



BREACHSPACE: CHRONICLES

VOLUME ONE

Created by Nuno Xei
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**A collection of short stories
set in the BREACHSPACE Setting.**



BREACHSPACE: Chronicles, Volume I

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ABOUT THE BREACHSPACE SETTING

BY NUNO XEI

The *BREACHSPACE* Setting is a world filled with fear, dread and unsettling realities. It is a world brought into existence because of a reality-shaping anomaly triggered by the opening of The Hellmouth, an event called the Great Cataclysm.

The Hellmouth is a gaping wound in the earth that spewed forth fiendish hordes in the early years. It would plague the continent of Uropia for decades before things settled down. Finding a new “normalcy” for the mortals wasn’t an easy feat; it required the Dawn of the Celestials, the Awakening of the Dragons, The Fall of the Curtain of Fey... angels, dragons and magic were added to the world’s tapestry. Each momentous event was a building stone, set in place, to make the world of Teira what it is today.

The present of the world is set 120 years after the Great Cataclysm; those who survived are at ripe old ages and now have children, and grandchildren, growing up in a remarkable world. New generations are growing up in a world where their cultural history has seized to exist.

People on the world of Teira have no memory of any world that came before the Great Cataclysm. Librar-

ies filled with history books no longer made any sense: ink faded away, written language turned into gibberish, pages crumbled to dust, and so forth. This didn't mean the world had no history of its own though. Explorers and adventurers would find evidence that proved the world predated the anomaly of the Great Cataclysm. It was as if time was mending itself backwards, even as cultures progressed into the new future. Many cultures adopted the X-Calendar to mark time, starting at X-0, to designate the year of the Great Cataclysm.

The gothic horror genre predominantly makes up the tapestry that is the *BREACHSPACE* Setting, but the setting is nothing more than a wrapper of sorts, that quietly smothers all other genres. The difference is that gothic horror literature is often a world where the general population is entirely unaware of the supernatural phenomena that exists and shares the same world with them. In the *BREACHSPACE* setting, all the people are well aware of the morbid reality they now face.

The *BREACHSPACE* Setting entertains the idea of tapping into the collective unconscious nurtured by older literature, folklore, legends, mythology, history and so forth. Furthermore, it draws on imagery from more modern references: from the height of the high action pulp fiction, to the bravado of silver age heroics; from the retro-futuristic genre of steampunk, to the ultra-futuristic dystopian cyberpunk genre. It intertwines ideas and archetypes from these things to build the new imaginary world of Teira.

Regardless of this accepted reality—as dark and impossible as this kind of world seems—the common men and women of the world have come to terms with their environment. They come together in communities, have children and witness deaths, both natural and grotesque, but most importantly, they value the concept of

living for today and looking forward to the next day, one day at a time.

Then there are the not-so-common men and women. These individuals have been changed by their new world, sometimes by benevolent means, sometimes by the Wasteland's corrupting Taint. They struggle to bring about the possibility of more glorious days, they abolish evil where it lurks, lead relief armies to battle across blasted lands, defend cities from offended dragons—but so too do they lead dark cults motivated by mysterious masters, rule over populations with an iron fist, perform age-old rituals to harness new powers and release fiends from the Pits of Hell.

The *BREACHSPACE* Setting offers tales of wonder, of intrigue, and of fear. This anthology focuses on the continent of Uropia, but there's still a whole world to experience... one breach at a time.

THE SECRET OF KONRAD DREXLAR

BY KEVIN LUMLEY

Cog Town.

That sprawling metropolis perched precariously on Signoria's northern border, just south of Odland.

Long had I heard of the city, never had I visited it before.

I reined my horse up now, on a hill overlooking the city, still some distance away to the east.

The massive cliffs of the Thunder Ridge range blocked most of the dawn sun, leaving much of Cog Town still covered in shadow.

It seemed vast. Surrounded by high walls that appeared to be made of stone and iron and perhaps something else.

I could see high towers that appeared to be made of iron or bronze. They shone in the bright sunlight. Also could I see factories of some sort, from which plumes of smoke or steam billowed upwards into the clear sky.

Some parts of the walls seemed to have strange machines perched upon them. These, I guessed, must be the legendary weapons for which the mechanical geniuses of Cog were famous.

Even could I see, high overhead, attached to a long rope, some sort of floating vessel.

I had heard that the denizens of the Cog had created machines that could fly, but until this moment I had doubted it most strongly.

Trading vessels and other boats were moored in the harbour. The docks being the first part of Cog to get sunlight; the calm waters of the bay reflected the sun's awakening hues.

I looked about myself, as a warrior does.

Behind me, the open grass plains leading back to the thick forests and mountain ranges of southern Signoria. In front of me stretched a large, flat, and desolate open landscape; the border of the Wasteland. The Od. A place of mutants, monsters, and madness. Of half-men and savage beasts, scavenging fiends and lost souls.

It was said that if one stayed too long in Ödlund, one would become as the rest of the inhabitants. Some invisible, malicious force known as the Taint, was claimed to make normal beings into sub-human creatures. There were also those who had been affected by the Taint to a lesser degree. These poor, deformed folk lived as best they could within their communities.

Just thinking on such things caused me to shudder. I was born decades after the chaos of the Cataclysm. Raised on tales of fiendish hordes battling with dragons during the time of the Hellfire Wars. The Taint is the left-over curse that has plagued the land since those bygone days.

I consoled myself with the thought that the Taint was unlikely to endanger me, as my business was in Cog Town itself.

I understood that few of the denizens of Ödlund now bothered to attack the city. The citizens, many of whom were Teslans and dwarves were amazingly gifted inventors, designers and craftsmen.

Men spoke of mighty cannons, large enough to destroy whole armies. Machines that shot out great balls of fire. Strange vessels that floated across the heavens, raining down death and destruction on those below. Some even spoke of soldiers wearing mechanical suits of armor, empowered by both Fey magic and dwarven-made gears.

As this would be my first time in Cog Town, I was eager to see these wonders for myself.

I looked around once more, checking for movement or the approach of anyone or anything. Out here, so close to the Od, one could not be too careful.

Spying nothing to cause me any concern, I gently kicked my heels against my horse's flanks and began to move in the direction of Cog Town's Western Gate.



As I drew closer, I saw how truly huge Cog Town was. The height of the walls dwarfed my horse and I. The walls were indeed a mixture of stone, iron, and some smooth rust coloured material, similar to clay. The gates I approached were made of iron and steel entirely. As tall as the wall themselves, I saw that they slid apart, rather than open and closed, as might a normal door.

At this moment, they stood open, and a small group of soldiers, or perhaps city watchmen lounged idly around. They had seen me coming from some way off and now waited patiently as I drew closer.

All of them were dressed in uniforms of black and red leather and wool. Trousers tucked into knee high boots. Short jackets, emblazoned with bright brass buttons. Swords were slung on baldrics over their shoulders. Pistols were holstered at their hips.

Some of them carried muskets. All wore short peaked caps, to shield their faces from the hot sun, no doubt.

They were a mixture of men and dwarves.

Dwarves, contrary to popular opinion, are not mid-giants at all. Their average height (in my experience) is about four and a half foot. The majority of them tend toward a, shall we say, robust body shape. But their burly frames are extremely powerful, and what they lack in stature they more than make up for in strength. Their facial hair is tough and coarse, little wonder that most prefer to grow luxurious beards rather than face the tedium of scraping away with a razor every morning.

I reined up just short of the assembled group, being careful to keep my hands away from my own weapons.

I know what they saw: A big man, dressed in the well worn clothes of a cavalry officer. My black pants bloused in my riding boots, my own dark blue, short Hussar's jacket, atop a white cotton shirt.

A straight bladed sword hung from the pommel of my saddle. Two pistols were thrust into the bright scarlet sash around my waist. A wide mouthed blunderbuss rested in a holster, attached to my saddle, behind my thigh. A cavalry lance was secured to the opposite side.

My shoulder length hair was unbound but kept out my eyes by a red kerchief wrapped around my head. My lean face, clean shaven, was well tanned, by long exposure to the elements.

One of the soldiers walked closer to me. "Good morn, sir. You wish to enter Cog Town?"

I nodded. "Indeed. I have long wished to see the wonders of your city for myself."

He grinned at me. "Never been here before, hey?"

"I have not," I agreed.

He nodded. "Might I ask your name, and from

whence you have come, sir?"

I hesitated. I had no wish to give my real name, as the business I was on was both private and confidential.

"I am Malaki Kris Rook. Late of the King's own Regiment of Horse. Now discharged honourably from his service."

The man seemed impressed. "What unit did you serve with, sir?"

"Skirmishers," I told him truthfully.

"Were you at the battle of Waldron's Drift by any chance?"

I looked at the man. Younger than me he was. Dressed impeccably. Boots shined, cap at just so an angle. Weapons and uniform, spotless.

I nodded. "Aye. I was there."

"So was my brother," he said excitedly. "He said it was a great victory. Four hundred against a thousand, yet the King's Regiments won the day. He said the Skirmishers were magnificent."

"We were," I agreed. "And took the losses to prove it. A hundred men I rode out onto the field with that day. Scare more than twenty returned."

"But that victory helped secure a truce with Romus."

"Yes it did. And I know people who say it was a price worth paying. Though, of course, they were not with us on the day."

Another soldier had come closer to listen. "I have heard of you Captain Rook. You also served at Talamorra, did you not?"

"There and many other places. Ten years service did I give to King Cosimo. I regret it not, but it did little except give me wounds and bring me grief."

"You're a famous man in Signoria, Captain," the same soldier replied. "Is that not worth something?"

"I would give up whatever fame I have, to bring back the men who died beside me," I said, more hotly than I had intended.

He looked embarrassed, as though believing he had upset me and was now sorry for it. He began to make apologies.

I waved them away. "No need, friend. I am weary from my journey is all. I grow irritable in my old age."

He laughed. "Why I scare put you past thirty years, sir?"

I chuckled with him. "A hundred in experience."

The soldier who had first questioned me pointed inside. "We'll detain you no longer, Captain Rook. Feel free to enter Cog Town. I hope you have an enjoyable time whilst you're with us."

I thanked him and nudged my horse forward. Then I pulled up again and turned back to him. "Your brother?" I asked. "What is his name?"

"Sergeant Guy Maxon. With the Black Muskets."

I smiled. "I know Guy. He's a good man. Tough and steady."

"My name is Starn Maxon. I'm a Lieutenant with the Guardsmen. If you need anything whilst you're in Cog, please ask for me by name, Captain. If I'm not here, one of the other lads will know where I am."

I thanked the young man again.

Nodding to the others I once more nudged my horse forward, and entered the almost mythical city of Cog Town for the first time.



As I rode down the main street, past many store and shop fronts that held a bewildering array of goods, I noticed that there were literally dozens of side streets,



branching off in all directions.

It became immediately obvious to me that I would need to purchase some sort of map.

Apart from locating a stable for my horse and a room for myself, I must needs find the location of a shop belonging to one named Konrad Drexler.

I spied a young woman approaching me on a white mare. The girl wore cream coloured riding breeches, bloused in a pair of knee high, glossy black boots. A black leather vest was worn over a red silk shirt. I saw she had a baldric slung over her right shoulder, which suspended a slim sabre by her left hip. A pistol was thrust in a dark blue sash around her waist. The unblemished skin on her arms and face was lightly tanned from the sun, and her hair, unbound and falling about her shoulders, shone like burnished copper.

She looked right at me as she drew closer, and gently nudged her own mount to the left, to steer it by me.

As she drew level, coolly meeting my eyes with her own, I raised a hand in greeting. "Excuse me, my lady. I am new to Cog Town. Just arrived now. I was wondering if you might know where I could purchase a street map? I fear I will be hopelessly lost in no time at all otherwise."

The young woman pulled back on her reins and regarded me for a moment. Her eyes flicked over my face, then my clothing, gear and horse. I'm sure she missed nothing.

Apparently satisfied, she smiled at me. She turned in her saddle, pointing back in the direction she had ridden from. The angle that she turned at presented me with an ample view of her sleek buttocks and out thrust bosom. She was a slim wench. But well rounded in all the right places.

"There is a bookshop at the beginning of the next

block. The owner is a man named Jonas. He will supply you with a map, and probably any other information you require about Cog Town."

She turned back to me, and I nodded my thanks. "I am grateful, m'lady."

"Your clothes and horse are dusty, sir. You have come far?"

"I have ridden across a fair piece of Signoria." I admitted.

"You are a soldier? That coat you wear. It is that of a Skirmisher in the Hussars is it not?"

"You're very knowledgeable about such things, m'lady."

She grinned. "My father despairs of me. I played with toy soldiers when I was little, now I make weapons to sell to real soldiers."

"You're a gunsmith?" I exclaimed in surprise.

A shake of the head. "I design many kinds of weapons. Swords, lances, knives, pistols, rifles. I have my own small factory. I design things and my blacksmiths manufacture them to my specifications."

"Well I'll be damned," I said.

She laughed, tossing that copper hair back from her face. "Not a career suitable for a lady, you think?"

"Far be it from me to remark on your choice of work, m'lady. I'm sure if you have a passion for it, you are quite as capable as designing weapons as any man."

She was still smiling, and beguiling it was to be sure. "I have a passion for many things, sir. What is your name?"

The way she was looking at me now, I began to suspect we might no longer be discoursing about swords and pistols.

I made a slight bow from my saddle. "I am Malaki Kris Rook. Late of the King's Skirmishers, as you rightly

guessed."

"And what rank did you hold?"

"I was a Captain."

She nodded. "Captain Rook. I have heard of you."

"Nothing bad I hope?"

"I know you were the hero of Waldron's Drift."

"I was a survivor of the Drift, it is not quite the same thing."

"What brings you to Cog Town, Captain Rook?"

"Please," I insisted. "Call me Kris. All my friends do."

"Then you must call me Tracy. I am Tracy Trevallion."

To my further surprise she nudged her horse next to mine and put out her right hand. I slipped off my worn leather glove and took her soft hand in my own. We shook firmly.

"I come visiting an old friend," I told her. "He's almost in the same line of work as yourself. Konrad Drexler. A Teslan watchmaker and inventor of odd curiosities."

Not letting go of my hand, her eyes changed. Her face grew sombre. I felt my stomach shift in anticipation of her next words. "I'm sorry, Kris. I'm afraid I have dire news for you. Konrad is dead. He was found murdered a week ago, in his shop."

I did not let go of her hand. I took a deep breath to steady myself. "I see. Murdered you say? Did they catch the person, or persons responsible?"

A shake of her copper tinged hair. "The Nightwatchers believe the murder took place in the evening, after Konrad's shop was closed. He lived on the premises, in rooms above his shop. There were rumours that he had been tortured. The inside of the shop was ransacked, as though someone was looking for something. Something which perhaps, Konrad refused to divulge the location of."

Tracy gave my hand a soft squeeze. "I'm very sorry

to be the bearer of such bad news, Kris."

I shook my head. "Not your fault, Tracy. I was bound to hear it from someone else, sooner rather than later."

We released one and other's hands. I rubbed my jaw thoughtfully.

"What will you do now, Kris?"

I shrugged. "I will find a stable for my horse, a room for myself and decide what to do next."

"I stable my horses across the road from my factory. I likewise live where I work. I have quarters for my clients, many of whom come to Cog just to buy my merchandise. You are welcome to the use of a room, Kris. Or, if you prefer, there is an Inn on the corner."

Keenly did I look at this attractive young woman. Our eyes met. She did not look away. "I would be most grateful, Tracy. I am not a pauper. I can pay for my lodging."

"Ha! I don't charge the people I invite to my house a fee, ex-Captain Rook."

"I meant no offense."

"None taken." She pulled the reins of her horse and the mare turned around. Her thigh brushed against mine. It was like a jolt of electricity flashing through me.

"I was going for a ride; I like to get out of the city every couple of days."

"Please don't put off your ride for me, Tracy."

"It's alright. We'll go back to the factory, get a stall for your horse. Find you a room in the guest's quarters. Get you a bath. You look like you need it. If you want to repay me, you can escort me to dinner tonight. I haven't been out for supper in quite some time."

I assured my new friend that it would be my pleasure.

So thus did I come to Cog Town.



We danced. We danced and we ate, and we drank and we danced again.

Tracey was as light on her feet as a feather. I whirled her around the floor, one arm around her slim waist, the other holding her upraised hand.

I daresay, we made a splendid looking couple. She in her long evening gown of dark red silk, myself in a new white shirt and black breeks. Her elderly servant, Edward, had brushed and cleaned my Hussar's jacket until it looked almost as good as the day it was made. The dark blue wool was spotless. The grey wolf fur at the cuffs and collar shone.

At Tracey's factory residence, I had bathed and then slept for a few hours.

Her housekeeper and best friend, Jess, had fussed over me like a mother hen. The elderly fellow, Edward, an ex-soldier himself, had likewise treated me like a visiting royal envoy.

"She likes you," winked Jess. "I can tell."

The feeling was mutual. I liked the copper haired young woman myself. She was confident, in charge of her life. I had quickly discovered she laughed freely and said what she thought, regardless of how unladylike or shocking it might be. She had her own opinions and spoke her mind. I was also intrigued by her choice of career.

Realising I was tired from my long day in the saddle Tracey had insisted I took a bath and had a nap for a few hours. "I have a project to finish in my workshop, Kris. You get cleaned up, have a doze. Edward will look after your clothes. I feel like dressing up and dancing tonight, I don't want to have to drag you around the

dance floor."

"You assume I can dance?"

"I assume you can do many things."



Now, to the slow music of the band, I held Tracey close and we talked softly as I guided us around other couples.

Some of those others, both men and women, eyed us covertly.

"I'm a bit of an oddity," the woman in my arms admitted. "I dress like a man, fight like a man, drink like a man, and make weapons for men to kill each other with."

"None of which one would guess at this moment."

A shrug. "Most will be astounded to see me in a dress at all. Let alone clinging to a handsome Captain."

"What happened?" I asked.

She drew back a little and looked into my eyes. "You are astute, sir."

I shrugged.

"I was married. To a man I adored. He died."

"When?"

"Two years past."

"How?"

"I killed him."

Now it was my turn to draw back and look into her eyes.

"We were testing some new weapons on the outskirts of the city. A raiding party of Ödlund tribesmen attacked us. We fought, several of our workers were killed. Taking to the horses we fled. A thrown spear brought down his horse. In seconds, he was overpowered and captured. I escaped." She took a deep

breath, calming herself. "I returned to the area of the ambush by a different route. The Odmen had him tied over the wheel of a wagon. They were... doing things to him. He was screaming. I'd never heard him scream before."

Another deep breath. "I had a long-rifle on my saddle. I dismounted. Laid it across a rock... and put a musket ball between his eyes."

Tear trickled down her cheeks.

"I would have done the same," I assured her.

I drew her closer to me, and she rested her head on my shoulder.



We argued over who would pay our dinner bill.

In the end, we got a waiter to toss a coin, neither of us trusting the other to flick the coin, in case we were skilled in the doing of it.

At the cloakroom desk, I shrugged back into my Hussar's coat and retrieved my pistols and straight bladed sword.

Tracey wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and slipped a leather satchel over her shoulder.

"Do you wish a carriage, Mistress Trevallion?" This from the Major Domo.

"No thank you, Tibbs. The Captain and I will walk home."

He sniffed. "Not sure the streets are safe, Miss T. Hearing all sorts of stories, I am."

From the manner in which he spoke, Tibbs obviously knew my new lady friend quite well. "Heard Odmen have been seen, inside the walls at night. Sneaking around. Looking for something. No one knows what. The Guardsmen have doubled their patrols, as have the

Nightwatchers.

Must have been for a reason."

"I thank you for your concern, Tibbs. I'm sure I will be safe with the Captain."

The older man looked at me. "Captain Rook ain't it?"

I nodded and offered my hand. "Yes."

He nodded back as he accepted it. "Starn Maxon told me you was in Cog. I served with his brother, Guy. He says you know Guy?"

"I do. Fought beside him a few times. Not always in barroom brawls."

He chuckled. "Yeh. That's Guy alright. I'm Orlando Tibbs. Used to be a Guardsman me'self. Before I bought shares in this place. Cog Town's safe enough normally, long as you doesn't go wandering about down in the thieves' quarter at midnight. Don't like the whispers about Odmen creeping around at night though. You take good care of Miss T. Her Dad's a good mate of mine. Like family she is."

I assured him I would guard Tracey with my life.

"Least I expect," he replied.



"It's incredible," I said. "I've been in this city for less than half a day and people I've never met know my name already."

The young woman at my side chuckled. "Rumours fly around Cog Town like lightning. I daresay half the city will know you escorted me to dinner tonight. That in itself, is worthy news for the gossipers."

"I had hoped to keep my presence here low key."

"You were not just dropping by to say hello to an old friend then?"

I sighed. "I'm not very good at subterfuge am I?"

Konrad was an old friend. I knew him back at the King's Court. He had worked in the armoury some years ago, before he decided to return here, to his home city."

We were strolling along the gas lit streets arm in arm. We were not alone, there were many couples about. Quite a number of Guardsmen also. They were taking the rumours of Odmen within their walls seriously.

"I shall not dissemble. Konrad sent word to King Cosimo a month ago that he had been successful in inventing something that he and the King had talked about in the past. What it was, I have no idea. Konrad requested the King send a trusted man to Cog to take back whatever he had invented, along with the design plans for it. Some kind of rifle or cannon I expect. Konrad was forever tinkering with firearms, gunpowder and explosives. Small wonder he hadn't blown himself up by now to be truthful."

I nodded to another couple as they walked past us in the opposite direction. I was admiring the gas lamps and the neatly cobblestoned street. Wide and level. Surrounded by shopfronts and stores. They were constructed of a mixture of sandstone, brick and wood. The effect was quite pleasing. Most were at least two levels high and some taller than that. Advertising shingles swung in a light breeze. Candles or oil lanterns shone from the interior of many shops. I guessed that not a few people lived, like Tracey herself, on the premises.

Tracey was thoughtful, assimilating the information I had just supplied her with. "So you are not an ex-cavalry Captain? You are still in the King's service?"

"I am definitely an ex-cavalry Captain," I assured her. "And I now contract in the King's service. He offered me a goodly sum to journey here and return to Florenza with Konrad's invention. He needed a man he could

trust. But a man who was no longer connected to him. Thus, he sought me out and offered me this job. I gladly accepted. I was getting bored to be truthful. Since I left the cavalry, I've been working as a guard for a shipping company down on the docks. Easy work, once I ran a few nere'do'wells off the wharves. I've a few men under my command, mostly fellows I soldiered with. It's good, steady work... but hardly taxing."

She looked at me thoughtfully. "I appreciate your honesty, Kris. Now I shall share something with you in turn. Before his death, Konrad had me make something for him—a lot of somethings. I manufactured them from the precise plans he gave me. I know what they are, but how he intended them to work, I have no idea. I'll show them to you when we get home."

Tracey paused. "Actually... just down there, two streets further, is where Konrad had his shop. Would you like to see it?" She pointed. "It's but a short walk."

I was intrigued with her newly imparted information. I nodded. "By all means."

She held my arm tighter and guided me in the direction she had indicated. I made no argument at her fingers upon my arm. I was quite enjoying the sensation of having a beautiful woman by my side. It had been a long time since I had enjoyed female companionship.

As we left the main street and walked down a smaller laneway, the lighting became less frequent.

We turned right, into an even smaller street.

I glanced behind me, as a soldier does in unfamiliar territory.

A shadow crossed the street behind us.

I tensed.

"What is it, Kris?"

I kept a wary eye on the spot where I had detected movement. It had been low to the ground. "Nothing. A

cat I think. Ran across the road behind us."

"Here is Konrad's shop."

I turned my head back and took in the exterior of Konrad Drexler's place of work and residence.

It was built on two levels; the upper tiered from that below.

"Konrad, like myself, worked on the ground floor and had his living quarters on the one above."

"Was the shop not secured, locked, after his murder?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. The City Governors have yet to locate Konrad's Will. Or discover if he had any next of kin, to whom they might forward ownership of the shop. If either cannot be found, within a reasonable amount of time, the City will probably auction his equipment and the shop's contents, and either rent or sell the premises to another. Why do you ask if it was locked up?"

"Because the door is ajar, Tracey. Anyone who wishes can make entry into the place."

"Your night vision is superior to mine. But yes, you're right. The door is open."

I gently removed her hand from my arm and stepped forward. I put my right hand on one of the pistols in my sash. With my left, I pushed the door open wider.

I stepped in front of Tracey and perused the darkened interior of the dead inventor's shop. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Never a good sign.

Suddenly, from behind us, I heard something rushing toward me.

I spun around and pushed Tracey to one side.

A figure ran headlong at me, from out of the shadows opposite. Silver glinted.

Without thinking, I pulled the pistol from my sash, cocked it and fired dead centre into the thing's chest!

The report of my shot was loud, but it couldn't

mask the cry our assailant made as he crumpled to the ground before us.

A large knife clattered to the cobblestones from out of twitching fingers.

A savage war cry and another outlandish figure threw itself at us!

Second pistol in hand now, I fired another shot off.

Our attacker stumbled but came on. I dropped the pistol and wrenched my sword from its sheath at my left hip. I blocked a downward swung arm with the blade. A howl emanated from my opponent as the razor sharp edge of my sword all but severed that arm at the wrist. A long handled hatchet just missed my shoulder.

“Odmen!” cried Tracey.

Were they indeed. I had heard of the savage inhabitants of The Od, the Tainted Land, but never hitherto encountered any.

I thrust the straight blade of my sword into my attacker’s chest. A grunt and a gasp and long fingered, hairy hands clutched at the steel where it entered the body. I twisted the hilt and pushed deeper. Slitted, deep set eyes, glared at me from under shaggy brows. The mouth opened and large, pointed teeth, snarled at me. Then the body went limp, and the sword was almost dragged from my grasp as my assailant collapsed onto the cobblestoned street.

I wrenched my sword back out of the corpse.

Another shot!

Tracey had reached into her shoulder bag and produced a pistol of her own. I heard a cry from the doorway to Konrad’s shop.

Yet another Odman, dressed in worn buckskins and armed with a club, had been about to stave my head in from behind.

Her first pistol dropped to the floor. To my amazement she pulled out another and fired off a second shot.

"There's another one," she said in a loud, but perfectly calm voice. "Inside the shop."

I eased her aside and stepped through the doorway, being careful to check both to my left and my right, less another attacker lie in wait for me there.

Outside in the street I heard the shouts of men.

"The Guardsman," Tracey guessed. "Shall I scream out for them?"

I hesitated.

At that moment, a dark form ran across the shop floor to one side of me and hurled itself at the large glass window. With a shattering of glass, another Odman burst through the broken window and rolled onto the cobblestones. Gaining his feet in an instant, he paused for a second, glancing first at me and then at Tracey. He grinned, showing those wicked teeth. Then he was off. Darting from side to side. Tracey fired her pistol, but apparently missed. He ran across the street and leapt upward, to catch hold of an overhanging awning. With an inhuman agility, he flipped himself up and over. Another leap saw him disappear over the edge of the roof opposite.

He was gone.



Tracey had no need to scream out for the Guardsman. They found us easily enough. They were accompanied by a Captain of the Nightwatchers. Citizens in residence on either side and opposite the deceased inventor's shop, had turned on lights, opened windows and even rushed out into the street to aid us. Some

were armed with swords and knives, one or two had a pistol or a blunderbuss. A dwarf, wearing nothing but a pair of short breeches, clutched a large saucepan. Seeing my raised eyebrow he scowled. "Thought it was me battle-axe. Half a bottle o' rum will do that to a fellow."

Everyone began yelling questions at us, including the Nightwatcher.

Many recognised Tracey, I heard her name bandied about a few times.

We assured everyone that we were unharmed.

No, we had no idea what the Odmen had been doing in Konrad Drexler's shop. We had simply been passing by and noticed movement inside. Before we could alert anyone, we had been attacked.

Some seemed disinclined to believe our version of the events. I had to point out to those people that should they suggest that the lady or myself were lying... I would be happy to settle the matter at dawn on the nearest piece of vacant land. With pistols or swords or their personal choice of weaponry.

Both the citizens and the Guard were most concerned at the effrontery of the Odmen to be inside Cog Town, running about, hither and yon, breaking into shops and waylaying innocent citizens.

I could hardly blame them.

Having answered their questions the Nightwatcher Captain graciously allowed us to be on our way. After my suggestion of a dawn meeting, none had seen fit to further question our version of the events.

Tracey and I took our leave, she refusing an offer to be escorted home.

The first thing we both did as we walked away from the still milling crowd was to reload our pistols.

"You fired three shots?" I asked my female companion.

She passed me a small flintlock pistol. It had two barrels, one beside the other, and two triggers to match. "The first pistol was a single shot, this was the second."

"I've not seen a double barrelled pistol as small as this one," I admitted. "And such fine workmanship to be sure."

"I designed it myself," Tracey replied proudly. "My gunsmith actually made it, to my specifications of course."

"You're both to be commended."

"As are you, Kris. Your response to our attackers was most impressive."

I shrugged. "I was a soldier all my life. Practice makes perfect and all that. Luck plays a part also. Although I noticed," I said with a grin, "that the more I practiced the luckier I got."

She smiled. "Yes, I've found that myself."

She had her arm in mine again. We were back on the main thoroughfare.

"I have an idea that the Odmen were not in Konrad's shop by accident. I think they were there looking for something in particular."

"What?" I asked bluntly.

Now it was her turn to shrug. "I'm not certain. But I'm sure it will have something to do with the things I was making for Konrad." She held up a hand. "Ask me not what. I will show you when we get home. I want your unbiased opinion as to what the items are."

"Very well. I'm assuming they are weapons of some kind?"

"Assume what you wish, Kris," she replied enigmatically.



In Tracey's workshop office, she showed me the things she had manufactured to Konrad Drexler's specifications.

I held one in my hand and turned it between my fingers, inspecting it minutely.

A rounded piece of lead that fitted snugly into a brass end piece.

"There is a small amount of black powder sealed inside the brass end," she informed me.

"It reminds of those rockets that the army engineers are always trying to perfect," I said.

"Yes," she nodded in agreement. "Yet these are too small to be rockets. The intention must be for the black powder to ignite and propel the lead ball on its way. Yet how does one ignite the powder? Sealed as it is within the hollow brass tube?"

"Whatever Konrad wanted me to take back to the King must be connected to these things. Which leads me to another thought... we must suppose that the Odmen inside Konrad's shop were looking for something. I begin to suspect that they must have had knowledge of his new invention."

Tracey put a hand to her throat. "The rumours of the Odmen sneaking around inside Cog have circulated for some weeks now. Spies perhaps? Mayhap they gained some knowledge of Konrad's invention and tortured him to reveal its location?"

"And Konrad likely dying before they got the information they sought—" I began.

"—Had them return to his shop, still looking for whatever it was he had made," she finished.

I nodded grimly. "Yes. Konrad's invention was not

the well kept secret it might have appeared. Somehow, the Odmen learned of its existence and were prepared to go great lengths to acquire it."

Tracey began pacing the floor. "The only reason that the Odmen have not overrun Cog in the past is because our weapons are far superior to theirs. They have the numbers, we have the technology. If, however, they got their hands on weapons similar or more effective than our own... then Cog Town would certainly be facing a most serious threat."

"I understand," I said. "I saw your strange cannons on the walls when I arrived. I also saw some kind of floating ships?"

"Ah," she smiled. "Airships we call them. They are filled with a lighter than air gas. They are a very effective part of our arsenal. We can drop explosives from them, onto the enemy below."

I shook my head in amazement. "I'm surprised you haven't sent or sold any of them to the other settlements across Signoria."

"We shall not. We do not trust others to well use our technology. If the airships became common, so too would aerial warfare."

"You're probably right," I agreed.

"We need all of this and more to secure Cog Town from the Odmen. They would overrun us in a second if they could. We were lucky tonight. The Odmen we encountered were not shape-shifters. They are extremely hard to dispatch."

"I had thought the shape-shifters to be mere stories," I confessed. "I find the idea of men being able to turn themselves into animals to be fanciful at best."

"Jest not, Kris. The Taint... the unseen, unfelt Taint... that curses the Wastelands... subtly changes men. You saw what the Odmen who attacked us

looked like. They are known as half-men. The fully tainted have the appearance of beasts on two legs. Head further west into Galli and there are others that are able to shift between the two forms. They are the most dangerous. They are all but impervious to pistol and musket ball. To kill one with a blade it is necessary to hack them limb from limb, or decapitate them."

"Charming," I muttered.

"It has been a long day, Kris. I am off to my bed. Tomorrow we should return to Konrad's shop. You and I might discover something that the Odmen did not."

I inclined my head. "I was thinking the same myself, Tracey. I shall bid you goodnight then."

We looked at each other. An awkward moment of silence.

Without quite knowing how it happened, we found ourselves in each others arms. Our lips pressed together urgently. I drew in a deep breath, inhaling her sweet perfume. I ran my fingers through her copper coloured hair. Her arms were entwined about my neck. After an age, we drew apart, panting. Staring into the others eyes.

I opened my mouth to say something, but Tracey put a finger to her own lips and then placed that finger on mine.

Silently she took me by the hand and led me out of her workshop.

We climbed the stairs to her apartments' above and I followed Tracey into her personal quarters.



"I'm impressed with how easily you obtained permission from the Precinct House to have a look around Konrad's shop,"

Tracey grinned at me. She looked radiant in her tight riding breeks and blue silk shirt. A green sash, wrapped around her slim waist, held two pistols and a baldric over her right shoulder supported her slim sabre.

"I am well known in Cog Town. Dare I admit that my father is the Mayor?"

"What does the Sheriff think we are looking for?"

"I explained we would be searching for plans that Konrad and I were working on. People know that he and I often designed things together. He would provide the design and the specifications; I would in turn manufacture them."

"I'm not even sure what we're supposed to be looking for," I said.

She shrugged. "Nor I. Some sort of pistol or rifle that might fire the small rockets I suppose?"

I nodded. "Yes. That's my thought also."



Almost four hours later we admitted defeat.

Although we had discovered many unique and interesting things inside the deceased inventor's shop, we had found nothing that looked like it might fire the small brass and lead rockets that Tracey had made on Konrad's behalf.

We had searched the ground floor of the shop twice already. Now we were in Konrad's private rooms above.

He had been a tidy man for an inventor. A place for everything and everything in its place. The displaced items we found scattered about had no doubt gotten that way due to the attentions of the Odmen last night.

We were in Konrad's bedroom. Tracey dropped down onto the wide mattress. "I'm getting weary of

this."

"I too."

There was a gleam in her eye, she cocked her head at me. Patted the bed beside herself. "We could take a break, my good Captain?"

I hesitated.

"Afraid we might be discovered?"

"There is that," I admitted.

"Poh. What do I care? I am free to spend time with whom I choose."

"Your reputation?" I suggested.

"No one would be surprised by anything I do. A woman who manufactures weapons for a living is shocking enough."

With a chuckle, I sat down beside her. Took her in my arms and pressed my lips to her own. The kiss grew into something else and we ended up lying atop the bed. My hand slipped underneath a pillow. I pushed it aside. It fell off the bed and landed with a clunk on the wooden boards.

A clunk?

"Tracey," I drew back from her. "Tracey, stop."

She blinked and frowned at me in surprise. "Stop? Aren't you supposed to be crying out for more?"

I chuckled again. "Give me a moment, woman."

Leaning over the edge of the bed, I retrieved the pillow from the floor.

It appeared to be just that: a pillow.

I ran my hands over it. Stuffed with goose or duck feathers I supposed.

But what was that?

With Tracey watching me carefully, I slipped my hand inside the pillowcase and felt around the opposite corners.

I grunted in surprise and pulled my hand back out.

With a key held between my fingers.

We looked at each other.

"Key," I said brilliantly.

"Safe," replied Tracey.

"Where?"

"Lets find out."

All thoughts of ardour forgotten, we scrambled off the bed, rearranged our clothing and began to search around for a lock the steel key might fit.



The key opened no safe at all.

But it did unlock the front of a tall grand-clock.

Tracey rummaged around inside the mechanism but found nothing.

She turned to me in despair. "There's nowt here, Kris."

"May I?"

Ignoring the gears and chains and other intricate bits and pieces I bent down and felt around at the interior base of the grand-clock.

Ah.

I depressed a hidden brass switch and the bottom panel popped up. I carefully reached inside and felt an object, wrapped in soft leather.

I lifted it out.

With Tracey hovering around me like a cat on a hot tin roof, I walked over to a table and laid my prize on its surface.

I smiled at my companion.

"Oh, for heavens sake, Kris. Unwrap it!"

Chuckling, I folded the leather back, and we gazed down at that which was revealed.

A chill ran through me. Then a hot flush of excite-

ment.

Tracey was speechless. "Do you know what this is?"
"The future," I answered grimly.



"I shall return as soon as I am able," I told my lover.
She hugged me one last time, and I climbed on my horse.

"By the time you return, I shall have made a hundred of them," she said.

"By the time I return, you will be a very wealthy woman," I pointed out.

She shrugged. "I've been wealthy for quite some time, Kris."

"Oh."

She laughed. "That's one of the things I liked about you, Captain Rook. My wealth obviously made no impression on you at all."

"I am dense in some respects."

"And sharp as a razor in others, my dear. Godspeed to you, Kris."

I raised my hand in a salute and turned my horse.

My escort, comprised entirely of trained Cog Town cavalymen, prepared to leave with me.

It would not now be safe for me to ride alone. Less the Odmen might have plans to waylay me for the valuable piece of equipment I carried.

It nestled inside my waist band. Heavy. Lethal.

Tracey and I had recognised it for what it was the second we had laid eyes on it. A quick inspection of the internal workings had allowed us to understand how the small lead and brass rockets were meant to be used, when coupled with the pistol we had discovered inside the grand-clock in the shop of the deceased

Teslan inventor, Konrad Drexler.

Perusing the design plans that had also been wrapped inside the leather covering we found that Drexler had named his invention, "the Revolver".

A pistol with a chambered revolving cylinder that housed six of the tiny rockets, those that Tracey herself had manufactured at Konrad's request.

A hammer with a small spike on the back of the revolver punched through the metal covering of the small rockets and ignited the black powder. The tiny lead pieces were then propelled from the eight inch barrel at tremendous speed.

I had test fired the Revolver a dozen times now. Once one got used to the almighty 'crack' of the black powder exploding, and the kick of the barrel as the lead shot forth... it was a most fearsome and deadly accurate weapon to be sure.

The plans also showed a design for a longer firearm the Teslan inventor called, "the Rifle". Using the same six chambered revolving cylinder and the brass and lead slugs.

Tracey and I had debated if I should take the Revolver back to the King of Signoria at all. Could men be trusted with this new weapon?

"Someone else will invent something similar in the future, Kris" Tracey had told me. "If not this year, then the next. Man is ever inventive where weapons are concerned. Why it was not that long ago that we were still using bows and arrows. Look how quickly the flintlock musket and pistol evolved.

"You gave your word to the King that you would courier Konrad's new invention to him, and I believe you should do so. We shall make copies of the plans. I will take measurements before you leave. I will be able to reproduce a Revolver exactly the same as this one in

less than a week. I will have my gunsmiths work around the clock."

"Imagine if the Odmen had found the Revolver?" I suggested.

She shuddered. "Armed with pistols and rifles such as Konrad has envisioned, they would have overrun us, there's no question of that."

"A pistol and a rifle that can fire six shots, and can be re-loaded in moments... Tracey... Konrad's invention is going to change Uropia."

She nodded in agreement. "Yes. I know. For better or for worse?"

I didn't speak. I think we both knew the answer.



It wasn't safe for me to attempt to carry the Revolver all the way back to southern Signoria alone. We could not allow it to fall into the hands of the Odmen, or anyone else.

Tracey and I met with her father and the senior members of the Cog Town Council, including Sheriff Gearwall of the Central District Precinct House and various military officers.

It was agreed that for allowing Tracey to copy and manufacture the Revolver, the city would provide me with an escort back to Florenza, all the way to the King himself.

It was also agreed that, for allowing me to take the Revolver to King Cosimo de'Medici, I would ask him to pledge a battalion of his Borderer's; armed with the new pistols and rifles, on the northern edge of Signoria territory. They to patrol and drive off any groups of Odmen who frequently preyed on Cog Town merchant caravans.



Turning in my saddle, I waved one last time to Tracey. She stood atop the high wall of Cog, waving back to me.

Then I faced south west, the direction in which the main road to Florenza ran.

I patted the Revolver in my waist sash. It felt both comforting and deadly at the same time. In my saddle bags, I had more ammunition for it. Tucked inside a pocket of my jacket I had the design plans that Konrad Drexler had so meticulously imagined and drawn up.

I was conscious as I rode along, surrounded by Cog Town cavalry, that I carried with me the very future of Uropia.

TAINED LOVE

BY E.J. TETT

The sword was tainted. She could feel the evil radiating from the weapon even though it was wrapped in cloth and stowed away in a drawer.

Still her eyes were drawn to where it was hidden in the old bookcase riddled with woodworm and smelling of dust and mould.

She chewed her lip. *Take it, she thought, end this.*

Her baby's cries brought her back, and she dragged a hand tiredly through her hair. "I'm coming, hun," she said, getting to her feet and leaving her book unread on the arm of the chair.

The bedroom was dark and smelled damp. She was worried about the sizable patch of mould that was growing right above her baby's cot. *Not that it matters, she thought. We'll be gone soon.*

"Theo," she cooed softly, lifting her son into her arms and cradling him against her chest. "Hey, sweetie, don't cry."

She went to the window and peered out to the street below. A knight, wearing the sigil of a red rose on his breast plate, rode past on a white horse, the animal's hooves clapping heavily on the cobbled street. She watched him disappear around the corner, and then

everything fell quiet once more. Theo settled in her arms, and she bounced him distractedly. "You're getting old, Kaysa," she muttered to herself, as her eyes scanned the streets, seeking into the shadows. "Old and paranoid."

She was just about to put Theo back in his cot when there was a knock at the door. Kaysa hugged her son to her chest for a moment as her heart pounded. Maybe whoever it was would just leave if she didn't answer, if they thought nobody was home...

There came a knock again, louder and more insistent. She put Theo back in his cot carefully and left the room, hurrying downstairs to open the door—better than them breaking in.

"Just a minute!" she called. Kaysa's eyes flicked to the bookcase as she passed, she could feel the sword call out to her.

"Good evening," she said as she opened the door, giving the knight a smile. She looked past him to the shadows behind, certain that she could see movement there. *Don't look suspicious*, she told herself, pulling her eyes back to the knight.

"Ma'am," he said. "I'm here to take you into custody, by decree of His Majesty the King."

Kaysa gave a nervous laugh. "King? Galli has no King. There must be some mistake," she said. "I'm just—"

"You either come peacefully, or we'll take you by force," the knight said, his hand going to the hilt of his sword.

We? she thought. Again her eyes flicked to the shadows; again she felt the pulse of the tainted sword in the bookcase behind her.

"Of course," she said. "I don't want any trouble. My son, let me just go and get my son."

The knight's hand moved away from his weapon and Kaysa gave him a small smile, hoping he wouldn't see her as a threat. "One moment," she said, leaving the door open as she turned back inside. She passed the bookcase.

"Ma'am?" the knight called when she stopped walking.

Kaysa ignored him. The evil seeped from the bookcase, and she closed her eyes briefly as a wave of it washed over her. She opened the bottom drawer of the bookcase and took out the cloth-wrapped sword.

"Ma'am," the knight said. Kaysa caught the note of warning in his voice, saw him reach for his weapon from the corner of her eye. She smiled and unwrapped the sword, admiring its brilliance as she held it aloft.

There was a rasp of metal against leather as the knight drew his own sword. Kaysa felt nauseous for a brief moment as she gazed at the tainted sword and then it passed. Her reflection in the blade smiled back at her; her hair, she noticed, was turning white.

"He will *not* have my son!" Kaysa said, angrily, turning to the knight.

"He is the King," the knight replied, smirking. "He will have what he pleases."

The knight stepped over the threshold, and Kaysa's eyes widened with indignation. "Out," she hissed. "Get out!"

She swung the sword at the knight and her weapon clashed against his. With a twist, the knight almost unarmed her and Kaysa stepped backwards to regain her balance. She cried out angrily and struck out at the knight again, taking him by surprise.

Kaysa thrust and parried with the sword, revelling in the power it gave her. The knight fought back, and the two swords created sparks between them.

Theo's cries brought her back. She gasped and looked at the knight; she could hear snarls and crashes from upstairs and her baby's screams. "No!" she whispered.

She kicked the knight hard in the stomach, her foot connecting with his armour. It was enough to buy her some time, and she turned and raced upstairs.

"Theo!" she cried, her eyes wide with fear. She reached for the door, pulled at the handle, and then fell backwards as a blur of fur and teeth burst from the room.

Kaysa screamed as the werewolf leaped over her. The tainted sword had fallen from her grasp, and she reached for it quickly and scabbled to her feet.

She glanced into the bedroom and saw a dark, deformed figure standing over her baby's cot, his skull twisted and strange. Her blood ran cold. *Mongrel man*, she thought.

"*Stay away from him!*" Kaysa screamed, shaking with anger. A flood of rage poured from the sword and into her body.

The werewolf turned in the corridor, snarled, and struck out with its great clawed paw. Kaysa barely acknowledged it as she turned with the sword powerfully and sliced off the creature's paw.

She felt hot blood splash onto her face and neck as she turned back to the bedroom. The figure, bent and dark and cloaked, snatched up her baby from the cot and ran towards her.

Kaysa grit her teeth and drew back her sword when the werewolf bowled into her, knocking her from the doorway. The man and her baby darted from the bedroom; she could just see them through the werewolf's fur. "No!" she cried again.

The werewolf snapped and snarled at her face, and

she pushed at its neck with her hands. The creature's breath was putrid, and saliva ran from its mouth. Its eyes were mad.

"*Theo!*" Kaysa screamed. She kicked the werewolf in the groin, and then snatched up her sword again. With an incensed yell, she plunged the blade deep into the creature's belly.

"Go!" she heard the knight cry, followed by his footsteps pounding up the wooden stairs.

Kaysa wrenched the sword from the werewolf, spilling its guts to the floor, and faced the knight. "Where is he taking my son?" she demanded, her voice shaking with barely suppressed rage.

"It's over," the knight said as he approached her cautiously, his sword held low and ready. "He will be well cared for. Give it up, Kaysa."

Kaysa bristled at his over-familiar use of her name. She felt the sword in her hand respond. "It will never be over," she growled and lunged at the knight.



Afterwards, Kaysa walked away. She remembered very little of the fight and knew only two things; she was exhausted, and she needed to get her son back. Her dress was blood soaked, and her hands and face were sticky with it. The knight was dead, and the sword felt far too good in her hands. Like it belonged there.

She wrapped the weapon in cloth again and left the building, walking dazedly through the town. It was dark now and eerily quiet. Kaysa stumbled down a dark alley and then fell to her knees, sobbing uncontrollably. She let the grief take her, and for a moment, she was beaten.

Think, she told herself, swiping at her tears with dirty,

bloodied hands. *Where would they have taken him? Straight to the King? No...*

"Maybe," she whispered, uncertain. Kaysa took a deep breath and stood up. She'd go to the old castle. If Theo was there, then she'd get him back. If not... *If not, then I shall kill the King...*



Rats swam in the murky brown water of the sewers, slime ran slowly down the brick walls, *things* floated past her in the dark.

Kaysa held a cloth over her nose with one hand, her other held up a torch so that she could see what lurked down in the darkness with her. The tainted sword was strapped to her back and although it was wrapped up she could still feel its coldness through to her skin.

She couldn't risk travelling through the streets, even though it was night time. The knights would still be about, as would any skinwearers, mongrel men and other scoundrels of the town. Kaysa couldn't risk anyone catching her.

Though if they dared touch me, I'd kill them all, she thought. I'd dance as their blood rained down around me...

Kaysa stopped in the tunnel. Those weren't her thoughts; that wasn't her! *It's the sword, she thought. The Taint.*

Once she had Theo back she would have to ditch the sword, get rid of it before it tainted her any further. Once she had her son she would move on, go somewhere the King would never find her. He couldn't follow her everywhere...

A squeak echoed through the sewers and Kaysa shivered and moved on. At least there were only rats

down there. She hoped there were only rats.

The flickering light from the fire of her torch cast strange shadows in front and to her sides, animal eyes reflected yellow in the dark. Water dripped down from above her, and the noise of rats screaming as they fought sounded far too loud. Kaysa could hear splashes too and tried desperately to convince herself that it wasn't the sound of footsteps, that she wasn't being followed...

"Who's there?!" Kaysa demanded, whirling around in the tunnel. Her heart pounded. She raised the torch but could see nothing behind her. Not even the rats.

My voice scared them away, she told herself. That's why it's quiet...

Kaysa stared into the darkness beyond the torchlight; she strained to make something out in the gloom. She could hear the sound of her own breathing and feel the heat of it on the cloth she held to her nose. "I am not afraid," she told herself sternly.

Something fell into the water beside her as she moved on, brick dust from the ceiling. Kaysa frowned and then looked up.

She almost dropped the torch.

The werewolf had its claws thrust deep into the brickwork as it held on above her, it looked down at her, its yellow eyes alight with hunger. It showed its teeth.

Kaysa's eyes widened and then she thrust upwards with the torch. The creature growled angrily and then leaped down into the tunnel in front of her, landing in the dirty water with a splash. Kaysa swiped the air with the torch again, threatening the wolf with the flames.

She tossed the cloth away from her nose and shrugged the sword from her shoulders, letting it fall into the water at her feet.

The werewolf bunched its muscles, ready to pounce; it growled low in its throat. Kaysa jabbed out with the torch again and then with her free hand reached into the water for the sword. She shook it free of its wrappings and once again felt the weapon's rage flow into her.

She faced the werewolf with flame and blade. "Come on," she taunted it.

The creature looked at her and then Kaysa saw its eyes flick to something behind her. She turned quickly as something hissed through the air. She felt a sharp pain to her neck and saw a figure step from the shadows. "What..." she muttered drowsily. The torch fell from her grasp and everything went dark.



The baby's cries made her head pound and she sat up, feeling queasy. "Theo," she muttered. "I'm coming, sweetie."

Kaysa opened her eyes and then closed them again, the shaft of light that came into the room was too bright for the moment.

Theo was crying. She opened her eyes carefully, blinked, and then looked at her surroundings.

She was in a cell. Dust motes sparkled in the light that came in through the single barred window. The door to her cell had iron bars from ceiling to floor, and she could see into the rest of the dungeon.

"Theo!" Kaysa called desperately, hearing him cry but not knowing where he was. *I'm in the castle*, she thought as she tried to see who or what else lurked in the other cells in the dungeon.

She stood up. Her cell was empty, but for a pile of straw that she supposed was to sleep on, the floor

was cold hard stone. Kaysa went to the bars and peered out. "*What have you done with my baby?*" she screamed.

"Quiet!" Somebody yelled back, and Kaysa strained to see who it was.

"Where is my son?" she demanded but she got no reply. She listened as Theo's cries grew fainter somewhere in the castle. *He's close*, she told herself. *He is not lost.*

Kaysa let go of the bars and paced the cell. Her head still pounded steadily, and she wondered if it was the effects of the sleeping drug or the tainted sword.

As she thought of the weapon she felt it draw nearer to the cell and she looked to the door. "Nasty thing this," the man said, holding the weapon at arm's length with his gauntleted hand. He peered in at Kaysa and gave her a yellow grin. Sweat glistened on his forehead and his white apron, stretched tight over his massive belly, was filthy dirty.

Kaysa looked at the sword hungrily, made a snatch for it through the bars. "Give it to me," she hissed.

"I'm just giving you one last look," the man said. "Before it's melted down."

Kaysa grabbed for the weapon again, and the man laughed and pulled it back out of her reach tauntingly. "The King thinks you can be saved," he said. "Says you're not too far gone. But I can see that look in your eyes, you're infected—"

Kaysa snatched the man's apron strings and pulled him back tight against the bars, changing her grip and twisting a knot into the apron at the back of his neck until he choked and spluttered and gasped for breath. "The sword," she demanded, and she grabbed it from him when it was in reach.

As soon as she touched the hilt she felt anger,

hatred, fear... all things evil rush from the blade and into her body. She drew the weapon back and let go of the man long enough only to plunge the sword into his spine. Blood ran down the channel in the sword when she held it aloft and for the briefest moment she admired how beautiful it looked. Then with a yell, she sliced through the iron bars as if they were made of clay and ran from the dungeon.



"Stop her!"

Kaysa didn't turn back to see who was pursuing her as she ran through the corridor. She could hear Theo crying again, louder this time, closer. She ran on, intent only on reaching her son. The sounds of the knights as they raced after her, the odd luxuriousness of the castle despite its years of abandonment, and the vague sense of having been there before barely registered.

"Theo!" Kaysa cried, seeing a woman halt suddenly ahead of her, clutching a baby to her chest.

"My son," Kaysa demanded, brandishing the sword. "Give him to me and you won't be harmed."

The woman hesitated, and Kaysa took a step closer. "*Give him to me!*" she almost screamed the words and when the other woman gasped in fear she felt a little shiver of pleasure run through her.

"No!" A man's voice cried from behind her. The knights had caught up... Kaysa heard the clatter of their armour as they came to a halt. She pulled Theo urgently from the other woman's arms and then pushed her aside as she fled again, running on through the corridor and then down the stairs and towards the open door, out into the courtyard.

"Lower the portcullis," someone ordered, shouting

loudly behind her. "Don't let her escape!"

Kaysa's feet hit the ground hard as she ran, Theo was quiet in her arms, but the tainted sword rejoiced in her hand and called out to her for blood. She skidded to a halt as the portcullis came down and her exit was blocked.

Men moved all around her, knights and others, all came forth from the shadows to surround her. Swords were drawn, and Kaysa's heart thudded painfully in her chest as she faced them. *You are not afraid*, she told herself silently. *You will kill them all*.

She kissed her son. "Hold on, baby," she said quietly. And then she fought with her baby in one hand, and the sword in the other, striking down every man and beast who dared to come near her, her eyes alight with twisted, desperate pleasure.



At the top of the castle, there was a large room with a brilliant view of the courtyard below. It was high up enough that the screams and curses and striking of metal against metal sounded distant, and the sight of the blood was manageable and somehow less real.

He looked out of the window and watched, before adjusting the bear pelt on his broad shoulders and checking the silver rose-shaped clasp at his throat; wondering if he should have a larger one made to better hold the weight of the fur.

A knight walked into the room and dropped respectfully to one knee, touching a hand to the rose on his breast plate and waiting to be acknowledged.

"Once she has been dealt with," King Artorius said, turning to the knight slowly, "bring me my son."

BLOOD AND FREEDOM

BY JOLEEN KUYPER

Lorau wiped the sweat off her forehead and pushed her dark hair out of her face as she picked fruit off the trees. She was grateful for the shade the trees provided, protecting her from the heat of the midday sun.

Her eyes fell on one of the other slaves working nearby, and the woman's thoughts soon came unbidden into her head. Mundane thoughts; Lorau was grateful for that at least. She found it hard to hide her shock or disgust at some of the things that went through people's minds, and her own discomfort at having invaded that private space, albeit unwillingly. When she looked at people, their thoughts simply flowed into her head as if along an invisible wire.

"Hey, girl!" a voice called, and she glanced up. It was Einey, the woman who organised the rest of the slaves. Mothered them in a way. "You're slacking!"

Lorau shook her head. "Sorry," she said demurely. She knew there was no point arguing with Einey. She also knew that the older woman had her best interests at heart. If any of the baskets were light at the end of the day, they would all suffer the consequences.

"Einey, do you remember anything about my mother?" Lorau asked as they carried the baskets back

toward the fortress once darkness started to fall over the orchards.

Einey snorted. "How would I remember that? Years ago, that was."

Lorau could sense the fact she was lying, but not what the truth was. Her skill was not yet developed enough, she considered. Or perhaps Einey knew how to shield her mind from those who could read it. The thought of others like her made Lorau hopeful.

"You remember everything," Lorau playfully challenged. She grinned at the older woman. "You remember every time I kept you awake at night as a baby, every time I grazed my knee as a toddler!"

Einey frowned, and Lorau sensed her worry. She sensed that there was something else buried deeper that she could not access. "Listen, girl," Einey said. "You were born a slave, and you'll die a slave. Best just to accept it, like the rest of us have."

Lorau nodded though she knew several of their fellow slaves had not accepted it any more than she had. She also knew they were planning to escape; she just didn't know if she dared to go with them.

It was dark before the slaves finished work and returned to their own quarters, and Einey made it clear she didn't want to talk to Lorau about the past as they shuffled into their beds. Lorau sensed thoughts long buried were forcing themselves to the surface and causing the older woman much grief. She felt guilt, but even stronger was the desire to learn what these thoughts were. What land did Einey come from? How did she end up here as a slave? And possibly some information about her own origin as well.

A baby crying. Men shouting in a strange language. The sound of metal on metal set her teeth on edge, but she kept running. The smoke made it hard to breathe,

but still she kept running. Sudden pain as a whip cracked across the back of her legs, causing her to fall onto the dirt, too slow to save the baby, she felt his skull crack beneath her breast.

"Einey, no!" Lorau exclaimed, realising tears were streaming down her face. Even in the dark, she could sense the old woman looking sharply at her.

"Shush, girl!" Einey hissed.

"But I saw... you were running... and the baby..." Lorau whispered.

"It was a long time ago," Einey said. "Best forgotten!"

"Who was he?" Lorau pressed.

"My son," Einey said so softly Lorau could barely hear her. "My son. Now stop. Don't search out secrets buried deep in people's heads!"

"I can't help it," Lorau protested. "Usually it isn't that strong... but if I look, I can't help but see!"

"Then don't look!" Einey replied. "What do you think the Masters would do if they learned about this? You must not let them learn of this, so find a way to stop!"

Lorau shook her head. "I can't," she said. "I might have been born a slave, but I won't die as one! I have to find out where I came from."

"Your mother was heavy with you when she was brought here," Einey whispered, her tone heavy with reluctance. "She'd had a long journey on their ship, it weakened her. She died so soon after you were born, and all the women did what they could to keep you alive."

"I'm grateful, Einey, I really am," Lorau said softly.

"Funny way of showing it," Einey snapped. "Now let me sleep. Tomorrow will be just as today was, as every day will be. Hard work. If you've time to be thinking about all this stuff, you're not working as hard as the rest of us!"

"Einey, where was she from? My mother? Where was she taken from?" Lorau asked, but Einey didn't reply. Lorau tried to feel her mind stubbornly once more for the answer, but Einey's mind was closed to her.



"How do you know that, girl? Who else knows?" Paolo asked, pushing Lorau against the wall.

"Let me go!" she replied breathlessly. "I know because I know, all right?"

"No, it's not!" he said, pushing harder. "Who told you? Who have you told? Do the Masters know?"

"No!" Lorau insisted. "I just, I just know!"

"How?" he asked. Lorau could barely breathe at this stage. Paolo was only a few years older than her but much taller, and considering the strength she gained working in the fields, his was far greater.

"I can sense it... when people are thinking something," she tried to explain.

"What am I thinking now?" he asked, not loosening his grip.

"You're worried I'm a spy for the Masters," she sobbed. "You think maybe you should kill me, so your plan doesn't fail. But you don't want to, because you think my eyes are deep and beautiful."

Lorau felt the grip slacken a little.

"How? Are you a tainted one?" Paolo asked after a moment, the muscles in his arm tensing once more, ready to force her against the wall again.

Lorau shook her head and sobbed. "No. At least, I don't think so. I've always had this ability... a little bit anyways... but these last few months it's started getting stronger," she explained.

Paolo stood back and stared at her. "We leave in

three nights," he said. "Be ready, and if you fall behind, we leave you behind. We have to be ruthless because they will be."

Lorau nodded. "I'll be there. I'll be ready," she said.

"You know what we're running toward might be no better than what we're running from?" he asked.

Lorau shrugged.

"We have to go North, into Galli. You've heard the stories?"

This time she nodded. "I'll take my chances with the wild beast-men," she told him. "I have to. I won't be a slave all my life."

"You're brave at least, girl," he said. "Now go, get back to work before Einey or anyone misses you."

Lorau nodded, gave Paolo a grateful smile, and hurried off after the other women.



We leave tonight, she told herself. The last three days seemed to stretch time out, but she just focused on the repetition of her tasks, eager to finally be free.

Lorau had to force herself to concentrate and not to grin at everyone. Only with Einey, she didn't have to try. Every glance toward the older woman brought a heaviness to her heart. *I don't think I'd be alive without her help, and now I have to leave her behind,* she thought.

Einey gave her a knowing look, and Lorau averted her gaze guiltily. She felt Einey knew, but dismissed the idea.

"Eyes down, that brute of a Master is coming," one of the women called over to them softly.

Lorau shuddered. Even before the Master looked at her, she felt nausea rising from the pit of her stomach. When he did look at her, she had to take deep breaths

to force the nausea away, and look at the ground. Master Álvaro didn't come to check on them often, but when he did, and Lorau looked at him, she didn't sense his thoughts the way she did with other people. Instead, there was something there which drew her in and enclosed her, making her feel frightened and ill.

"You," she heard him say. His voice crackled with menace and Lorau slowly dragged her gaze upwards.

"Yes, that's the one, her with the big eyes," he chuckled. "You, girl, you'll be coming to work in my castle."

Lorau was frozen to the spot.

"Well? Don't you have anything to say to that?" he asked crossly.

"Sir?" she croaked.

"Wouldn't you like to thank me for taking you out of the fields? You'll be a serving wench now in my castle!" he said, his voice roaring through her head like thunder.

Still Lorau could not speak, and he frowned.

"Tomorrow I'll send someone for you," he said. "By then, you'd better have found a way to thank me," he grinned at her, a gold tooth glistening in his mouth.

He walked over to her, taking her face in his hand. Lorau swallowed, trying not to look at him. His skin was cold, and her head felt like it might explode. She sensed no thoughts in him, just a dark sickness.

"Tomorrow," he repeated, moving her hair out of her face. "Make sure you're cleaned up before you come to the castle."

Lorau could barely breathe. She only knew for sure it was over when she felt Einy's arm around her. "What's up with you then, girl?" she asked. Lorau looked up to see the Master riding away on his horse, the dry fields throwing up dust in his wake.

"Tainted," Lorau gasped. "Tainted. Him. Evil."

Einey shook her head. "Baccus, that's what you are," she said dismissively. "A job in the castle? Who wouldn't want that?"

"Tainted," Lorau repeated.

"Baccus," Einey repeated. "You're too young is all. You're getting mixed up. He'll want you to serve up more than his food, surely, but that doesn't make him a taint. Just a man with an eye for a pretty girl."

"He doesn't want to have me!" Lorau said. "Or maybe he does but that's not what scares me. He's possessed by darkness! He will destroy whoever he touches!"

She felt a stinging pain on her face and realised Einey had slapped her. "That's enough! You can't be saying that sort of thing about the Masters! You'll get us all in trouble!"

"What's the difference?" Lorau snapped. "We might as well be dead if we're to live as slaves all our lives!"

Einey turned away and got back to her work. Lorau felt guilty, but she'd meant what she said and so couldn't take it back. A tear trickled down Einey's cheek. Her mind was still, and somehow out of reach—it was dark, but not in the way that made her feel ill—it made her feel sorrow instead.



"You came," Paolo said, giving her a cold stare. "I heard Master Álvaro came for you."

"He's a taint," Lorau replied defiantly. "I won't work for him. For any of them." She glanced around. There were half a dozen men, and one woman. She didn't know any of them well.

Paolo shrugged. "I said you could come," he said. "So come on! Silence, everyone. We must crawl along

the ground first, when we get to the wall I'll tell you how we're going to get over it."

Lorau rolled in the dirt like the rest of them to blend in with it, then edged along the cool surface of the soil as they crawled through the field she'd worked in a few short hours before.

The wall seemed so far away, and she grew tired, but the memory of the Master and the sickness behind his eyes when he looked at her spurred her on. She coughed into her sleeve when the dust choked her, trying not to make a sound in case someone heard.

She was second only to Paolo in reaching the wall, and watched as he dug with his fingers, scrabbling around the base. Though her eyes and nose and throat hurt from the dust in them and she wanted to rest, she forced herself to help. By the time everyone was there, Paolo was able to tug at one of the huge stones, pushing and pulling at it until it was loose enough to be pushed through to the other side, leaving a gap just large enough for them to crawl under.

"Hurry," Paolo said as each of them wriggled through the gap.

Lorau glanced back before diving into the hole in the wall. She saw torches moving quickly in the distance. "They're coming!" she squealed.

"Hush, and hurry!" Paolo said again, shoving her roughly through then following himself. "Help me put the stone back! If they don't know how we escaped, it'll give us more time!"

Lorau halted, but the others were running on. "Everyone for himself!" she heard one of them call back as she turned and pushed at the stone with Paolo, throwing all her weight behind it until she felt it slide back into place.

"Thank you," Paolo said as he helped her to her feet

and they started running after the others. "Why did you help? I don't blame the others for going on without us."

"I've been a slave too long," Lorau replied bitterly. "You gave me an order, and I obeyed it."

"You're not a slave anymore," Paolo said. "But it'll take some getting used to."

Lorau nodded. The gesture was lost as they ran along the rough terrain. "So what way do we go?" she asked.

"This way, north, to the mountains and over them," Paolo told her.

"Have we got a chance?" she asked, staring at the shadowy shapes of the mountains in the far off distance.

"A chance," Paolo nodded. "No more, but it's better than not having one."

Lorau gulped and followed as Paolo ran toward the mountains. They seemed impossibly far away. There seemed to be so much open plain between them, she had no idea where they would hide; though it was clear they would not make it there by daybreak.

"We'll hide in ditches or wherever we can during the day, and we'll travel at night," Paolo said.

"Can you read thoughts too?" Lorau asked, surprised.

Paolo smiled. "I saw the look in your eyes, that's all. Sometimes thoughts aren't so difficult to sense."

Lorau was about to return his smile when she heard noises behind them. "They're coming!" She exclaimed in a loud whisper. She looked around. The landscape was open apart from the big compound behind them.

"Run!" Paolo said. "The rest of them went due North, if we go east a while, we might get lucky!"

Lorau didn't get a chance to reply, she just ran after Paolo as he took off. She could hear shouts behind

them, her nose and throat and eyes were still raw, but she fought the feeling off as they ran. The noises seemed to be getting closer, catching up to them.

Paolo suddenly stopped. Lorau almost collided with him. "Shh!" he hissed, then threw himself to the ground in a slight hollow. It was a dried up stream bed. Paolo pulled Lorau down on top of him. "Lie still!" he mouthed at her, she barely caught it in the moonlight, then hardly dared breathe.

She sensed him as he approached. Sensed the darkness that had long taken hold over him. He stopped just a few feet away, and Lorau had to repress the urge to yell out in terror, or be sick. Paolo's slow, careful breaths were the only thing that stopped her from being sucked in to the darkness of her former Master.

A cry came out from some distance away. Triumphant. "Caught them," she heard Álvaro's callous voice exclaim. "We'll follow this group another time. They won't get far." Lorau could hear his voice change, then his footsteps, and those of his men, moved away and her nausea receded.

Paolo continued to hold her where she was. The sound of his breathing and his heartbeat slowly returning to normal helped her calm down.

"That was close," she whispered eventually, as soon as their former Master and his men were too far away to hear them.

"Too close," Paolo agreed. "We'd better move. They may be back soon." He got up and helped Lorau to her feet. In silence, they moved towards the distant mountains, silhouetted against the northern sky. They were both too tired and scared to think about what was happening to the others and how close they had come themselves to being captured.



"What was that?" Lorau whispered.

Paolo didn't reply, just held a finger to her lips as they lay shivering on the mountain pass. Whatever was making the noise screeched high above them as it slowly moved away.

"Things," Paolo shuddered. "Tainted things. Devils maybe."

"I was so desperate to reach the mountains, I didn't think about what would be here," Lorau said. "All those nights running, and days lying in pits... I didn't think of anything but getting here."

Paolo smiled at her. "Have you thought about where you do want to go, or what you want to do, when we reach the other side?" he asked.

"Find out where I'm from, where I belong," she answered. "What about you?"

"I come from the South," he said sadly. "Álvaro plundered my family's belongings and made me a slave. I will go back one day and kill him."

"At least you know where you're from," Lorau said. "I don't know anything about myself... why I am the way I am."

"What are you?" Paolo asked. Lorau sensed desire in him as they stayed close together now for warmth, even though the immediate threat had passed. It didn't scare her, as Einey had suggested. It was very different to what she had felt from the Master.

"I don't know," she told him.

"But the way you said, 'why I am the way I am'. You mean the way you know what people are thinking?" he asked.

Lorau nodded and turned to him. "Doesn't it frighten

you?" she asked.

"It did," he said with a shrug. "But not now." He stroked her face gently. Lorau smiled, wiped the tear from her eye, and kissed him.

The screech came again, closer this time, and they both jumped. Another call followed it, this one recognisably human.

"They've caught up to us!" Lorau gasped.

Paolo gripped her hand tightly and listened. "No," he whispered. "These people are coming from the north."

"Barbarians?" Lorau asked.

"Can they be more barbaric than our former Masters?" Paolo replied. "We must hide, all the same."

Lorau followed as Paolo scrambled up onto an overhanging rock above the narrow path. There was just enough room for them both. As they tried to get their breathing under control, they watched as a band of men made their way along, treading past where they had been sitting shortly beforehand. At the head of the band was a huge wolf, so tall several of the barbarians could have sat on its back. As it passed directly underneath the rock, it stopped and sniffed the air.

Lorau held her breath, she could sense Paolo's terror and it only made hers worse. She inclined her head ever so slightly toward the ground again as the creature gazed upwards. She sensed something more there than animal. It didn't make her feel ill, but to her mind it wasn't quite right either.

The eyes of the creature stopped scanning and gazed directly upwards. Lorau froze, she knew it could see her or at the very least, smell her. She stared into its eyes, trying to probe its mind, but beyond what she had already learned she could discover nothing else. She was still trying when the wolf leapt forward, then reared up on its hind legs. The front legs reached the

platform where Lorau and Paolo lay. It ignored him though. It just sniffing Lorau as the men who followed it milled around below.

A howl erupted from its throat, throwing hot, meaty-smelling air over Lorau. Paolo's fear was strong, but Lorau was able to distance herself from it. The creature scared her, but somehow she also sensed it meant her no harm. It fell back and continued leading the men along the path away from them. It was only as they rounded a corner that Lorau felt Paolo gasp for breath beside her.

"I thought that was it," he admitted.

Lorau nodded. "I did too, at first. But it meant no harm, that creature. It was just curious about us."

"About you," Paolo replied. "It ignored me. Could you... did it have thoughts? Anything you could read, or hear, or however it works?"

Lorau shook her head. "Not like people do. Not words. Just a sense that it was curious."

"Well let's hope it learned all it wanted to and won't be back," Paolo replied. "We should move onward."

He swung down from the outcrop and held out his arms to Lorau. As they walked and climbed, her mind kept returning to the wolf that was something more than wolf.



"I don't know how to act around free people," Lorau said. "I've only ever been a slave."

"You'll be fine," Paolo said. "We should try to keep going north, get to somewhere more civilized maybe. But we should be able to get some proper food here, and a place to sleep that's better than those rocks and ditches." He held out his hand for her as they descend-

ed the last few steps of the mountain. "Welcome to Galli," he said with a smile.

"I need to find people. I need to figure out where I'm from," Lorau said. "Where will we find a town or a settlement?"

"I don't know," Paolo replied with a hint of a sigh. "North, I suppose. Why do you have to find out? Why can't you just live for now? Enjoy freedom?"

"I'm different," Lorau said simply. "I can't rest until I know why."

"Maybe you just are that way. No reason," Paolo replied. "You have to live your own life. Look to the future instead of the past."

"I don't know who I am, I have to find out," Lorau insisted.

"You're Lorau. You're the woman I love, damnit!" Paolo exclaimed, grabbing her suddenly. "Stay with me. We'll find a place to set up home together!"

Tears glossed Lorau's eyes.

"Give me an answer," Paolo pleaded. She knew there was only one answer he wanted to hear.

His emotions were heavy in the thoughts she sensed in him when she looked into his eyes.

"I—" Lorau began but was interrupted by a shout behind them.

She turned to see Álvaro coming through the mountain pass behind them, followed by many men with swords. A wave of nausea swept over her. "No!" she gasped. "No!"

Paolo grabbed her again and shoved her aside. "You will not take us," he said to the slave masters as they approached. "You will not take us back there!"

"She is mine," the tainted man said. "You will die if you step closer. The others died, those who protected your secrets. The woman Einey and the others who

escaped. "

"Einey!" Lorau gasped, but there was no time to grieve.

"If she is with you then I am already dead," Paolo replied. He grabbed a piece of wood and held it up like a club.

Álvaro threw back his head and laughed. He walked toward Paolo, slicing the wood in two with a swift strike of his sword. "Rotten," he said. "Like everything in these cursed lands! Only Andalus remains great!"

The rising sun glinted off Álvaro's gold teeth as he smiled. He raised his sword and cut through the air with it. It whistled as it moved, then Lorau heard a gurgling sound. All within an instant, blood soaked through Paolo's shirt, and he slumped to the ground.

"No!" Lorau cried again. This time, there was defiance and anger in her voice instead of desperation as she tore her gaze away from Paolo and toward her former master.

"No!" she repeated, staring at him. She was too angry to realise the paralysis that had overcome her earlier was now gone, the nausea too.

He smiled at her again, gesturing to the other men to stay behind, but Lorau ignored them. She allowed her mind to be sucked in to the darkness of his mind as he stared at her, disregarding her disgust at some of his thoughts, then she took all her energy and threw it along the invisible current that linked their minds. Álvaro staggered backwards and dropped his sword to the ground. His tanned skin paled for a few seconds.

Lorau took the opportunity and reached for his sword. It was heavier than she expected, but her adrenaline was enough to boost her strength. As the other men started toward her, the cynical grin returned to Álvaro's face, but it was too late. Lorau plunged the

sword forward like a huge dagger, right through his chest. The grin faded as he slumped to his knees, then fell away to the side.

For a moment, Lorau felt silence, as if there was nothing in the world but the deep red hue of the blood pumping out of the slave owner's body. All of a sudden, a wolf's howl cut through the scene, bringing Lorau's awareness back to the advancing party of Álvaro's men. She dragged the sword from his body and held it up, stepping backwards a little.

As the men came closer, she realised her energy was spent. Lorau saw the massive wolf appear behind the men. She immediately knew it was the same one. Even as it came rushing toward them in vast bounds with its teeth bared, she wasn't afraid.

The slave master's men turned to face the threat, but it was too late for them. The wolf snarled, caught two with a blow of its massive paws, then sunk its teeth into another's neck. The rest tried to fight it, but they couldn't seem to cause any significant wounds—just minor cuts and grazes—as the large wolf took down more and more of them.

Lorau watched, letting the sword she held drop to the ground, until all were dead or severely incapacitated. The wolf stopped and stared at her for a moment, then walked slowly toward her. It stopped a few paces in front and reared up on its back legs. Still Lorau felt no fear of the huge beast, but she was shocked at what she saw next.

The wolf's skin appeared to recede as the shape-changing animal's size diminished; the snout shrank, the ears retracted, and suddenly an old man clad in a wolf skin stood before her.

"Little one," he said.

Lorau stood up. "You saved me," she said. "I don't

know why, but I thank you."

"I should have saved you once before. You... and your mother," the man said. The lines on his face made him seem weary with age and struggle.

"My mother? You knew my mother?" Lorau asked excitedly, gazing into his eyes. As he met her stare, Lorau felt his thoughts, and she understood.

"Dearest daughter," he said, a tear winding its way down his face.

"You knew who I was, when you encountered us on the mountain pass," she said.

He nodded. "In my wolf form, I could smell the familiarity in your blood," he told her. "Tell me... what of your mother?"

Lorau looked at the ground and shook her head. "I never knew her. She died bringing me into the world."

Her father nodded sadly.

"You are not like other people," she said. "The wolf...".

"I rose to become a leader," he said. "In my wolf-form, I have much power. I sought to rescue you and your mother... but you rescued yourself, it appears."

"I had help," she said, looking down at the lifeless Paolo.

"You had plans together?" her father asked.

Lorau shrugged. "I wanted to keep travelling, discover who my parents' people were. He wanted to settle. We never got a chance to finish the discussion," she said.

"Well now you know some of the story," he told her.

"My mother," Lorau said. "Were her people from Galli as well?"

He shook his head. "She was my special bride, from a far off land."

"What land?" she asked.

"She called it Persis," he answered. "I have never been there. It lies far to the south-east."

Lorau sighed. "I do not know where I belong," she said.

"Perhaps there. Here may not be safe," her father said.

"Nowhere seems safe..." she sighed. "At least you can protect me here."

A sad shake of the head prompted her to gently probe his mind once more. She gasped as she saw his thoughts, and then her father nodded.

"It is the bargain I made," he said. "I needed the strength to rescue you from the pirates."

"I did not sense it before," Lorau said.

"A father's love can mask most things," he said. "But I am a tainted one, a mongrel, nothing can change that."

"You would not harm me!" she pleaded.

"I would not hurt you, but being near me could taint you too in time," he said.

"No," Lorau protested, but as she probed the darkness, she knew he spoke the truth.

"You have a special way. Your mother had it too," her father told her.

Lorau's eyes widened again. "She could do what I do? Hear people's thoughts?" she asked.

"Yes. She, and others like her. There is a collective; she left it to be with me, to have our children," he said.

"How do I find them?" Lorau asked, excitedly.

"Stay alive... and they will find you," he said, reaching out to put a hand on her shoulder. "Use it to keep yourself safe, and they will come to you when the time is right."

Lorau touched his arm.

"You must go, south-east," he said and gestured at

where Paolo lay, "I will see that he gets a proper burial."

"Leave already?" she asked.

"You must." He brushed a tear away from her face, kissed her forehead and turned away. After just a few steps, he stopped and turned back to her.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Lorau," she replied.

He nodded. "It was the name I wanted for a daughter," he said sadly, shaking his head. "Oh, Einey," he lamented in a cry so forlorn it was like a howl.

Lorau choked.

"Einey?" she asked in a whisper.

"Your mother's name," her father said.

Lorau nodded and forced back a sob. Álvaro's callous words rang out through her head again. Everything fell into place. Even the slight darkness that she had usually encountered when trying to probe Einey's mind. Somehow her mother too had been corrupted by the taint, and had hidden everything from Lorau in order to save her from the same fate.

She knew I would run, she slapped my face that day knowing it would harden my determination to get away, she thought.

"I shall never forget you, Lorau," he said.

Lorau grabbed him, pulling him into a fierce hug, then turned away, so he wouldn't see her tears.

As she walked away, hours later, a mournful howl came from the mountains behind her. Lorau stopped and turned toward it, letting out a keening wail in reply.

SPARKS AND EMBERS

BY TIM JAMES

The pretty girl sat on the edge of the fire, the flickering flames lighting her face with a warm orange glow, casting the shadows into a dancing relief. There was something about her that made her special. It was not that she was beautiful, rather in some ways, she was just plain. But there was more to her than that; anyone who spent any time in her company would have come to appreciate it.

Anton watched her, sitting beside her and hoping that she did not notice his intense fascination, although it was more than likely that she had noticed. He had known her long enough.

Still there was that something about her - the green eyes, the auburn hair, the slight dusting of freckles across her nose. They all made her pretty, not anything more. But when she smiled, the whole world lit up around her, her eyes igniting with humour.

Just how could Anton tell her just what she meant to him when they had been friends their entire lives? To her, he was just Anton. Her best friend—not a potential suitor. He would tell her though. One day.

Beyond the edge of the firelight, the houses of their small village were slightly more than dark shadows,

refuge from the elements. Tonight, it seemed as though the whole village was gathered around their communal fire, sharing the freshly roasted pig—a rare meal served in honour of their guest—while they listened to stories and songs of his deeds.

The girl leaned closer to Anton and nudged him gently, apparently not aware of his attention, “They say that he is ancient, older than any living man and that he comes from old Anglatar before it sank beneath the waves.”

“I have heard the stories, Sara,” he whispered back, “But he does not look that old!”

The subject of their whispers sat on a wooden stump, infinitely relaxed, better dressed than anyone else in the village, a short cloak over his shoulders itself covered with his unbound long black hair. Listening rather than taking part, basking in the glory of the tales told of him, a knowing twist to his lips as though he viewed the whole thing with wry amusement.

One of his companions was waxing lyrical, talking of the assault on the dragon Killorax, how his dear friend Willam had stood alone, when all others had faltered and brought the beast to its knees, until it begged for its life, like a child crying for its mother.

Anton allowed his gaze to wander, just for a moment staring at the legend that sat across the fire opposite. He tried to look past all the stories and legends that lay about him like an invisible cloak, and wondered just what the truth was.

He could not be more than human, he had to be just a man, but no one would dare suggest that; it would erode the legend that had grown with him as the years had passed by. When you looked at him though it was hard to deny that there was something more about him, a worldliness that went beyond the simple life that

most people lived. A depth to his eyes, the scar that ran down one side of his face just seemed to add to his rugged good looks. No, if you were going to look at the living definition of the word hero, then Willam was a near perfect fit.

There was the murmur of conversation, as the villagers revelled in the their guests, probably relaying all the tales that were heard of him. Anton was more than happy to sit there and catch the occasional whiff of Sara's fragrance, soap and lilies.

The hero took another sip from his ale, nodding as though he recognised that it was a pleasant one. Next to him, one of his followers stood, bowed with a flourish, "Ladies and gentlemen!" he exclaimed with a deep voice that carried well, drawing a silence from the villagers so that, just for a moment, all that could be heard was the crackle of the fire.

"As this well shared meal comes to its end, I would like to take a moment, on behalf of Willam and the rest of us, to thank you so much for your oh-so-kind hospitality. Although there are many tales told of my illustrious friend, he truly is only a man; a person who has been able to apply himself with an inborn skill available to any other man with the desire to excel.

"Yes, he may be famed for his use of sword and shield, for mighty deeds, but I am sure that many of you here have skills that he could not even hope to master. Carpentry? I've seen him try his hand at that... and well let's just say that try might be too kind a word!"

Beside the speaker Willam shook his head, the smile still on his face, batting the comments aside with deferential grace. The other chuckled and then continued, "And really you never - and I mean ever - want to test his culinary skills."

The speaker slowly bent over and picked up a small

lute from where he had been sitting. It was an old instrument, made of dark wood. The lute was held out before him, "I have my own skills in the face of a dragon. I'm an observer, not a fighter. No, I am not a warrior, just one glimpse of the mighty beast and I would be running as quickly as possible in the opposite direction, but I can tell the tale. I can sing the song of the man who did face down dragons. Fair warning though, do not ask him to sing this tale himself unless you want him to sound like a dragon himself!

"So, in thanks for this grand feast! We know how important your livestock is to you. The sharing of a whole swine is a rich gift indeed; I would very much like to sing you a song in return. It is a favourite of many: Willam Seizes The Day."

An excited rumble issued from the villagers as they waited. The musician spent a few moments tuning his instruments, perhaps more than was necessary, allowing the anticipation to build, measuring it with an inborn skill, until he knew that the moment was just right. Then he struck the opening chords and began his refrain.

*Years ago when the world was young,
The mouth did open,
And this Hell was begun,
The sea did boil, and the land was riven,
Torn apart by the cataclysm.*

*Of the old world there is little to say,
Just forgotten memories of our grandparents day,
So now this world is ours to hone,
To rebuild and call our own.
What a savage, savage place it may seem,
With tenacity and courage we will redeem,
All those things that have gone before,*

Will pass through us and into lore.

*We must learn to look through open eyes,
To see beneath the horrors what wonders lie,
From half built cities that do breath steam,
To volcanic mountains where dragons dream.*

*And here it was that his story began,
Born as ever from woman and man,
Of his childhood there is so little known,
But from lesser seeds mighty oaks have grown.*

*Alone he toiled or helped farm wheat and hay,
But when offered a soldiers coin he seized the day,
Left behind his hearth and home,
With the kings, armies he did roam.*

*Through battle, war and strife,
He learned his trade—it was his life,
With borrowed armour and sword,
He began service to his lord.*

*At the battle of Arag's Plain,
He slew and slew, and slew again,
Fought so hard for more than pay,
When victory was presented, he seized the day.*

*Through rank after rank he preceded,
Reward for doing all that was needed,
Toward a future where glory lay,
Whenever opportunity presented, he seized the day.*

*He led the charge at Madden's Gates,
And overthrew Rundle blind with hate,
The perfect soldier in almost every way,*

Is it any surprise he seized his day?

*As a man in ranks he was devoted,
To the job, his life and was promoted,
And all the while he saved his pay,
To set aside for when he needed to seize another day.*

*When the time came at last for him to move on,
He said farewell to the life of the soldier son,
He gathered his things, and into the world he made his
way,
It was time once again to seize the day.*

*Please excuse me now, oh avid listener,
We need a musical pause for this singer,
For after this simple, exquisite refrain,
We'll begin the climax that gave him his fame.*

*He sailed to distant isles,
Beat the great wizard of guile,
Rode the steam train to the end of the tracks,
Where he fought the clockwork men made of cranks,
He stormed the room of invisible men,
Slew them all, one to ten,
More than bloody sword work,
He seized upon the perks,
Upon romance, he never misses,
Even stealing from mermaids loving kisses,
He does his best to answer every call,
Welcomed warmly in every hall,
He has seen the vilest murderer hanged,
Guilty souls plunged down with the damned,
He's downed mead with dead men's wights,
Destroyed Lich with his righteous might,
Under thunderous, lightning skies,*

*He fought hard and will not die,
From man to beast and back again,
He's fought animals, monsters and men,
But there is one that stopped his tracks,
The fearful dragon Killorax,
Eye to eye, toe to toe,
Man to lizard nose to nose,
Claws, tail, teeth and breath,
The only outcome pain and death,
Yet there he still stood tall,
No scream or craven's call.
For three days whole, two cold nights,
He faced down draconian might,
Blooded, battered scarred but not broken,
He walked away with a dragons token.*

*Hear now, hear it well,
My tale ends yet with a joyous knell,
He wanders well and does good deeds,
Passing time until time it leads...*

*The greatest challenge yet undone
A final task to be won,
He will ride North, West, East and South,
Seek out, find and close the Hellmouth.*

*Know him well, sit and pray,
That when it comes, he will seize the day.*

The melody lingered for a few moments and then died away like a whisper of wind. A still quietness hung in the air and then the villagers began to clap and cheer. They sang similar songs on occasion, but rarely did they hear them recited as well as this. The magic that could only come from a true performer. Not only

did he sing with skill, but with a natural talent that could not be replicated.

Anton watched Sara, standing there with a gleam in her eyes, and once more felt the wash of his feelings run over him. With that smile on her face, there was no one who could compare to her, no beauty that could match hers; her very laughter sounded like the ringing of bells that made his heart skip and jump.

How was it he lived like this, he wondered? Watching her every day and doing nothing. Just letting each moment go by one after another, not telling to her how he felt. Some of the other lads in the village his age were married, with kids. But not him. They had spoken to their loves, won their hearts and made them their wives. Why was it he seemed so incapable of doing the same thing?

Each day he would tell himself the same things: that he was still too young, that his friends had married early, that he and Sara were friends, that he would wait a little longer. So he would go about his work, day after day, tending the smallholding, looking after the chickens, tending the two goats and four pigs, once in a while butchering something as it was needed.

But that was the trap. Day bled into day. Time passed, and nothing changed. There was always an excuse at hand. How long would it go on for?

The words of the song echoed through his head, and he knew the answer. Don't think. Just do. Seize the day. Act in the moment; no matter what the cost. Even as the thought crystallised, as his heart tightened in his chest, Sara stood up next to him, "It's getting late," she smiled, "I'm going to call it a night."

"Sara," Anton mumbled then stopped, gave a weak smile of his own, "I'll see you tomorrow." Even as the words tumbled from his lips, he kicked himself, but

swore he would talk to her later. After all, it was seize the day, not the night.

He watched her walk away, feeling a lurch as she headed to where Willam sat, thinking that he should do the same, to thank the singer for his song. But suddenly, he felt the need to be away, to sleep, to prepare himself for tomorrow. As he walked home, he felt something he had never felt before: a cold certainty that things would change the next day. There was no doubt, no wavering, on the morrow he would speak to Sara, and he would see just where that would take him.



One of the local roosters let loose a greeting to the rising sun and others followed suit, an orchestral crowing to welcome the dawn. It filled the air, informing one and all that the working day was due to start, letting the villagers know that it was time to rise.

Anton stretched, his brain was sluggish as it banished the dregs of sleep. Whatever dreams drifted from his head merged with memories of the night before, the crackling of the fire, the stories told, the song sung, being close to Sara right through the night. In that moment of waking, he remembered what he had thought, what he had felt, and was surprised to find that the resolution still held.

A palpable thrill ran through him, a feeling of being more alive than he had ever been and the deep rooted realisation that something had changed inside him. He was not sure exactly what that was; a new certainty at the centre of his being.

With an unusual burst of energy for so early in the morning, Anton jumped from his bed, leaving the blanket in an untidy mess. He pulled his nightshirt over his

head, dressed quickly, and slipped out of his small home, reaching the stone basin and pump. A few easy movements on the squeaky handle allowed the spring water to gush into the waiting receptacle.

It only took him a few minutes to dunk his head beneath the crystal clear water. As he stood up, a trail of silver droplets were left behind him. Any vestiges of sleep were washed away with the chill of the water. But it was more than the shock of the water that gave him the thrill of being alive, it was the deep rooted resolution that had taken hold of him. It seemed like a divine understanding of who he was, and how things worked, at the core of his being.

At the same time, he could not help but call himself stupid, ignorant even. It suddenly seemed as though his entire life had been leading toward this precise day, and it was so obvious that he wondered how he could have overlooked it.

He and Sara were virtually the same age, as kids they had played together, they had been friends as long as he could remember. She showed no interest in any other boy or man as they grew; whenever there was a gathering, a party, a celebration, she always sat with him. Whenever they went to the inn, she was always there. If there had ever been any interest in her from any of the other males in their village she never told him, never acted on it. She always looked for him.

And like a complete idiot he had never even noticed.

Today was not just a case of him acting on a decision, it was about putting things into motion that should have been done months, if not years, earlier. Today was the day that he was going to change his life. Forever.

Anton ate his porridge cold. He half resented the fact that the soonest he would be able to see Sara would

be lunchtime, and even then, only if he was lucky. There was so much that needed to be doing. With a deep breath, and a spring in his step, he set about his chores; jobs that were both mundane and commonplace, but were vital to the life of the village.

The first task was to feed his chickens, letting them loose in their run and collecting their eggs. This was followed by letting his goats out of their shed, milking them and leading them to pasture. Then it was a case of letting his pigs loose in the yard and feeding them the slops that he had gathered the day before.

Anton kept two eggs for himself and a small jug of milk, then walked two pails over to the store. Even though it had just opened there was already a queue of people waiting, most of them carrying something much like he was. They stood patiently waiting in the early morning sun, talking about the gathering the previous night, all seemingly basking in the afterglow of what could only be considered a wonderful evening.

Some just talked about the atmosphere of the night before, others about how some of the kids now wanted to go off and face down a dragon, some reflected on the tales told while a few of the older men wondered just how exaggerated the stories had been.

Anton allowed himself a half smile but did not join any of the talk. He had more pressing things on his mind. He knew he was meant to go to the fields and help the others tend the crops, do all that needed to be done, but part of him wanted to run, to run and find Sara and set things in motion. He knew how it was going to work out with an iron certainty, unlike anything he had ever felt. He just wanted to change everything. He had waited for so long that time had begun to fly, but now that his resolution had become iron the minutes themselves seemed to drag.

For an unmatched man, he was more than good enough. He had his own home. He had livestock. He had prospects.

He placed the buckets on the counter, waiting as Tiller, the shopkeeper, counted the eggs that rested in a bed of straw, and then poured the milk into a measuring jug.

"Sixteen eggs and the milk, what y'want?"

Anton shrugged, "I could do with some bread, cold meats, honey perhaps, and two bottles of ale."

Tiller pulled a face, "You got stuff on your slate, ain't you lad?"

Anton nodded, and Tiller looked under the counter.

Tyler pulled a small board up and looked at it.

"Hmm, you've built up quite a bit of credit boy. I can do that for you, but we're goin' t'be nearly even then."

He nodded as he handed the buckets over. Tiller took them from him into the rear of the shop.

It was as he stood there waiting that he heard the conversation behind him.

"Well I must say, Willam took quite a shine to that young lass," one of the men was saying. There was a brief pause and the other chuckled, "I'll say, and from the noises she was making last night I'd say she took quite a shine to him too!"

Both men laughed, but Anton felt something lurch in his chest. There was no way he could have known who the two men were talking about, but a part of him did anyway.

A sense of cold dread seeped through him like a summer chill. He felt his mouth go dry, even as the first man said, "Not surprised really, with that smile she could bewitch most men!"

Nausea seeped through his belly, rising like a steady tide, blood drained from his face as his dreams shat-

tered within him. This was not how the day was meant to have gone.

"Hey, Anton lad, you okay?" one of the men asked. "You've suddenly gone quite grey."

He waved the men aside and staggered from the shop, leaving a bewildered Tiller behind him. The storekeeper returned with the wooden buckets now, refilled with the things Anton had asked for, only to find that his customer had gone. He sighed, shaking his head and turning to the next man, and put Anton's pails to one side.

Anton paused outside, taking massive whoops of air, doubled over, his hands on his knees.

Not only did he hear the voices of the men echoing through his mind like a funeral bell, but worse, the subject of conversation whittled away his confidence regarding his plan for today. Part of him knew that the talk could have been on a multitude of subjects, but he only caught bits of dialogue that he certainly did not want to hear.

"—an interest like that in one of our own—"

"—heh, certainly knows to use that sword of his—"

"—don't know whether that Sara's a lucky one or not—"

"—can see it ending in heartbreak for Sara—"

"Sara."

"Sara. Sara. Sara. Sara."

The one word—the name—came to dominate all other words. As the freezing numbness took hold of his heart, Anton looked through dry eyes at a dull world, then stiffly walked away.



Willam stood with his friends, laughing and joking as

they prepared to move on. His chestnut gelding stood next to him, a simple pack strapped behind the saddle. He looked every bit the hero, his cloak catching the slight breeze and curling around his legs; his bastard sword sheathed at his side; hair tied into a tail and the scar on his face tight and white, only adding definition to his square jaw.

The clothes he wore were light, suitable for a long, hot ride, whatever armour he normally wore out of sight, packed ready for the journey, only his shield was visible, ready to be worn across his back when he started to ride.

Anton walked toward him, just another villager going about his business, his face white and still, his mouth a tight black line.

Without a break in his step, he walked right up to the legendary figure, causing Willam to blink and give a wide smile, "Well, what can I do for you, it seems as though you might be having a bad..."

Anton flipped the wicked six inch knife over in his hand where it had been hidden behind his arm and without hesitation plunged it into the hero's belly cutting upwards, gutting Willam where he stood as though he were nothing more than a hanging swine.

With a look of surprise on his features, the warrior reached out with one hand, clasped Anton's shoulder, dropped to his knees, then keeled to one side, dead in a spreading pool of his own blood.



It does not matter how famous a man is, or whether he is a warrior, a hero, a great soldier, or a leader. It matters not whether he fights dragons or serenades mermaids. His feats of magnitude are meaningless if

another man has it in his heart to kill, and succeed. If the will to kill is all-consuming, there is little force that will prevent it from happening. A primal bloodlust will circumvent swordsmanship and legend, and a simple knife will bring the most mythical of lives to an end.

But as the flames of one story flicker and die, collapsing into embers, perhaps, just perhaps, the spark of a new tale is ignited....

MARKUS, THE WAKING MAN

BY JOHN BRADY

Markus took a cloth from his belt and wiped the bloodied sword. The gulls had started pecking at the body of the demon. Which, he thought, was just as well. This high up the beach, it would take an exceptionally high tide to wash it away, and no other scavenger seemed to care for demon-flesh.

He scanned the rest of the beach. There was nothing, save for the crude shelter he had built that morning from sticks and a hide. A light frosting of snow still clung to the grass atop the dunes, signaling that there was plenty of life left in the long, hard winter. He was not surprised at the still scene. Conal had said that only one demon would come, and he had never been wrong.

Markus sheathed the sword in its scabbard and checked the demon once more, just to make sure. Two more gulls had joined their mates to feast on the severed remains. Cutting its head off usually did the trick, but it paid to be careful. He had taken its arms and legs off too and kicked the red, scaly limbs into the distance. Plenty for the birds, who had now started on its bulging yellow eyes.

With a grunt of satisfaction at his butchery, he rolled

the shelter up and donned his cloak. He retraced his steps through the dunes and followed the stream towards the mist-shrouded glen in the distance.

It wasn't long before the expected horse came trotting around a copse of trees, the sound of hoofs muffled by the snow. The rider was resplendent in a green woolen cloak, fastened with a gold pin. Markus thought him pampered and weak, typical of the human stewards who served the Fey.

"Come to check if I'm still alive, Conal?" Markus asked.

The man pulled his horse to a stop. "Can't have the *nathaire* roaming the countryside, now can we?" He used the local name for the demons, as they all did in Tirnaland. All except for foreigners like Markus.

"Give me your horse. The poor beast could do with a rest from carrying your weight." He said it in a joking tone, but allowed just a little contempt to seep through.

Conal didn't notice, or at least pretended he didn't. "He's a cultured soul. He wouldn't stand the smell." Markus gave a mirthless chuckle. "How was this one?" Conal asked. He turned the horse and matched it to Markus's stride.

"Tough. It lasted a couple of minutes, but they're always tired after their swim. Tell me, how do they do it? How do they know when the demons are coming?"

Conal's veneer of affability dropped. "That's not your concern, *paragon*." He almost spat the last word. "The Lady Clodagh tells me. I tell you. That is all you need to know." He spurred his horse on. "I may see you tomorrow. Try to keep sober."

Horse and rider disappeared over a hill, leaving Markus to spit into the snow in disgust. Soon, weak tendrils of smoke appeared in the distance. He used the stepping stones to cross the stream, taking extra

care on the snow-flecked rocks. He didn't want to have to sit naked at the fire today while his clothes dried.

A cart drawn by a donkey passed as he reached the road to the village. Markus recognized the driver, one of the blacksmith's apprentices. The boy acknowledged him with the merest of nods, and Markus returned the greeting. It was as much as he expected. Whether it was his accent, or the constant smell of demon blood, the natives usually gave him a wide berth. He was happy to keep it that way.

The village only had two streets, forming a crossroad at the centre, but it was still lively for a place of this size. Most of the buildings, like the bakery and the smithy, were plainly-built with wattle and daub. Only the inn stood out, with its walls of stone and unlit lanterns. Men and women walked by on the muddy street carrying food or other materials while small children who weren't old enough to work the fields or learn a trade played in the doorways. Their clothes were drab and simple with woolen garments predominating. The only exceptions were the two stewards who overtook Markus on their horses. A man and a woman, dressed much like Conal had been, mounted high so that there was no fear of the mud staining the furs which covered them. Even from behind, Markus could imagine their grins as they set off at a gallop once they had passed the inn.

Markus's one-roomed wooden hut was at the end of the main street, next door to the inn. Before he entered, he had looked around the corner and watched the riders disappear into the mist shrouding the mound. That was the reason this village was so busy; a faerie ring set on top of a small hill. An entrance into another realm, but one he could not gain entry into. Only the stewards could get in and, in truth, they only came out when they had to lower themselves to deal with someone like him.

He pushed open his own door, into his own realm, and threw his roll into the corner beside the straw bed. The room was sparse. The most important things he owned were his weapons, and these stayed with him at all times. What remained in his home were things he wouldn't miss if they were stolen; some wooden plates and tankards, a candle, and a spare set of clothes which were probably worse than what the average farm-wife could make for herself. After a few minutes cleaning and oiling his sword, he sighed. There was little else to do in this village, especially when most would rather avoid him than look at him. With his cloak on his shoulders, he stepped outside into the evening gloom and went next door to the inn.

He ordered an ale and took it to his usual bench in the corner, where he could sit with his back to the wall. Not because he thought he was in danger, but because he could make the villagers that little bit more uncomfortable when they entered and tried to avoid his gaze. The inn was lit by candlelight; the wooden windows shut to keep out the chill. He cast a watchful eye on them all; the barkeep rinsing his tankards, the groups of men huddled in twos and threes around the tables and the occasional woman who arrived to take her man home. Nobody had weapons, that he could see, for they were mostly farmers or tradesmen. They kept their voices low, as if they didn't want to draw his attention. They only spoke up to flirt with the serving girl or shout mock-abuse at the barkeep for the quality of the ale. People came and went. He started on his second ale, sipping slowly to try and make it last. The alcohol had begun to affect him, making the aloof people and the wet landscape feel farther and farther away.

"Sind Sie Markus? Der Paragon?" In his ale-induced fog, the voice at his elbow confused him. It took him a

moment to realise it was speaking in his own language, one he hadn't heard since... when?... a very long time. He contorted his mind to turn it into the local dialect, then back again. *Are you Markus? The Paragon?* He turned to see a dark-haired boy standing there, a look of wonder on his face.

"Huh?"

"You're Markus. From Ödlund? The hero?"

Markus pulled himself up from the slouch he had fallen into. He was amazed—someone in the village had spoken to him. "I am Markus. I may be from Ödlund, but I am certainly no hero."

"They say you've never been beaten."

"Some say the Faerie Queene sits on a throne made from horse droppings. It doesn't mean it's true."

The boy laughed. It was a sound so natural and infectious that Markus couldn't stop himself from grinning. "I'm from Ödlund too," the boy said. "I came here with my family last week. My father is a baker."

Markus's senses cleared enough to see that the remaining three customers and the bar-keep were staring at them. He scowled back, causing them to peer into their tankards.

"That's just fine," he said, focusing on the boy again, "but what are you doing here? This is no place for a boy." He swung his tankard to indicate the inn, splashing drops on the bench.

"I'm no boy. I'm ten years old and already know how to run a bakery. So, where in Ödlund are you from? We're from Angelburg."

It wasn't worth a lie. Why not tell him the truth? "I don't know. I remember so little about that land. I know enough to know I'm not from here, but it's as if there is a fog in my memory. I can't even remember my family."

"Get out. This is no place for a boy." The barkeep

had appeared from his station. "Sorry if the lad was bothering you Markus, I know you enjoy your moments of quiet." He grabbed the boy by the arm and dragged him towards the door.

"Leave him!" Markus bellowed. He shoved his chair back, knocking it over.

The man recoiled in panic, his hands held in the air. "Alright, alright. I'm not going to harm him. You don't need to turn berserker again." Markus glared at him as he backed all the way to the bar without turning.

Markus put a hand to his head, cleared his anger and looked up at the barkeep, "I didn't mean to—"

The barkeep held up a hand, "It's fine Markus... it's fine." He turned around and headed back behind the bar.

The boy beamed as Markus righted the chair and sat. "So you're a paragon—a hero with powers? What can you do?"

"Ach." Markus suddenly felt weary. "I'm no paragon, boy. If I was a paragon, I'd have the strength of an ox, or the speed of a hare, or the vision of an eagle. I'm just a man with a sword, who kills the demons when they come."

"But you've never been beaten, right?"

The boy's look dared Markus to prove him wrong, but instead of annoyance, he actually felt a bit of pride. "That's right. I've had a few scrapes, but never been beaten."

"I want to be a hero too," he said with such seriousness that Markus nearly laughed. "I want to bring a team of paragons to the Hellmouth and close the thing, so my family can go home. My father told me the country wasn't always called Ödlund—The Wasteland—I was told it was once beautiful...".

Markus felt another emotion he couldn't remember

having had; sympathy. "You'd do best to stick to baking, boy," he said gently.

A cool breeze wafted through the inn, and a worried-looking woman peered about from the doorway. "I think you're wanted," Markus said.

"Oh, that's my mother," the boy said. He shuffled his feet, reluctant to go, but backed away anyway. "I'm Stefan."

Markus laughed outright this time and reached a hand out. The boy didn't hesitate and shook it. Seconds later, Markus was alone with his thoughts and the dregs of his drink again. He finished it off in one go, and went home to sleep it off.



Markus blinked his eyes open as the morning dew and sunlight struck his face. He pushed himself up on one arm, feeling the cold, wet snow under his naked body. He was on the hillside again, below the mound. And yet he could have sworn he went to bed on the straw mattress. He had only had a couple of ales, not enough to make him leave his house in his sleep and somehow decide to lie down in the snow.

He glanced around and was glad to find nobody else about. Shivering, he dashed down the hillside, his muscles complaining about the sudden workload. Inside the hut, he hurried to dress himself and then set about trying to light a fire on the dirt floor. There was a knock at the door, followed by a shout of "Markus!" He knew that voice only too well. When he opened the door, Conal entered without invitation.

"Rough night?"

"As you said to me yesterday, none of your concern," Markus answered.

"Ah, yesterday." Conal's smile widened, a reaction which puzzled Markus. "Two of them are coming today at midday on the south strand. They will be a few minutes apart, long enough for you to handle them."

"What type?"

"She didn't tell me."

Markus frowned. "I told you before, I need to know all about them. Could you please lower yourself to pass that message on to your mistress?"

Conal nodded, but with a grin that suggested he would do the opposite. "Make sure *you* kill *them*," he said as he left.

Markus gave up on the fire. Mercifully, his sword lay on the floor, along with two daggers. At least he had the sense to leave these behind when he went for a sleep in the snow.

After rolling up his shelter, he bought a loaf and some cheese and set out for the south strand, one of the three beaches he patrolled. All of them looked out on the grey humps of Cavallon across the sea, where the demons came from. The southernmost beach was a little further away than the middle one he had been at the day before, but he still got there in plenty of time. The snow was just starting to thin, so that he could even see some bare grass beneath.

It was a small beach, easily covered from the shelter he set up on the slope of a dune. Markus cut the bread with a small knife from his roll and ate it with the cheese. Sitting on a hide, he scanned the waterline back and forth as the sun rose higher. He was patient. He had done this so many times, always with the same result, and he expected no different.

The target was spotted: a man rising up out of the surf. But Markus knew better than that. They often took human form to live among people, so they could spy, or

sometimes, kill. What man could swim across the sea? Markus drew his sword and walked down the dune.

He was just yards away when it looked up and saw him. He knew what it was, and now it knew that its deception was useless. It dropped its veil and revealed its true self; a demonic being, almost as tall as two men. A flat, triangular head, mouth open to expose two concentric rings of fangs, sat on a scaly red body. Two arms extended from each shoulder joint, one each ending in a hand, but the bigger pair of muscular arms ended in lobster-like pincers. It was formidable, but he had handled bigger and uglier demons.

Markus advanced with his sword drawn back when its form shimmered. Rather than turning back into a man, it materialised a couple of paces to his left. He swung his sword, but the blade met only air as the demon shimmered again and re-appeared back where it had started. *What? This was new!* A claw slammed him in the chest, knocking the astonished Markus onto his back. He rolled just before a claw pierced the sand where his face had been and sprang to his feet.

The demon lashed out with its pincers, but this time Markus was ready. He slashed at its arm, and the blade bounced off the tough scales. Markus grunted in surprise, but followed through and kicked it in the groin. The demon rocked back a pace, allowing him to lunge at its belly. He connected with its hide, but the tip of the sword only penetrated an inch. Markus leaned forward and pushed, trying to drive the blade through the creature. He only succeeded in pushing it backwards towards the waves. The demon braced itself and stopped, leaving Markus standing with water up to his ankles, both of them locked in place.

It clamped a claw around the blade and held it in place, fixed between Markus and its own chest. *Strong*

too. Damn! Markus tried to yank his sword free, but the creature held firm, grinning with the knowledge that it had the upper hand. They stayed that way for a few moments, grappling with the blade, until the demon broke the stalemate.

It lashed out with a clawed foot and Markus felt pain in his leg. He looked down to see a bloody gash across one trouser. The creature slashed again, this time gashing his knee. Markus danced back, trying to keep his legs out of range while not losing his sword. The demon twisted and clamped down on the blade with its other claw. To Markus's horror, it snapped his sword in half, and sent the tip spinning away.

Lunging forward its teeth snapped at Markus's stunned face. He leaned back and lost his balance, tumbling to the sand. It pounced and landed on Markus's belly, knocking the wind out of him and knocking the shattered blade from his grasp. He reached up for its throat with both hands, trying to keep his elbows up to fend off its blows.

"Yesssss," it hissed. Its breath was hot on his face as he tried to summon every ounce of strength he possessed to keep it away. *This shouldn't be happening*, he thought. *I'm going to die here*. He had one last chance. He pushed up to try and unbalance the creature, then released one hand from its throat. *Quickly*.

Markus strained his arm as far as he could and pulled a knife from his boot. The demon saw it too late. Markus plunged the weapon into the creature's eye. It rolled off him, screaming in pain, a noxious fluid running from its injured eye. Markus regained his feet and in one movement, tripped the demon and pinned its throat to the sand with a booted heel.

The demon scabbled furiously at his legs, tearing further rents in his trousers. Keeping it pinned, he

sheathed the dagger and picked up the broken sword. The creature saw it coming and opened its mouth in a silent scream. *That's it. Nice and wide!*

A shout from behind jerked his attention away. *The second demon!* He turned his head and there it was, just yards away, but it hadn't been the one shouting. The boy, Stefan! He was racing from the dunes with a knife in his hands, charging toward the demon that had been creeping up behind Markus.

"No!" Markus shouted. "Get back." He thrust his blade through the mouth of the first demon, skewering it to the sand. He drew his dagger and ran. The boy was swinging wildly with the knife, the second demon easily avoiding it. There was something different about this one, and a moment later he knew what it was. Two bat-like wings extended from its back, a spur on the end of each.

Markus yelled again, but he was too late. One of the wings slashed down, and the spur raked Stefan's chest. Markus grabbed the demon's chin from behind and yanked it upwards. With a scream of rage, he carved open its throat, almost severing the head from the neck. It might have had wings, but it wasn't as tough as the other one. He dropped its lifeless body and went to the boy.

A deep wound crossed his chest and blood bubbled from his mouth. Markus tore off a portion of his trousers and tried to stop the flow, but he had seen enough wounds to know how this would end.

"Did you get him?" Stefan whispered.

"Yes, I got him," Markus croaked. He tried to keep the tears from his eyes, in case the boy saw them. "You saved my life. I didn't know he was behind me."

A smile creased Stefan's features. Markus cradled the back of his head with one hand, and watched until

the small chest stopped rising.

"No," Markus said softly. He bowed his head and let the tears flow. Why? Why had this happened? He stayed there a moment longer and then glanced over at the first demon. Its body was still, the hilt of his sword protruding from its mouth. The gulls had started their tentative approach, a sure sign it was dead.

Markus took the boy's body to the shelter and wrapped him in his cloak. Carrying him in both arms, he set off at a run back to the village. Tracking his own footprints from the morning were another, smaller set; Stefan must have followed him through the snow and sand. Markus kept up the fastest pace he could muster. There was nothing that could be done for Stefan, but at least he could take him back to his family as quickly as possible.

Just before the river crossing, he heard the steps of a horse. *Conal!* The man who hadn't told him what demons he was dealing with. The man who hadn't told him the boy would be there. The man who served those who didn't care enough to tell him. He laid Stefan's body on the ground and walked slowly forward. When the unsuspecting steward was within a few paces, Markus charged and swept Conal off the horse. The man fell with a cry and Markus attacked, pounding him with his fists.

"Why didn't they tell me?" he screamed. "Why?" He paused for a moment and pointed. "That boy is dead, because of you and your masters."

"Stop," Conal pleaded. He held his hands up to ward off further blows. "I didn't know. They didn't tell me."

Markus answered with a punch that broke Conal's nose. He hit him again and again, until Conal stopped protesting, and his own knuckles bled. The other man was still—his face a bloody mess—except for the rasp

of his breathing. Markus went to the man's horse and found a rope which he tied around the steward's feet, the other end to the saddle. He cradled the boy's body in one arm and mounted the horse, guiding it with his free hand. They set off at a gallop, dragging Conal through the snow.

By the time they reached the village, the moans from behind had stopped. This time the villagers did notice Markus's return. They all stopped to stare with a mixture of curiosity and fear. Markus steered the horse towards the bakery, and as he approached, the woman he had seen at the inn the previous night came out. She took one look at the small body he carried and screamed. Markus tried to harden his features. His tears had dried, and now he had work to do.

"The demons," he said. He passed Stefan's body to her and without another look spurred the horse on through the onlookers. He dismounted in front of the faerie mound. It was shrouded in mist, as it always was, as tall as two men. He knew that just climbing its bank would be useless. Unless you were Fey or one of their underlings, it was just a foggy rise rather than a gateway to another realm.

Markus cut the bloody rope from Conal's legs and lifted him over his shoulder. The other man was barely recognizable as human anymore, his face a mess of swelling tissue and blood. Markus climbed the slope until the mist enveloped them. There was a depression inside, but he couldn't see anything through the gloom. He dropped Conal's body and drew his dagger.

"Listen to me!" Markus shouted. "I have had enough of being your lackey. A boy died today, because you did not see it fit to tell me that the boy would be on the beach. I want you to tell me why? Why do you not care?"

He waited, but there was no reply.

"All right," he growled. "Let's see if they care about you." He held Conal up under one arm and pressed the dagger to his throat. "Do you want this man to live?" he shouted. "I don't care for him, I will cut his throat now and let all his blood spill on your court. Then your portal will be open to all the fiends of Hell."

Again, there was no response. Markus's shoulders dropped. He honestly thought they would relent. He looked at Conal's broken face. If there was one thing he could say about himself with certainty—it was that he kept his word. He tensed, but before he could draw the knife across the taut throat, a shaft of sunlight struck his eyes.

"Looks like you have some worth after all," he muttered to Conal. The mist dissipated, revealing a ring of trees around the rim of the mound. A brilliant blue sky appeared above him, and the sound of birdsong and rustling leaves came from the trees. It was all so clean, and fresh. He smelt grass and flowers, instead of blood and sweat.

"What now?" he asked Conal, but there was no response from the limp body.

"Why are you here, Markus?" The voice was like sweet honey in his ear. He turned to see a shimmering figure under a tree; a tall woman with the sharp facial features of the Fey, dressed in a simple green dress. A garland was wound through her long red hair. "Why have you hurt my steward so?" Her voice had a mournful quality which almost punctured Markus's resolve. She was beautiful, but he was under no illusions. She could have killed him without lifting a finger.

Before he could speak, a male figure appeared by her side, walking towards Markus. He took an instinctive step back. From the waist up, the figure looked like

a Fey, but below that were the legs and hooves of a goat. The Fey ignored Markus and picked Conal up as if he weighed no more than a feather, carrying him off through the trees.

Markus held a bloody palm up to the woman. "This. It's the blood of a boy called Stefan. He's dead now, but you must know that already. You're Clodagh, I presume?" She gave a slight nod. "Then you probably saw it happening before it even happened. And what did you do? Nothing!" He advanced on her, his anger strong.

"Calm yourself," she said with a trace of menace. "I will show you what is happening, if you want to know... if you *really* want to know. The truth is something which humans are often better off not knowing." She gave a smile which chilled Markus to the bone.

"Yes, I want to know. I want to know why the demons come here, and why you won't go out and fight them. I want to know why you didn't tell me the boy would be there today."

She beckoned him forward and walked through the trees, through a different gap from the one Conal had been taken through. He sheathed his dagger and followed. They emerged in a tall, arched chamber. Vines covered the walls, reaching up to high windows that let in a radiant sunlight. Clodagh stood in front of the only piece of furniture, a throne carved of dark wood. Over a fire, a small cauldron bubbled beside her.

"Are you ready?" she asked. Markus nodded. She picked up the cauldron and poured water on the fire. Markus jumped back as a huge gout of flame erupted. The chamber filled with steam, blocking the sunlight and filling his mouth and nose with heat. "Remember, we are only observing."

A burnt, blackened landscape formed in front of

them. Twisted stumps of trees were the only sign there had ever been life there. A red glare outlined a distant rise. Clodagh raised her arm. Markus felt his stomach lurch as the scene shot towards them. The glare came from a massive hole, big enough to swallow a mountain, gouged out of the earth. Even though he knew he wasn't actually there, he could still feel a sense of dread creeping up his spine.

"The Hellmouth," Clodagh said. "Nobody knows why or where it came from, but what we know for certain is that it appeared in the world of Man, and every being has suffered since." Markus glanced at her, but had to turn away from the look of accusation. "We have had to reach out to your world, to deal with the consequences of the Hellmouth. This is what it does." They saw images of demons, ones he had never seen before—thousands in number, hundreds in type. Demons with three heads, six arms, or many mouths. They were all doing the same thing. Hunting and killing men, women and children. Tearing them apart and feasting on the remains. Naked, mutilated bodies were heaped in piles higher than any building he had ever seen. Perhaps they were the lucky ones. Others were led away, cowering, towards the Hellmouth, shepherded by grinning demons.

"Even our own kind have been tainted."

The view swiveled away from the enslaved masses towards a hill where three figures watched impassively. One was a demon, blue-skinned and muscular, a forked tongue flicking in relish. The other two, a male and a female dressed in black leather, had the high cheekbones and proud bearing of the Fey.

"The Unseelie," Clodagh said. "Until the Cataclysm, we held an uneasy balance. Now, they go forth and cause mischief."

"You call that *mischief*?"

She ignored the question. "They ally themselves with the demons, helping them spread to all the lands of Uropia. And now, even as we speak, they are massing."

The scene changed to one of an army, marching at night. Markus reckoned there were more torches than stars in the sky. There were demons, some as large as houses with arms that reached down to the ground, and beside them marched men with hard faces. There were other creatures too, ones he didn't recognize. "They attack the civilized states. Only the sea and our own actions keep them from coming to Tirnaland in large numbers. The ones you have killed came to spy on us and report back to their masters. They would have control of the portal, the ring, if they could. Portals lie on fiendish planes, so that the demons can use them, but the one that we came through is ancient, from before the Cataclysm, so we control it; we can stop the fiends them from coming through it. The Queene has others guarding our shores also; celestials from Sanctuary, and paragons from other lands. We can do this unhindered as long as you keep the demons in check."

"And you can tell when they are coming? How?"

She waved her hand. "Like this. You have been looking at the past, but we can see the future. It's not perfect. There are many things that can affect the future, so many possible futures."

"So you didn't see him die?"

"I did." Markus was stunned. He had expected an excuse, not the truth. "I saw that you would beat the demons, and you did. That was the important thing. If you had lost... well, that would be another matter. We would have had to risk exposing ourselves to

fight them, and we are not ready for them to see our strength yet. Fortunately, our paragon did his job." She smiled again, a smile that seemed genuine but did not cool his anger.

"I am not a paragon," Markus said through gritted teeth.

"This happened some years ago." Clodagh waved a hand. Now the view was of a family fleeing across a mountain, two terrified parents with a small boy and girl. "Do you recognize them?"

Markus didn't, but he thought he knew what was coming next. "Here." She lifted her arm and recognition shot through him like an arrow. He dropped to one knee with the shock. It was his parents, and his sister, Lena. He would have known the plaits in her hair anywhere. The boy must have been him; the boy who was racing ahead, peering around the rocks and looking for enemies. Within seconds, he saw what they were running from. Four demons, each with six long, spider-like legs, bounded after them. Markus desperately tried to remember this happening, but couldn't. It was all new, fresh and horrifying. He gasped as the first demon overcame his father, oblivious to the sword the man carried. Markus forced himself to watch as they tore his parents apart, and then silently wept when he saw his sister die. The young Markus ran on. Terror was clear in his face. *I must have gotten away. How?*

His answer came swiftly. The last demon knocked the boy to the ground and ripped open his chest with a clawed foot. It buried its fangs in the awful wound and began to feast.

Markus looked at Clodagh in confusion, only to be met with a sardonic smile. "Yes. You died, and it wasn't the only time."

Another scene appeared, but this time the Fey

woman gifted the memories to go with it. Markus stood on a beach as a grown man; the demons were on top of him, pulling and tearing at his flesh. He saw them rip the skin from his limbs, and remembered the pain. Watched them slash at his face, and remembered the light going out. Over and over, dozens of times, he had died by their claws, their fangs, their inhuman strength and savagery. The torment was unbearable, many times over. *And yet...*

He looked up at Clodagh through tear-filled eyes. "How? How am I still here?"

"Each day, after you have died, you appear, whole and unmarked, close to where you spent the previous night. I do not know why. Perhaps because you were born close to the Hellmouth."

"And my memories? You're the reason why I can't remember anything?"

"It was the Queene. When you found your way here, she saw your pain and decided to ease it so that you could be of use to us." She shrugged. Whether it indicated discord with the Queene, he did not know. "Since then, every time you die, Conal throws your carcass into the sea where the krakens and bottom feeders feast on it. I often wondered what you would do if you found your own corpse some morning." She smiled without humour. "Then I cleanse your memory as you wake. "

He barely heard her. The pain and the terror of one hundred deaths washed over him like a wave, causing his hands to shake and his stomach to churn. But there was something else too; the relief that comes with having cheated death. All the times he had woken up, alive and refreshed. Now that he knew, the confidence grew inside him. He had a purpose all of his own, not one that he had been cheated into.

"The waking on the hillside; I always thought I had been drunk, and you let me."

"It suited our purposes for you to think you were a drunk, and it will again."

"What?"

"If you are to defend the beaches, you must forget again."

Markus looked at her. If she was going to cleanse his memory again, then why show him this? In that instant, he was sure he knew why. Because she wanted to torment him. He could see it in her knowing smile, and her devious eyes.

"No," he whispered. "I want to remember my life. You do not have the right to take it away from me. I want to remember what I've done and what's been done to me. I want to remember what you have done, and not done. Because of that, I will not do your bidding anymore."

The steam started to disperse, so that he could see the vine-covered walls. But there was no opening for him to go through.

Clodagh advanced towards him. "You have no choice. You *will* do what we want."

Markus ran to the wall and put his palms on it, feeling for a catch or recess or some other way of releasing a door. Behind him, Clodagh laughed as she closed the distance between them. He found nothing except smooth stone and vines. He turned around and found her standing almost within arms reach. She started to raise her palm toward him, to steal his memories. He couldn't let her do that, not again. He had only just found out who he was. He wasn't going to lose that. Markus pulled the dagger from his boot and held it in front of him.

Clodagh threw her head back and laughed, a hor-

rible sound that echoed around the chamber. "Fool. You cannot harm me. Now put that away before you hurt yourself."

It was Markus's turn to smile. "Exactly." He held the blade up to his throat and closed his eyes. *This had better work.* He clenched his teeth through the pain as he dug deep and pulled the blade across.

"No!" Clodagh raged.

Warm blood flowed down his neck, and he fell to his knees. The room began to spin as darkness crept across his consciousness, fogging his senses. It was all so familiar from the other times he had died.

Soft hands clasped his throat, and the darkness stalled. "You are not getting away," he heard Clodagh say through the fog. It started to clear. He could see her kneeling above him. His blood stained her hands. He tried to fight, to push her hands away so that he could leave, but he hadn't the strength to... just die. Markus strained his body to try and open the wound, but she was too strong for him.

"Markus." It was another voice, a familiar female one full of strength and compassion. The Faerie Queene. An image of her beautiful face filled his mind. "You have served me well, and you deserve the chance to make your own destiny."

"Yes." The reply came from somewhere inside him. Whether he spoke it or thought it, he did not know.

"Make your own way, and when you are ready, come and find me."

"Thank you," he managed, and the darkness took him.



Bright sunlight woke him again, but this time he

knew exactly how he had gotten to the hillside. He sprang to his feet and ran home, conscious that Clodagh could arrive any moment on an enchanted mount, and make him forget everything. His clothes lay on the cot. How? Surely Conal hadn't brought them back. As he lifted his trousers, he gasped. A sword lay in his scabbard. He drew it and the glow of the blade lit up the dim room. This was no ordinary sword. He grinned. A gift? From the Queene? He sheathed it again. The scabbard was a poor vessel for so fine a weapon, but the disguise it would give was no harm where he was going. Markus dressed and tied up all his possessions in the hide, throwing it over his shoulder. He hurried from the village but not before making one stop.

A small heap of stones marked the newest inhabitant in the graveyard. Markus said a silent prayer that Stefan's spirit had found peace. "I promise that I will do everything I can to send the fiends back to where they came from," he vowed, "and then the Fey can leave our world alone."

He walked along the road until the smith's apprentice overtook him with his cart.

"Where are you going?" Markus shouted out.

"Newbridge," the sleepy youth replied.

"There's a port there, yes?"

The apprentice nodded.

"Then move over." Markus hopped up beside the reluctant lad and never looked back.

THE PRICE OF A SOLDIER'S SOUL

BY KIRSTEN CROSS

The greatest honor that can be bestowed on the bravest of warriors is not medals or fame, it is the honor of becoming one of the Erabareta, the Chosen. The mightiest of soldiers, the most ferocious guardians of the Empire, the most compliant of men.'

*Itzui Omaniki,
Grand master of the Order of the Initiates*



The gentle music of water trickling over stones washed in through the open window carried on the softest of jasmine breezes. The ward was quiet—a moan here, a croaked whisper begging for water there. Efficient nurses in starched aprons moved silently among the wounded, administering medicine and gentle touches, shushing the restless and silently—sadly—covering the faces of those who had passed into the Land of the Ancestors. A crooked finger would beckon, and solemn faced orderlies would quietly and reverently remove the bodies, their final journey out of the ward preceded by the mumbled chanting of a priest

in full ceremonial dress.

The war was taking a heavy toll on the brave men and women of the Imperial Yokozan Army. Their numbers had been thinned in the latest battle, but they had still managed to repel an opposing army swelled by the supernatural anomaly called “The Horde”.

Their swords culled the enemy’s mockery of an unholy army into dust. There was no honor in killing creatures made of dirt. They had no *soul*, no breath of life in them, just the stench of the grave slurry that passed for blood in their corrupt bodies. They had no families, no empathy, no concept of the word ‘love’. They knew no mercy, no comradeship, no *honor*. Nothing but the Hellmouth itself would mark, or even mourn, their passing. When they were destroyed, they left nothing on the battlefield to speak of their brutal time on this land—just a fine coating of gray dust over the bodies of the Yokozan soldiers whom had given their lives fighting against everything the vile, hellish enemy stood for.

And the cost had been high.

Thousands of the Empire’s finest men and women had marched on to face The Horde. It had been an easy army to raise. The Horde had conveniently made themselves the ultimate incentive for anyone that did know the meaning of love and honor to fight to the death against the enemy. The mere mention of the anomaly’s name was enough for any civilian who could carry a weapon to immediately take up arms against the rising tide of filth that threatened their borders. The petty and domestic squabbles were laid to one side. Politics—normally the very lifeblood of the Inner Court—were forgotten as a common enemy massed on the steppes.

Sheer courage and an awareness that right was on their side was a very thin shield against the spear of

evil, but every bit helped.

The Horde had been enormous. Vast expanses of clay monstrosities, masquerading as a collective of some kind of twisted, sentient beings had threatened to overwhelm the Emperor's army. Fortunately, as an army, they'd been slow, clumsy, vicious, but ultimately stupid. The Emperor's army, disciplined and well trained, had mown through them like a scythe through corn.

But as the Imperial army had thought their foes to be easy pickings, something had changed. As the numbers of The Horde fell, the survivors became more cunning—more capable in combat—they learned from the fallen. Like an ant colony, they shared a collective consciousness that took the death experiences of those that fell and fed them, like some sort of intellectual nectar, to the survivors.

If one Horde duplicate had been destroyed by a backswing, its experience of that confrontation transmitted to the others. In an instant, the others had analyzed that death from all angles and worked out a strategy to counter the backswing with a deathblow of their own. The intelligence analysts had a term for it. They called it "*collective conscious computing*". As the battle had worn on, the abilities of the surviving Horde became more ferocious and more deadly. The Empire had lost many great fighters that day.

The conflict had sapped more than just muscles—it had struck at the very heart of the army. Morale was low, despite the victory. Dark mutterings in the corridors of the Palace had spoken of Mind Hunters sent to spy in the Imperial Court, but nothing had been proven. Sure, a couple of diplomats had been politely asked to leave—their throats slit by their escorts when clear of the Palace and their bodies left to be devoured by

wild animals—but no one had been brought to face the Inquisitor and his array of instruments of Truth. The whispers merely floated around the Palace, carried on a breeze that stank of wilted jasmine and dishonor. Behind closed doors, there were hushed conversations, conspiratorial glances and counter-intelligence moves that would shame any warrior. Alas, that was the nature of war.

A spy in the camp is worth a thousand soldiers. And the Empire was exceptionally skilful at spying.



Colbuzo Akasawi lay on the cot, his left side heavily bandaged with spotlessly clean linen. Beads of sweat lined his olive-skinned brow and his powerfully muscled arms tensed as images of the battle flashed in front of him. In his fevered mind, he could hear the march of their feet, pounding a counter-beat to the war drums that sent waves of dread through the Empire's army. He could smell the stench of rotting flesh as those who were Tainted drew ever closer. The feeling of nausea as the Taint made its presence felt. The sheer dishonor of the battle. The cascade of images made his closed eyes flicker. Then they became a blood-soaked blur, merging into one another as if a flock of cranes had turned in on itself and became no longer a graceful, pirouetting dance in the sky but a swirling, hurtling mass of chaos.

Screams... of horror, of pain, of vengeance, of fury. The vile, otherworldly guttural snarls of The Horde becoming more intelligent, more cunning and more belligerent as its numbers were thinned by the Yokozan blades. Screams as the artillery fired their cannons, blasting The Horde into choking dust. Screams.

Screams. SCREAMS....

Colbuzo's eyes snapped open, and he gasped, shocked at the silence that seemed to suffocate him but still did nothing to muffle the screams of battle in his mind. His chest rose and fell as he fought to bring his breathing under control. His ragged gasps sounded loudly throughout the ward and a nurse looked up, concerned for the well-being of her patient and deeply disturbed by the horror she could so clearly hear behind his rasping breaths.

The nurse was experienced enough to know when a patient gasped due to wounds of the body, and when they gasped due to wounds of the mind. She looked towards the end of the ward, a frown wrinkling her forehead. Her almond eyes were the deepest brown Colbuzo had ever seen, and he locked into her gaze, silently begging her to give him something, *anything*, to stop the screams....

She glided to his side and picked up a virginal white cloth. Dipping it in a bowl of water scented with rose blossoms, she gently dabbed at his forehead, wiping the sweat and the fear away. The simple touch from something that wasn't tainted—something that was pure—was enough to push the darkness back, to diminish the screaming to a background moan. That, he could deal with. He sank back into the pillow and closed his eyes again, letting her gentle touch soothe his brow and his tortured mind.

Too many battles. Too much horror....



"How is he?" Taboui Nakouchi was becoming irritated by the doctor's constant bobbing and bowing. He ran a hand across his graying hair that lay tied in a tight

plait running down his back like a second spine; the traditional mark of a warrior. The sides of his skull were shorn, the silver stubble at his temples adding a shimmer to his skin that seemed as if the sun were blessing him.

The doctor bobbed again, "He is stable, *Tabouisan*." Taboui fought the urge to slap the man across the face as he came back up.

"Stable? That's all you can give me? Stable?"

Bob. Bow. The doctor's smile went no further than the corners of his mouth. Taboui frowned. The damn doctor's constant bobbing was starting to make him feel nauseous.

The doctor came back up from his latest bow and smirked serenely at the soldier. The soldier's rough tone had initially frightened him, but he had quickly recovered his composure. Here, he was in charge. This warrior knew nothing of medicine and probably was of lowly birth anyway, so the balance of power was restored in the doctor's mind to its rightful place. This soldier may have been one of the Emperor's personal bodyguards, but he was still just a roughneck with a sword. The doctor held the moral high-ground by birth. That knowledge gave him a warm, oily feeling that fed his own smug satisfaction. The doctor smiled lazily and poured honeyed tones into his voice to placate the warrior, much as he would do to sooth an aggressive dog. "He is recovering well, *Tabouisan*."

"I need to speak with him," said the soldier.

"Oh, I'm afraid that is impossible, *Tabouisan*. You see—"

"—Okay, here's the thing! You bow one more time," Taboui held up a warning finger, "and the back of your neck will feel my blade, physician. And as far as impossible is concerned," Taboui reached into his jacket and

pulled out a parchment roll with a seal securing the end. He held it up like a baton for the physician to see. "This, my friend, says otherwise."

The silent class war shifted again. The doctor's position as superior to this ruffian with a sword had been usurped by a simple scroll. The doctor's eyes gave nothing away, but the sight of the Seal of the Initiates was enough to override his objection and power as a physician.

He started to bow once more, remembered Taboui's snarled comment about the back of his neck and a blade, and stopped in mid-bow. Taboui's mouth twitched in mirth. The man looked stuck, as if he had a bad back and had tried to get up too quickly. Slowly, the doctor straightened up—surreptitiously trying to make it look as if he hadn't bowed at all—and stepped aside, an outstretched arm inviting Taboui to step into the silence of the ward.

"Five minutes only, *Tabouisan*. I really must insist." His head dropped onto his chest in an unstoppable and unconscious bow as he silently squirreled the scenario away for analysis later on. The Court had spies everywhere. Even in the most sterile of sanctuaries.

Taboui grunted his consent. "Noted."

He strode down the central walkway between the beds of battle-weary soldiers. Each man had carried himself with honor that day. But there were few that could hold a lantern to the bravery of the man he wanted to see. Taboui's brown eyes scanned the beds, looking for the distinctive form of Colbuzo. The man was twice the size of many of his fellow warriors, and it wasn't hard to spot him amongst the rows of wounded soldiers. Taboui smiled to himself as he saw a woman with the beauty of a lotus blossom in full flower tenderly wiping the forehead of a prone figure. Trust Col to have

the prettiest nurse taking care of him.

"You never change, Col. Attracting the girls like bees around a wisteria tree!"

"Taboui!" Col smiled warmly and struggled to sit up. The effort sent shockwaves of pain through his body, and he gasped in agony. Taboui hurried to support the man's weight with a tender, but firm arm and he and the nurse slowly lowered him back onto the cot.

"That was really *smart*, wasn't it Col? Lie still, you damn fool! You can still listen to me when you're horizontal, you blithering idiot!"

Taboui turned to the nurse, the gruffness of a warrior replaced with respect and gentleness in his deeply melodious voice as he spoke to her. "A thousand apologies, *Abousi*. My coarse warrior ways left me devoid of the most basic of manners for a second there. Forgive my outburst." He bowed deeply to the nurse and came back up with a dazzling smile that made the nurse quickly cover her mouth, stifling a giggle. Her brown eyes flirted with the old soldier for a second, and she turned and dashed away to gossip with a gaggle of nurses about the handsome older warrior, who had honored her with the term, *Abousi*. Emperor's Flower. A compliment of the highest order.

"Hey! I saw her first!" Colbuzo grinned at his friend, gently punching him on the arm.

Taboui glanced down, an eyebrow raised. "Who is mightier in a herd, the experienced and fighting fit stag or the young buck with a damn great gash in his side, huh?"

"Depends how big your antlers are, oh most ancient and wise, *old* stag!" Colbuzo grinned mischievously at his friend and mentor.

"Cheeky young buck!" Taboui chuckled, his laughter slowly melting away into a faint smile. He sat down on

the edge of the bed, taking care not to make any sudden movements that might cause his friend renewed pain. Finally, the smile dissolved into a serious frown and Taboui was silent for a moment.

"What? What is it, my friend?"

"Time to stop the frivolities, *Colbuzosan*." The formal use of his name made the younger man frown.

Taboui sighed deeply and pulled out the parchment roll. He handed it to Colbuzo. "You've been chosen. It's a great honor." The words were flat. Emotionless. Taboui spoke them as if he had a blade to his throat and was reading them under duress.

Colbuzo took the scroll gingerly, as if it were a stick of 'Emperor's wrath'—a highly explosive substance that the Yokozan Empire had developed—and would blow his hand off at any second. He glanced at his friend, his soft brown eyes searching for an answer to a question he couldn't even begin to form.

Taboui stared at him blankly and sighed again. "Your exemplary service and bravery in battle have proven you worthy of selection. The Order of the Initiates commands that you give yourself over completely to your Emperor, body, mind and soul. Yada, yada, yada."

"Me? They've chosen me?" Colbuzo's face cracked into a broad smile. "But this... this... this is wonderful! My god, Tab, do you realize what an honor this is? Me!"

"Yeah."

Colbuzo frowned. "Well you don't sound very happy for me, old stag!"

Taboui smiled sadly at his friend. "I am happy for you, Col. I just hope it's everything you want."

"Why do you say that like it's a bad thing?"

"Because not everyone makes it, young buck. Not everyone can take the shock of giving over themselves so completely to the Biodroid Program. Men go mad."

"Men who aren't strong enough to handle it, you mean!"

"Men like you, Col."

"So you think I'm going to go insane and run off into the Wildlands or something, Tab? That my mind won't be able to cope with being granted the ultimate honor a soldier can have?"

"It's not your mind I'm worried about."

"I don't follow—"

"It's your *soul*."



"Prohibit the taking of omens, and do away with superstitious doubts. Then, until Death itself comes, no calamity need be feared."

'The Art of War' Sun Tzu



"Come in, *Colbuzosan*." The robed official glanced up from his desk.

The low table was placed on exquisitely embroidered rugs depicting bejeweled Fan Tails; their cobalt blue feathers glittering with iridescent colors, the sacred 'Eye' on the tip of each long feather a deep green and rendered in tiny pearls, delicate stitches and seed beads. The rug was worthy of any room in the Palace. It was a mark of status. Colbuzo knew perfectly well he was in the presence of someone with the money and power to be able to afford such a rug—and in the Empire, money talked.

The official relaxed back, his hands resting loosely on his bended knees. He waved a casual hand in front of the table, and Colbuzo bowed in thanks and sat on the

floor, cross-legged.

The official raised an eyebrow in surprise. The soldier had broken protocol. When sitting in front of one's superiors, the lower classes should always sit on bended knees. This casual manner was a sign of disrespect! The official pursed his lips.

Before he could reprimand the man for his lack of protocol and basic good manners, the young soldier spoke. "Please, forgive my sitting in this way, *Yestzuisan*. My side is still a little stiff, and I find it hard to sit as I should be sitting. I mean no disrespect to you."

"Think nothing of it, Colbuzo," Yestzui Mikkosui's disapproving look changed suddenly to a genuine, warm smile. "You are recovering well, I hope?"

"Very, thank you. The medical care I have received has been... exemplary." Colbuzo frowned to himself.

"And that troubles you? That a soldier of your caliber should be surprised that he receives a little, shall we say, special treatment?"

"May I speak freely, *Yestzuisan*?"

"Of course."

"It does, slightly. Not that I'm ungrateful in any way, but—"

"—But you still wonder why you should receive the very best care that we have when there are others you think equally worthy who don't? That you feel, maybe, you've been singled out for some reason?" Yestzui chuckled. "You really are an oaf, aren't you, soldier? Certainly you've been singled out! You've been chosen!"

Yestzui's demeanor suddenly shifted and he leaned forward, his elbows resting on the low, rosewood table, studying the young man intently. "Unless, that is, you're having second thoughts?"

"No! No, I... no, absolutely not, *Yestzuisan*!" Colbuzo

looked mortified. If they suspected that his dedication to spending his entire life serving the Empire wavered, even just for a second, he would be cast back into the ranks a mere soldier—cannon fodder for the next battle.

Yestzui held up a hand. “*Colbuzosan*, your honor is not in question here. I merely jest with you. You have no need to fear. I have no intention of casting you back into the ranks as food for the enemy’s cannons. We have invested far too much time and effort in you to do that.”

An alarm sounded in Colbuzo’s mind. The man had just repeated word for word what he had thought privately only seconds before! Was the man a Mind Hunter? A spy?

Colbuzo quickly let his mind go blank, imagining a solid brick wall in front of his mind’s eye. All Imperial Guards had been taught this in basic training. The threat of Mind Hunters was taken seriously. These dark individuals could creep silently into the innermost corners of your mind and steal your thoughts like master thieves. Hated and despised, Mind Hunters were also deeply feared.

Yestzui smiled serenely. “Ah, the old brick wall trick, huh? Good to see you haven’t forgotten your basic training, soldier.” He laughed. “No, I’m not a Mind Hunter. But I have the memories and abilities of one of them, my friend. Want to know how?”

Colbuzo nodded.

“Because I too am an Initiate. Like you. Chosen to serve the Empire. Whereas you have been selected to become an elite member of the Biodroid Program, I have been initiated into the Collective. It’s part of the Program, but we don’t have our bodies fine tuned. We have our...” he chuckled again as if sharing some

private joke with himself. “Well, we have our *minds* tweaked.” The man laughed and clapped twice. “Tea?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You will take tea with me.” It wasn’t a request.

Colbuzo ignored the waif-like serving girl who silently padded into the room. She began to lay out the tea making equipment. The *Chashitsu* was an important and serene ritual; a privilege reserved for those of high status. It was a compliment and an honor to be asked to take tea. Colbuzo’s curiosity grew.

“Is this part of the training? I... I don’t mean the tea, but...”

Yestzui smiled and nodded. “Very astute, my warrior friend. Yes, every experience you go through from hereon in is part of your training. You must learn to absorb every detail, every aspect of each and every thing that happens to you. It all happens for a reason. Even the simple act of the *Chashitsu*. Disregard nothing, my friend.”

“But I was told my training wouldn’t begin for another week...”

Yestzui shook his head. “Your training is almost complete, my friend. It began when we took over your medical care. Are you not surprised to have recovered so quickly from such terrible injuries?”

Colbuzo’s recovery had been remarkably fast. It had only been a matter of days since Taboui had brought him the scroll. The next few days had been a blur of dreamlike images—of men and women bustling around him, giving him injections that kept him conscious but unable to respond to his surroundings. He had lain, paralyzed by drugs, yet oddly tranquil, unconcerned by this strange, disembodied state. When he had finally regained his faculties he had felt fitter, stronger and more powerful than at any other time in his life.

His side and chest still hurt from the wounds of the battle but... that was the odd thing. He hadn't remembered receiving any kind of wound to his chest, but a thin, expertly sutured scar running from his sternum to his throat indicated that he had been opened up like an oyster shell.

Yestzui carried on talking, ignoring the serving girl. "Do you not wonder as to why you are speaking to me today?" He sat back and smiled. "It is my job to guide you. To prepare you. To make sure you remain worthy. You are an Initiate. The process started from the second our doctors put the implants in."

"Implants? What implants?"

"The implants that are currently merging with your own body, my friend. Like the coming together of light and dark to create one perfect form in balance and harmony, so the droids are now merging with your blood, your very essence." He paused as the serving girl placed bowls in front of them and bowed deeply. Yestzui ignored the soldier for a moment and nodded briefly at the girl. She bowed again and began whisking a large bowl of thick, green liquid, careful not to splash a single drop.

Colbuzo watched, fascinated by the precision of every move but starting to imagine a churning, boiling mass inside him, merging with his own blood in the same way that the carefully selected teas blended under the expert whisk of the serving girl. A swirling vortex formed in the center of the tea bowl, drawing Colbuzo in deeper—hypnotic, resonating...

He could see the movement of the muscles and tendons under the woman's alabaster skin. He could hear the beat of her heart slow as she focused in on the ceremony...

Yestzui continued with his exposition, "The implants

that will turn you into one of the *Erabareta*, my friend.”

Yetzui’s voice was a distant echo, it dragged Colbuzo back to a more corporeal world. “I don’t understand...”.

Yestzui shrugged. “They tend to keep the details quiet until the process has actually taken place. Scares the hell out of you if you know beforehand what’s happening.”

His matter of fact tone chilled Colbuzo. He felt a knot of concern tighten in his gut. Had this distinguished honor been a mistake? What had they done to him? He tried to quell the panic that started to stab at him.

Yestzui picked up on the man’s unease, but it was done now. There was nothing the soldier could do to change his fate. Yestzui’s nature took a turn for the dark. He enjoyed this bit. Telling the novices what they could expect. How much pain there would be. How their very soul would be torn asunder by the onslaught of the droids. Like a rampant infection, they were already multiplying in their thousands throughout Colbuzo’s body, spreading like a mechanical disease.

“Right now, like tiny bacteria, they’re invading every part of your body, waiting for the final moment when you go through the transformation.” His eyes took on a distant, tranquil look. “It is a truly miraculous moment, Colbuzo. A moment of wonder as you feel their power surge through you. As you become one with the Collective. Merging seamlessly into the position you always knew was rightfully yours. It’s one hell of a rush!” He laughed, but there was an edge to his mirth—brittle, sharp and jagged.

The woman carefully placed the whisk on the stand she had laid out and sat back, silent contemplation stilling the atmosphere in the room to a single, everlasting heartbeat. She bowed and picked up a cup. She crad-

ed the fine china in her hands like it was her own child. She held the cup out to Colbuzo and bowed again, offering him the tea. He returned the bow and took the bowl carefully, resisting the temptation to smile at the pretty creature. He put the cup to his lips and drank. The tea had a strange, bitter taste, and he winced as he swallowed. Green tea wasn't normally this unpleasant.

The cup dropped from his fingertips and stopped suspended in mid-air, the drops of spilt tea forming a motionless cascade of droplets hanging in the air like green emeralds. Colbuzo felt as if he were moving through molasses—every action seemed slowed. With great effort, he turned his head and looked at the girl, confusion in his eyes.

She sat motionless, one finger raised, pointing at the suspended cup. She smiled lazily and curled the finger into the palm of her hand. The cup dropped from its suspended state, scattering the bright green tea across the priceless rug. The delicate cup bounced and veered off towards the marble floor that surrounded the strategically placed sitting mats, shattering into a thousand pieces.

Colbuzo felt consciousness slipping from his grasp, and he slumped to the right, his body was utterly limp, but his mind was still sharp. He couldn't speak. He couldn't ask the woman why she had poisoned him. He couldn't ask Yestzui if he had failed some kind of test without realizing that he'd been tested in the first place. He couldn't even beg for a second chance to prove himself worthy. He could do nothing.

As he lay on the floor, his cheek resting on the cool marble, he heard a sharp clap and the rustle of cloth. He felt strong hands grasp him firmly by the arms and lift him, compliant and unresisting, onto some kind of

stretcher. As he watched the ceiling tiles start to flicker away from him, he finally succumbed into unconsciousness. As he drifted into the darkness, he heard the distant voice of Yestzui.

“And so it begins...”.



‘Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.’

‘The Art of War’ Sun Tzu



The chamber was lit by bright lights. These weren't mere mundane lanterns, these effervescent glowing spheres were products of Science and Alchemy. The Empire had developed its own, brutally efficient blend of necromancy, high science and primeval magic to capture the sheer essence of the elements. The Emperor's magicians were masters of earth, air, fire and water as well as the individual elements that formed a part of their existence.

An efficient and savage program of knowledge-gathering on the mortal body through the dissection of criminals, captured spies and those thought of as worthless in society had led to a detailed understanding of just how much punishment the mortal form could take. Furthermore, it informed them about how the elements could be blended with the humanity of those unfortunate enough to be a part of the experimentation. The resultant fusion between anatomy, magic and science had led to the development of the Biodroid Program.

Selection was considered an honor.

Colbuzo lay on the bench. He could feel the restraints on his wrists, around his ankles and across his chest. He was helpless. In the background, an ethereal chant droned like a bee on a summer's evening—hypnotic, all permeating, soothing those who heard it into compliance and surrender. Straining against the straps was pointless. Better to lay back and accept his fate. After all, he was honored. Wasn't he?

That seed of doubt started to grow. What if the cost was too high? What if Taboui had been right? What if his words had been a silent, unworded warning not to agree? What *if*? A worthless question. It was too late. He could feel the presence of the droids like a virus coursing through his body. Hunting down the last vestiges of resistance and overwhelming them altogether.

The chanting grew louder, a flat drum beating out a slow, rhythmic heartbeat that pounded in Colbuzo's ears. His own heartbeat kept pace with the beat of the drum. Perfect rhythm, perfect unity, perfect balance. He became aware of the sensation of his own blood, pumping through his body like a water-course, carrying life-giving essence to every part of his body, mind and soul.

Then the pain started.

A coursing rush of agony, flowing through every vein and artery replaced the awareness of his own circulatory system. It felt as if every nerve in his body was being torn loose, sending waves of pain impulses crashing into his brain.

The transformation had begun.

In place of blood, liquid metal began to flow. The droids metamorphosed the mortal body into a steel fortress. They fed on the iron in his blood, digesting it and, through a process of alchemy known only to the highest members of the Order, turned it into liquid steel.

The surface of his skin began to bubble and writhe, transforming into a layer of metal as thin as the fold on a sword, wafer thin but impenetrable. The ancient swordsmiths had begun this process one thousand years before. The Order merely took the skill of creating the world's deadliest sword by folding the steel in on itself hundreds of times a stage further. They had liquefied it—turned it into something that could be introduced into the body of a warrior and turn them into pure metal—a living, sentient machine with the morals of the most noble of warriors and the clinical killing ability of sciences' most wondrous advances.

The only problem was the soul.

The metamorphosis literally tore it to pieces as the last element of the Divinity fought instinctively against what it saw as tainting. Ethereal, transient and the most sacred part of any warrior, it was the soul that gave warriors the courage to fight against the evil of The Taint; those who became one of the 'Chosen' were vulnerable. Without a soul, they could do little against the onslaught of demonic corruption.

There was only one way to fight this weakness. Through magic, the consciousness of the soldier was retained. It was then linked through a neural network to all those who had been chosen. A telepathic network created strength in numbers, just like a hive. Just like The *Horde*...

Colbuzo struggled violently as the liquid metal blood and steel skin advanced rapidly up his body from the extremities. His screams were barely audible above the pounding chant of the priests and the crash of the heartbeat drum. He looked around wildly for some form of escape. Through blurred eyes and gasps in between screams, a face he knew came into view. A face he had trusted. "Tabouil!"

The silver-haired warrior laid a gentle hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry, *Colbuzosan*. I tried to warn you. Of all men? You are the last person I would wish this on. But the Emperor has spoken. This is his will."

Colbuzo tried to speak, but the liquid metal had reached his neck and was filling his throat, choking off his air. He clutched at Taboui's arm, his steel covered fingertips digging deep into the older man's flesh and making him yelp with pain. With a grimace, Taboui turned to his friend in time to see him mouth silently... "*Help me!*"

The chanting reached a crescendo and abruptly stopped.

Taboui felt the grip on his arm slacken as the metal reached the young soldier's eyes. Colbuzo drew a last, desperate gasp, and slumped back, his eyes closed and his mouth open in a death mask of horror and fear. The old warrior gently pried the stiffened metal fingers from his flesh and tipped Colbuzo's head back, closing the gaping scream.

"It is done." Taboui stepped back and bowed. Rising slowly, he waited, staring intently at the body of his seemingly dead friend.

An almost silent approach brought Yestzui to stand serenely next to the old soldier, "Is the transformation complete?"

"Any moment now."

Yestzui smiled quietly. "You chose well, *Tabouisan*. Your excellent reputation as a Selector for the Order is well earned."

Taboui didn't respond to the silky smooth compliment. Colbuzo had been a friend. The others had been just unknown soldiers. Every one of them had been worthy... but they hadn't been friends.

For the first time, the Selector had a feeling of be-

trayal coursing through him. The minutest tremors of doubt rippled through his mind. Yestzui glanced at the old warrior sharply.

Colbuzo's face looked almost serene, like one of the ancient Emperors who had entire effigies of themselves created out of wafer thin metal that was overlaid on their bodies in the tomb. The practice had been a final, desperate attempt to leave some kind of lasting image of themselves as their bodies crumbled into dust underneath.

Colbuzo's eyes snapped open—gray disks with a pinpoint of black in the center replaced the soft brown eyes that had once looked out from a handsome face.

Colbuzo could hear the breathing of those around him. He had no need of breath any more. He remembered who he was. He remembered breathing. He remembered begging his friend for help as the agony ripped through him as the metal suffocated him. He remembered the smell of jasmine on the breeze that had floated in through the hospital windows, the scent of rosewater and the pretty nurse who had soothed him.

And then he remembered the screams. He remembered the horror of the battle that had left him so dreadfully wounded. The blood-spattered faces of his friends and comrades as the unholy Horde decimated their numbers. The realization that, although The Horde's corrupt vocal cords uttered nothing more than a guttural snarl, each destroyed clay duplicate whispered to the wind its experience. Each whisper mad the remaining Horde stronger—learning from every sword thrust and counter attack the Imperial army had rained down upon the army of dust.

He could hear that whispering now. Here, in the supposed sanctity of the Palace, surrounded by all the magic and science that the Order could muster, still

some kind of Taint wound its way through all defenses, permeating even this holy place. A buzz of voices in his mind as his droids linked up with those of hundreds of The Chosen, slotting Colbuzo perfectly into place within the nobility of the Collective. He could feel their muscles, sense the breeze on their skin, watch through their eyes at will. The metallic sheen of his skin morphed as the droids adapted their natural camouflaging skills to make him look almost 'normal' once more. But even the droids couldn't change those haunting, soulless metallic gray eyes.

One whispered voice repeated a mantra over and over. Colbuzo strained to listen, filtering out the others. The words were indistinct but... slowly, he tuned them in, listening intently....

'To know your enemy you must become your enemy...'

That was the price. To defeat The Horde, the Empire had created its own. A horde of android soldiers—perfect killing machines, interconnected by a telepathic web of continuous voices, each one teaching the others, each one strengthening The Collective; each one stripped of their souls, their individuality, their identity, but cruelly left with an awareness of the absence of these essential components. *This* was the price of a soldier's soul.

For Colbuzo, the price was too high. He threw his head back and wailed in utter despair.

