happy to be alive and free to worry about a few minor, if expensive, inconveniences.

Song returned after several minutes, smiling and struggling to restrain laughter.

"Rutger has something to show you below deck, Captain. Let me take over here."

Singer knew better than to ask questions and stepped aside to let his first mate manage the ship. When he found Rutger below deck, the big

Dutchman was finishing up shackling a man to one of the heavy cannons. An empty powder sack covered the prisoner's head completely.

"What's going on here?"

"Oh, hello there, Captain. Song tells me that was a fancy piece of shooting you did up there to hit that Azzie priest."

"Rutger, you didn't call me down here to pat me on the back for my marksmanship. What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing wrong here, Captain," Rutger said, his voice nearly breaking into laughter. "We've just got ourselves a little stowaway here, is all."

He pulled the powder sack from his captive's head. "But we've got it all under control now, ain't that so, Captain Hayward?"

Singer couldn't help but smile at the sight of the British commander's tear-streaked face and quivering lips. "Christopher Hayward," he said. "I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to meet you again, especially under the circumstances."

"Piss off, Singer," Hayward said, his voice sobbing and petulant.

"Now, now, Captain, that's no way to behave! We've got a long voyage ahead of us and I would hate for us to get off to a bad start."

Hayward spat on his boot.

"The Captain told you to mind your manners," Rutger said. He raised his boot and kicked Hayward in the head.

"Rutger," said Singer, still smiling, "that's no way to treat a guest from such an esteemed institution as the Royal Navy. It's just not civilised."

"Aye, sir. My apologies."

"Clearly Captain Hayward is overwrought with grief over the men he left behind to die at the hands of the Aztecs. Such a tragedy, don't you agree?"

"Aye."

"You'll hang for this, Singer," Hayward said.

"Well, we can talk about that once you've recovered a bit of that gentlemanly demeanour of yours, Captain Hayward. Rutger?"

"Aye, Captain?"

"Lock this rabble in the brig until he's ready to act like a civilised Englishman, will you?"

"With pleasure, sir."

tales of yxning

Prior to his birth, there was an exceptional frost over the land, causing dozens of crows to fall dead out of the trees. Weebly's mother dreamt that she gave birth to a great aurochs, brown and hairy, and with long horns, which became ruler of the meadows, and was crowned with a wreath of laurel.

There were other portents: bubbles were seen in the beer in the form of a witch's hat, and a slab of knockwurst, when cut, dripped blood out onto the table. All the doors of the castle developed an exceedingly ominous creak, and a little grey mouse was seen chasing after a black cat.

Having all the status that the son of a stable boy and a kitchen maid might command, Weebly Pumrod found that his share of food was generally only a scintilla above the leavings that would be thrown away. His father had run off soon after he was born, and his mother had trouble enough feeding herself. He grew up short, thin, and hungry, yet he worked hard.

One day the other stable boys goaded him into trying to ride a large unruly brown stallion. Much to everyone's surprise, he made an excellent jockey.

In the spring after he turned 17, Weebly Pumrod fled the stables of the Earl of Sprentwick and set out on his own for a career as a professional jockey.

Many were the fairs and festivals of the Lesser States that year, and each one had a horse race for Weebly to ride in. How he loved the sound of the horn announcing the start of a race!

His success was unprecedented and he ended up with a fat purse of gold and silver in the town of Freshbrook. Here he booked passage down the Ulzie River on the SS Blabberkessens with the hope of riding in a late summer fair in the town of Swarte Swannen.

As they pulled away from the town, Weebly sat out on the open deck and admired the beautiful wooded scenery, occasionally broken by the

the tragical history of weebly pumrod, witch hunter

Bruce Hesselbach

small clearing of a ramshackle dwelling, maybe a few sheep, and here and there a cow.

A large muscular blonde man sat next to him. "Nice day we're having, preacher," he said.

"I'm not a preacher," Weebly replied. "I'm a jockey."

"Oh. Yren Higbe's the name. Pleased to meet you."

"Aren't you the famous wrestler? I saw a sign about you at the fair in Drompelsnert."

"Yes, that's me, in the flesh," he said. "I'm going to a wrestling match in Saferus."

"I'm Weebly Pumrod. I'm going further downstream, but I suppose we'll have a stopover at Saferus."

"Sure we will. And in the meantime, we can have ourselves some fun right here."

What Yren Higbe had in mind was some gambling, with passengers betting on his ability to win at arm wrestling. As their boat drifted downstream past Ick Rock, Nerdsbridge, Caulo-

nia and Molaus, Weebly and his friend Yren raked in the loot time and time again. Weebly even won a dark suit of clothes in his size from a short merchant.

"That'll serve the turn if you ever have to go to a funeral," Yren Higbe said.

When they landed in Saferus for a two-day stopover, Weebly and Yren hit every tavern in town. It was there that Weebly met Phyllis, a beautiful young barmaid with blue eyes and dark brown hair. Yren Higbe made the acquaintance of Doris, a very affectionate redhead.

Weebly did all that he could to help Yren impress Doris, thereby earning Yren's undying gratitude.

Much as Weebly regretted that he could not stay for Yren Higbe's wrestling match, it was not feasible. Vowing they would meet up with him again, Weebly and Phyllis returned to the SS Blabberkessens which drifted off to the southwest.

Among the crowds of new passengers were three large, tough looking wine merchants named Ted, Fred, and Ned. Before long, the three of them started teaching Weebly and other crew members the joys of a card game called "Maw".

"I'll stand behind you and give you good luck," Phyllis told Weebly.

The boat drifted downstream past the town of Eaxlegrece, where some old graphite deposits used for lubrication had nurtured the manufacture of wagons and carriages. Weebly generally seemed lucky at first and won a number of hands. Then his luck started going sour.

The boat was approaching the town of Oyle, where large deposits of sulphur naphtha oozed into the river from a foul-smelling swamp. Weebly was in an epic game with the wine merchants. The stakes got higher and higher. To his horror, Weebly lost.

"Lucky for me I have another purse of gold hidden in my sack of clothes," Weebly thought. However, when the boat set sail from the dock at Oyle, Weebly found that the three wine dealers were gone, his girlfriend Phyllis was gone, and the last purse of gold was gone too. He was so worried and upset that he could not sleep a wink that night. When he did finally awaken, he learned that he had missed the town of Swarte Swannen, and was heading towards the swampy city of Bilgeport.

"What will I do? Where will I go?" Weebly said, distracted. When they arrived at Bilgeport, Weebly left the boat in his dark funereal suit, thinking to go find a cemetery and die there. On the way he stopped at a lonely bridge and started railing at the world. He railed at gambling; he railed at faithless loose women; he railed at sleeping late in the morning.

Suddenly he came to his senses as he heard loud applause. "You tell them, preacher!" rang out below. He looked over the side of the bridge and found that there was another road down there, and a large crowd had congregated. "Amen preacher!" they shouted. Mortified, he fled the bridge, but not before some ardent believers had pressed silver coins into his hands.

Weebly spent several days wandering south until finally he obtained a job as a horse trainer on a wealthy estate in Twadderly. He worked there for six years until war broke out between Lyvelode and Sandever. The two armies sent detachments everywhere throughout the lesser states requisitioning horses. Town fairs and festivals, and horse races, became extinct. Weebly survived by becoming a ploughman. Though he was small, he was strong. Weebly heard stories of wars, battles, plagues, and felt glad he was just an obscure hayseed.

Five years later there was a break in hostilities and Weebly learned that there was to be a wrestling match in Fafyntycoll, which was not too far from his old home in Sprentwick. Thinking that he might be able to visit his mother, and perhaps see his old friend Yren Higbe, he set out, poor as he was, on a decrepit old grey mare which was the most valuable thing he owned.

After travelling for several days, Weebly came to an old abandoned barn. "This looks like a good place to stop for the night," he thought. When he went inside, he found a man who had been beaten and tied by thieves.

"I'm the chamberlain of the Earl of Elrich," the man said. "Praise the Lord that you rescued me."

The Earl rewarded Weebly with 50 florins for saving his chamberlain, and promised Weebly a job if he ever needed one.

When Weebly went to Sprentwick, he found that the town had been decimated by the plague. His mother was dead, the old castle was abandoned and in ruins, and the stables where he once worked were now a field full of weeds with a few pieces of rotting wood here and there.

Returning to Elrich, Weebly was given the position of assistant porter. The work was dull compared to being a jockey or horse trainer, and he yearned for the days when he was out on his own going from festival to festival.

Then one day a detachment of dragoons came to the castle and asked for him. "Am I in trouble?" he thought. "What have I done?"

"The General has an assignment for you," the Captain said.

All that Weebly could imagine was that the

General wanted him to help train horses for a race.

General Aille was a tall, thin young man with very straight posture. "How would you like to be the mayor in charge of a city?" the General asked. "You will be a wealthy man, have a staff of assistants, and not need to do any real work for the rest of your life."

Weebly replied: "Sounds good to me, sir."

"All you need to do is assume the identity of an enemy I wish to eliminate. Would you be willing to do that?"

"Certainly."

And so it was that Weebly Pumrod became Seodd Whepwurm while the real Seodd Whepwurm was hung as an impostor. Weebly was then sent off to be mayor of Scaldwell, a city that Whepwurm had never visited.

Now this Seodd Whepwurm had been an itinerant preacher and a notorious witch hunter. Weebly was the very doppelganger of Whepwurm: a short, thin man, with one eyebrow perpetually higher than the other, a constant expression of ennui on his face, rather mousy brown hair receding at the temples, a mouth often left somewhat open due to a clogged nose, and a rather ridiculous goatee that looked like it had been stolen from a goat and glued on.

It appealed to General Aille's sense of revenge to have this clownish bumpkin take the place of Seodd Whepwurm. The witch hunter had taken an old friend of Aille's and burned her at the stake. Now that Aille was in charge of pacifying the newly conquered northern provinces, he needed to appoint men loyal to him and was short of prestigious leaders. Mountebank that he was, the real Whepwurm had had a certain amount of renown and something of a following. The City thought they were getting a famous preacher, not an assistant porter.

Aille had no idea whether Weebly could handle the task before him, but he gave him some good advice and hoped for the best. At the suggestion of General Aille, Weebly hired a scribe to do all his reading and writing for him. Weebly said, "My eyesight is getting bad, and you will do all this to help me save my vision." In fact, Weebly could not read or write a jot. He signed

his name as a big scrawl, not an actual letter in it.

The city of Scaldwell, a bustling entrepôt on the Nog River, was the capital of the northern province of Uppgang. Its robust economy was based on wool, furs, hides, a large monastery, medicinal hot springs, and some garnet mining. It was also considered the "egg nog capital of the world".

On the advice of General Aille, Weebly recruited a staff of assistants: one person recommended by the Abbott, one by the leading merchants of the town, one by the guild of tanners, and one old retired soldier. Weebly had not been in office more than a week when he got to attend the gala wedding of the daughter of the wealthiest merchant in town.

Throngs of people wandered back and forth under the canopies of large tents. Weebly soon began getting tipsy from all the wine available. What a celebration it was! There were musicians and jugglers everywhere, and beautiful women dressed in expensive gowns. It reminded him a bit of the fairs and festivals of his younger days, and then, suddenly, he saw him.

"Yren Higbe!" Weebly exclaimed.

When Yren Higbe saw him, his jaw dropped. "No, it can't be," he said.

Weebly took him aside and said, "I recognise you, Yren Higbe. Do you recognise me? Yes, I am really Weebly Pumrod, the jockey, but don't tell anyone. It's a big secret."

"That's fine with me, Your Honour," Higbe replied. "I'm Sir Higbe now. I was knighted for my cavalry service in the last war."

"That's great," Weebly smiled, his head spinning from the wine.

"Do you know, sir," Higbe said, "that you're in mortal danger? I hear that the witches of the province are planning to hex you to death for being a terrible witch hunter."

"Can you help me? You're a strong man. Maybe they'll listen to you."

"I'll think of something," Higbe promised. At that point, Weebly's assistants came up and dragged him off to meet the Countess of Old Stoogeborough.

Weebly thought to himself that he must be

having a nightmare, because the Countess was none other than Phyllis, that tart of a barmaid who robbed him blind on the Ulzie River. She still looked as beautiful as ever, albeit a bit more mature, in her gorgeous low-cut silk gown sewn with pearls, gold and rubies to show off her wealth.

Weebly could not help himself from glancing over his shoulders to his left and then to his right, and looking all around, every second expecting her three brawny goons to come up and waylay him. However, the only person who approached was her husband the Count, who was a short, shrivelled-up, superannuated prune of a man in very expensive raiment. He looked miserly and mean as a tough, gristly old rooster.

"By God," Weebly thought to himself, "what else could go wrong?"

He spent the rest of the ceremony fearing the looks of elderly women, whom he took to be witches, and dour old men, whom he took to be fanatical witch haters who would demand that he start burning witches at the stake.

"I would be better off in the stable," Weebly said.

"What did you say, sire?" asked the Abbott.

"Oh, the province is much better off now that it's stable," Weebly replied. "Let's pray for peace."

That evening, Yren Higbe rushed off to the home of Oemeo Prohorp, reputed to be the greatest wizard in Uppgang. Higbe gave him a purse of gold and begged him to do something to protect the Mayor of Scaldwell from his enemies, the witches.

Prohorp gazed into a mirror of polished coal. There he saw many witches, witches from Dracawyr, Caladrius, and Gloca Gessa. Witches from the mountains of Opinicus, Levurra, and Cwelen. Witches from the valleys of Choldewater, Galabrac and Crimpage. With bubbling cauldrons, they were casting spells that Seodd Whepwurm should never sleep again, that he should wander restless over the earth, and that he should kill himself.

The witches cackled and rose into the air and became crows, crows flying across the moon,

blotting out the moonlight and casting great moon shadows as they flew.

Prohorp pulled out a small pot and placed it in front of the mirror. He then poured into it from three silver flasks. "Freeze them! Freeze them!" he cried.

Great clouds gathered in the mirror. Snow and ice fell on the crows, and they began dropping from the sky. Higbe felt elated: his wizard had vanquished the evil witches. But then the scene changed.

Now the magic mirror showed a clearing in the Gwondian bog. Here was a swamp witch with fetishes and herbs on a table casting a doleful spell. "Aha!" Oemeo said. "She is casting a spell of fearsome beasts and tragedy."

"What will we do?" cried Yren Higbe.

"We will counter it with a spell of cute little animals and comedy," Oemeo replied. He began filling a pan with herbs. "Let's see, she has brank-ursine, devil's bit, loosestrife, madwort, centaur, oxlip and spleenwort."

Oemeo began rummaging around in the room, looking for ingredients. "We need lovage, bugle, duck's meat, catnip, mouse-ear, dog's grass, gladwyn, uh-oh."

"What?" Higbe asked.

"Don't have any gladwyn. Have to use pim-pernel instead. Then we need hog's fennel, common sow thistle, uh-oh."

"Don't tell me."

"Yes, we have no common. Have to use prickly instead."

"Will it still work?"

"Well, we'll see, won't we?" said Oemeo as the concoction began smoking and bubbling.

Higbe did not wait around. He rushed out the door to head for the Mayor's house. If the magic didn't work, he would try to protect Weebly himself.

Unknown to Yren Higbe and his wizard, the spells of the crow witches had imbued the real, departed Seodd Whepwurm with great restlessness in his grave. After turning over again and again, his dead body began to be imbued with the necromancy of hatred. He dug his way out of the grave, determined to kill his doppelganger with his own bare hands. Fortunately for Wee-

bly, this murderous undead witch hunter was many miles away and could only shamble along by night, hiding in caves by day.

Not far from the centre of Scaldwell stood the Mayor's house. The four-storey brick building included many bedrooms for the entertaining of visitors of state. The elaborately carved walnut interior featured many gold and silver antiques. Needless to say, the ground floor had a contingent of guards. Weebly's room was a penthouse at the end of a long hall on the topmost third floor.

Phyllis, the barmaid-turned-Countess, was attracted to the new Mayor. That very night she managed to bribe her way past the guards and into the house. Up to the top floor she went and into his room. By Weebly's snoring, she could tell that he was sound asleep in his four-poster bed. She was not unprepared for this contingency. Throwing off her rich robes, she entered the bed wearing nothing whatsoever.

Weebly gradually awoke from dreams of war and battle. Sending out his hands as scouts, he soon discovered that this territory was entirely friendly, and he rose to the occasion.

It was then that the witches' spells began to take effect. The amorous couple was transformed into two huffing aurochs, then two buffalos, then two centaurs, then two horses. The bed, of course, was completely crushed.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" Phyllis said. "No one has ever been as excellent as this!"

Meanwhile the jealous old Count came to the door of the Mayor's house and demanded entrance. Realising what was happening, the guards refused to let him in. They did not hear the creaking noises behind them, and were all stabbed to death by a crew of mercenaries hired by the Count. "I will catch them in the act and kill them both," fumed the Count, as he headed up the stairs. Fortunately he did not know what floor Weebly was on, and he and his men searched each floor as he went up the stairs.

Yren Higbe burst through the door of the Mayor's house, exhausted from his fast ride into town. "I've got to save Weebly," he thought. "Pray God I'm not too late."

The first sights did nothing to ease his fears,

for there on the ground floor of the house were the dead bodies of twelve guards. Higbe went up a narrow service stairway, two steps at a time. Did he hear men running about? He got off at the second floor, in a panic as to what to do.

"Aha!" he said, spying a suit of armour in the hallway. "This ought to help." And in a trice he put on the suit of armour and stood motionless in place in the hall.

In her past life as a barmaid, Phyllis had managed to cheat and enrage three confidence tricksters named Ted, Fred, and Ned. They had been tracking her, and had finally caught up with her in Scaldwell. With the prodding of a knife to the neck, a servant at her home had let slip that she was now at the Mayor's house. Hot with anger, the three con men went directly there and snuck in through a window. Once inside, they realised from the dead bodies that some skulduggery was afoot, and they rushed forward to try to find Phyllis before anyone else beat them to it.

After their amorous exploits were over, Weebly and Phyllis sat up in the collapsed bed in their normal, human forms. "That was the most amazing, wonderful thing I've ever experienced," Phyllis crooned.

"I'll bet you say that to all the Mayors," Weebly answered.

At that point, the old Count burst in through the door, sword in hand. "I'll teach you to play around with my wife!" he exclaimed, chasing Weebly around the room and out into the hall.

As they contended together throughout the Mayor's house, the magic spells of the swamp witch and the wizard produced a great chaos of people turning into animals and then back into humans again. Across the hall from room to room one could see bears, lions, and gorillas chasing people.

Running for her life, Phyllis saw a fox being chased by hounds.

The Count saw a lion running after a zebra.

Weebly saw a wolf chasing a duck.

No one knew at any given moment if he would be the one chasing or the one being chased. At times the Count felt like a mighty lion chasing his prey, and at other times he was a lowly duck trying to escape with his life.

Then things began to get strange. One could see a bear chasing after a salmon on legs. There was a gorilla running after a large banana with human legs. There was a small grey mouse chasing after a black cat.

The three con men, Ted, Fred and Ned, made their way up to the third floor where they obtained a glimpse of Phyllis in the nude running for her life from ferocious animals. They at once gave chase. To escape them, Phyllis bounded down the stairs and out onto the second floor.

While they were in pursuit, the three con men fell under the wizard's somewhat faltering or defective counterspell, and they were transformed into a human-sized pumpkin with human arms and legs, a human-sized egg with human arms and legs, and a human-sized knockwurst running on all fours with two sets of human legs.

Yren Higbe in his suit of armour stood breathless in the middle of the second floor. Here came Phyllis running for her life. Then came a monstrous pumpkin. Then an egg.

In a dither, Yren Higbe lashed out at the next pursuer with his halberd, and sliced the knockwurst neatly in half. Blood gushed out. "Oh my god," Yren said. "This is horrible!" And he fled down the hall into a dark storeroom and threw off his armour. "I've got to get out of here before I get bewitched myself," he thought, his heart racing.

Meanwhile the Egg man was chasing Weebly out onto the roof.

Both the Egg and Weebly had found swords hanging on the wall in a room on the third floor and they duelled back and forth. Weebly had never handled a sword in his life. However, the Egg man, even if he had been a good swordsman, was hampered by his rotund shape.

Back and forth they lunged and parried, and they teetered on the edge of the roof. Finally, in a flourish of swordsmanship, the Egg flung Weebly's sword from his hands.

Weebly thought for a split second. Do I need to jump off the roof? What can I do?

The Egg snidely said, "Now I've got you."

Then the Egg lunged forward. Weebly jumped backwards. The Egg's motion forward made it

spin, and it lost its balance and went flying off the roof, smashing into an omelette on the street below.

Grabbing his sword, Weebly ran down the stairs. "I've got to save Phyllis," he thought. However, once on the third floor, he was chased by ferocious beasts and could not find Phyllis anywhere. "Phyllis, hold on!" he shouted. "Weebly will save you!" But in a short time he threw his sword away and began to panic. "Help, save me!" he cried, being pursued by a bear, a wolf, a duck, a mantichore, and a half-human pumpkin.

Hearing Weebly's cries, Yren Higbe took courage. He slapped himself in the face. "Snap out of it," he said to himself. "You're a wrestler! You never run away from danger!" The storeroom was dark, and he felt around looking for a weapon, when suddenly he tripped over an anvil. "Oh ho!" he said.

Weebly ran down the hall on the third floor and down to the first floor, then back up to the second floor. He dashed past a half opened door. Behind him rushed the bear and the wolf. Then came the pumpkin.

At once Higbe dropped the anvil from over the top of the half-opened door, and the pumpkin was squashed into a large orange stain.

Down on the ground floor, the Count had managed to catch the fleeing Phyllis. "I've got her, men!" he cried. "Let's take her back home and administer justice!"

The remaining animals pricked up their ears and then rushed down to the ground floor and out into the street. Once they made it out into the street, their human forms returned and they all left with the Count and the captured Countess.

The Mayor's house fell silent. Weebly and Higbe looked at each other with a touch of hope. "I think they all left," Higbe said.

"We should be safe now."

"They got Phyllis," Weebly panted. "We should save her."

"How come you only had twelve guards?" Higbe asked.

Weebly fainted.

Hundreds of citizens crowded the park as Weebly stepped up to the dais. "As you all know," he



began, "one week ago the Mayor's house was the site of an assassination attempt. Undoubtedly, witches are the cause of this. I have devoted my life to stamping out their evil influence, and, of course, they are seeking revenge.

"I have decided to go on a secret mission to help defeat and destroy these evil witches. While I am gone, I am leaving the City in the able leadership of my good friend, Sir Yren Higbe. This man is fearless, incorruptible, and wise. Listen to him and obey him the same as you would me. And so farewell."

With the cheering of the populace, and a few hats tossed in the air, Weebly rode out of the City on a fine black mare, with a small tent and a purse of gold coins in his saddlebags. He had told Yren Higbe: "I can't take all this violence. I am not cut out to be a leader. What would happen if there were a real crisis, or a war or something? Friend, I am going back to Elrich to resume my life as an assistant porter, as far away from witches as I can possibly be."

Two days later, Weebly had ridden 70 miles out of town. It was late afternoon and he was thinking about where he would bed down for the night, when to his surprise he saw in the road ahead a young blonde woman, dressed in rags. She was trudging along barefoot in the dusty road, with her head hung down.

As he came up alongside her, he saw her face. "Phyllis!"

"Oh Mayor Wherpworm," she answered. He saw at once that the Count had branded her on the right cheek with a large letter "A" for adulteress. Obviously, he had divorced her, but at least she was still alive.

He put her up onto the horse behind him, and told her the true story of his life from beginning to end. When he got to the part of the riverboat ride, she cried and asked for his forgiveness, which he readily gave her.

She said that she had been flogged by the angry Count, but that the Count's old housekeeper had managed to plead with him to spare her life and just divorce and brand her, and so he did.

Twilight came on and the two travellers

decided to pitch a tent on a level spot off the road. "What a fine large tent you have," Phyllis enthused.

"Nothing's too good for the Mayor," replied Weebly.

They were gathering wood for a fire when they began to hear a noise in the forest, a kind of shambling sound, as if a person were dragging their feet along in the leaves.

Suddenly out into the clearing came the reanimated dead body of Seodd Wherpworm. He was every bit the mirror image of Weebly Pumrod, except for the rotting flesh, the burn marks of the rope around his neck, the eyes glowing like coals, and the ferocious hatred driving him.

Dumbstruck, Weebly was glued to the ground. Seodd grabbed him and started choking him as Weebly vainly struggled to get free. As they fought, they whirled around the clearing in circles.

At first, Phyllis was too terrified to think. But then a thought occurred to her. She pulled out a large, sharp wooden tent peg and ran over to the fight.

Unfortunately, the men were twisting and swirling. Phyllis kept tentatively trying to intervene but each time she pulled back at the last moment. When it looked like Weebly was doomed, in desperation Phyllis suddenly lunged with all her strength, spiking Seodd Wherpworm through the heart. In an instant, the reanimated body of the notorious witch hunter crumbled into dust.

After he had had time to catch his breath from the fierce fight, Weebly looked at Phyllis and said: "You saved my life. How can I repay you?"

"I'm on my way south to set myself up as a shepherdess. Why don't you join me? It's a quiet, peaceful life."

Weebly thought it over. "Some people might say I had everything and now I have nothing. But I've been there, and being rich and powerful is not what I'm cut out to be. I would like to lead a quiet peaceful life, but I don't know anything about being a shepherd. Do you really think I could learn to be one?"

"I'm sure you'll be excellent."

After All

Some Huge Great Shunt-Yard

MICHAEL WYNDHAM THOMAS

Previously...

*I was sitting in a car when it melted away.
I awoke... somewhere. In a house. With people.*

I leaned against the lounge door, watching, listening. Now and then I made to nod and joke, to catch this or that eye – though I had no part in the stories I was hearing. My mind kept wandering. Initially it returned to the wardrobes in the rooms upstairs. We'd been directed to them, sort of, after our walk. Apparently, the biscuit-girl had whispered to big Rob that it was time we got the full lie of the house. I'm assuming that this was a kindly suggestion, not a claw-in-velvet-glove command. Anyway, up we went and had a rummage. The bedrooms chose us. Each had a wardrobe filled with clothes for one particular person. Mine were all a bit... well, eighties, really. The things I tried on fitted alright, though there was a shiny, short-sleeve jacket which I knew I wouldn't be filling out any time soon. Then it was down to the kitchen, where a tall fridge hummed away, stocked to suit all diets. A pyramid of sandwiches stood on a plate in the middle – generous of size, fairish of taste. I was munching one now, pausing in mid-swallow to grin at another round

of modest laughter from the lounge. Ham and cheese: at least, that's what appeared to be lying there when I peeled back the bread. There'd been something cling-filmy round it, too, suggesting a departure lounge rather than anything ambrosial. Perhaps that made sense. I thought again of Marjory's words about waiting till our selves were gathered in. Yes, this was food for transients, for folk betwixt and between.

So much had happened, all in the space of... well, whatever they had for hours in these parts. When we'd filed in from the kitchen, a woman was sitting in one of the comfy chairs – youngish, quite a looker despite the seventies page-boy hair and cheesecloth top. Marjory nearly sank to her knees before going through the same routine that had taken hold of Rob in the lane.

"You," she'd exclaimed, before turning to the rest of us, her finger darting back and forth between the woman and herself. "Me," she'd added, now weak with happiness. Something had made her pivot round: "Thank you!" she'd

called out, and I caught the fleeting image of the biscuit-girl at the window. I'd frowned. Why didn't she come in? Introduce herself? Or at least take a bit of credit for all these reunions she was creating, these leaps across the ridges of time? Then, remembering my promise to myself out in the lane, I'd "excuse me'd" my way between Marjory and Marjory and sunk a double – no, a triple at least – into my whiskey-glass. The glow was instant, deep and wide. It got me through all the introductions.

After that, with food and drink in everyone's reach, the talk patterned itself. The Robs reminisced – about a summer holiday, a birthday, a teacher at school. Then, like quiz panellists, they conferred, little Rob correcting big Rob's faulty memory, big Rob – emboldened now – filling little Rob in about what happened after this event or became of that character. To my amazement and relief, the facts that lay beyond little Rob's years – whether cheery or sad (or, as in a couple of cases, downright desperate) – didn't seem to faze him in the least. Cats hit by cars, a favourite aunt breathing her last at a bus stop in Wolverhampton, a surprise trip to a Mott the

Hoople concert (complete with autographs from everyone in the band and several who weren't) – the open-faced boy met all of them with equanimity. Then, as though instructed (which perhaps they had been, by telepathy, by the biscuit-girl), they fell silent and gave the floor to the Marjories, whose talk followed exactly the same lines.

My hunch was right about Marjory: my Marjory, the one I'd met alone. I remembered her instant response of "F natural" when Rob gave us the last amplified note he'd heard at his reunion. Sure enough, her young self ("Little Marjory" was out of the question) gave music lessons – private pupils, mainly. There were also stints playing 'cello with quartets and orchestras. I heard "Philharmonic" uttered in a meaningful way, followed by a pause and a synchronised nod from the Marjories. That hit me strangely – as though I were watching Young Marjory bowing before a mirror that had absorbed all the lines and wrinkles owed her by the years. I didn't catch which Philharmonic it was – there are dozens knocking about. But I didn't like to ask. Amid all the coffees and fruit juices around



the lounge, my whiskey was pretty obvious, especially as I was keeping it topped up. None of the Robs and Marjories seemed disposed to lecture me on the effect of spirits on the listening ear, but I didn't want to draw further attention to my comfortingly heavy glass.

As I lounged at the door, the soothing hum of the fridge just behind me, my thoughts seemed to blend the sadness of an orphan with the bafflement of a hotelier confronted by a midnight coachful of unexpected guests. Yes, more than ever, Marjory seemed to be right. Here we were, gathering up our selves. But what had she said then, out in the lane? "Then we go." Go where? For what? She didn't know herself. Well, never mind that now. But were these all the selves there'd be, or would the front door open at regular intervals during the evening (or whatever it was that time and fog were doing out there), admitting more Robs, more Marjories, till the fridge was empty and we'd found more and more bedrooms, more sartorial dodginess in their wardrobes? Or was it just one self apiece? If it was, and given that one isn't too much to ask, where was mine? Reflexively I thought again of Junior One, the biscuit-lid, the pudgy, snake-belted boy. Then I thought of all the other selves who might come through the door at me. I was safest with the biscuit-lad. No, forget that: I wanted to fling my arms round the lot of them.

"It was Scarborough," big Rob was saying. "Where the ice-cream van got swept out to sea."

"Liskeard," countered little Rob, his head shaking frantically, "Liskeard, Liskeard."

And a little later, after more coffee and juice...

"Debussy," said older Marjory, the obliging mirror-face, keeper of greys and wrinkles. "When I found the last movement had been torn from the score. It was the Debussy."

"The Brahms," countered her smooth and pretty self. "And it was the first and last movements. I... we... had to share with that chap... you know... the striped trousers..." Then a burst of giggles, girlish for either of them.

Wolfing the last of my sandwich, I found that my mind was on the ramble again. If little Rob and young Marjory were here now, did that

mean that there were Rob-and-Marjory-shaped gaps in their allotted years? Or had they left animated shells behind them? Or were they simultaneously here and there – not to mention elsewhere – perhaps in some huge, great shunt-yard where past, present and future swerve and rattle on parallel lines? Come to think of it, was I in at least three places at once? That was Karen's phrase – or rather, her estimate of how I wanted her to be. For the very first time since... well, melting... I thought of her. She never yelled the words at me. She never yelled at all. I ducked round to face the kitchen. I was trembling. I missed her. Never mind the pudgy, snake-belted boy with the biscuit lid – or the girl on it. I'd happily have Karen as my other self. Instantly I choked the idea. In a place like this, who knew what chain reaction such a wish would start? I was here and she was back there, with years ahead of her. Who was I, now, to scoop her out of a mid-day crowd or her office lobby – or that easy chair with the wonky castor I was always about to fix? As if reacting against all this chivalry, my thoughts turned to some very dark places. It might feel like only a day had passed up here, but what clue did I have about... well, Karen's time? Had years passed already? Was she a wife again, happily, chaotically coping with the kids we'd postponed? I saved myself from more of all that by jumping out of my skin. We all jumped. The wind came swarming again, as it had done just after Rob told Marjory and me his tale. Like a score of creatures, it rattled the window-frames, fuffed with the curtains. I looked back into the lounge. The others were passing a deep yawn around. Smiling, young Marjory passed it to me. Someone – the biscuit-girl, a superior or subordinate – who knew? – had decided that we were all knackered little kids, that enough was enough for one day, and had dispatched the wind to harry us to blanket street. Trance-like, we crocodiled our way upstairs. Bringing up the rear, I resolved that, if the wind started up again, that "Miami Vice" jacket would do nicely as a frame-wedge. At the foot of the stairs, I took a last look behind me. The abandoned food and drink had vanished. TQF

4

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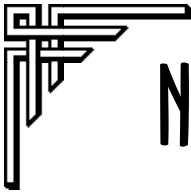
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Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into The Unknown A Timid Poet



John Greenwood



Previously...

A mysterious but compulsive computer game on his spaceship's on-board computer has made Newton Braddell, intrepid space adventurer, forget all details of his mission. After crash-landing on an unknown but strangely familiar planet, the captain of the Tanjong Pagar encounters a multitude of astonishing and weird alien lifeforms, as he attempts to retrieve both his ship and his lost purpose.

There is, I began to realise, something unsettling about a man without a voice. Not that Marsiling was reluctant to communicate with Eunos and I. Far from it: we passed many hours of otherwise monotonous travel in deep conversation, but all our interaction took place via the innovative camera lens and screen which Eunos had providentially fitted to my Dover and Somerset translation device. Marsiling's words were spoken in the flat, expressionless tones of the computer voice synthesiser. I began to wonder what his real voice might have sounded like, had he not been born to a life of silence. What language did his community, now devastated, speak? The question irked me, for reasons I could not properly explain, even to myself.

I took the problem to Eunos one evening, when we had decided to park the hover car, after Marsiling had complained of nausea. We had spent the day crossing some difficult terrain, and Eunos had made some abrupt manoeuvres that

would have jolted the stomach of the most experienced passenger.

I had called a halt to the journey at the bottom of a deep gorge, cast into chilly shadow by improbable pinnacles of rock that rose majestically on either side of us, their dark slopes dotted with creepers and stubbly, hardy shrubs, spiny-leaved succulents that clung to the almost vertical rock face with impunity. It was late evening, and we had been airborne since just after dawn.

While the old man recovered, I sounded out Eunos on the subject of Marsiling's native language. Typically, the android immediately wanted to know the reason for my enquiry.

"It's just a subject that interests me," I replied. "I enjoy finding out new things."

Eunos looked at me blankly. "I cannot imagine how that information will help us find the Red Hill Clementi," he responded.

"Of course it won't," I said, a little petulantly. "Cease this shilly-shallying at once! Tell me

what you know about the languages of Kadaloor, if you please, Sir!”

The reader might look askance at the peremptory tone I had begun to affect with Eunos, and looking back on this period of my life, I cannot help feeling a little ashamed of myself. But in my defence, I can only repeat that Eunos's behaviour towards his master had grown more insolent and aloof by the day, especially since I had over-ruled his objections and invited Marsiling to join our party. The only way I could get a straight answer from my mechanical manservant was to adopt a swaggering, arrogant manner towards him. I can assure the reader that I did not enjoy the pretence. I am by nature neither haughty nor proud, but trial and error proved to me that this was the most reliable method of getting results from Eunos. Perhaps a similar pose had been adopted by his previous masters, even by the venerable Outram Park himself, and Eunos had learned to respect only the language of absolute authority.

In this instance, he softened a little, and admitted that he had little data in his memory banks on the subject in question. He even apologised to me, a rare event in itself.

“Well then, never mind about that,” I said, beginning to regret my harsh tone. “Just tell me what you do know about it. For example, what language were you speaking to me when we first met? You recall, I could not understand you until I located my Dover and Somerset. Was that the tongue of your former master, Choa Chu Kang?”

“Yes, that's right,” said Eunos. “Although I do not remember Choa Chu Kang ever giving his language a specific name. He had as little contact as possible with the outside world, and when it was unavoidable, it was always with members of his own family, whose intrusions he begrudged. He suspected his younger relatives of trying to charm their way into his will – Choa Chu Kang had considerable wealth, gained I know not where. But although they all spoke the same language, they did not discuss its origins.”

My mental image of the seismologist was becoming gradually clearer on each of the rare occasions on which Eunos could be persuaded to speak of him. Hazzarding a guess, I asked Eunos

if perhaps the language of the Kang's might have been Chinese.

“How could I possibly answer that?” he remarked coolly. “Assuming that this language you mention is of Earthly origin, I cannot be expected to understand it. Do you speak this Chinese yourself?”

I admitted that I could not, but I was reasonably sure that I would recognise the language if I heard it spoken. Ignoring his rudeness, I demanded that Eunos demonstrate his former master's speech. Eunos had long since learned to converse in perfect English, although by what means I could not fathom, and we had dispensed with the intermediary of the Dover and Somerset several months ago, so it was a novelty to hear him pronounce the Kadaloorian syllables of his former master. If it was indeed Chinese that he spoke, it was a strangely altered flavour of that ancient tongue. I shook my head, unable to decide one way or the other.

“What did that mean?” I asked the android, purely out of interest.

“Oh, nothing much,” said Eunos. “Just a randomly generated list of words.”

Marsiling appeared then quickly from behind a clump of bushes, where he had emptied his stomach. He looked pale and red-eyed, and I decided then and there to go no further that day. We would camp in the gorge for the night, I explained to my companions, and continue the following morning. Marsiling was quietly grateful. Eunos was about to make some trifling objection, but I stopped him with a severe look. I felt I was at last becoming a genuine leader of men.

That night I dreamt again of Thanggam. His terrible voice boomed through my night, and I awoke musing on the remarks Marsiling had made about the awful fungi. If it was true that Thanggam's kin were found only in areas of geothermal activity, then was it possible that the spores were responding to some signal given from beneath the planet's crust, some subtle shift in the temperature and chemical composition of the soil which favoured that particular organism? If it was more than an old wives' tale, I thought to myself, taking a large hypothetical

leap, then perhaps Choa Chu Kang's work would not lie forever incomplete. Perhaps the pattern of mushroom growth would match the tectonic fault lines Kang had attempted to trace. It was a bold supposition, and I decided to keep my speculations to myself for the time being. If I was wrong, then I would at least have escaped Eunos's mocking scorn. Still, it was an inspiring prospect, and I awoke to another day of travel and toil with renewed vigour.

We passed an uneventful week in the hover car, scooting over a landscape of increasing barrenness, the nearer we drew to the border of Punggol land. I resolved to discover as much as I could about Marsiling's life. Surely there must be something in his history which could provide a clue to the riddle of humanity's presence here. He obliged me with a long account of his life, most of which I do not now recall, except to say that it was of little interest or relevance to the questions uppermost in my mind. I did not, of course, tell him this, but listened politely to all his meandering chatter. I was surprised to learn that the old man was, by trade, a poet. That poets plied their trade at all on this alien world was remarkable enough in itself. Whether his art resembled its Earthly counterpart was quite another question, and I asked Marsiling to recite, or at least write down some examples of his work, but he refused.

"I am a failed poet," he confessed, "I would not wish to insult your sensibilities, or unfairly pollute your assessment of Kadaloorian poetry with my inferior efforts."

I protested against this false modesty, as was only polite, but he was not to be moved by my chivvying, and stubbornly bowed his head, professing his literary incompetence. I had not suspected such low self-esteem in one who had survived such trials against tremendous odds, and lost no time in telling him so.

"I only wish you could hear the work of Teck Whye," said Marsiling sadly. "Famed throughout the world, Teck Whye is esteemed by all as Kadaloor's greatest poet, if indeed he still lives."

I sat up in the tiny communal kitchen of the hover car, and listened to Marsiling with rapt attention. Underneath and around us a landscape

of low, unassuming bushes and red rocks undulated past us at dizzying speed. We had been crossing this semi-barren scrubland for several hours, without any sign of life beyond the occasional herd of grazing animals, shimmering on the horizon.

"I would be grateful if you could give me an example of some of Teck Whye's versifying," I replied to Marsiling, who was sitting across from me at the little fold-away dining table, our plates scraped clean before us.

The old man smiled. "How could I of all people become Teck Whye? Speak the words of Teck Whye? The idea is absurd!"

After some confusion, I understood from Marsiling that all Kadaloorian poetry was improvised. The act of inscription was considered fit only for profane tasks: book-keeping, shopping lists, instruction manuals. The divine spark of poetic genius, so Marsiling claimed, could only be kept warm in the mouth of the poet.

So was his an aural tradition, with poems handed down through the generations? Not even that, according to my informant. As a rule, the Kadaloorian poet spoke only his own words. There was a certain taboo, although not an inflexible one, against reciting the poetry of another. Marsiling might have been persuaded to give me a taste of Teck Whye's genius, was he not burdened with so large an estimation of his own inadequacy. I was sorely frustrated by his reluctance. Here, it seemed, was a real spyhole on the culture of these mysterious, now vanished people. But Marsiling was not to be swayed. Instead, he spoke at length about his own obsession with literature, his dogged pursuit of the art, his overwhelming shortcomings, his disillusionment.

"Why continue with it?" I asked him bluntly, as I swept our dirty crockery into a chute, which opened out in Eunos's quarters. Once he had finished the washing up, the clean plates would be returned along the same route.

"It is a question which I have been unable to answer since I first understood my own inaptitude," said Marsiling. "It appears to be like an addiction. I despise the whole sordid business of

it, but can never quite rid myself of the need to versify.”

It was a conversation that was to be repeated, with variations, many times over the course of our journey, and long before that journey was over, my interest in Marsiling's poetic failings had waned considerably. If only my companion had agreed to give some informal performance, however brief and imperfect, of his own oeuvre, I might have entered into his sufferings with more sympathy. But this incessant bleating about a literature of which I had no experience left me cold.

About a week into our journey, on the very border of the Punggol controlled desert, according to our maps, we experienced an earthquake. The movement began at night, as we slept outside the hover car in our tents, simply for the sake of a change. I awoke to find the synthetic canvas flapping violently, and my first sleep-addled thoughts were that an unusually strong wind must have reared up in the night. Some more sceptical part of my brain reminded me that even the strongest hurricanes failed to shake the ground, as was happening just a few millimetres below my sleeping bag.

In absolute darkness, I stumbled towards the exit, fought with the zip, and emerged, shaken in more ways than one, into the oasis where we had struck camp for the night. The unhappy earth rumbled on. I caught a glimpse of the ancient terrors of pre-scientific man faced with such phenomena. It was difficult to suppress the expectation that some disgruntled subterranean god was about to emerge and smite us all. I remembered an ancient tribe of Earth I had studied as part of my anthropology degree. They attributed seismological events to a giant armadillo, buried deep underground and bound tightly with ropes. (By whom? The myth did not explain.) When the fettered animal struggled, the ground above shook. Witnessing an earthquake for myself, I could at last sympathise with this account, which I had then considered absurd. The ground beneath us is the very essence of stability, a lesson we all learn as soon as we can walk. What else could explain such an absurd event, one that contradicted all common sense?

Eunos was there, calm and collected as ever. He illuminated the campsite with a small, portable floodlight.

“An earthquake,” he told me.

“Yes, I know,” I replied with deliberate patience. I sat on a pile of grey rocks, home to a profusion of dry, spiny plants, and prepared to sit out the planet's tantrum. I knew already how lucky we were to run into the earthquake in the middle of a desert. There were few safer environments in these circumstances. Had we still lingered at Woodland Heights, or perhaps in Marsiling's cave of extinct bats, we might have been instantly obliterated or, worse still, trapped behind fallen rubble for days on end.

We waited in silence (Eunos and I exchanged few unnecessary words nowadays) for Marsiling to emerge from his tent, but he did not. The ground continued to roar, at unpredictable intervals. Eventually, concerned for his safety, I unzipped the doorway and peered in. The floodlight behind me lit up a pitiful sight. Huddled in the bottom of his sleeping bag, his hands over his head, the old man was whimpering like a beaten dog.

“What are you doing?” I asked him rather sharply. “Come out of there at once!”

But the poet refused to move, nor did he show any inclination to check his unmanly behaviour. I was ashamed for him, and turned away in disgust.

“What is the matter with our guest?” asked Eunos, when I emerged backwards from the tent.

I shrugged my shoulders. “He won't say,” was all I could tell the robot.

Eunos started forward to see for himself. I went to stop him, then changed my mind. I was curious to see what strategy the android would adopt to coax the startled creature from his bolt hole. That Eunos cared at all about the welfare of our newest travelling companion was news to me. His attitude towards Marsiling had been at best one of perfunctory courtesy. This uncharacteristic solicitude gave me food for thought, and on more than one occasion as we continued our trek into Punggol territory.

Eunos vanished into the tent, and I was left alone in the desert, feeling the fluttering after-

shocks travel up from the soles of my boots. Within mere moments, he emerged, a pale-faced, wide-eyed Marsiling in tow. The aged bard cast many an anxious glance about him, before Eunos whispered something to him, and he was reassured. I dared not enquire further, for fear of breaking the spell, and we two humans sat in silence as the dawn crept up on us, and as Eunos packed away the tents around us. A few minor tremors continued to bother us as we waited, but Marsiling screwed his eyes tight, breathed deeply, and rode out his nameless fears.

Later that day, as we pushed further into Punggol territory, I had the chance to ask Eunos how he had managed to coax Marsiling from his hideaway. The android visited my quarters every day at noon to serve me lunch, which I usually ate en route. This time I stopped him as he was about to leave, and demanded an explanation.

Eunos shrugged. "Marsiling believed that the fungal organisms calling themselves Thanggam had emerged once again, and threatened our survival. He is convinced that earthquakes are caused by mushrooms growing underground. I simply explained to him that I had performed a geothermal scan using instruments built into my irises, and could confirm that the mushrooms would not pierce the surface for several hours. If we left promptly, we could avoid another confrontation."

"I had no idea that you possessed such geothermal equipment," I remarked.

"I don't," said Eunos. "It was simply expedient for him to believe that I did."

I was shocked. "So you lied?"

Eunos was unperturbed by my accusation. "It got us moving, didn't it? Marsiling hails from a pre-scientific culture. His people have reversed cause and effect in this case. They believe that the mushrooms create the earthquake, where in actuality it is the earthquakes, or indeed any geothermal activity, which activates dormant spores on the surface, causing them to germinate. There was little point trying to change his mind on this issue."

I had no cogent argument to offer against him at the time, so I changed tack. "What did you mean when you spoke of the organism calling

itself Thanggam? Surely Thanggam is dead! We all witnessed its demise."

Eunos looked at me with the unmistakable expression of an adult trying to keep his patience with a doltish child. "The entire species call themselves Thanggam," he explained slowly. "Since they are immobile, they have no contact with any of their own kind, and consequently believe themselves to be one of a kind, unique in the entire universe. It is partly this attitude which lends them their supreme arrogance and cruelty."

"But I remember quite clearly, you told us that the slopes of volcanoes were often crowded with such mushrooms."

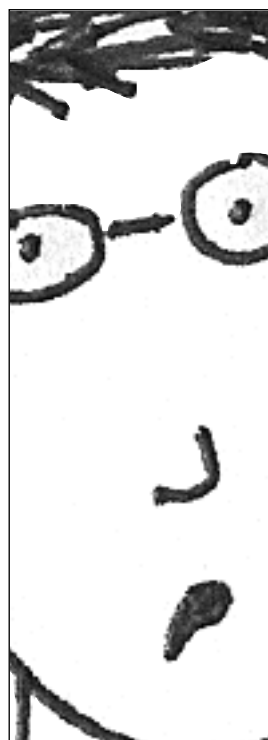
"They are," said Eunos. "But they have no sense of sight, and their telepathy has evolved to work only on humans. They cannot communicate with each other in any way, or even know of each other's existence."

His words came as something as a shock to me: a race of fungal creatures, all believing themselves to be self-created and unique, all naming themselves Thanggam, and all dependent on human slavery for their continued survival."

I thought of an objection, and lost no time in putting it to Eunos. "You say that Thanggam's telepathy has evolved to exploit humans," I countered. "But you presuppose that humans have existed on Kadaloor for many thousands, or millions of years!"

Eunos looked at me blankly. "What of that?"

"You surely cannot be seriously suggesting..." I began, but I remembered almost at once that everything the android suggested was done so in deadly earnest. I fell silent, and the robot turned and left me alone in my quarters, with my troubling thoughts. TQF



The Quarterly Review

Transformers

Michael Bay (dir.)

Film, US, 144 mins

Few things in the universe can claim to possess the terrible majesty of this movie. A black hole, perhaps, might come closer but you'd be annoyed when your popcorn, cola and hotdogs got sucked into it!

Few films have done so much on screen – given so much! Ensuring that the screen is constantly full of spectacle, *Transformers* is both magnificent and munificent. This is a generous, generous movie. Even someone who hated every second of it couldn't possibly walk out of the cinema feeling short-changed.

It does things that previously could only have been done in animation, comics, books or a child's imagination – giant robots, smashing each other into buildings, hiding from parents, and peeing oil on buffoons!

It's impossible not to compare *Superman Returns* to this movie in less than flattering terms. *Superman Returns* might have had more affecting character development, but where were the super-brawls? If it had been a low-budget indie film about a divorced man returning to his old home town and running into his ex-wife it could have kept everything that was good about *Superman Returns* and lost nothing particularly important.

If the producers of *Transformers* had taken a similarly disappointing approach, we'd have had 144 minutes of an elderly Sam Witwicky looking mournfully at yellow VW Beetles.

Thankfully they did not!

Instead what we have is hour after amazing hour of glorious robotic indulgence!

Where the five *Superman* films so far have pathetically produced just four super-powered adversaries (if you take *Superman II* out of the

equation, that leaves just one super-villain in four films!), *Transformers* throws in robot after robot, ripping the screen apart in a symphony of machinery that builds to a crescendo of all-out robotic carnage!

Shia LeBoeuf, as Sam Witwicky, has an effortless charm that holds it all together, in what can be a very thankless role – think of Courtney Cox's game but ultimately futile efforts to bring some human interest to *Masters of the Universe*. Who wants the camera pointed at a puny human when there are much cooler things to be looking at?

Transformers might not be the best movie of all time, but it is almost definitely the most awesome. – *SWT*

Apex #10

Jason B Sizemore (ed.)

Paperback, 96pp

This is the first issue I've seen of this rather impressive magazine. The cover looks very professional, and the colours are bold and attractive. Of the many stories within its well-produced pages, my favourite was "Bad Sushi", by the very glamorous Cherie Priest (as evidenced by the photographs accompanying the follow-up interview), a disturbing piece of Lovecraftian horror in a distinctively unusual setting.

The first thing I read, though, was an interview with William F Nolan, author of the novel *Logan's Run*, on which the film was based. He comes across as slightly testy – perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the interviewer hadn't taken the trouble to read the novel first!

An account of a road trip to World Horror 2007 fell a bit flat for me, but would make entertaining reading for anyone who had made the same trip, or had ever wanted to. – *SWT*