



IRON BOUND

FEATURING

DAVID J. WEST

TY JOHNSTON

and

MORE

Iron Bound Online Magazine @ 2010
Iron Bound Online Magazine by Jesse Dedman.

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INTRODUCTION

As I write this, Ironbound by Overkill blares through my surround sound, dominating the room with the thunderous sounds of triumph. Even before the sounds begins to fade, even before my ears adjust for silence, the Guardians of Asgaard by Amon Amarth storms in for its moment of glory. In short, you can say that I'm well prepared for everything related to Iron Bound. Being in Houston, Texas, this very first edition releases on the same month of the renaissance festival, which just so happens to be one of my favorite occasions. Hell, it's one of the rare moments in which women want you to check out their racks without any strings attached.

Moving forward, this edition includes five wonderful stories, all of which themed heavily with images of swords and sorcery but with different degrees. A flash fiction trilogy of sorts entertains us with a string of unusual imagery and perspective. Though not headlined by the tattered banners of war or drenched in the blood of fallen combatants, the tales are truly unique and absurd, there for they belong just as much as any of the other stories. Sailing to Valhalla by David J. West is, I dare to say, probably the one story in this edition that echoes that of traditional folklore. Notions of respect, of fairness, and honor drawn by a race that quickly turns for the worse. Behold Now the Behemoth by Ty Johnston offers those fans of epic battles something to look forward to. Pressed hard by the Persian onslaught, a dwindling group of survivors follow the command of a questionable ally. In the pursuit of a

powerful weapon the ground becomes saturated with blood. As a follow-up, we have James Lecky's *Cold Legion*, which closes the issue nicely.

Last but not least, I included the first episode of the *Master's Torment* in this edition as its content made *Iron Bound* a more suitable home and audience. With that said, for those that don't know about *Deadman's Tome*, I strongly urge you to check out our sister online magazine. She's a bit crazy and demented, but offers a lot for those that love horror fiction.

-Sir Dedman

Table of Contents

THE MASTER'S TORMENT: MORANET'S REBIRTH

Jesse Dedman

THE WHITE RABBIT/ THE MOLE HOLE/ ROSE'S BABY

A.D. Dawson

BEHOLD NOW THE BEHEMOTH

Ty Johnston

SAILING TO VALHALLA

David West

COLD LEGIONS

James Lecky

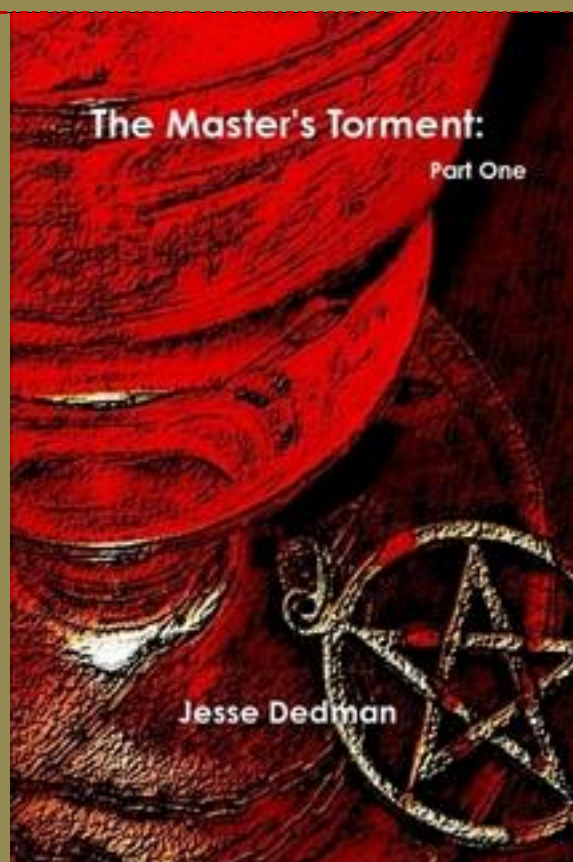
If you have questions, comments or concerns then send an email to Legato10@swbell.net

The Master's Torment

Moranet's Rebirth

By Jesse Dedman

Originally published in Deadman's Tome. Also, the full version is now [available here](#).



P

oor Moranet, son of the king, spared by the wicked hand of the Queen, falsified the wrongs with weariless perseverance, even in the face of death. Before his demise, life handed him a series of unfortunate hardships that drove the dagger of hopelessness deeper and deeper, until all that remained was pure hatred and anguish. A death absorbed by such raw emotion could blind the deceased, keeping the spirit bound in our world, and the prince of Scyrfelt differed not the slightest.

The mark she left behind seethed painfully upon his flesh in a throbbing discoloration. He should not have ignored her command. After all, the highest order in the house demanded respect for her authority; otherwise, she would exemplify how limitless her authority was. The queen of the castle, his mother, exhibited compassion in the absence of

abuse. Rarely did she ever give anyone a friendly expression, and the walls whispered of malicious intent for the Lord of the Castle, the distant cousins, and even her son, Moranet. There were moments where she dragged guests into the stockades to treat them like disobedient slaves that broke their last command, all the while laughing with a voice that intensified the torture. Reason would often need to be present, but her logic knew no bounds for reason, instead she acted merely on response to a threat only she seemed concerned about, while roaring the King's command.

Moranet stood in the hallway leaning his back against a wall. A chilling breeze rolled in from the windows, embracing him in a wrath of shivers. Her command resonated with a cold touch, for she desired for him to follow suit with the King's master plan. With only a few details, the plan appeared rather indifferent to humanity, shattering the idea of hospitality even further; nevertheless, the command must be followed.

Through the expansive gallery he walked, and with each step his resistance towards the very idea morphed into an icy indifference. His steps echoed off the glamorous walls, which were decorated with fabulous paintings and pieces of polished armor. He paused before a small side door with fingers wrapped around the handle. The servants that walked by were ever curious, some with concern, others with fear, while a small portion with knowledge of why he hesitated. Moranet pushed on the door and stepped down into the shallow waters of the Queen's interior Garden. The moisture soaked into his boots, but he gave no acknowledgment.

The overgrowth of vines and other greenery masked the walls, dominating the hard rough stone with intrusive branches and roots. Roses layered a corner all to themselves, while lilies at another, but in between lay a hybrid of different flowers; combining the beautiful with the carnivorous, producing a man-eating plant that attract the curious hand. However, the charm faded into a dull, brownish, and grey hue that expressed the malnourishment it had endured. Just as the Queen predicted, her prized creation suffered because of a lack of attention. The servants have been slacking, and refused to lure any more villagers for feeding what they considered a monstrosity.

Moranet demanded the gardener to come closer with hand ready to punish for any

refusal. "This Hydra, why does it look ill, as if it hadn't been fed for weeks?"

Cowardly, the grey, wrinkly, and cock-eyed man lumped a few feet, while dropping the tool he had in hand. He feared the splash of the water would be the last of such noise that would act as prolog to his death. "Oh, Sir Moranet, please spare my neglect, for it was only done in your respect."

"This plant is dear to the Queen and it is in a state that could no longer prove useful. How, you shivering disgrace, could that be respectful?"

"Your mind echoes with her command, but not without resistance. I only ask that you see reason, and allow this to go ignored. The kingdom will thank you, I'm sure of it," said the Gardner, in a stronger voice, followed by an ominous laughter. After choking on his disrespectful laughter, the Gardener lowered his frayed hat and reached into the water for his tool.

"If you only knew the half of it. Torment has been accompanying me for way too long, and the only way to make peace with it is to befriend it. Do as she orders and feed the Hydra."

"Yes, but only if we could lure more villagers. They have gotten wise on us, and noticed that none have ever returned," said the Gardener, with a wicked smile.

"Hold your tongue, and acknowledge that she pays you well for your service."

"Pay well does she? Only if one values life over anything else, but life can hardly even get you scraps of moldy bread," said the Gardener, in a mocking tone. "Her reign will fester and rot before another villager steps into her lair."

Moranet, without a moment of notice, grabbed the Gardener by his robe, and threw him against the closed mouth of the plant. The sudden thud shattered the frail man's competence, but as his fingers pressed against the soft, mushy surface, he realized his weight kept him safe. However, the conductor of his demise noticed the element of safety, and Moranet gave with a cold delivery of steel an inviting taste of blood for the plant to enjoy. The first drops fell from the rim of the plant's wicked jaw, and the taste invoked a surge of life into the once dying Hydra; Moranet made sure that the beast got its food.

The jaws slammed on the prey, tearing into flesh, snapping bones, and consumed the

body, but Moranet couldn't watch without the torment of the faintest whisper. Like a voice echoed in a long empty hall that spanned the distance of many miles, the clarity of its words vibrated into a distorted chorus, but the message was obvious, and it found resonance in his heart. Though the prey was a mere useless peasant, it was a reminder of the horrific deeds he had endured thus far. Contrary, in exchange for her respect, anything was at stake, and he wouldn't have handled it any differently, for it was her name that was spat upon by a loathsome Gardener. Nevertheless, such admiration doesn't spare one from the seeping touch of guilt, overtime a callous develops, but even hardened skin can be broken.

Ignoring the chorus of shame, Sir Moranet left the shallow pools of the grand garden, which thrived within extensive networks throughout the castle, allowing the Hydra reach whenever intruders dared to enter. Unfortunately, it would take years for the plant to recover from the mistreatment it had received, unless they marched a village load of sacrifices. Upon returning to the throne room to bask in the Queen's presence, a wonderful, mystical, and sweet scent wafted from the tall gallery of windows, which overlooked a forest with a wonderful view of a waterfall. Her charmed incense glowed with amber tips, while a trail of smoke circulated in the air, gently passing by, and the particles teased with a bliss that played inversion to her voice. She called for him, but she sat in the king's throne facing the balcony, which basked in the golden rays of the high noon sun.

"I can see why your father despises you, denying you of your rightful throne," said the Queen, in a soft, but vibrant tone imbued with morbid tranquility. "You were expected several minutes ago. Why so late?"

Sir Moranet bowed, and like Atlas, he bore a world of pressure. He couldn't release his gaze from the floor, and he tried as hard as he could to summon the will to at least look at her, but nothing was there. Being already emotionally defeated, the young prince could only hope that the Queen didn't hear anything too troubling to warrant further abuse; with her the threshold was in constant flux. Silence trailed her question, and it festered into awkwardness. Moranet couldn't speak without swallowing, but his throat felt like a barren wasteland.

"Pride was never your strong suit. I have seen fresh recruited squires with more

courage than you. But I suppose that should be expected, you are your father's son, and like the others you are weak. Too weak to spread the word of the King, and you have only so much to your advantage," said the Queen, her voice building with dominance. "Your one winning quality is your loyalty, but I have heard a rumor today that hurts me, and any pain I feel is felt by all of those around me."

Somewhere, somehow, the will to speak rose from within, and Sir Moranet spoke with insecurity, "I assure you, my Queen, that anything you have heard pales to the example I made in your name."

"Hesitance to fulfill an order tells me that you are not in agreement with what the King dears most. I know you killed the Gardener in defense of my name, but you hesitated to fulfill what is best for the Kingdom. So I find your loyalty in question. Perhaps you are too distracted, I know of someone you have been seeing lately, a woman within these walls that you have hidden from me. She distracts you from fulfilling the King's will."

The prince's heart fell into an abyss never thought imaginable as if his mother's lurking question could tug upon it. The dread merely warned of what evil she could manifest, and knowing full well of her inability to even consider negotiating, whatever she said he had to do. He was frozen in fear, all the while hoping to God that she wouldn't destroy another life that was dear to him.

"As I understand it, you two are planning to wed, but you could never have my approval if I fear she corrupts you. However, there is a greater evil lurking about. Sir Helbrant plans on secreting his notorious lies into the minds of our villagers. And being that common folk are much like sheep, they could easily be herded into wanting to bring destruction on their very own righteous King."

"Please, mother, allow me to slay this pathetic excuse of a knight," said Moranet, in a bold tone.

"I sense you want to ask of me something in return, but you shouldn't doubt my judgment. Whereas the King would judge your future wife to death, I would allow you to have more nights with her," she said, in a rare, but maternal tone. She rose from the depths of the throne and stepped into the layering sun light, which shone from the opposite direction,

trailing her frame with a golden aura. Her hands wrapped around the glow of a burning incense. The loose garment of her robe draped off of her slender arms, while a faint titian hue dimly illuminated the ends of the sleeves. "Bring me his head, and I'll make sure your father does nothing to her. Otherwise, he may have me slay her in front of you."

Moranet felt as if an energizing jolt vibrated throughout his body, releasing him from the fear in exchange for a soothing, rejuvenating aura of calm. He obtained her recognition, even though he desired her recognition and respect, respect was too much to wish for as of yet. The prince could only hope that fulfilling this quest would grant him into the inner circle of his mother's trust, which he and his love would both benefit from.

The bright of the mid-day sun dimmed to a spectrum of orange values as the sun burrowed behind the mountains. The calming wind of the day gave into a windy frenzy, as if the gentle touches of before were the build for something worse. Moranet and a few knights stormed into town on their steeds after receiving word of Helbrant's location; they surrounded the pub with weapons drawn, some wet with blood in order to make their intent known. Upon entrance of the pub, Moranet, backed by two knights, expected an air of fear to embrace them, but the eyes of those around them spoke of an inversion of the norm. Instead of fleeing for their lives, begging for mercy, and kissing his feet for shreds of respect the villagers sat with newfound confidence, which they wore with weary, sweat-drenched skin. The lies that flowed out from Helbrant's mouth ran as fluid as wine, filling their cups with a sweet, inviting aroma, intoxicating them on the very sip with its potent content.

"I come by the King's command, I hope you all find value in your lives," declared Sir Moranet.

"The command you follow is all part of her wicked game. Your mother speaks for a king that may not exist anymore. Why do you allow yourself to be her fool," said Helbrant, not concerned by the number of drawn swords that closed in little by little with every suggestive word.

"I see that you have manipulated the minds of these people, but their blunt knives, and farming tools could never scratch our armor. I suggest you admit to the crime! That you spread lies about the king and his rule," said Moranet, with a hand on hilt, ready for the

slaughter.

“The only thing I will admit to, is that it pains me to see how much wrong that wretched woman has done. The Queen is the voice behind the commands you obey, and the lives you take mean nothing to her. The dead collect as if to build a morbid stairwell of rot, so that she can reach even a new level of power. She claims to believe in our Holy Lord, but her ways of manipulating mirror the craftiness of those wretched pagans.”

“Calling the Queen a witch, are you? This treason could only be paid with your head,” said Moranet, smirking at his target, while his drawn blade glistened in the wavering candlelight. “You have no army to come to your defense. There is no one for you to call too. Why don’t you shake with fear?”

“These people will forever question the leadership. The renegade seed has already been planted, and the only way to destroy what I have done would be to eradicate everyone, but then such an example could be used in my favor if my preaching lives on, and I know it will. The Queen’s rule is over. You can count my words on that one, cousin.”

Moranet knocked over the table; the clustering clatter of the bronze dishes bolstered the harsh sound of steel blades biting at one another. The upturned candles gave life to an upset flame that quickly devoured the dry wood of the furnishings, growing into a searing blaze. The blood of the opposing villagers poured onto the ground, staining the crude wool rugs, and those that fled found their demise in a tiresome death. Moranet’s blade touched the flesh of Helbrant’s neck, and the cold steel mirrored his indifference. The Queen’s promise gripped him firmly, squeezing the little doubt he had, rendering the grief into an uprising fury. For the sake of his future wife, and the protection of the King’s rule, Helbrant must die.

“Your head will be placed in shame before your body is made cold, but in the afterlife may you look upon the glory you almost destroyed. With your death I can take my wife, restore order to this shattered kingdom, and rule as the rightful king I am. Good-bye, Cousin,” said Moranet. The narrow strip of his blade sliced into the skin, and streaming blood smeared upon the steel as it dug deeper. After several whacks the head was finally free from the body, and Moranet and his knights left the pub, while the fire continued to

consume in a hardly controllable growth. Let the villagers struggle for their own safety, and let that be an example of how things would be without their precious Queen to care for their weakened King.

After retiring his steed for the night, Moranet walked towards the throne room, but a curious whisper caught his attention. Two female servants, dressed in dirty robes, conversed about the well being of the King like usual, but a dreaded word was muttered that demanded to be checked.

"Your mouth better not be as foul as your face, you hideous, dirty swine, for any joke of this kind would mean instant death. A death you would not enjoy," muttered the prince. He enclosed the two into the corner with an extending arm, while his other hand held onto the lifeless head.

"I speak only what the others have told me. The king is dead," she said, in a whimpering voice.

"By who's hand and you better not hesitate."

"His life was taken by the means of poison, but the Queen doesn't believe it, she would have us believe it was the will of the Almighty," she coward away, and exploited a flaw in Moranet's towering presence with the other following close behind. The prince wanted to stop them, but the opportunity fled too soon for him to realize. Moranet kept his doubt at bay, which lingered with an endangered presence, as his focus narrowed in favor of fulfilling the king's command.

An ominous darkness restricted the faint light of the distant glowing ambers, while the Queen's crying echoed faintly off the towering walls of the enormous chamber. The chorus of sorrow resonated with an eerie, glow that hovered near the threshold to the King's chamber, and though the irregular sound beckoned the prince to come closer, the touch of sadness that once vibrantly sounded ceased to be. Instead of a cry of despair, she cried with a subtle, sadistic laughter that bestowed upon Moranet a greater sense of urgency. The preservation of the Queen's delivery of the King's command urged him to storm into the room, but what he saw dropped him to his knees. His father had already lost the little color of life he had left, and sitting upon his corpse was mother. Tears of joy ran down her face, and

they licked the cold, soft flesh of the king. With a free hand she traced the contours of his face like a passionate lover would do.

“Suffering all those years, being made silent while playing nice to your boyish ways. You have finally given me something worthwhile,” she whispered into the dead king’s ear.

“Mother, I’ve returned with his head,” said Moranet, cautious if he should continue. “Please, tell me that death of father doesn’t please you this way.”

“Don’t worry, my precious little boy, you have done a number of great wonders,” said the Queen, in a charming voice contaminated by questionable intent. “Your deeds bring security to my command, and preserving my rule is your sole purpose.”

“I thank you, mother, for your respect, but shouldn’t I have a spot on the throne,” said Moranet, in a daring voice.

“Of course you will, but as slave to my desires. You will act as the hammer that crushes all of those that refuse my rule.”

“Is it true you poisoned father,” asked Moranet.

“Why would you ever accuse me of such treason? Your father died by the will of the Lord, don’t ever ask again. Please, give me the head and go off to your future wife,” said the Queen. Moranet, riddled by cowardice, found himself a puppet to her command, and once again he left her presence feeling a sense of reward and confusion. However, the confusion faded upon thought of Elizabeth. The prince ran to his chambers, climbing the spiral stairwell without caving into fatigue. He plowed through his door with lusty desire, but found his love to be still on his return. Her naked body, stretched along the floorboard, was illuminated by a dim yellow tint that waned from the decorative candles. Dried tears stained her cheeks, while she appeared lost in a dream.

“What horror,” cried Moranet. “Could it be that my mother has wrong me to the point of nothing, surely she couldn’t be as mad as my cousin claimed her to be.”

“Oh, my weak son, how it must be a heavy load to be you,” said the Queen, who stood behind him. How she got to his room so fast he did not know, yet his fear shifted to the ornate dagger she held in her hand. “She isn’t dead, not yet anyway.”

“Everything that was done was done not for him, but for you. All of it was for you! It

was never father, but you," cried Moranet, while huddled over his love. She blinked to the touch of his cold tears, and spoke briefly of his name. "What did you do to her," he yelled.

"You pathetic child, love dilutes you to think so low of your own mother. Never can this be allowed without the spent of blood," declared the Queen, while inflicting a nasty gash into her son's arm. "You will prove yourself loyal to me! Use the knife beside her and kill her."

Moranet shivered at the thought, and though he harbored loathsome thoughts towards his master, the will to disobey sounded like a whisper in comparison. With a nervous hand he grabbed the tiny knife, which bore a series of bloodstones along the handle, and an old symbol of power used by those long passed. He paused with the point of the blade longing for penetration, and his hesitation brought to him another painful lick of the Queen's fury. With sudden flight, the prince dashed out of harm's way and stood resistant to his mother's command.

"You will not get away with this evil. Once the word gets out that you poisoned the king, your time will be short," said Moranet, right before running to the window, shouting out the cruelty of her evil deed.

The Queen pulled her son away from the window, knocking him onto his knees, forcing his head down with her blade resting at the back of his neck. She controlled him completely, pulling him closer to his naked wife to be.

"If you value your life, take the knife and stab it deep into your wretched whore," ordered the Queen, the teeth of her blade dug into his skin. Moranet took the ritual knife and raised his hand into the air. The slow, torturous slicing of his flesh motivated him beyond what love could counter, and his clinched fist was wet with his lover's blood.

"The ritual is nearly complete, and you shall feel overcome by anguish when you question me," said the Queen. "You will protect my rule, and keep the invaders out from my kingdom."

"Never," shouted Moranet. The prince sobbed, and anger soared through his blood, building up into a rage that questioned her control.

"Not alive you won't, but in death you will. Your soul shall be bound to this castle, defending it against those that I despise," said the Queen. Moranet broke out of her grip,

but received a fatal blow that would bleed him out in a paralyzing state. The Queen stepped over the corpse and demanded that they be tossed into the depths of her gardens so that the blood could enrich her horrors.

In the chaotic void of darkness, where not even the faintest shred of light could penetrate, and yet a grayish demeanor fell upon the surfaces of many things like a silky vane flapping in the wind, waning in and out of sight without much notice. Only this dull touch of detail could direct him, for everything else hid behind a never moving wall of night. While the subtle touch of grey embraced the shapes of people and objects, a distant, sad, and yet melodic chorus of harps played from an undetectable location. Surrounding him in a sea of mystifying sound, a series of angelic voices sung in a foreign tongue. Though the composition grew with instrumental inclusions, the volume decreased below the decibel of a faint whisper. Only when he concentrated could he hear it, but never long enough to indicate whether madness had stricken him delirious for a song that never existed. An oily smear of neutral tones invaded the walls of emptiness, providing a limited sight that would seem wonderful to the blind and yet a curse to others.

Time seemed to no longer pass; he stood in a forever-prolonged minute, while waiting for an answer to a question he kept forgetting he asked. Memory passed through him like a circling freight train, roaring through with images of the things that he could faintly remember—too fast to be remembered. What kept him wanting to catch his forgotten memories was the intoxicating anger that flowed around him as if it gushed from a hot spring that could never tire. He sought for the pain, misery, and fear of those that he could only faintly sense, but he couldn't find as to why. The only substantial thing he could remember was his name, Moranet.

White Rabbit/ The Mole Hole/ Rose's Baby

A.D. Dawson

The Bleeder

A Monster in search for his humanity...

[Now on sale here](#)

THE WHITE RABBIT

May had a pain. Skunk often caused her to have stomach ache, which led to her spending hours huddled up on the toilet praying that there was nothing else going to come out from her burning arse hole – this afternoon was one of those times. She preferred to look down at her shoes at times like this – it eases the agony of stomach cramps. She could feel the cramp taking hold again; it was fucking painful. She let out a scream as she felt like her insides were going to be ripped out. Her anus was nearly ripped apart and she heard something plop into the water. She sighed with relief. Looking down into the bowl, she thought she saw something... something odd. She looked away and then looked straight back again. “What the fuck...” She let out in bewilderment for there in the water was a little white rabbit, no bigger than her fist, and it was struggling to climb out of the basin. She lifted it out of the water and placed it on the floor before her a damp squib. It shook itself and looked at her through pink eyes. He took a yellow pill from out of a silver box and swallowed it– he grew to a metre high and his white fur dried to cotton wool.

THUMP!

May became alarmed when she heard banging at the door – it was he. Her eyes widened and she jumped up fastening her jeans. The rabbit passed her a red pill from his box and she swallowed it without question. She felt strange and began to shrink until she was no bigger than a toy soldier. The rabbit offered up his arse and she slid easily into the warm and moist pinkness in a trice; she would be safe there. The door opened and the rabbit tried to shoot through the legs of the person that had opened it – a punk with sugar-coated hair. The punk brought his Doctor Martin down onto the spine of the animal severing its spinal cord. It twitched and died. In death it shit out a miniature May, whose voice was too small to be heard...

MOLE HOLE

“What the...?” he let out angrily as he sat up in bed one morning.

“What’s what?” said the sleepy crone to his side

He pointed a gnarled finger towards the bottom of the bed; lying there on the bedspread was a pile of earth. He wondered how it got there; they didn’t have a cat and the windows and the doors were fastened shut. He climbed out of his pit and shoved a hand into it... nothing. He hurried downstairs and returned with a dustpan and brush. He cursed whilst brushing the earth into the pan. His wife unwound her curlers and put in her teeth before dressing and going

downstairs...

...It didn't seem very long and she was taking out her teeth and putting in her curlers ready for bed again. He lay on the outer edge of the bed, lest he should near her. She usually fell asleep before him and then subsequently kept him awake with her clack, clacking. When he awoke in the morning another pile of earth sat at the bottom of the bed. He cleaned it up once more vowing to find out where it was coming from during the night.

That night he went to bed prepared. He checked his torch to see if it was working. He placed a cricket bat on the floor next to him ready. Just after midnight he heard a scrapping noise and he switched on his torch. There at the bottom of the bed was a pink-nosed mole. It rubbed at its eyes – the torchlight was like a laser into the optics for him. He swung at the mole with his bat and it dived under the covers for safety. He jumped out of bed and pulled the sheets clean off the bed sending his wife to the floor; her nightdress went up to her cellulite thighs exposing a dreadful hairy mound. The uncovered mole took a dive just as the bat flew close by... he landed head first into the old wife's vagina.

"You are daren't to get me now aren't you?" guffawed the mole as he settled into is new home...

ROSE'S BABY

"You are looking very beautiful today, Rose." said Lily.

"Thank you," replied Rose. "I am now with child you know." She added as she shook her thorny stem for effect.

Lily was quite taken aback; she had shared a bed with Rose for years and had never known the like. "[...] didn't know Roses **COULD** get Pregnant," she stammered.

Rose winked knowingly.

"And who is the Father?" Lily asked.

"Pardon?"

"Who is the Father... there had to be a Father doesn't there?"

It was Rose's turn to stammer. "Of... of course there's a father, how do you think I got in this condition?" Rose beckoned Lily to come closer. "Do you see over there in

the vegetable patch... DON'T LOOK NOW!" Lily jumped back in fright. "Sorry." Rose continued in a whisper. "Do you see the row of carrots?"

Lily nodded.

"If you look just past them to the left, near the broccoli.... do you see the spinach?"

"Yes I do."

Rose giggled. "Look at the big marrow on its own next to the spinach... is he not gorgeous?"

"Is he the Father then?"

Rose swooned. "Yeeeeeeaaaah... isn't he just so dreamy; the baby will be handsome just like its Father if it's a boy and beautiful just like me if it's a girl."

"You make a really gorgeous couple."

Rose blushed a deeper red than how she was intended by her maker. The conversation ended abruptly when a huge bumblebee disappeared into Lily's trumpet – Lily let out a giggle as it flicked lightly across her ovary.

"Do grow up, Lily," said Rose with a frown.

Sailing to Valhalla

David J. West

The Bleeder
A Monster in search for his humanity...

[Now on sale here](#)

T

he dragon-necked prow of the skute ship carved tufts of ivory foam from a roiling azure sea. Salted spray and coarse ash laid foundation in Tyr's nostrils as he held the steering board against the mighty current with his scarred right hand while the left clutched a finger of iron. His goal loomed out of the depths like a god's rotten black tooth. To lay claim a race must be won.

Tyr gazed at his twin sons. This was for them.

"Father," said Ole, pointing off the starboard.

A few hundred yards away sailed a full longboat with near forty men, rowing hard to assist the wind in their race for the trembling dark mountain. The longboat rose and fell with the heaving ocean, concealing it behind liquid hillocks every other heartbeat.

Ascended from the deep, unsteady as a newborn calf, the island belched a steady plume of ash. Points of red flared across its jagged landscape and steam shot from the edges of angry pits.

"Won't it be dangerous?" asked Sven.

"Doesn't matter," said Tyr. "We need land. Even if it takes weeks to make it hospitable, it will be ours."

"If Halfdan reaches it first?"

"Then we leave," said Tyr. "But not unless he beats us. All honorable men are bound to the oath. He will honor the oath."

Drawing closer, the ash surrounding the island threatened suffocation and the sun resembled a great bloodshot eye.

The longboat was nearly even with them to gain the island and all the saga poetry Tyr had been reciting to himself fled. A race must be won.

"Hard to port," commanded Tyr.

"But they'll beat us."

"Hard to port and take the steer-board when I jump."

Ole nodded while Sven's wrinkled brow questioned his father's sanity.

A sudden knock against the keel shook them spitting water through the overlapping planks, but Tyr guided the skute closer. Already the longboat had overtaken them and seemed sure to reach the island first.

"Why aren't we turning about?" asked Sven. "We've lost."

"Look forward," answered Tyr.

A string of wet stones formed a broken path to the island stretching some hundred yards or more. It was not solid and would require leaping from rock to rock many times.

"Looks sharp as a dragon's spine," said Tyr, grinning as he put on his helm. He reached for his sword-belt but another rock just below the surface knocked the skute and he had to correct for the pathway.

Sven gasped, "What if some are too far to leap?"

"You worry too much, the skein is already cast, what will be...will be," said Tyr. "Take the steer-board."

The boy took the oar with both hands as Tyr leapt to the first jutting piece of basalt. Seawater splashed, soaking Tyr's woolen boots, but he never relaxed his grip on the finger of iron.

"You forgot your sword-belt Father!" shouted Ole.

"No time," replied Tyr, as he danced like a skipping stone despite the sharp fresh edges. The dark pillars were not steaming so he trusted their safety from heat. He was harder than stone and stronger than the sea. A race must be won.

The longboat slowed and turned to land amongst the raw jagged coast. Halfdan's men used oars against the surf to hold the ship steady as he dropped into the shallows and waded ashore. "I've done it," he shouted. "I claim this as Halfdan's island!"

"You're too late," said Tyr, a number of paces behind on the slanting black mountainside. Showing the finger of iron in his hand, Tyr knelt and buried it beneath crumbling dusky stone. "I have planted my iron, the island is mine."

"You dog. How could you've beat me? Your skute is still in the breakers."

Sven and Ole were struggling but still the skute drew near.

"It doesn't matter, it's *my* island. All men know the law. Leave." Gusts of ash swirled about Tyr, shooting his long graying blond hair forward. "I can light my fires around these few acres of rock and you witnessed my planting iron here...it's mine," said Tyr. "Leave."

Halfdan's good eye twitched as his broken nose ran. "The Bone Woman said I best kill you an' your sons."

"You can try and shame yourself."

"We're forty men. I could take you, your sons an' let you all sleep in the fire. None would know your end." Halfdan laughed.

“You would violate the oath of my land claim?”

“Dead men in Valhalla will ask why you’re so burnt.” He looked to his kinsmen for approval. The motley group of men chuckled and muttered. “All know you as a named man, Gatekeeper,” said Halfdan. “No matter your sacking of Byzantium or even slaying the elder wyrm. Cold iron will kill you the same as any man.”

“I’ve been shown the skein of my life.” Tyr smirked. “I know I won’t die here...do you? Coward?” His sons nearly had the skute to shore.

“Your tongue demands a duel,” said Halfdan.

“What weapons do you choose?” asked Tyr, watching Sven guide the skute to the rocks as Ole held his father’s sword-belt upon the bow.

“All say your strength is the sword, so I’ll choose the ax.”

“I choose what is in my son’s hand,” said Tyr.

Halfdan and his kinsmen laughed.

Turning, Tyr saw Ole now held only a rope which he attached to a pinnacle of stone securing the vessel. His face darkened but he would not go back on his word, he smiled not allowing Halfdan any pleasure at this turn.

“Change your mind? Gatekeeper?” taunted Halfdan.

“I said it and I’ll take the rope. Don’t need iron to defeat an oath-breaker like you,” said Tyr.

The kinsmen laughed now at Halfdan.

Halfdan frowned. “You’ll not shame me to accept rope against iron.”

“I choose rope. You’ve shamed yourself,” said Tyr. “Keep the ax. But I remind all of you, the legends say,” Tyr said to the kinsmen, “to shed blood on a day-old island is to invite disaster. Children know this. Once I slay Halfdan, I warn against any reprisals for at least one day.”

“You think to insult me?” shouted Halfdan, spittle flying, “whilst telling old wives tales?”

“You insult yourself dishonoring my claim,” said Tyr, taking a length of rope from Ole. “But I’ll grant you a true final insult, you aren’t going to Valhalla.”

Halfdan's one good eye crazed as he fully realized the implication of the rope. "You black-hearted Grendel." Facing his kinsmen Halfdan shouted, "Let's all just kill him an' his sons. Enough of this foolishness."

None moved forward, the insult and duel had been issued and they would not partake of its grim derision despite the collective loathing they held for Tyr and his insult. No man deserved such a fate as that Tyr suggested. What could be worse than denying a man entry into the Hall of Heroes?

"The gods will damn you for such an act," said a warrior in a bear-skin cloak.

"Do they damn those that die at sea? Those that die in their beds?" asked Tyr.

"Yes, they do," was the collective answer as the helmed men nodded in unison.

"And what makes Halfdan any better? He seeks to steal my claim," said Tyr. "He has no honor."

"Warriors belong in Valhalla," shouted Halfdan's son, Eorl.

"Warriors, yes, but him?" asked Tyr, gesturing with disdain.

"Enough! Let's end this," said Halfdan, swinging his bearded ax.

Tyr wrapped several feet of rope about his left arm and fashioned a heavy noose at the end. He left another four strides long available to swing between arm and noose. This seemed a perilously short and poor weapon to the onlookers. Tyr swung the noose in a steady primal rhythm.

Stepping to within six strides, Halfdan kept his ax raised close to his head, yet too wide a target for the narrow noose. "Think I'm an earsling? You think to trip me up and split my brains upon jagged rock? You're a bigger fool than I reckoned."

Tyr backed up two strides, still keeping the heavy hangman's noose swinging.

Halfdan advanced two strides and Tyr retreated two.

"The legendary bravery of Tyr Thorgrimson is proven false," taunted Halfdan. "I'll not be letting your sons live after this."

Saying nothing, Tyr retreated a stride again as his foe approached.

Steam billowed behind Tyr from hot pockets of boiling water and the red cracks of doom glowed not far beyond in the ash covered gloom.

“Nowhere to run,” said Halfdan, closing in to five strides. “Truth is, I don’t even need this burning island but I’m happy to deny you an’ your sons land.”

The noose swung east to west like the sun rising and setting, Tyr’s hand was as the fixed earth. The mountain rumbled and once more ash sought dominion.

Stepping to four strides Halfdan smiled in grim triumph. “Even if the blood legend was true, it’d be worth it to have your head on my prow. Think I’ll set it in the dragon’s mouth.”

Halfdan’s men discussed the bloody end of Tyr and some few jeered him.

Sven and Ole watched, waiting for the serpent’s strike.

Halfdan closed to three strides and his muscles tensed for the death-dealing chop.

Two strides.

The noose shot out from Tyr’s swing, striking Halfdan in the face. Flying inside Halfdan’s reach, Tyr wrapped the rope about his foe’s neck. The bearded ax, thirsty for blood, dropped but connecting naught but rope held by the protected left arm. Halfdan screamed as a mouthful of taut cord went over his mouth. Bound up as a spider’s prey Tyr lifted Halfdan and carried his enemy over a ridge of jumbled stone.

Halfdan’s nose recoiled at the sulfurous belch that enveloped him greater than Tyr’s rope. He tried to scream through the gagging rope as Tyr raised him overhead. The stinking boiling pit popped and beckoned. Fingers bound by fierce strands of rope reached in vain, clawing at thick air.

“Stop, you can’t do that to my father,” screamed Eorl.

Grim satisfaction on his face, Tyr loosed.

Halfdan flew, splashed, cooked and was still.

Tyr took up Halfdan’s ax, scowling at the wide-eyed kinsmen. Pride is a hard thing and the race for new land must be won.

“Kill them!” shouted Eorl. Two dozen men followed the jarl’s son brandishing iron.

“Stop! Or the gods will sink this land because of the blood. They will send the island back to the sea,” called Tyr.

But none would heed his superstitious warning, they came on calling for the blood of the man who had denied their Jarl entry into Valhalla.

Lamenting the island's loss over the blood that must now be spilled, Tyr threw deadly stones down the mount at the charging foe. As crimson hit the ground, the earth shook and reeled, molten rock bursting from the peak.

Half the kinsmen stopped and ran for the longboat. The remaining few met the iron of the ax above, then the shuddering stone below. Eorl turned and ran as Tyr raged and chopped asunder the last kinsman who dared face him. Angered at losing his island to the blood law, madness took Tyr. Picking up a boulder, large as a man, he charged after the fleeing Eorl.

The mountain rocked again spewing ash.

"A curse on you Tyr," shouted Eorl. His men pushed the longboat off with their oars. Waves threatened to keep them close to the chaotic vibrating shore.

The momentum carried Tyr, racing down the mountainside with the stone over his head. The longboat rolled over the tide, gaining a few yards from the island. Running to the surf Tyr cast the projectile into the belly of the ship, smashing through the hull. A geyser erupted from the decking as Eorl's men rowed away.

Gasping and panting, covered in gore, Tyr turned making his way back to Sven and Ole. "Cast off, we must be away."

Doing as their father asked, they raised the sail and rowed like titans, rising over the breaking grey surf. The island buzzed and grumbled an unholy tumult.

The longboat of Eorl listed now, taking on water and turned back on its starboard. Men cried aloud as the deck sank rapidly under their feet.

Shaking with venom and internal vigor, the black mountain lurched and sunk at an incredible rate. Steam and hot gas boiled the sea as red fire was quenched, tempering men's souls. Seawater rose and fell in blooms of undertow and the land was gone.

Eorl and his kinsmen shook and cursed, turning swords on each other to be allowed entrance into the Hall of Heroes as waves lapped hot at their bodies. The only way to be granted entry was a quick and bloody death. Swords sheathed in kinsmen turned the sea crimson and all men were silent in moments.

Tyr grumbled. He had won the race but lost the island. "The gods' laws will not be

mocked. Fresh blood cannot be spilt upon new land. My sons, mark and remember.”

“Where shall we build a homestead now?” asked Sven.

“All lands have been claimed east of here,” answered Ole.

Grinning, Tyr said, “Halfdan’s lands are without men now.”

Fields of Rot



Chris Lecher & James Mustang

Knee-Deep in the Dead

Waves of undead armies pour out from an open Hell Gate, and it's these guys we have to rely on.

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Behold Now the Behemoth

Ty Johnston

Persia

642 A.D.

T

he arrows came as a deluge, blackening the sky.

Captain Thuxra barely had time to grab one of his men, a young sergeant named Kuru, and pull him to the shelter of a near portico. Then the arrows began to land.

The first noises were the soft, rain-like pattering of the missiles finding home in the dirt roads of the town or cracking on the stone roofs of the buildings. Then the thumping noises of stabbed meat followed, and the screaming.

The street in front of Thuxra and the sergeant was filled with souls unfortunate in that they could find no shelter in time. They died by the scores, armored soldiers and muslin-garbed women and children alike impaled by the falling shafts seemingly belched forth from the sky.

One man, one of Thuxra's, darted for the safety of the portico.

The captain slung out a hand in order to pull in his comrade.

The runner's scaled armor slowed him, as did the weight of his tall helmet and the curved sword hanging from his belt. He fell at his captain's feet, a bolt of iron-tipped wood through his neck pinning him to the ground.

The horror caused the young sergeant behind Thuxra to cry out and rush forward.

With both hands the captain grabbed Kuru by the front of his tunic.

"Hold!" Thuxra shouted.

The sergeant's eyes were wide though, staring over the officer's shoulders to the death unfolding before them in the streets.

Another man fell, two arrows sticking from his back and another angled from his groin.

An old woman yelled out, her already prostrated in the street with a black shaft through a leg. Another missile thumped her square in the head, dropping her.

A child cried beneath a two-wheeled cart lashed to a skewered donkey on its side kicking and braying its last breaths.

The man in Thuxra's grasp cried out again, this time a long shout of agony that bespoke the anguish in his heart and the fear in his mind.

"Hold!" the captain repeated. "There is nothing you can do for them!"

Then there was the silence of death, and the sun returned to shed hot bitterness across the town.

The sergeant's eyes were streaming wet as he swayed back on his feet. Thuxra stared into the man's face, saw there was little fear of battle madness, then shoved back to send Kuru on his ass on the stone stoop in front of the house where they had sheltered.

The younger man sat there, his unblinking vision moving from dead body to dead body mere yards from him.

Thuxra turned to face the street carnage as a wailing mother dashed from another stone abode and scooped up the crying lad from beneath the wooden cart. Others began to peer from the safety of their homes, most of them sun-skinned commoners. The captain was glad to see the majority of his men in the vicinity had been fast and lucky enough to find temporary seclusion from the onslaught.

"Damn Arabs," a voice said from behind.

Thuxra turned to stare down at Kuru still roosting in front of the closed door. "Sitting there will not put an end to them."

For the first time since the arrows had appeared above, the sergeant blinked, then he stared up at his tall captain.

Thuxra reached out a hand, for lifting and as a sign of camaraderie.

The younger man blinked again, then took the offered grasp and pulled himself from

the ground. His eyes turned down, not facing his commander. "My apologies, sir."

Before further words could be shared, the din of metal on metal screeched to their ears, followed by the shouts and screams of combat.

Thuxra strode into the middle of the street, as did several other soldiers, and stared southward. He could see naught but dust stirred and the high tips of spears jabbing at the sky in the distance, but his ears told him the story.

The captain turned back to the man with whom he had sheltered. "Sergeant, find the Jew and gather as many of our men as you can, then meet me at the northern wall in ten minutes."

Kuru's eyes remained locked on the signs of the nearing battle.

Thuxra grabbed the young man once more. "That was an order!"

Kuru's eyes focused on the captain. "But the enemy is right there." He pointed south toward the growing dust and the clammerings of arms.

"Remember our mission," Thuxra said with a shake of his fellow man. "It is all important. It might yet save us all from these Muslim devils."

The captain let go of the sergeant and spun to glare about at the other warriors watching him from porches and further down the street. "Persians! On me!"

Men immediately trotted forward. Within seconds there was a ring of steel, bronze and iron circling the captain.

"We ride in ten minutes!" Thuxra shouted. "To the north wall!"

There were no grumblings. The men had too much respect for their leader for that, but more than one eye glanced south toward the conflagration.

“Go!” Thuxra slapped Kuru on the arm.

The captain's charge to the north wall was not without incident. Arrows returned to the sky once more, blotting out the sun. Quick legs and a dead man used as a shield saved Thuxra from being impaled. His only wounds were a slice along one leg and a gash on the back of a hand, neither cut serious enough to draw his immediate attention.

What did draw his attention were the deaths of his men. Another five died or were left behind in the barrage from above.

By the time the captain cleared the last of the huts and other dwellings, he was just short of a dozen men.

Looking back, Thuxra sighted black smoke above the southern part of the settlement, and the ringing noises of warring steel continued to din from afar.

As he watched civilians fleeing on foot past him and out the northern gate, Thuxra realized how lucky he and his surviving soldiers were not to have been cut off by the advancing army of Arabs rumored to be a million men.

“Captain!”

Thuxra spun to find Sergeant Kuru charging toward him on horseback. Another dozen scale-clad men on steeds followed, as did a familiar figure cloaked in gray.

The sergeant pulled his animal to a halt and slung out a hand to the captain. “The Muslims are almost to us!” he shouted. “Climb on! We’ll have to ride doubles!”

Thuxra glanced to the few men he had brought with him, then looked at Kuru and those he had managed to bring. "Is this all we have? We came here with two hundred."

"The rest are caught up in the fighting!" Kuru motioned back to the nearing sounds of battle and the stench of burning flesh wafting from that direction.

The figure in gray rode up on the other side of the captain. The hood of the gray cloak shifted to stare down upon the officer. "I warned you not to stop here for supplies, Thuxra. We are only days from our goal."

The captain's eyes were hard as steel as he stared back at the figure in gray. "I need no advice from you, Jew."

The cloaked man chuckled. "Very well." Then he rode off through the open gates.

Kuru extended his hand farther. "Captain, come on!" He glanced back as if he expected more arrows to come flying in their direction.

"Damn it!" Thuxra grabbed the hand and slid onto the saddle behind his junior officer.

The Persians did not stop riding until the following morning when they came upon a mountain of gray stone that stood highest among other mountains of gray stone.

"Mount Sahand," said the cloaked figure as he pulled his steed to a halt next to the captain and sergeant.

Behind Kuru, Thuxra slid off the back of their riding beast. Shaking his legs to wear

away the pains of riding, the captain gave a dark stare to the Jew. "You are sure we are in the right place?"

The cloaked man pointed. "Just to the east of the mountain. Gan Eden."

Sergeant Kuru dropped from his saddle. The rest of the armored riders did the same.

"The elusive Garden of Eden." Thuxra began checking his weapons, the short sword on his belt, the knife in his left boot, the small shield strapped to his back and another half dozen daggers secreted throughout his garb and mail. "This is the home of your god, Shimon?"

The cloaked man now slid from his own saddle, tossing back his hood to reveal long dark hair with a strand of gray growing through it. "Not exactly."

"You told King Yazdgerd this place would lead us to this Yahweh of yours." Kuru's face was stormy, his teeth gritted and eyes hard.

"He is not my god," Shimon said. "Not any longer. And what I told your king was this was God's garden on earth, the wellspring of all life."

Kuru stepped in front of the Jew, raising a fist as if to throttle the man. "You said we would find your god there! The same god these devil Muslims worship!"

"Sergeant! That's enough."

Kuru stared at his captain. "This sorcerer ... this Jew ... he has lied."

"Perhaps, but we will not know the truth until we enter this garden." Thuxra yanked around his shield and slid it onto his left arm.

The sergeant returned his harsh gaze to the man in gray.

"If I have been misunderstood, I offer my apologies," Shimon said, "but what I told your king was we would find high representatives of Yahweh at the entrance to the garden, Cherubim themselves."

Several of the other men began to grumble, whispered curses aimed at the sorcerer.

"You expect us to face supernatural creatures?" Kuru asked.

"We are only to speak with them," Thuxra corrected. "If we must, we are to make offerings to this god, promises of gold, perhaps more."

"We are begging," Kuru said.

Other soldiers nodded in agreement.

The captain spun on the younger officer. "We are doing what is necessary for our people! The Muslims have already beaten us! Do you not understand this? After they bested us at Nahavand, there is nothing standing in their way. They will run loose throughout all Azerbaijan."

The fury of his commander's voice forced Kuru to take a step back.

"The Muslims are stronger now, worse now, than they were when their precious prophet was still alive." Thuxra spun about to glare at his men circled around him. "Ten years dead, and Mohammed is more powerful than ever."

Kuru glared back at his commander. "Which is all the more reason we should be facing down these devils instead of tramping across the countryside on false promises and a fantastic mission."

"Enough!" The captain tugged his sword from its scabbard. "We are here to save our people. This mission might be one of desperation, but it is all we have. Any man here who will

not follow orders, who will not follow the word of his king ... that man will have to face me.”

The circle of eyes upon the leader wore heavy brows beneath the shadows of their helms, but no one stepped forward to confront the captain.

Shimon chuckled.

Thuxra spun to face the mage. “Do you find this humorous?”

“Yes. I see men wasting time while the Arabs are butchering their people and you debate the path you have taken. Your king did not need time to talk when I offered to lead a group of his men to Gan Eden, to deal with God directly.”

Kuru spoke up. “And why did you do this? You are no Persian. Why did you make this offering?”

Thuxra stared hard at the sergeant, but he remained silent, seeking to know the answer.

“I no longer love God,” Shimon said. “That should be answer enough.”

Thuxra stared about at the ring of soldiers once more, waiting to see if any of them would say anything in response. But silence ruled the group. The coldness of the sorcerer’s words told them he meant what he had said.

“Rest,” the captain said, putting away his sword, “and fill your bellies. We ride in an hour.” He pointed to the gray peak of Mount Sahand before them. “There lies our enemy.”

Thuxra counted twelve of them standing guard in front of the valley leading into the

mountain range. At a glance they appeared little of a threat. Each was nearly naked, wearing only a loincloth and sandals, but they carried spears, sturdy poles tipped with wide golden darts. And their bodies were all bronzed muscled.

“They should pose little problem.” Sergeant Kuru leaned forward in his saddle, one hand raised to shield his eyes from the bright sun overhead.

Thuxra gave the younger man a stony glance, then turned away from him. He kneeled and once more stared down from atop the craggy hill they used for observation. “Don’t let their lack of armor fool you. They are strong, with what appears solid weaponry.”

“I see no sign of encampment,” one of the other men said from behind the captain. “Where are their homes? I don’t even see tents.”

“They need no such things,” Shimon answered from horseback to the left of the sergeant. “These are Cherubim, most holy guardians.”

“Does that explain why they’re not moving?” a soldier asked. “They’re just standing there, facing us.”

“We outnumber them,” Thuxra said, pointing, “but that gorge they’ve stationed themselves in would help nullify our numbers.” He stared about. “And the ground is all rock for miles around. We won’t be able to present a proper charge from horseback.”

“Bah!” Kuru dropped from his saddle and drew out his sword. “They already know we are here. Let’s get down there and be done with it.”

Thuxra stood. “Sergeant, while I disagree with you, I see little else to do. We don’t even have archers.”

With those words, the soldiers still in the saddle began to dismount and prepare

shields and arms. Soon they were all gathered in a line at the top of the hill, helmeted eyes glaring down and across gray rocks to their enemy lined up below.

The captain drew his own heavy blade free of its scabbard.

Shimon simply sat in his saddle and watched.

They rushed down the hill as fast as their legs would carry them, sweat dripping into their eyes as their armor, shields and swords clanking along as they near the narrows of the valley.

The response from the Cherubim was nil at first. None of the twelve budged, like statues their eyes facing ahead at their oncoming foes. It was only when the Persians were within spearing distance the unarmored figures moved.

Twelve spears darted out like lightning, the stabs nearly faster than the eye could see. The first dozen Persians were struck, all. Not every blow was fatal, nor were there many serious wounds, but all twelve soldiers were knocked back as if struck by giant hammers.

Thuxra and Kuru were among the next dozen to charge forward, running around or leaping over their downed comrades. Having seen the mettle of their opponents, this group of attackers was a bit leery, slowing just outside the range of the spears.

The Cherubim advanced. They each took two steps forward, their spears jabbing again.

As a group, the Persians were better prepared this time, their shields held in front to

block the blows. Still, a number of them were knocked to their knees.

Thuxra slammed aside a spear with his shield, then lashed out with his sword. The blade sliced along the arm of his enemy, leaving a wide gash and drawing a line of blood. The wounded man did not appear to notice his wound, but he did not immediately launch a counter attack.

Around the captain, his men too now fared better. Kuru dropped to a knee below the level of the spears and stabbed up, his sword lancing the groin of one of the Cherubim. Other Persians were fighting back too, and most of the first wave had regained its footing and were fighting back.

The Cherubim continued to stab out with their spears, their attacks rarely missing their mark, but few of their blows drew blood and even fewer proved fatal. Many a mortal man was bruised, knocked to the ground, but he was as quickly up and fighting once more.

Slashing aside another spear, Thuxra realized the Cherubim were better fighters by far than his own men, who were hardy veterans of the war with the Arabs. The Cherubim were fast, striking like asps, and their blows when struck were as the fists of giants. But the Cherubim would not kill. That was their weakness.

Slowly, the captain and his men pushed the Cherubim back one step at a time. Spears clashed upon shields, the heavy thrusts grinding the soldiers to a near halt, but still the men advanced, their swords flashing out to slice flesh and draw blood.

Then there was flame.

From the corner of one eye, Thuxra spied the new menace. A sword was produced from somewhere in the hands of one of the central Cherubim, sparks of fire dancing the

length of the long blade.

A gasp from behind drew the captain's attention. Thuxra dodged back from the front line and twisted to find Shimon only yards behind, the sorcerer still astride a steed.

Screams of pain caused the captain to look to his men once more.

The Persians' advance had been broken. In the time it had taken Thuxra to glance to the Jew then back to his soldiers, four men were rolling on the ground, their armored forms sheathed in flames the color of the sun.

The rest of the Persians were wheeling away, a few trying to grab at their burning brethren but the fires keeping them at bay.

The Cherubim advanced a step, the one with the sword swinging his weapon in wide arcs, leaving a burning claret swash before them.

Shimon spoke, his words loud and guttural, but Thuxra understood not the words.

The captain spun on the sorcerer. A question was on his lips, but the wild gesticulations and the ruby-glowing eyes of the mage kept him silent.

"The sword, you fool!" Shimon pointed over Thuxra's shoulder. "Be quick about it! I cannot hold them long!"

The Persian leader turned once more, this time to find the Cherubim unmoving, as still as if frozen by northern winds. Some were standing with spears outstretched, while others were paused in mid step, one foot off the ground. The one gripping the flaming sword was like stone and within arms-reach of the captain.

"Take the sword, damn you! It is all that will save us!"

Licking his lips, Thuxra glanced back at Shimon, then reached for the weapon. He

sheathed his own blade, then knelt before the burning sword to avoid the flames. Hesitating only briefly, Thuxra began to pry away the fingers of the other-worldly creature holding the sword.

The long blade fell from the grip, and the captain caught the weapon by its pommel.

The fires died instantly.

With confusion on his face, the Persian turned back to the sorcerer.

Shimon was no longer astride his horse, but now stood with greedy arms outstretched. "Give it to me! I can bring the flames again! And we can defeat these enemies."

Thuxra looked down at the heavy sword in his hand, the lengthy blade as silver as a full moon, the hilt wrapped in bands of dark iron. It was a mighty weapon, a weapon of powerful magic. With this, the captain could hope to lead his people to victory over the invaders.

"Give it!"

Thuxra blinked, then strode forward. He knew not how to use the weapon, how to bring the flames of Heaven or Hell. The wizard would know. The captain held out the weapon.

With flailing fingers, Shimon snagged the pommel from the officer's hand. He held the sword high, the blade pointing at the sun, and whispered ancient words.

The flames came to life once more.

The sorcerer laughed, an evil chuckle that rocked his chest.

Thuxra and the remaining Persians stared in awe as the fires danced up and down the blade.

Shimon slowly turned to face the captain, the sword gripped tightly in front of him.

“You are no longer necessary.”

Thuxra took a step back and gripped the handle of the sword at his belt.

“Captain! Look out!”

The words came too late. Thuxra tried to turn, to face whatever was behind him, but all he caught was a glimpse of a pale forearm slamming into the side of his helmet. Then the ground came rushing up and there was darkness.

“You have been betrayed, mortal.”

The mere sound of the words should have given Thuxra hope, but they did not. Alive or dead, he was in a dire place.

The Persian opened his eyes slowly, blinking away grit and sunshine as pain slammed into his head as if he had been hit by hammers. He groaned and looked up into blue eyes layered with golden hair. Thuxra recognized the man as the one from whom he had taken the flaming sword.

“The magus killed your men, then fled,” the voice belonging to the blonde man said.

The hurt still wrapping itself around his head, Thuxra glanced about himself. The ground was a black circle about him, only the center where he lay was still the gray of the rocky terrain. The scorched bodies of his soldiers and their steeds lay in a ring some yards from him. The line of Cherubim still held their ground where he had last seen them, except for

the one kneeling next to him.

“You must go after him.”

Thuxra looked to the speaker, then slowly pushed himself up to sitting. The pain in his head lessened somewhat, but aches sprang up in his limbs, and his flesh not covered by armor felt sore and red. “Simon slew them?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you kill me?”

“It was not our intention. We merely meant to drive you away. We ... are not permitted to kill except in extreme circumstances.”

Thuxra spat into the black dust around him, then stood. “I suppose that’s why you brought forth the burning sword.”

“Only to frighten and harm in as little way as possible,” the other man said. “I only knocked you unconscious because I could see what Simon was prepared to do. You survived only by my close proximity; the fires not being able to harm me.”

The captain yanked off his helmet as he stared about at the dead. Even the horses had been slain and lay crisping beneath the sun.

“Why would the Jew do this?” he asked, speaking to himself.

“Simon long ago lost his mortality,” the leader of the Cherubim said, “with that he lost his fear of God, and his love of God.”

“Meaning?”

“He seeks revenge.”

“Revenge? Against God?” Thuxra scoffed. “For what?”

"For existing. For being punished for his sins."

Thuxra stretched out a hand over the dead. "Why kill my men?"

"He lied to your king. It was a ruse that brought you here. Simon cares not for you Persians, nor for the Arabs."

"Simon?"

"His name of old."

Thuxra turned and stared into the blue eyes. "Why does he need the sword?"

"Of that I am not sure, but you must go after him. You must return the sword. It is not something meant for the world, and we are not permitted to leave our station."

"I have no horse."

"You can walk."

Thuxra chuckled, but it was not with mirth. "There's nothing but rocks to the south and west, mountains to the north and salt deserts to the east. I'll be dead in a few days at most."

"God will look after you."

Thuxra shook his head. "I am a soldier, not a spiritualist. I have no faith in ... whatever lies beyond."

"The magus fled to the east but a few hours ago. He is on foot, and will not fare well in the desert. You can catch him before he accomplishes ... whatever he plans with the sword."

Thuxra glanced down at Kuru's blackened body. He had not liked his sergeant, but the man had been his responsibility, under his leadership and care. It seemed the world was ending, at least Thuxra's world. The Muslims were pushing into his native lands, dominating

all. The religions of old were being pushed out, as were the kings and armies of the Persians.

Now, hoping to make a last stand, Thuxra had been betrayed.

There was little choice. He had nothing to return to back home. Even without the intervention of the Cherubim, he would hunt down and kill the sorcerer.

“How long since he left?” the captain asked.

It was three days before Thuxra spotted his prey, and by then the Persian was nearly dead. He had discarded his armor, piece by piece, beneath the angry sun during those days, but had stubbornly held onto his shield and kept his sword strapped at his belt. His shirt was no more, torn into strips to form a headdress. His back was raw and blistered from the days in the heat, and a pair of singed but whole bladders full of water kept him alive as his booted feet crunched through the white grit of the salt desert. He had held onto his helmet for some time, hoping to use it as a water catcher, but now that too was gone as there had been no signs of new water.

Now his water skins were empty, and food was needed to provide strength. Thuxra was weak and starving and he could not go on much longer.

But now he had spotted Shimon, a cloaked figure atop a distant horizon, the man's trail in the sands easy enough to follow.

Thuxra gripped the pommel of his sword and rushed forward. He knew he had not much time before his body would give out, and he needed to end this quick, to avenge his men

and his country and to return the sword to the Cherubim. For return the sword he would; no mortal should have such a weapon, even if that weapon might turn aside the wrath of the invading Muslims.

Atop the next chalky dune, Thuxra lost sight of his foe. The captain brought a hand up to shade his eyes, and he stared all around, but there was no sign of the sorcerer.

He cursed low under his breath as he trudged forward once more, now slower and more wary. The wizard must have seen him and was trying to set an ambush. It could be the only explanation, unless some ill fate had befallen Shimon, and Thuxra did not believe his luck was that strong.

He continued to follow the gashes in the grit left behind by the sorcerer, but eventually those footprints simply disappeared, ending abruptly. Thuxra glanced from side to side, but he saw no signs the white sands had been kicked about to hide a continuing path. And there was no place to hide. The sun was directly overhead and the nearest dunes were yards away.

The Persian dropped to one knee and peered at the final footstep. He reached out with the tip of his sword and brushed the weapon through the impression in the sand.

Nothing happened, but Thuxra did notice something new.

Beyond that last footprint, mere inches beyond, the color and texture of the sand changed. There was a barely visible line where the salty whiteness turned a paler shade, and its construction was more fine, nearly that of ground flour.

Thuxra slide his sword forward. And the front of the blade was gone.

He yanked back on the weapon. And it reappeared in full.

It was an illusion. There was an invisible barrier of some type that hid Shimon from him.

Thuxra grinned and stuck out a hand. The fingers followed the path of the sword and became invisible several inches above the ground. He wiggled his fingers, and was glad to find they felt no different despite his not being able to see them.

He pulled back the hand and stood, then lifted his sword and shield. There was no telling if the wizard was just the other side of this wall, waiting with the flaming sword in hand.

Thuxra stepped forward.

He had expected the world to change in some dramatic fashion, but nothing happened as far as he could tell. He was still standing in the desert, still alone, though he was now standing on much finer grains of sand.

But the wizard's trail did continue forward from that point.

Thuxra glanced back and saw his own wake, and that of Shimon, behind him. He stared quizzically at where the invisible barrier had been, but then shrugged. He had expected more, some powerful magics, but perhaps that had been enough; the wall had, after all, hidden the mage from him for some little while.

Thuxra trudged onward.

Down a hill and up a hill. Then his prey was before him.

Shimon was sitting with his legs crossed in the sand, his gray cloak still wrapped about him despite the heat. The sorcerer sat facing Thuxra, a water skin held out as if in offering.

The captain tightened the grip on his sword and forearmed away the sweat pouring down above his eyes. He stood staring into the dark orbs of the man who had killed his men,

who had doomed his people to servitude at best and possibly assimilation or destruction.

“A peace offering.” Shimon lifted the water skin higher.

“I should gut you.”

The wizard laughed, but continued to hold out his present.

Thuxra plunged. He took one mighty step, then leaped the last of the distance between them. His sword was overhead, slashing down for a killing strike.

“Wait!”

The sword stopped inches from the sorcerer’s neck. Thuxra pushed on the weapon, but it would go no further. He tugged on the sword, but that too was useless. The blade was held immobile, his fingers glued to the grip.

The Persian screamed to the sky.

“Calm yourself.” Shimon dropped the bladder at the warrior’s feet, Thuxra hearing the gurgle of the water sloshing around. “Be seated.”

Thuxra kicked sand in his face.

The move was obviously unexpected. Shimon cursed and flailed back, his arms too late rising to shield his eyes.

Thuxra found the spell gripping his arm released. With a grin of all teeth, the captain of King Yazdgerd’s army drew back his sword for a killing blow.

He struck from high, the blade slicing deep into the sorcerer’s neck, spraying scarlet in an arc that darkened the surrounding pale grit. The mage reeled from the blow, his head thrown back and allowing the wound to wash his cloak in blood and gore.

Then Shimon fell still, his arms outstretched at his sides, his head resting in sand

leaving his wide eyes to stare upward at the golden orb of the sun.

Thuxra's breaths came heavy, the rush of the kill slowly oozing its way out of his body and mind. He took a step back, his sword still up, and glared at the unmoving figure splayed on the ground before him.

Then he blinked and glanced about. The sword of flames. Where was the sword?

His eyes darted around the dead mage, but there was no sign of the weapon of the Cherubim.

Shimon must have hidden the burning sword somewhere, but there had been no place. Thuxra returned his own blade to its sheath, then dropped to his knees, his fingers greedily scurrying through the sands clotting with blood in front of him. He dug through the silt and tossed aside handfuls of it, spraying drying globs of blood intermixed with the ashen soil.

Then a grip like iron wrapped his throat, cutting off the Persian's air and causing his eyes to bulge.

The mage was sitting up, his torn throat torn no longer, blood still caking the front of his dress. Shimon's left hand clenched tighter the captain's neck, causing Thuxra to gasp, as his right hand withdrew the silvered sword from its burial place at his side.

Thuxra tried to fight, but found he could not move, his body entire like stone as had been his fingers only minutes earlier. He could only watch as the tip of the magic sword was swung around just below his chin.

"At first I was delighted to discover you had survived," Shimon said, holding the end of the silver blade at the captain's throat. "I wanted a witness, someone to tell the rest of the world what will happen here today. But I see you are rebellious, and I tire of it already,

Captain Thuxra. Your time is done, as is that of your people.”

The Persian tried to speak, to protest, but his tongue felt as if layered in thick, heavy grease, and his lips were as still as if frozen solid.

The sorcerer slid back the sword for a killing stroke.

Thuxra spied movement over the mage’s shoulder, a distance blurring of roiling action on the horizon.

Shimon caught the shift in the captain’s gaze. He lowered the sword and twisted to look over his own shoulder.

It appeared like a sandstorm, a bronzed hill of grit rolling toward them from the far edge of their sight. The rumbling wall of sand stretched north and south, to the ends of their vision.

Shimon laughed, jumping up and waving the sword in the direction of the storm. He glanced back at the Persian. “I knew it would come! I knew!”

Thuxra suddenly found himself with the ability to move again, but decided against any untoward motions as it might draw the ire of the wizard. Still, he slid a hand nearer his sword in its sheath.

With a grin on his lips and in his eyes, the sorcerer looked to the oncoming brown fury, then back to the captain. He lifted the sword of the Cherubim high above his head. “This is why we are here!” he shouted.

“Have you gone insane?” Thuxra dared to ask.

Shimon chuckled again. “For six hundred years, I have been ignored, captain. But no longer! Not after today!”

Beneath the shadow one arm, the Persian placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. He had to keep this fool taking, to keep Shimon's focus on whatever madness had gripped him. "The Cherubim told me you were seeking vengeance," he said. "Is this true? Vengeance against God?"

"No," Shimon said. "No, no, no. Not vengeance. But his notice! He has ignored me, the last and most powerful of all sorcerers, more powerful even than his own son, the miracle-worker who would not even save himself."

Thuxra nodded at the sword in the sorcerer's hands. "What need of you with the sword? Why put my men and I through all this?"

Without looking back, Shimon pointed behind himself. "The coming beast cannot be slain by mortal arms." He shifted the sword high once more and stared at its brightness. "But this was forged by God himself and presented to the guardians of Eden!"

Seeing his chance, the sorcerer's eyes on the magic sword, Thuxra slashed out with his own blade. But it was too slow. As if of its own accord, and faster than any speed shown so far by the wizard, the silver sword swung around and knocked aside the Persian's blade.

Shimon grinned and brought the end of his stolen weapon beneath Thuxra's chin once more. The captain still gripped his own blade, but he kept it at his side, sure that any sudden movements would mean his death.

"Fool," Shimon said. "You are no match for this sword or I here, in these lands, lands of magic. We have crossed over, into the invisible desert of Dundayin, east of Eden, where the Book of Enoch tells us dwells the Behemoth."

Thuxra's eyes darted past the wizard again, taking in the growing wall of grit rolling in

their direction. The sandstorm was enormous, the largest the Persian had ever seen, and it seemed only miles away, closing fast upon them.

Without turning this time, the sorcerer caught the captain's gaze again. "Yes. That is the beast itself coming. And once it is here, once I have slain it with this sword, God will not be able to ignore me."

"To what end?" Thuxra asked.

"He must give me what is rightfully mine. A place at his side. A measure of holiness beyond that of all others."

"Madness."

Shimon chuckled, but his sword did not waver.

The wind of a sudden picked up, twirling tiny dust devils about them, spraying the pale sands into miniature dunes about the sorcerer's feet and the Persian's knees.

And then the desert came to life, exploding behind and above Shimon, a solid wall of dirt shooting straight up, growing higher and higher and higher until it seemed as if it would reach to the sun itself.

Hardy winds buffeted the back of the wizard, splaying open his robes and twisting about his hair. Thuxra thrust up an arm to shield his eyes from the sands drubbing against his face; for a moment he thought to bring his sword back around, to stab out at the mage, but that moment died with a roar.

The noise was like a thousand deep, base trumpets all blowing at once, bellowing forth a solitary note of rancor. The captain of the Persians stared up at the looming wall, still growing taller and taller, and he could see from where the terrible sound was emitted. The

beast had a mouth and eyes, vast sockets amidst the turmoil of the stirring sands and soil that seemed to make up the thing. The eyes were angled in anger, glaring down upon the two mortals below. The mouth was deep and wide, black in its depths and without teeth, a gigantic open maw bellowing forth its roar and appearing large enough to swallow a castle.

“In the words of God to Job, ‘behold now the Behemoth!’” With those words the wizard spun away from Thuxra to face the monster, Shimon’s arms outstretched as if he were trying to grip some invisible force.

Thuxra saw his chance. He bound to his feet, ready to deliver a stab.

What stopped him was the swirling tendrils of sand that suddenly shot forth from the living wall of earth that was the Behemoth. The captain guessed there must have been a hundred of the snake-like appendages, but there could have been more. He did not know. He was too busy dodging and slashing with his sword to make a count.

Shimon seemed not to notice the stems of dirt writhing and stabbing around him. None of the tendrils struck the wizard, as if an invisible barrier shielded him, so he stood there still with arms outstretched and his eyes closed. A grin spread across his lips as the heated desert wind blew with force about him, causing his cloak to dance.

The many arms of the beast did not have as difficult a time finding a target in Thuxra. The captain used his shield as best he could, but the blows were like those of giants and dented the metal soon enough, one strike even leaving a rent in one edge. His sword too flashed about, and the blade struck true, but there was nothing to kill. Thuxra was fighting dirt, and dirt did not die.

“Wizard! Whatever you have come here to do, I suggest you do it!”

Shimon's eyes opened gradually, the wind still playing about him and curling his long, dark hair about his face.

"Now, damn you, Jew!"

The mage muttered ancient words, a language long lost to mortal men, then shifted to glance back at Thuxra as the Persian sidestepped a tentacle of dirt and knocked aside another with his shield. "Today, he cannot ignore me," Shimon said.

"I believe you have his attention!" Thuxra shouted.

Then the captain was laid low. A dozen darts of sand slammed into him, some pummeling his chest while others battered at his shield and limbs. He went down beneath a puffing of pale dust, his sword arm rebellious and swinging even as he fell.

Shimon's grin grew wider.

And he turned back to the Behemoth.

The sorcerer lifted his arms once more, the silver sword gripped in both hands over his head. He tossed his head back and screamed, a lone howl of anger and pain to shake the universe. The blade in his hands sprang to life once more, flames flowing up and down its hoary girth.

The tentacles of sand exploded wild, thrashing about the air, then fell apart, sifting down to the ground.

Thuxra, battered and bruised, forced himself up on one pained elbow to see the silver sword's flames suddenly shoot skyward like a burning missile. A line of fire extended from the magic blade to the heights of the looming Behemoth, then exploded in a colossal blaze.

The flames whirled about the uppermost regions of the gigantic beast, then leapt and

skipped their way down the monster, forming a barrier of webs of fire.

Shimon sucked in air, then screamed once more.

The Behemoth bellowed forth its solitary, bass note, shaking the ground and bringing a new ache to Thuxra's already throbbing head.

Then the flames exploded once more.

The light was enough to blind the Persian. He lifted his shield arm and shut his eyes, and the warmth of the fires flowed over him. He expected to die at any moment, the heat to melt the skin from his bones.

But then the blaze died, and the heated desert winds were tossing about, seeming cool to Thuxra's skin after the intensity of the magic.

The captain lowered his arm.

Shimon's still stood there, his back to Thuxra, his arms above his head with the sword held high. The sorcerer stood rigid, his head upturned at what he had wrought, and the Persian's eyes followed upward.

The Behemoth was no more. It had not disappeared nor fled. It had been turned to glass. The flames of the magic weapon had fused all that monstrous sand into a gigantic, glass sculpture as high as the highest towers and as long as the horizon. Here and there the sun glinted off the remains of the beast, brown though it still was. Grains of glass drifted along the wind, once pieces of floating sand, and shards of all sizes hung from the dead monster, some few cracking off and falling to shatter in little puffs of white dust.

Thuxra saw the sorcerer's shoulders quake as Shimon lowered the sword to his side. The mage continued to stare skyward, as if expecting some sign or something further from

the dead behemoth.

But nothing happened. The sun still shone. The desert winds played about in the white grit and glass powder.

Shimon threw back his head further and roared.

The shock of the scream knocked Thuxra on his back once more. It was a cry of anguish unlike anything the Persian had ever heard before, even more harsh and deep than the horn-like noise of the Behemoth itself.

That was when the cracks began to appear in the dead monster. At first the cracks were mere threads, but they grew and grew and formed into rifts and canyons. The entire Behemoth began to shake, and glass shards began to fall more often and more rapid.

Thuxra right away saw the danger. The glass Behemoth loomed over them. If it should tumble apart, tons of glass javelins would rain down on them.

“Shimon! You must stop this!”

But the sorcerer did not.

His bellowing went on and on.

And the Behemoth cracked, a cry of its own even in its death. Spears and daggers of glass exploded out from the monstrosity and shot to the desert floor.

Thuxra rolled up as much of his body as he could beneath the meek shelter of his haggard shield. Shards the size of lances stabbed into the ground all around him and millions of tiny needles rushed to tear into his skin.

Like a wave, and with a mighty crash, the tons of glass flowed down across the desert covering the white dust for acres and acres.

When the rain of death had ceased, Thuxra poked his head from beneath his shield. He was surprised to be alive. A few sharp grains had snagged his arms here and there, drawing pinpricks of blood, but for the most part he was uninjured. Whether it was luck, protection from the wizard or the hand of God, Thuxra did not know. But he was glad of it.

Then he noticed Shimon's hollering had ceased.

The sorcerer was now planted on his knees, his head hanging low between his arms outstretched and reaching into the rubble of glass. The silver sword had been discarded, tossed to one side. The man appeared unhurt, but his head shook gently up and down as if he were gasping for breath.

Slowly and quietly, as he did not know what reaction to expect, Thuxra worked his way to his feet. With his shield raised and his sword in his fighting hand, he eased his way to the sorcerer's back.

The glass cracked beneath the Persian's boots.

Shimon looked up and behind.

Thuxra drew back his sword for the attack.

Tears drummed down the sorcerer's cheeks, leaving clear tracks in the grit of the desert and glass dusting his face.

The Persian lowered his sword.

"Nothing," Shimon whispered, "after all these centuries, nothing. Even when I destroy one of his prized beasts, Yahweh continues to ignore me."

Thuxra grunted and returned his sword to his sheath.

"All I wanted was his notice," the sorcerer said, "just ... his light to shine on me once."

Even in anger, I cannot draw him forth.”

The Persian retrieved the sword of the Cherubim from where it had fallen, then with one last glance at the Jew, turned and marched away. It was a long walk back to Eden, and he had no more time to spare.

The Cold Legion

James Lecky

He had never known cold like it. The very notion of warmth was an ill-remembered dream, tantalizing and mocking. Even in his boyhood days, when the Ugra River would freeze so solid that a regiment of horsemen could safely thunder across it, had he know cold like this.

But still he forced his way on, though ice formed on his skin, seizing up the joints of his armour, worming its way into his very soul.

The plain stretched before him, a featureless white sheet with no point of reference. North. South. East. West. These were just words now, words that had no meaning in Krayl's kingdom.

"Just walk, My Prince," Brother Oslyabya had told him. "You will find the Citadel in time."

But here time, like distance and direction, danced to Krayl's tune, and the Demonlord would play it forever if it suited him.

The bodies of the frozen dead surrounded him, locked in ice. Warriors all - their arms and armour ancient but free from rust and dirt - staring at him with unseeing eyes. There, a

tall red-beard with a plumed helmet, a battle-axe gripped in his mailed fist. Had he passed him before? Or had the cold numbed his brain so that even memory was ice-bound?

A blast of wind rocked him from his feet and he fell with an agonized moan.

Get up, he told himself, rise to your feet and walk, Prince Demyan.

And in those moments, as he lay there with the wind and snow caressing him with frigid fingers, he was once more back on the banks of the Ugra, staring across the wide expanse of water towards the horde that stood on the far shore...

#

"We cannot hope to hold them, My Prince," General Orlov told him. "The Shining Host of Jebe Khan will sweep us away like wheat before the scythe." There was helpless fury in the old soldier's words.

"So you would have us run instead, Orlov? To where? If we fail here the Motherland will be laid open before them, and what are our lives compared to that?"

"I do not fear death, My Prince, but I have fought too many campaigns against Jebe Khan to think that we can defeat him now."

He knew that Orlov spoke the truth. The Shining Host had crushed army after army, kingdom after kingdom as they rampaged west: a quarter of a million warriors raised from birth to love blood and slaughter. Against that, his army was pitiful indeed.

"We will do what we can. If we are to keep company with wolves then we will learn to howl."

Orlov nodded. "A fitting proverb, My Prince. Howl we shall."

A small, discreet cough from the far side of the pavilion caught his attention and Demyan turned to see Brother Oslyabya emerge from the shadows.

"There is another saying, My Prince," he said. "The sheep has no choice in the jaws of the wolf – but we are not sheep, and there is always another choice."

He was a small man, dressed in black robes, his long dark hair and beard greasy. Around his neck he wore a sun-symbol of tarnished brass.

"What other choice, Brother?"

"Simply this – if the gods will not aid us, then there are others who will."

And he told the Prince then of Krayl – the Lord of Frozen Hell – and of his armies, of how a man might ask a boon of the Demonlord, if he were willing to pay the price that Krayl demanded.

“What price might that be?” Demyan asked.

The monk shook his head. “That, My Prince, will be a matter between you and Lord Krayl. But if you would dare to enter his kingdom I will show you the way, for those who walk in the sunlight must also know the shadows.”

“Send me there.”

“My Prince!” Orlov said. “You dare too much.”

“I would dare more if I could,” Demyan told him...

#

And when he rose, using his sword the way an old man would use a stick, the citadel was there before him, rising silently from the plain.

Vast, carved from basalt and granite, its towers stretching to meet the snow filled clouds. Dark though it was, the unaccustomed colour stung his eyes and brought a curse to his lips.

He moved towards its yawning gateway and the flickering torchlight beyond, but before he had taken a dozen steps the ice around him splintered and cracked, dark shapes crawled onto the landscape.

The frozen dead had awoken.

They stood before him, row after row, blocking his entrance to the Citadel. Their weapons - axes, scimitars, broadswords – were in their hands, and their eyes glittered with a feral fire that was totally at odds with their frigid flesh.

“Welcome, Prince Demyan,” one of them said. It was the red-bearded warrior he had seen before. “Welcome, brother.”

“A pox on your welcome, Bryntyry,” another said. “He is no brother of ours.” He was squat, clad in lamellar armour, and his dark eyes were slanted. Like the eyes of Jebe Khan.

“We are all brothers here, Akhmat,” Bryntyry said reprovingly. “But brother or not, we cannot let you pass, Prince Demyan.”

"Then blood will be spilled," Demyan replied, readying his sword.

"Only your own," Akhmat told him. "For the legions of Lord Krayl do not bleed."

"We shall see."

They came toward him, Akhmat in the lead. His sword glittered with frost and tiny icicles hung from his long moustache.

"You should not have come here, boy," he said. "Better a slave in the warm world than a corpse in the frozen one." His sword swung in a long murderous arc, aimed at Demyan's neck.

But the blade did not connect. Demyan, his muscles screaming in protest with every movement, ducked low and struck out at his opponent's legs. His sword slammed with jarring force into Akhmat's ankle, half-severing his foot. A second blow took away his leg and a third his head.

But he did not bleed.

A second warrior rose up, a Morningstar in one hand and a long bladed dagger in the other. Demyan charged, shouldering him to one side then putting a handspan of steel through his throat as they slithered and slipped on the ice.

A spear point struck the Prince, punching through his mail and piercing his side. He grunted with pain as a hot splash of steaming blood poured over his hip. But the pain and warmth gave him strength and he lashed out, taking the spearman's arm away at the elbow.

They were fragile, these cold dead things, as brittle as ice, and they fell easily before his sword. But they were many and he was only one man – a man who fought and cursed and bled.

"Enough!" Bryntyr cried, and his voice cut through the clamour of battle like a hot blade through ice. "Let him pass!"

The frozen dead moved aside and left the way open.

Demyan stood there, staring into the darkness beyond the gateway. His limbs were coated with blood, his helmet gone, sword blunt and nicked in his hand.

Bryntyr took him by the arm.

"You have earned the right to enter," he said. "But I would urge you not to do so. I once asked a boon of Lord Krayl, as did all here, now we must serve him through frozen

eternity. Go back to your warm world while you can, Prince Demyan.”

“I cannot,” he replied.

“I did not think it would be otherwise.”

Then he was through the gateway and into the courtyard.

On the far side, flanked by massive torches that burned without heat, seated on a throne of purest ivory, sat Krayl, the Lord of Frozen Hell.

“Welcome,” he said, his voice as soft as the scrape of a glacier down a mountainside. Around his shoulders he wore a sable cloak; bone-white hands gripped the scabbard of a longsword that rested across his thighs. A circlet of white gold sat upon his pointed skull and his pale blue eyes regarded Demyan with cool indifference.

“A boon, Lord Krayl,” Demyan said. “I wish a boon.”

“Of course you do.” Krayl rose from his throne with sinuous grace. “What other reason could there be for your presence?”

“My people suffer and bleed under the yoke of Jebe Khan,” Demyan said. “Give me the means to defeat him.”

“That is easily done,” Krayl replied, his tone jaunty and amused. “But what do you offer in return?”

“My life. My soul.”

“Such things cannot be given here. Only taken.” The longsword slid from its scabbard.

“You mock me, Lord Krayl.”

“Aye. Yours was a fool’s errand, Prince Demyan, and fools deserve nothing better than mockery and death.” Krayl laughed, the sound of icicles rustled by the wind, and leapt to the attack.

The song of blade upon blade filled the courtyard as Prince and Demonlord met, their swords weaving through the freezing air. Weary as he was, Demyan found new fury and strength in the red madness that overcame him.

Something had broken in his soul, filling his mind with hatred, with the need to obliterate the creature that stood before him, regardless of the cost. His people would die –

trampled under the hooves of the Shining Host – but he swore by the gods of the Sun that Krayl would not live to gloat over their destruction.

Their swords met time and time again, neither able to force a way through his opponent's defenses: hack and slash, parry and riposte, a symphony of steel that rang and echoed through the citadel.

Demyan lunged forward, full weight behind his sword, a feral cry torn from his lips. Krayl swung the longsword, screaming his own battle song in return. The blades came together with a crash of lightning and Demyan saw the Demonlord's weapon crack under its impact, a long fissure running along the length of the longsword.

He struck again and the sword broke apart, its shards falling like a snowstorm.

The Demonlord smiled.

And Demyan brought his blade down on the pointed skull, cleaving through the circlet, down through his head, splitting the features in two.

Lord Krayl shattered but did not bleed.

Demyan's rage left him then and he slipped forward onto the cobbled courtyard.

For nothing. The whole thing had been for nothing.

Hot blood stung his limbs, hot tears stung his eyes.

"Bravo, My Prince," the glacial voice said. And this time there was no mockery in it.

The Demonlord sat on his ivory throne once more.

Demyan swayed, his strength utterly gone. Blood dripped from his wounds onto the cobbles, but there was still defiance in his voice. "Again, then, Lord Krayl." He stood and tried to raise the sword but his muscles betrayed him.

"No, My Prince, not again." Krayl rose and crossed to him. He caught him as he fell and held him gently in his frigid arms. "I grant your boon," he said. "And I accept your offer. Your life and soul are mine. You will make a fine addition to the cold legions and when, in time, I fight my own battles against the Lords of the Sun, you will be there in the vanguard.

"Go back to the warm world, Demyan, fight your battles, and claim your victory. I will put cold fear into the hearts of your enemies and they will scatter before you."

He stroked the young Prince's blood-matted hair and watched as the life drained out

of him.

“Return to me, Prince Demyan, when your victory is won. The Cold Legions await you.”

