

Page 1 – A BLIP IN THE PLOTLINE by Nancy Machlis Rechtman. Ms Rechtman has had poetry and short stories published in *Your Daily Poem*, *Writing In A Woman's Voice*, *Grande Dame*, *Impspired*, *Paper Dragon*, *The Blotter*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Young Ravens*, and more. Nancy has had poetry, essays, and plays published in various anthologies. She wrote freelance Lifestyle stories for a local newspaper, and she was the copy editor for another paper. She writes a blog called Inanities at <https://nancywriteon.wordpress.com>.

Page 5 – KROMUS: THE BETRAYER by Nathan Gromotowicz. Mr. Gromotowicz is a Canadian writer who writes for the fun of the craft. He was inspired by the master pulp author Robert Howard to take up the pen and paper himself. He hopes that those who stumble upon a tale of his find it to be entertaining and engrossing.

Page 10 – ANNIE RUSHING'S GOITER by William Kitcher. Mr. Kitcher's stories, plays, and comedy sketches have been published and/or produced in Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Czechia, England, Guernsey, Holland, India, Ireland, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, and the U.S. His stories have appeared in *Fiery Scribe Review*, *The Metaworker*, *New Contrast*, *The Prague Review*, *AntipodeanSF*, *365 Tomorrows*, *Little Old Lady Comedy*, *Yellow Mama*, *Black Petals*, *Slippage Lit*, and many other journals. His novel, *Farewell And Goodbye, My Maltese Sleep*, will be published in 2023 by Close To The Bone Publishing.

Page 16 – WHEEL OF FIRE by Alexander Morrell. Mr. Morrall is the author of five novels: "Crimson", "The Emerald Seer", "Prince of Chaos", "Curse of Fire" and "The Legion of Umbria", as well as a short story collection, "Tales from the Ridge". His short fiction is published in online literary publications *The Ansible* and *Bewildering Stories*. Attending the University of Massachusetts Amherst, he earned a BA in English before working as communications director for an improv comedy troupe, and as a small-town newspaper journalist. Personal experience in college inspired his latest new adult thriller novel, "Crimson". Ascend Learning editor Alexander Schab called *Crimson* "a novel of characters dripping with personality, dialogue is excellent, and plot is intriguing." Most days he can be found at home in Massachusetts with his partner and Maine Coon cat.

Page 26 – THE GLORIOUS ILLUSION by Tim McHugh. Mr. McHugh writes, "I am a young author who loves writing in the fantasy/sci-fi space and am looking forward to getting my second short story published. My first will be published in an upcoming issue of *Lovecraftiana*, a Rogue Planet Press magazine.



“A BLIP IN THE PLOTLINE”

by NANCY MACHLIS RECHTMAN

A few thoughts before I start on my new story. I just entered a writing contest where they choose the category and I have to write a story in that category. Why in the world would they have given me Horror as my category? I don't write Horror. I can write Romance. Or Comedy. Or Romantic Comedy – any of those would have worked great. But Horror? I don't like scary things. Or disturbing things. Life is disturbing enough, isn't it?

I like ghost stories though. Especially if they take place on an old pirate ship. With lots of blood dripping through the walls.

Excuse me! Who are you? I did not write this. I vehemently deny enjoying ghost stories. Or pirate ships. Or bloody walls.

I like stories where it's dark and dreary. Where someone has been washed ashore in a storm. All alone. And they're surrounded by spirits. Disturbed, angry spirits.

Who are you? How are you hijacking my computer? Where are you?

I'm a castaway just like you. No friends. I've been thrown away and rejected - just like you.

I'm not a castaway. I live in the city where I know lots of people. Why are you doing this?

For the prize, sweetheart. If I can write

something good enough, I can escape this place. In fact, you can take my place here. And I'll have enough money to live the good life.

I heard about the prize. It is an awful lot of money. Maybe we can write something together and split it.

But you'd have to crawl through the darkness. Through the swamp. Where the deepest darkest fears of your mind reside.

I can't be in the dark. Ever since I was a child, even if it was only a lightbulb burning out, I was terrified. That's when they come. I need the light.

I know that. That's why I'm going to win the prize. My story is so much better. And the monsters don't scare me. The blood doesn't scare me. The screams don't scare me.

Something must scare you. You're obviously trying to get back to civilization. Does being alone on a desert island scare you? Or maybe having everyone go missing from your life?

Nothing scares me, I told you that. Your fears rule you. I see you every day. Afraid of everything. Your fears make me strong. The prize is almost in my hands.

How can you see me every day? Where are you? You're on an island somewhere. Out in the Pacific I'd guess? And I'm here in New York, thousands of miles away.

Soothe yourself all you want. I'm in your

apartment with you all the time. I see you jump every time there's a bang. Or a siren outside your window. I see your light on all night because you think the darkness means death. I know you hear the monsters moaning at your door.

Stop it! Leave me alone! I don't know how you got into my computer, but you need to go right now. I need to work on my story so I can win the prize.

Your story is garbage. Nobody is going to read it. Just like everything you write. You're too afraid of the world. You live in a bubble. You don't ever go more than four blocks in any direction from your apartment. You can't possibly know anything about life. My story has what they're looking for. It terrifies them People love being terrified – to a certain point. My story is filled with darkness and doom. Pirates. Death. No one even knows where I am – that scares them most of all.

Get out of my head! How are the words I'm trying to type turning into your words? Why is it so dark in here? What did you do to the lights? What are those moaning sounds?

Give up. I've already won. I get the prize. You're just pitiful.

I'm just going to slam the top of my laptop shut. Then you'll have to disappear. I'll get the prize. I need the prize. I need to find a way to move on, too.

If you slam the computer shut, how are you going to write? How will you win? And what do you think you're moving on from? You can't escape your life. Can't happen, sweetheart.

Stop calling me sweetheart! And I can't

live like this much longer. Things need to change. Anyway, I can type on my iPad.

I'll find you there.

I'll type faster than you. I'll submit my story while you're sleeping.

I don't sleep.

Everybody sleeps.

I'm not everybody. And I'm too busy watching you.

What do you want from me?

I told you. I want to win. You're standing in my way. I want that prize. I want off of this island.

How can I possibly be holding you back? There are other people trying to win, not just me.

I ended up as a castaway because of you.

How is that even possible? This is the first time I've even had contact with you.

That's what you think. You believe that only because I chose not to say anything. But you are the reason I'm stuck. You remember buying this computer two years ago at that computer place on 45th? And you didn't have enough money to buy the one you really wanted new? So you saw this one and the guy felt sorry for you so he let you have it for under a hundred bucks?

How did you...

I was already there. Waiting. And when you brought it home you thought you were some kind of great writer and you started writing that story about the pirate who fell for the beautiful woman being held captive so he tried to help her escape? You were so proud of yourself. But you caused so much damage.

What are you talking about? I wasn't proud of myself at all. I ended up deleting

the whole thing and never thought about it again.

When you deleted everything, you killed everyone on the ship, including my love. They came after me with knives and stabbed me for trying to help her, leaving me for dead as they threw my body into the briny sea. But the rest of them died in the terrible storm. I can still hear their screams before they drowned. I was bleeding something fierce and I guess I passed out, but eventually I woke up on this island, alone, half-dead, not caring if I lived or died.

I don't believe you! I've never hurt anyone in my life! I wouldn't kill a soul. Why are you saying such terrible things? I stopped writing that story because it was a terrible story and I'm much better at comedy and romance anyway. At least on paper.

When did you start hearing all the moaning and crying? You must remember.

I have no idea. How do you even know about that?

And see the blood on the walls?

Stop it!

Wasn't it after you destroyed my world? Took away my love?

I was just writing a story!

An entire world, don't you get it? But you somehow missed me, didn't you? You had no idea that I had survived.

None of this is possible. You're trying to drive me crazy so you can win the prize.

You can keep telling yourself that all you want. It doesn't change the truth.

I'm not some kind of all-powerful wizard! I'm just someone who likes to write. I just write these little stories for fun because I'm so alone most of the time. I write so I

don't feel all alone.

Do you ever think of the damage you're doing to the lives you've created?

It's usually just light romance. Everyone ends up happy in the end.

Except for my story. Nothing happy or light about that. You have to realize that you owe me. That you destroyed so much, there's no way you should expect to win the prize.

This is just crazy. Nothing you're saying makes sense. You're just trying to get me to give up so you can get the money.

Think about it. Think about why you can't sleep. Why you have no friends. No boyfriend. Why you're haunted by the cries of the dead.

Stop!

Stop writing. I'll write my story. And when I win the prize, you won't ever hear from me again. I'll just disappear.

And the voices?

They'll disappear with me.

But wait a minute. Your story IS my story. I brought you to life. Everything you think you're going to write came from me. You really have nothing. It's all me.

Do you remember writing about me? Probably not. I was just the pirate you didn't even bother to name. I walked by the room my lady love was locked in every day, but you never bothered giving me a chance with her. I only got to talk to her when you weren't writing. But then came the day when you destroyed our world and I watched her die. Along with everybody else. You deserve to suffer for that, not be rewarded.

I barely remember you at all! You need to get over this – even if I did create you, you weren't even a major character! Merely

a blip in the plotline. What in the world is that noise?

It's the sound of suffering. It will never leave you. The only way you can make things right is to let me win the prize. I promise, I'll leave you then.

OK, OK! You win!

Fine, I'm glad you've come to your senses. Just...

Introduction:

I am starting this story from scratch since my last computer had an unfortunate accident. Nothing was salvageable according to the guy at the repair shop where I brought so I could know for sure it couldn't be fixed. I was so distraught for awhile as you might imagine, but I'm feeling much better now. And recently, I found this lovely little used laptop at a small computer shop around the corner. I'm really looking forward to getting back to writing again. I think I'll write a nice romantic comedy.

I don't think you know the first thing about romance.

I didn't write this. Who is this?

I'm the lady love, lost tragically at sea. You do remember me, don't you? After all, even though you never bothered naming me either, I was so much more than just a blip in the plotline. ❖

“KROMUS: THE BETRAYER”

by NATHAN GROMOTOWICZ

Kromus parted his lips reluctantly from the wineskin; he had greedily drunken all of its contents. A fine southern vintage he never had the pleasure of savouring. A prize from the caravan his marauders had waylaid the night before; one of the other prizes being a young blonde-haired blue-eyed woman, currently shackled to the centre pole of his spacious and ostentatiously adorned tent. He had claimed her for himself, and evenly distributed the plunder among his band of reavers. He was a fair and amicable leader; knowing well how to keep a band of cut-throats happy and eager to receive instructions. But harsh when faced with unruly dissidents, executing rebellious individuals on the spot brutally with his bronze mace.

Kromus pondered her reason for venturing so far south. She travelled with a man who appeared to be her brother; blonde haired and blue-eyed, he had sprung to her defence, broadsword in hand, and fought well. Almost too well for Kromus. His own path from hyperborean climes was fraught with treachery, covetousness and red-handed murder. It was a passing curiosity. He would ravage her tonight, regardless of what she would say. But the heady wine would beg to differ, he drank beyond his limitations this night. He failed

to rise from the silken cushions he reclined on and plummeted back down, unable to fend off unconsciousness for long. Before his eyes shut, he descried beautiful azure eyes that smouldered with intense hatred. The only response he could muster in his stupor like state was a savage grin.

During Kromus' crapulence-induced coma, the captive woman painfully freed her delicate hands from her shackles. She slit his throat during his drunkenness-induced coma.

Eyes wide open. A niveous field cast in the brilliance of a nude full moon. Kromus rose like a corpse from its grave. He perceived no sensations, no warmth, nor the bite of cold and his heart was still. Whipping winds bayed menacingly about him, yet their bite was innocuous. *Whence have I come to be in this place?* Distant flames distracted him from his immediate inquiries and attracted him simultaneously. He neared an unattended campfire, reached out his hands to warm himself, yet felt no warmth. *What has happened to me?* He fretted, striving to recollect how he came to be in a snowy wasteland reminiscent of his hyperborean origins. He shivered involuntarily as he gazed upon the terrain that evoked wretched memories from

his childhood.

Kromus ostensibly warmed himself by the blistering fire. He peered fixedly across the lively flames and froze—someone was seated on the opposite side. Kromus descried through the distorting flames that it was a person fully attired in armour seated on a log.

The man rose with a sudden stiffness which caused Kromus to start. He rounded the campfire sluggishly and deliberately, coming into view for Kromus to clearly see. From every minute opening in the suit of armour seeped an oleaginous ichor; from the portals of the horned helm's visor, to the spaces between each finger piece.

"*Kromus: The Betrayer!*" A harsh, guttural voice issued forth from the rotting suit of armour. "The title suits you far too aptly!"

"Who are you? And how do you know me by name?" Kromus was taken aback, his hand poised over the hilt of a bronze mace tucked into his baldric.

"I know not who I am, but I know all about you." Kromus winced, the suit's ragged voice was brutal on the ears, and Kromus did not like people who knew all about him. The slimy suit of steel proceeded to speak: "My mortal coil was poisoned." Kromus bristled like a cornered feral cat, and his memory raced searchingly, but futile. The phantasm drew gleaming steel from a sheath at its back; the broadsword reflected moon light ethereally, flaring it out blindingly. Kromus shielded his eyes, drew his bronze mace and equipped his buckler. "Is this Hell?" whis-

pered Kromus hoarsely, dread creeping into his voice.

"Close, but not quite." The revenant lunged with a well aimed thrust. "Do not fret, I'll escort you there!" Kromus dodged to the side and swung a mighty blow downward at the garishly reflective sword, lodging it deeply into the frigid ground whilst slamming the rim of his buckler into the front of the revenant's helm, sending the shade reeling backwards. Kromus brought up his mace in a large arch and brought it down upon his foe's helm with shattering force. The suit of armour keeled over from the crumpling blow, every orifice in the armour squelched out foul ichor as it thunderously crashed against the niveous ground. Kromus was not naive to assume his supernatural opponent downed; he went straight for the buried sword and took hold of it. The flesh of his hands burned as he made contact with the leather of the grip, he yelped and pulled away.

The revenant straightened, the damage gradually reversed, and it laughed horribly with a derisive note.

"What are you!" Despondency descended on Kromus crushingly, as well as killing curiosity. He scanned his environs desperately; a niveous wasteland encompassed him; nowhere to escape and naught to utilize as an advantage.

Kromus scooped up his mangled mace into stinging hands. "I can give you great wealth and many slaves! I am a man of influence and power, surely whatever wrong I have committed against you can be

righted?”

The effulgent sword dislodged from the frozen ground and levitated to the hand of its master. “The single thing I am desirous of is vengeance.”

Knowing there to be no alternative, Kromus dropped the pretense and howled madly, rushing his supernatural opponent. The revenant lunged much faster than before. Transfixing Kromus through the sternum, severing his spine as the sword protruded from his back. He was lifted like a viand on a spit. With one encased hand, the vengeful spirit took Kromus’ long brown hair in hand and freed his blade from the dying man’s torso; suspending him in midair by his hair alone, the ghost divorced the body from the head with a swift slash. Blood gushed onto the niveous ground, where it was absorbed readily. The phantasm immolated the body in the flames, but reserved the head.

“Damn all the Gods there may be, this is not my murderer!” The spectre fed the head to the fire, it was an insatiable hunger. “Enough of this! You have *exploited* my faltering memory to satiate your hunger for long enough—give me what you promised— my killer!” The spectre demanded indignantly.

“I swear, the next visitor will be you true killer,” pleaded the fire desperately.

“No, no more of this. Your words always ring hollow. I demand you make good on the vow you made to me when I materialized here...or I’ll throw snow at you!”

The element gasped; “you would not

dare!” The apparition scooped up snow, and moulded it into a perfect ball ere tossing it into the windswept fire.

“I will not be the reciprocal of such irreverent behaviour,” wailed the flame indignantly. “Begone from my sight. Vanish. Have your cursed vengeance!” bel-lowed the fire peevishly as a portal materialized. The phantasm entered without hesitation or forethought, its patience with the element’s interminable appetite long ago strained thin.

The phantasm was teleported to a gloomy chamber stockpiled with sorcerous paraphernalia that ignited very indistinct memories eroded by the passage of time. There was no source of illumination besides the radiant sword the phantasm wielded to illuminate its recollection. Towering oaken bookshelves stood at each wall, lacquered in a greasy thick layer of dust; books nearly eaten away wholly by silverfish and cockroaches that shunned the light. A teak work desk stood at the centre of the room, on top of it was a mound of massacred scrolls and parchments. Behind the study desk was an armchair with a very tall back rest, on it was enough dust accumulated to comprise a seated person. The spirit stepped closer to peruse the brutalized parchments—the seated dust coughed violently, and startled eyes manifested. Bloodshot, they stared intently at the revenant.

“Does my sight beguile me?” An incredibly hoarse man’s voice emanated from the dusty lump seated on the armchair. The heap of dust sprang into anima-

tion; gradually shedding faux skin to exhibit a man with long grey hair that trailed to the flagstone floor, with a grey beard that was just as overgrown. He straightened himself with alacrity.

“My supernal creation has returned to me.” Proclaimed the man with elevated ardour.

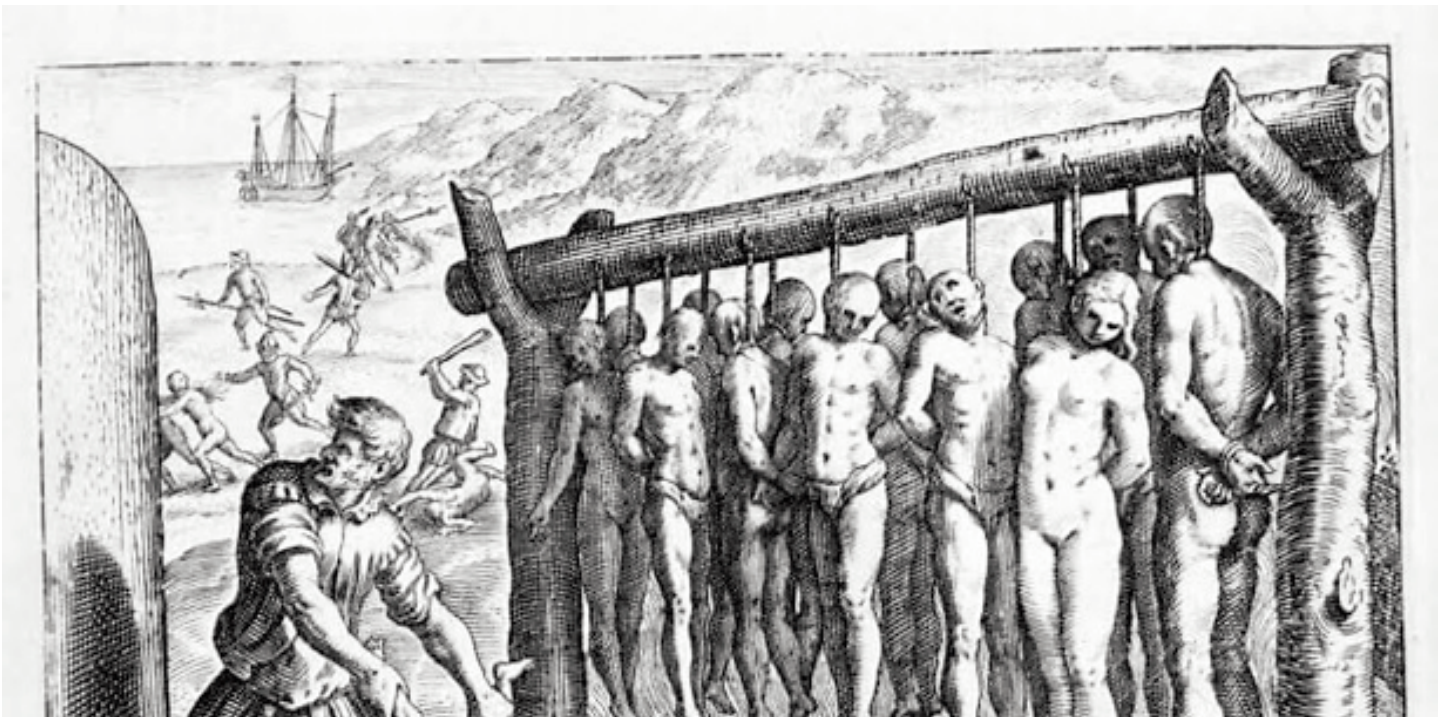
“Yes. I have returned—to *kill* you!” At the mention of the word “kill”: the man lit up joyously, tears welled in his eyes; his visage struggled to emote the rapture he felt.

“What in the hells!” Uttered the shade, perplexed by the man’s reaction to its intent. The man bounded onto the desk like a cat, scrambled across, sending shreds of parchment drifting into the air and leapt down on all fours before the revenant. He lathered the spirit’s steel boots with messy

wet kisses. Once satisfied with his adulation, he wrapped himself around its legs and wept.

“Balsagoth has forsaken me,” the man wailed haplessly, his face a woeful grimace. “Balsagoth no longer whispers to me in my nocturnal wanderings. He has dispossessed me of the sorcerous might he once benevolently bestowed upon me. And not only that...he has cursed me—his most staunch acolyte with dreamless slumber and immortality to boot!” bawled the forlorn wizard.

The pitiful magician’s words and tears spurred no sympathy in the living dead’s cold non-palpating heart. It only cared for vengeance: a vengeance that was birthed when it was killed and cast to that realm of interminable night and winter, and since then that hunger has only festered through



the centuries of tedium spent there. It hardly recalled anything ere its protracted transient stay in perdition. The blade felt feather-light in the shade's grip as it brought the sword up with a gauntleted hand that rattled with rapt anticipation for the coming bloodshed.

The wizard tore himself away partially, gazed up at the blazing sun, eyes blinded by the light, he shot his arms up to the ethereal illumination with hopefulness beaming in return from his on portals and cried: "I have exhausted all options available to me. But now you have come back to me. Bringing with you Darkness Bane: a sword fashioned solely to be wielded by your hands. Surely, Darkness Bane which has my erstwhile power as its life force will free me from my torment. I beg of you, strike me down." He held his arms aloft and shut his eyes.

"Nay, you will live!" proclaimed the shade sharply. "Long and unprosperous will your existence be."

"*What!*" spat the flabbergasted sorcerer, who looked upon the shade with disconsolate horror. The wizard sprang to his feet and jumped onto the ghost's sword arm in a feeble attempt to impale himself on the mystic sword. The phantasm harshly shoved the magician from him, who immediately righted himself, and was at it again with a frog like leap, but this time he was intercepted midair by a steel-clad knee to the stomach, sending him skidding across the rough stone floor to violently collide with the teak desk.

He coughed and wheezed. "Do not

fret, I'll make certain life does not escape you," assured the ghost mordantly with glee brimming. The shade began sheathing Darkness Bane with tantalizing deliberateness. Rays of diminishing light resembling a romantic sunset were cast on the magician's horrified visage ere the blade sank to the hilt in its sheath. ❖

“ANNIE RUSHING’S GOITER”

by WILLIAM KITCHER

Marc Rushing felt awful every time he looked at the huge goiter that had grown on Annie’s gorgeous neck. Except for that, she was perfect: the beauty of Ava Gardner, the intelligence of Marie Curie, the talent of Lena Horne, the personality of Marie Dressler, and the feet of Cara Delivigne. Annie was allergic to levothyroxine, and surgery would be potentially dangerous because the goiter was pushing on her vocal cords, so Rushing knew he would invoke Clause 18.

He went into the backyard, took a steel case out of his pocket, opened it, and removed a small box with a prominent red button on it. He pressed the button.

After a few moments, Gunther appeared beside him. “You called?”

“Annie’s goiter can’t be fixed. I want to use Clause 18.”

“Let’s go back to the office,” said Gunther. “Put your hand on my shoulder.”

Rushing put his hand on Gunther’s shoulder, Gunther pressed the “Go” button on his watchstrap, and they disappeared.

Back in the office of Guaranteed Love Ltd. twenty years later, Gunther took Rushing’s file out of a cabinet and studied it. Rushing’s face and body returned to what they looked like when he was forty-

five.

“Clause 18,” said Gunther. “What I can do is this: for a small premium, we can try it all over again with Annie. Or I can refund 90% of your payment, and you can go back to your wife.”

“God, no!” said Rushing. “I want Annie. How much is this ‘small’ premium?”

“Let’s see. You had the Platinum Package because you really wanted her, and by the way she looks in this photo, I can understand that, so that’s an additional 10%.”

“Fine. Take that out of the ‘Incidental Expenses’ fee I paid.”

“Can do, Mr. Rushing. Put your initials here.”

“So, listen, I don’t have to go all the way back, do I? There was a lot of anxiety at the beginning. Like all relationships. Can’t you send me to just before she got the goiter?”

“I’m afraid not. I have to be surreptitious about giving her the, uh, ‘vaccination’, and I think she’d notice me hanging around. No, your five-year high school class reunion is perfect. Lots of people around bumping into each other. She’ll barely notice my giving her the jab.”

“OK. Can we do this as quickly as pos-

sible? I hate to think of Annie sitting there with that huge thing on her neck for any longer than she has to. She won't have it in some alternate timeline, will she?"

"Alternate timeline," Gunther said with a snort. "That's ridiculous. No, my system is foolproof. Now, I'll get the vaccination ready, and you prepare yourself as well."

"Ready to go," said Rushing.

"Good." Gunther returned Rushing's file to the filing cabinet, then twiddled the combination lock on the fridge beside the cabinet, opened it, and extracted a small hypodermic needle. He examined it, put it in a case, and the case into his jacket pocket. He punched some numbers into his watchstrap, and looked at Rushing.

"Ready?"

"Yep."

Rushing put his hand on Gunther's shoulder, Gunther pressed the "Go" button, and they disappeared.

They landed in a dark corner of Sherwood Secondary School's parking lot. Gunther preceded Rushing into the school gym, spotted Annie, and waited. Rushing sauntered in, attempting to look as casual as possible. Cool music was playing, the lights were low, and flowers scented the gym, mostly overcoming the stench of high school athletes. He remembered exactly where Annie had been the first time they'd done this, and he ambled toward her.

There she was, talking to her friend Roxanne. Annie looked stunning in a short tight blue dress, emphasizing her magnificent body and legs. Her straight

brown hair hanging to the middle of her back glistened in the light, and he could see her deep brown eyes twinkle as she laughed. Rushing could have wept at how beautiful she was, which he had actually done a number of times. The fact that she was also the smartest and funniest person he'd ever met didn't hurt either.

Occasionally, a fellow former student would look at Rushing, assume an astonished look, and get out of the way. Gunther moved closer, coming up behind Annie.

Rushing stood quietly near Annie, until she sensed his presence and looked at him. She was mystified at first, and then exclaimed, "Marc! What happened to you? What happened to your face?"

Rushing was at a loss and groped at his face. Something was wrong but he couldn't put his finger on it, literally. He ran from the gym, followed by Gunther, and found the nearest boys' bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror in horror. Gunther came into the bathroom. "You forgot to take your de-aging pill, didn't you?"

Rushing looked at Gunther. "Back to the office?" He put his hand on Gunther's shoulder. Gunther input the coordinates into his watch, hit "Go", and they were gone.

Gunther took Rushing's file out of the cabinet and had him initial Clause 27, "Customer Error - Add 5%". Then he unlocked the fridge, and removed another needle. He pointed to Clause 32 on Rushing's contract, "Extra Injection - Add 8%", and asked him to initial it.

“Can’t you use the needle you already have here?”

“It loses its potency very quickly,” answered Gunther.

Rushing initialed Clause 32, swallowed his pill, put his hand on Gunther’s shoulder, and they were gone again.

Rushing checked his reflection in the windowpane of the gym door. Magnificent, he thought. Well, as magnificent as he could manage.

He headed toward Annie while Gunther made his way around the walls to the same point. Rushing stood nearby, admiring Annie, as Gunther brushed past her and jabbed her arm with the needle.

“Ow!” she cried.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry,” said Gunther. “I forgot to trim my fingernails today.” He shuffled off.

“Who the heck is that?” said Annie to Roxanne. “He wasn’t in our class, was he?”

Roxanne shrugged, and Annie then noticed Rushing standing there. “Oh, hello, Marc. How are you?”

Rushing was about to answer when Annie turned away from him back to Roxanne.

What the hell, thought Rushing. “Gunther!” he called, and went after Gunther, who was just exiting the gym. Rushing caught up to him as Gunther was punching in coordinates on his watch. “Gunther, it didn’t work! She didn’t even smile at me!”

“Back to the office,” said Gunther, and they were gone.

“I see the problem,” said Gunther,

looking in the fridge. “That was a flu shot. I keep a few extra just in case. Let’s go back. No charge. Take another pill. No charge.”

“I should think not,” said Rushing. “I’m beginning to think this whole thing is a scam.”

“Of course not,” said Gunther. “I couldn’t stay in business if it was a scam. Government regulations, that kind of thing.”

Rushing and Gunther walked into the gym and split up. They walked around the entire gym and met up at the other side. “She’s not here!” exclaimed Rushing.

“Give it some time,” said Gunther. “Maybe we’re early.”

They had a couple of beers, both danced with Jenny Binkley, and won the foxtrot contest dancing with each other, but Annie never showed up.

Rushing asked Roxanne where Annie was and was told that Annie had no interest in a reunion and was surfing in Hawaii.

Back in the office, Rushing said, “What the hell, Gunther? I thought you said there was no alternate timeline.”

“Yeah, you got me there,” said Gunther. “Just a glitch, I guess.”

“A glitch?” cried Rushing. “Suppose she still has that thing on her neck?”

“Let’s try this again, and after I jab her, I’ll swing by your house at all times to check up on her.”

Rushing looked at Gunther skeptically.

“One in a billion,” said Gunther. “This couldn’t happen again. Take your pill.”

Rushing did so as Gunther checked and double-checked the needle, and then they disappeared.

There was Annie in her blue dress, laughing with Roxanne. She looks so beautiful, he thought. No, I can't think like that. I must concentrate until this is done. Where's Gunther?

Gunther sidled along the back wall, then approached Annie from behind, and jabbed her arm.

"Ow!" she cried.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," said Gunther. "I forgot to trim my fingernails today." He shuffled off.

"Who the heck is that?" said Annie to Roxanne. "He wasn't in our class, was he?"

Roxanne shrugged, and Annie then noticed Rushing standing there.

This is it, thought Rushing. This is the moment. This is when they'd re-connected due to the jab the first time he'd tried to see Annie again, before her goiter that he swore wouldn't happen again. This is also the moment that hadn't happened before because of the flu shot. Please, Gunther, please have gotten it right this time.

"Marc, oh my god! It's you! I can't believe it's you! It's so good to see you!" She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him so hard he thought he would suffocate, and die happily at that.

"You're not in Hawaii," he said.

"God, no, why would I be in Hawaii? I hate the ocean. Do you know how many hungry sharks there are?"

Rushing laughed, and Annie laughed, and she looked into his eyes so deeply he

knew it had worked this time. He wondered if he could ever tell her how this had happened, and he told himself to leave things quiet until they were eighty or ninety.

A few minutes later, Gunther came up to Rushing and whispered into his ear, "Annie doesn't have a goiter. Not at any time. It's all good. All you have to do is make sure she gets a checkup and her thyroid hormones are regulated. Do that as soon as possible." He looked up at Annie and smiled at Rushing. "Looks like it's working out." Gunther patted Rushing on the shoulder.

"So far, so good," said Rushing. "Thank you."

"No problem," said Gunther. "You know where to reach me if there's anything."

"Say, Gunther, is it possible she could get another goiter?"

"Possible, yes, but unlikely. I mean, how many people get two goiters in a lifetime?"

"But something else could happen?"

"Sure, but that's life. And you still have Clause 18. If it helps, I've never had a bad result with a customer. Except once with you. And that's not going to happen again, is it?"

"No, of course not."

And Gunther disappeared.

"Who was that?" asked Annie. "And how did he disappear like that?"

"Oh, that was Gunther. He's kind of a magician."

Everything went swimmingly between

Rushing and Annie after that. It was easy to get Annie to go to her doctor about her thyroid: he made sure she watched a documentary about goiters.

They cruised through life, as happy as a couple could ever be. They married a few years later and had three children. Rushing was happy in his job as an urban planner and, after staying at home with the children for a few years, Annie returned to work as a model and singer. Rushing doted on her.

They made a pact to never go to bed angry, not that they ever argued very much, and to always have breakfast together, no matter what, reading the morning newspaper in their sunroom that overlooked their garden, which backed onto a ravine. Annie would read the News and Entertainment sections, and Rushing would read the Sports and Comics, and then go on to the rest of the paper when Annie had finished.

One morning about twenty years later, Annie finished her breakfast and the paper and said, "I'm going to take the kids to school, then run a few errands. I'll be back about noon."

"OK," said Rushing. "Drive carefully."

She left, and he wondered, as he did every time she drove, if this was another potential pitfall. But he put it out of his mind. Gunther had said he'd never had a bad result with a customer. Except with him. Once. Or a couple of times.

He read the rest of the newspaper, and came across a little item buried at the bottom of page 38. A new company called "Guaranteed Love Ltd." had set up shop,

and promised to send you back in time to re-connect you with anyone you wanted to be in love with. How they did it wasn't mentioned, of course, and the writer of the item expressed more than a little skepticism.

Rushing laughed to himself. So this was when GLL started, he thought. Originally, he hadn't heard about the company until a few years later, and wished he had known about it from the beginning, thus avoiding the last few years of his disastrous first marriage. He had sometimes wondered what had happened to his first wife, but didn't care enough to ever try to find out. No doubt she was happy somewhere, boiling eyes of newts in a cauldron.

He didn't have anything urgent to do at work that morning so he decided he would drop in on his old friend Gunther.

He remembered easily where the office was and went inside. Gunther was sitting behind a desk, the filing cabinet and fridge beside it.

Gunther rose and extended his hand. "Good morning, sir. Welcome to Guaranteed Love Ltd. How may I help you?"

"I saw the article about your company in the paper today."

"And you want to take advantage of what we have to offer. Let me tell you about our various packages."

"No, no, that's all right," said Rushing. "You see, I've already been a customer. Well, I will have been, a few years from now, if you see what I mean. Don't you recognize me?"

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“Marc Rushing.”

“Rushing. Rushing. Let me check my future files.” He rifled through his cabinet and took out a file. He read it, then looked up at Rushing. “Yes, I remember now. You and your sweetheart Annie.” He took out a pair of 8 x 10’s of Rushing and Annie, and admired them. “She was very beautiful, wasn’t she?”

“Still is. And still also the most fascinating woman I’ve ever known.”

“We had a couple of missteps, didn’t we?”

Rushing laughed. “Yes, we did. But I’m happy to say it all worked out in the end. I’ve been so happy these twenty-odd years. I came by to say hello and to thank you. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Well, I’m very glad to hear that. It’s nice to know I’ll do well in the future. Say, I’ve noticed here that you have a credit on your account. I can cut a check for you or apply it to any future services you may need.”

“I won’t be requiring any services. I’m very happy. And I don’t need a refund. Consider it a tip for a job well done.”

“Well, thank you, Mr. Rushing,” said Gunther, making a note on the file and closing the folder. He looked up at the office door and Rushing followed his gaze. There was a silhouette behind the frosted glass. “You’ll have to excuse me now. It looks like I have a customer, no doubt trying to figure out if this is a scam or not.”

“Well, I must be going anyway,” said Rushing, shaking hands with Gunther

again.

“I’m so excited,” said Gunther. “My first customer!”

“Not exactly,” said Rushing. “I’m first in a strange kind of way.”

Gunther smiled. “Yes, of course.”

Rushing went to the door, opened it, and in stepped Annie.

Rushing looked at Annie and then back at Gunther.

Annie said, “I, uh...”

“Well, Mr. Rushing,” said Gunther, sheepishly. “It’s in the name. It is a ‘limited’ company.”

“I want Clause 18.”

“I’m sorry. That expired ten years ago.”

“All right. I’ll sign up for the Platinum Package again.”

“Right after my next customer. Good day, Mr. Rushing. Good morning, Mrs. Rushing.”

Annie smiled at Gunther, and Gunther smiled back at her in a way that Rushing thought was particularly suspicious. ❖

“WHEEL OF FIRE”

by ALEXANDER MORRELL

Heat rifled up Gasc's ears as he moved to a tower of kitchen drawers. Pulling out the second and third from the bottom, he climbed up, reaching for numbers five and six on his way to the top. He stood on the pulled-out drawers, balancing so they wouldn't eject, as he reached for the top one. His toes started to wiggle as the drawer under them complained. Closing his fingers, he pulled out the drawer, stretching his arms ever higher as he reached inside. Managing to extract a mahogany chest, he lifted it above his head with two hands like a champion's prize. Sidling the chest under his arm and closing each drawer on his careful descent, he reached the kitchen floor.

Inside was his family's greatest treasure: fine silver cutlery. He was on his way to sell them at market for a night on the town. No more would he wash floors and scrub pans. His father had neglected him for the last Saturn's Eve, and this would be his. The congregation would look down on him no more. After spending a pittance on drink and food, he would secure his passage for the New World, leaving this life of drudgery behind. He doubted his father would miss his presence, just the old silver. There was only one problem. Children needed chaperones in the Pleasure District.

Padding downstairs, a thunderclap rattled the temple he and his father called home. This was followed by a splash which was strange. Normally the canal's flow was peaceful this late at night. He was sure it was no phantasmagoric beast from his daydreams and adventure tomes. Waking life was so bereft of excitement, and nowhere was this truer here than in this strange city his father's work dragged them to. Passing rows of worn pews, he peered through the double doors' keyhole. A fetid breeze blew through, shriveling his nose.

Opening the door, he beheld the river that brought the city's trade, stretching across the horizon. Beside the river, carriages and pedestrians bustled on cobble streets. City-goers delighted in adult debauchery, and he was soon to join them. His father wanted him inside studying his letters, but he would be disappointed. Rainless clouds hung like dour curtains. The world hungered for release, to cure the city's humid staleness. Looking skyward, Gasc wondered at the thunder, glimpsing a red dot hovering over the river. He'd never noticed it, scratching the first stubble on his chin.

A soft patter of waves lapped the shore, broken by the sound of something rising from the water.



Gasc shut the door at once. The world was full of danger, and perhaps this was some terrible beast. Setting down the precious chest, he crossed the sanctuary to pass through a door beside the altar. His father sat glaring at him from behind square spectacles. Gasc studied his father's technique: maneuvering his quill like a master fencer. His father rarely spoke, at least to him. When he wasn't preaching on Sabbath, he wrote sermons. Watching letters take form, the lad recognized every other one. He had no patience for them like his father did.

"Gascoigne!" Father Eugene pounded on the desk, toppling his inkwell. The preacher squealed, grabbing a handkerchief to rake it across his soiled parchment. "Never interrupt my writing! Times like these, I wish your mother were still alive."

"Me too," Gasc sniffed, balling his fists. "Father, I heard something outside. In the river."

"Bah, nothing but wind and words. It's getting late and tomorrow is Sabbath. Begone, and don't disturb me again."

Gasc left before his father saw him cry. Once the door shut, his tears fell to the floor. Pews ringed him like a silent congregation, mocking his weakness. He padded to a stained-glass window depicting the warrior-saint Sabbaeus, silver sword hailing Paradise. Peering out through the golden lens, made luminescent by a moon that hung at eye level, he touched the cold, sanctified glass. A noisome night in the riverport of Barrowdir played out before him.

Three weeks before, his father was called up to serve at a temple of his own in this cursed city. He was given a derelict ruin on a marshy stretch of river, into which folk dumped all manner of waste. Often, an empty crate of dream tar, or a clutch of bloated corpses gathered on the banks outside. Nonetheless, it bordered the Pleasure District, Barrowdir's greatest attraction. One could sin all night and cross the canal to be absolved in the morning at their temple. Some came straight from nights in the district, still stinking of horrors.

Out there in the night, Gasc watched his father's congregation sin in the evening with painted ladies. They spat on beggars, but only had spare coin for the collection plate on Sabbath. For this, Father Eugene strived. His sermons had to be immaculate to bring in nobles who bought forgiveness with gold. Father Eugene never had time for Gasc, not since his wife passed. It seemed he lost two parents that day. Her sickness overtook her, much like the city's beggars, coughing up blood until she was small as a babe.

Gasc denied his father's religion, the compulsion to remain meek before the storm. No more would he fall in line with the hollow creed. The only time was now.

A scratch came from outside the main doors, prompting Gasc to peer through the keyhole once more. Slowly, he pushed the door open, sighting that strange red orb over the river again.

"Boy," came a gravelly sound from the ditch beside the temple. In the space where

rainwater drained, a wet mound of fur rolled to face him. Two curved horns stretched from the beast's great head, and it grunted as it rose on two hooves. Backing away, Gasc covered his mouth, but no sound would come. "Have you got anything to eat?" it asked, seeming to shake the ground as it moved. The creature was full eight feet tall and corded with iron bands of muscle.

"Wh-what are you?" Gasc stammered.

"Once a man, exiled to this time and place," the creature's eyes were foggy and distant. "I've been cursed with the form of a minotaur."

"A time traveler? Ridiculous. Though I did hear something slosh in the river."

"Nearly drowned in that putrid runoff. Barely made it to your temple. In my world priests turn none away."

"Well, I wouldn't ask my father for favors. You're a monster!"

"I am no beast," The creature's lip trembled, falling to one knee. "But I'm hungry." His great chest heaved with the effort to draw breath. Though he appeared formidable, his ribs showed, fur was patchy, and muzzle discolored.

"Alright, I'll give you some food. But only if you go away."

"Go away. If only I could. I am not only cursed but banished so it seems I'm stuck here."

"Alright, well come around to the back." Gasc led the minotaur out of sight before bringing him an armful of bread, cheese, and a rare shank of salted beef his father saved for holidays. Setting the food

down, he watched the minotaur devour a sourdough loaf in seconds.

"So, you were cursed with this form? Are you telling me magic is real?"

"In my time, yes. A dark god gave me this form. Its demon servants can't be far behind." Gasc's face turned pale as the minotaur ate. "Hmmm, this is good. What is it?"

"Never heard of beef?"

"Well, I wasn't born a cow," the minotaur chuckled.

"What do I call you?"

"I've forgotten my name and much of my past. I was a great warrior, that's all I know."

"Built like that you'd be the greatest warrior in Ambryn! How about Marduk? That's the Sangoli God of war. Mard for short?"

"Mard. An ugly name."

"Well, you're not very pretty."

"And what's yours?"

"Gasc."

"Even worse," the minotaur belched an ungodly sound as he finished his meal.

"I've got an idea," Gasc snapped his fingers. "You've emptied our pantry, so we'll need coin if you want more food. Let's visit the Pleasure District's fighting pits. Stay here."

Gasc retrieved the mahogany chest he'd pilfered from the kitchen. He could've sold the family cutlery for food, but he had other ideas.

#

His father forbade him from the Pleasure District, for children were not

allowed without chaperones. Mard *looked* like an adult so Gasc would be permitted to enter. Both feeling out of place, he sensed a bond with this minotaur, however strange. Mard seemed to share his desire to drink life in full, or at least ‘eat the whole pantry.’ On a night like this, there was no time to waste in the pursuit of adventure and excitement.

Covered in a cloak, Mard’s horns were hidden, and Gasc led him across the canal to the fens, passing more academies, cathedrals, and brownstone manses. Finally, they reached Moortown, lying in the shadow of high kleptocracy, where pirates, rum-runners, and fur traders settled. Further down, mossy green walls and spiraling arena seats welcomed them to the fighting pits. Past Barrowdir’s western gates lay the frontier, perilous highways, and impassable countryside. Gasc had never been this far west, a land of fantasy and wonder in his eager mind.

Moortown was neither clean nor orderly. People and their hovels popped up at random. Cows ate cobble grass, and herders nursed hangovers in wagons of hay. Flagons of ale and bottles of brandy lined the streets, slipping from drunken fingers. Passing the medicated masses, they entered the fighting pits where a crowd raged more raucous than any in all the land. They slurred fight songs of Barrowdir, eager to see the games.

Arena platforms loomed above, upon which swarmed hordes of rabid spectators. Flanked by guards, clerks checked tickets for the games. Gasc led Mard to a conces-

sion stall on the main causeway. Golden helmets, miniature trumpets, and silken scarves of many colors lined the stall. Behind the counter was an Ambrish lady only a few years older than Gasc. He approached, clutching the mahogany chest he pilfered from his kitchen’s top drawer. Setting it on the counter, he nodded to her and gulped.

“Milady, I’ve some goods to sell. I see you take an appreciation for fine metals, and I need coin to purchase tickets for the games.”

“Not the usual request,” she grinned slyly, opening the chest. Silver shone in her green eyes as her smile grew. Gasc wringed his hands, feeling sweat drip off them. Mard leaned against the counter, sniffing about for food. The lad reached up and smacked the disguised minotaur on the shoulder.

“Usually I’m the one selling,” said the lady. “But you’ve got Sangoli silver here. I’ll give you fifty gold lilies for the cutlery.”

“Oh,” Gasc bit his lip. “Thank you, milady. That would be grand!”

“No ‘milady’ needed. My name is Adara.” Her smile was like summer sunshine, even tinged by irony, and he had no idea how to respond. No woman had ever treated him like an adult before. For once he’d combed back his hair and put on formal dress robes. He hadn’t worn them since confirmation. They were wool and hot as sin but made him look older.

“A-and I’m Gasc.”

“Here to see the games?”

“Well, yes. But I’ve got a fighter to

enter as well.”

“You better hurry then. Perhaps I’ll see you inside?”

Gasc nodded three times, before Mard pulled him away with a sack of gold in his hands. The minotaur rasped, “So, I’m doing some fighting, eh? What’s in it for me?”

“Food,” Gasc said at once. “And gold! What more could you want?”

Mard scratched his muzzle as Gasc ushered him down to the gladiator level.

Gasc found a seat halfway up the stands. He wanted front row but determined not to squander his gold. It was more than he’d ever had, and if he wanted to escape his father’s wrath, he’d have to save some for passage across the sea. For now, he watched the games, with a flagon of ale in hand. Tipping it back, he nearly wretched at the taste but looked around and saw other men drinking with ease. The second sip tasted better.

A bell tolled on the governor’s pavilion as the games began. The usual warm-up matches ensued, gladiators armed with tridents and nets stalked each other. When one was caught, they asked the governor and the crowd how to dispatch them. Gasc rose to his feet, shouting with glee. It was the first time he saw men fight like this and the emotion took hold of him.

Enraptured by the melee below, Gasc didn’t notice a female form sit next to him until he turned left. Nearly falling from his seat, he took a moment to catch his breath. Adara laughed at his side, slapping his knee, and tipping back her own flagon.

“Enjoying the games, Gasc?”

“Quite so,” he nodded, unable to look directly into her green eyes. They shone like beacons and made him feel warmth he hadn’t felt before.

“Now, our main event!” called the ringmaster. A squad of six warriors in glinting breastplates marched onto the sand. “Let’s hear it for your champions, the Golden Governors!” Cheers consumed the crowd like a wave of madness.

Gasc frowned, muttering, “I hope the golden pricks all get maimed.”

“What was that?” Adara asked. Gasc shrugged and pretended he hadn’t spoken.

With the backing of Barrowdiran nobles, they wore gilded helms plumed with horsehair and shining broadswords to match their armor. They almost resembled centurions of old, which Gasc had only read of in books.

Now on his third flagon, a gamble popped into Gasc’s mind, and he couldn’t prevent it from passing his lips. “I’ll wager forty gold at twenty-to-one odds that a Golden Governor gets bloodied this day.”

“Agreed,” Adara grinned. Gasc regretted his words almost immediately.

He watched with bated breath, turning to horror as the Golden Governors dominated their inferior opponents without losing a drop of blood. Gasc grabbed what gold pieces remained his, filling his pockets and left the sack for Adara.

“But wait,” she said. “There’s another contender.”

“A last-minute entry,” barked the ringmaster. “We’ve got one last challenger! It’s

the mystery giant Mard!”

Confused responses reverberated through the crowd: questions, groans and facepalms. Gasc leaned forward, wondering how they could place Mard against the governors in his first match. It was suicide!

The eight-foot mystery contender approached in his voluminous cloak. With a single tear, he ripped the cloth from his body, revealing sinewy muscle and naught but a loincloth beneath. A broadsword rested on his belt, which he drew with vigor, turning mad eyes on the governors.

Spectators watched, baffled and unresponsive as shock rolled over their faces. None had seen a creature like this before.

“Wh-what is Mard?” bellowed the ringmaster. “Are beasts allowed in this round?”

Gasc couldn’t look away, mouth agape, and Adara’s expression soured at once. The crowd grew silent, watching their gold slip away on the minotaur’s shoulders. Moments later, the six Golden Governors lay sprawled on the sand and Mard rested the blade on his shoulder. A flurry of onions, tomatoes and radishes hurled at the minotaur.

“There must be some mistake!” called the ringmaster. “This contestant cheated!”

Twelve sentries in chainmail bearing halberds trudged into the arena. Mard leveled his sword, facing new foes.

#

Gasc awoke on a damp stone floor, bathed in darkness. He shivered, hugging his legs in the corner of a cell. To his left, he saw Mard chained in the next cell over. Both eyes were bruised, one lip bloodied,

and sword cuts covered his fur. The beast had seen better days. How such a creature came to be, Gasc could not fathom. His world was one of men ruling others with coin and iron. There were no monsters, no beasts who fought like mad, until today.

Finding his feet, he moved to a window overlooking the Ystrin river. He gripped the sill as foul breeze washed over him. Gasc wondered what became of Adara or his gold. He won that wager but now he was penniless, imprisoned for entering a non-human combatant in the arena. He never imagined spending all the gold in one night. This was to be the first day in the rest of his life. The ship back across the sea would never come for him now.

“There is no justice,” he breathed. “No saints, no gods, nothing but savagery.”

Again, Gasc spied the red orb hovering in the night sky. It grew larger as he looked, leaving a bright trail, descending toward the city. Dread wrenched his gut, expelling three pints on the stone floor. Frantic eyes returned to see carriages roll past the river’s edge. Flickers of scarlet shone on the river’s glassy surface. Gasc watched as the crimson orb spewed flame in all directions. Hovering over the river, it hung in air for what felt like an eternity.

Gooseflesh covered Gasc’s body. The minotaur thrashed his head, groaning. In a blinding flash of light, the orb erupted, illuminating heaven above and the faces of onlookers below. Spiraling claws of flame lanced over the river, coalescing in a wheel of fire that spun on its side. Carriages

stopped in their tracks. Onlookers babbled as they approached the water's edge, pulled along as if by an invisible thread.

Dispersing as quickly as it appeared, night closed around the wheel of fire. Out from its depths dropped an irregular but rounded form. It slipped from the blaze to splash two hundred yards from Gasc's window. Only he seemed to see the shape, as he was closest, and no onlookers reacted. Closing his eyes, the otherworldly sight was burned into his memory, and his mind unraveled to explain. Gasc stared at the water, seeking out movement within Ystrin's gentle lap.

With the roar of a raging tempest, the wheel of fire collapsed in on itself until nothing remained but a yellow mist that hugged the river. Silver moonlight created a golden haze, obscuring what lay beneath. City-dwellers shrugged and returned to their carriages or evening strolls.

As folk turned away, a tentacle broke the river's surface, ascending skyward. Gasc stammered, trying to get the minotaur's attention. Shuddered gasps rippled through the onlookers, as the tentacle rose high above before slamming into the pier. Shards of wood erupted as the tentacle flailed, reaching higher on the bank. It wrapped its suction cups around the wheel of a carriage. The carriage was dragged, tearing up cobbles, prompting shrieks from nearby people. Its driver unhooked his horses just in time before the carriage was launched into the air over the Ystrin. It landed with a horrific splash, sinking from sight.

Waters churned where the carriage sank as tentacles appeared, crushing down. The family who'd been inside moments before scrambled up the bank. A wave of terror propelled the masses away, but the beast had a taste for carnage. More tentacles emerged, reaching to grab people by their ankles. With tremendous force, they were snapped back down the bank, into the roiling shallows.

A grunt at Gasc's side made him jump. He flinched as Mard flexed, shattering his manacles to pieces. He tore the chain that bound his hooves and slid off the wall. Cracking his iron-banded neck, he kicked down his cell door. Gasc's door burst open next, as Mard bent to rub his knees. Pained gasps escaped his muzzle, as Gasc saw the full extent of the beating he suffered from Barrowdir's guards. Mard shook his head to the side, indicating Gasc should move. Sidling as close to the wall as possible, he sucked in his breath.

Mard crouched and bowed like a sprinter before exploding forward. His horns blasted through the brick wall, and he found himself hovering in midair over the river before plummeting into the waters below. The boy peered out through a gap the size and shape of an eight-foot minotaur. As waters raged at his jump, Mard swam toward the beast. With a mind-cleaving squeal, the beast submerged. Gasc watched an ominous current cross to the space below his perch.

Gasc watched as a bulbous head emerged from the water. It was covered in a dozen blue orbs that focused on its prey.

The boy doubled over, as an odor like fetid flesh wafted from the thousand-toothed jaws of the beast. His feet froze to the floor as he stared into the many eyes of madness. Six tentacles reached out, converging on Gasc from different angles. He trembled as into the noxious maw opened wide.

Before the lipless mouth could wrap around his head, it recoiled, slamming shut short of his face. The beast reeled backward, tentacles framing the air around Gasc. Spinning on its side, the ovular beast thrashed as a darker form clung to its backside. Rolling, Gasc lost sight of the human-sized shape that hung to its round, smooth flesh. Before fighting the urge to vomit again, Gasc buried the fear deep within. He climbed out over the Ystrin, making his way across the dungeon wall, and dropping to the street beyond. Once there, he sprinted toward his father's temple.

What dark creature had appeared from the portal, Gasc could not say. It too was unlike anything he had seen before today. Perhaps it was linked to Mard, but Gasc knew only the minotaur could defeat such a creature.

His father waited for him outside the temple, sermon tome nestled under his arm, as he watched his son approach. "Quickly, inside with you!" he urged his son. Gasc slapped his father's hand away.

"I will not! My friend is fighting that beast. I'll not leave him to be killed by it."

"Your *friend*? What are you talking about? Come inside, we must pray!"

"Your god never warned of beasts from

other worlds. What good is he now?"

"Gascoigne! Get inside now!" His father reached again, still clutching the tome in his other hand. "I won't lose you too!"

"No!" cried the boy, slapping the tome from his father's hand. Its pages fell to the cobbles. His father shrieked, cradling the tome like an infant in his arms. His parchment was smeared with mud, ink running. Gasc shook his head, as a geyser of water plumed in the river nearby. He ran to the bank, watching the turmoil wreaked from Mard's underwater struggle. A wave engulfed the bank, revealing tentacles that clung to the earth with spiny cups. As all twelve eyes and tentacles appeared, Mard was hurled to tumble across the bank.

The lad looked over his shoulder, as the minotaur rose before yanking the spoke off a carriage wheel. He held it like a club as the beast thrashed again, unveiling fetid jaws, and yowling like an aquatic panther. Gasc sprinted up the bank, attempting to escape their next clash. A tentacle whipped around his calf as he was sucked toward the beast's jaws. Gasc stared into his doom, growing closer each second, before a scent of wet leather arrived.

Mard plunged the wooden spoke into a saucer-like eye, splattering his muzzle with grey goo. The resultant screech caused boy and minotaur to clamp their ears in agony.

"Begone, foul beast!" Gasc heard from the cobbles above. His father approached, wielding the temple's relic: an ancient longsword. In Eugene's other hand, he clutched his sermon book, like a paladin

defending his temple. Gasc knew his father was no warrior, and he tried to cry out, to warn him before it was too late.

Lured by the preacher's call, the beast lashed its tentacles to the bank and rolled forward with sickening speed. Its barbed cups caught hold of the preacher's robe, dragging him closer. The relic sword clattered to the cobbles. Its toothy maw gaped wide and Gasc whimpered in the mud. Before the jaws descended, a furry form closed the distance.

Snatching up the longsword, Mard plunged its tip into the creature's backside. Driving it up through tenuous flesh, the beast sheared their minds with one last wail. Writhing in a maelstrom of tentacles, the beast turned on Mard, flinging stones and tearing out his fur. The minotaur roared, slashing again to split the beast's twelve eyes down the middle.

#

Gasc's head was pounding as his vision returned. He searched his body and found no injury, defying all expectations. The otherworldly beast's rank maw still roared in his ears, its breath filling his senses. Shaking his head, he emerged from his pantry bedroom.

Entering the kitchen, he found his father wielding a rolling pin like a club before a towering mound of fur.

"Father, this is Mard!" Gasc cried. "He saved your life."

Mard sighed a cavernous noise, holding great paws out to either side.

"This beast?" Eugene growled, legs shaking. "There's no reason for any of this.

It's all just chaos. And was that otherworldly beast from your world as well?"

"For that I must apologize," Mard sighed. "It may've been sent by the demon god who cursed me."

"Demons? Well, you'll not find shelter here!"

A knock came at the main door downstairs. Gasc trotted down to see who it was, finding Adara the merchant joined by Eugene's whole congregation. For once their eyes were warm and glad, bearing bags and glittering valuables. Adara's green eyes shone brighter than all the rest.

"I've come to make a donation," Adara jingled a sack of coin before Gasc. "And so have the rest of these folk, for saving the city from that monster. Seems their prayers were answered."

"Father!" Gasc called up the stairs. "I think you're going to like this."

Behind the crowd of well-wishers, Gasc spotted the remains of the beast from the river. Its flesh had melted into the shore, and its skeleton laid half-dissolved like gelatin. Professors from the university across the canal studied the parts as beggars milled in the river's waters. Gasc squinted to see what the beggars stuffed into buckets: pale, squirming worms that resembled tentacles from the beast. ❖

“THE GLORIOUS ILLUSION”

by TIM McHUGH

“Fin!” Maude yelled with her booming voice, “Would you work a li’l faster? I need you inside.” Maude’s broad figure filled the doorway leading back into the inn. Her big hands were settled on her wide hips as she eyed Fin down.

He could hear the frustration edging her tone, but he didn’t blame her for yelling. He had been out in the stables for nearly an hour now. He didn’t enjoy shoveling horse shit in the muggy heat, but he just didn’t want to go back inside among the rowdy travelers. Fin much preferred the smell out here.

“Leave me alone, Maude! It’ll be done when it’s done.”

She gave him a dirty look, but disappeared back into the doorway, leaving Fin to his work. Maude was the proprietor of the inn, a broad, homely woman. She usually wouldn’t let employees yell at her, but she had a soft spot for Fin. She would look after him when she could.

Fin wasn’t just another employee. He had lived at the inn with his mother since he was born there about sixteen years before. His mother worked for Maude as a prostitute. When he was young, he enjoyed meeting all the travelers and hearing their stories. Ever since he was old enough to understand his mother’s profession, and

why the travelers spent so much time with her, he had been waiting for his opportunity to leave the ugly, three-story inn.

The sweltering heat in the stables encased Fin like a wool cloak. His shirt was sticking to his body and flies circled his head. He decided he had been out there long enough, so he quickly finished up with the shovel and went about tending to the horses in the stables. One horse, in particular, caught his attention, it was brown and shaggy, with uneven patches of hair, but Fin liked this one. It had a laid-back, even lazy demeanor. Fin often wished he could be just as worry-free.

He went and found some oats for the mare, and while she ate, he gently brushed its hair. It was calming, even in the heat.

“AH! I dun see no shitter out ‘ere.”

Two men stumbled out into the stables, interrupting Fin’s work. He shook his head in disgust as he watched them. One was short and boney looking, the other was nearly as tall as Fin, but with flabs of fat falling out of his shirt. Both were covered with sweat and grime.

“Outhouse is ‘round back,” Fin said with venom in his voice.

“Ohhhh ho ho ho! The pretty little boy is angry.” The short one had sticky-looking hair, a patchy beard, and wore

clothes spotted with yellow stains, “What’s the problem wit’ you little boy?”

Fin just ignored them. He met men like this almost every day at the inn. He tried to focus on the calm horse, but they wouldn’t relent. The small one took a shaky step towards Fin, “Smells like shit out here! You have an accident, stable boy?” he slurred, to a loud round of laughter from the big one.

Fin just kept his head down, kept brushing the horse.

“What a talented little man! You can brush the horse all by yourself!” the big one chimed in.

“Drunken shit,” Fin mumbled under his breath.

“What did you say, boy?” The fat man frowned and took a step forward, but the little one put his arm out to stop him. He just chuckled with a sly look in his eye. Fin didn’t feel too threatened by the pair, he was well over six feet in height and had a well-muscled frame.

“I said you’re a drunken shit,” Fin spit, dropping the brush and looking straight at them.

Now the short one stumbled forward until they were face to face. The tip of his head barely reached Fin’s chin, but the smell of ale wafting off his breath easily reached Fin’s nose.

“You look familiar lad,” his broad smile revealed a couple of brown teeth, “Your mother’s the one who works in the inn, yea?”

Fin’s hands curled into fists.

The drunk man continued, knowing

he was on to something, “I was thinking ‘bout having a go wit’ her! What’s she cost these days? A copper?” A chorus of laughter rang but Fin didn’t waste a moment; he grabbed the little man by the shirt, lifted him off his feet, and drove him to the ground. He wound up for a punch, but the fat one was on him in a moment. He tackled Fin off his friend and laid on top of him. Fin covered his face with his arms and tried to squirm free, but there was too much weight on him. The man unleashed a few punches on Fin until the skinny one pushed him away and joined in with a few kicks to his body.

“WHAT IS GOIN’ ON OUT ‘ERE?” Maude was back, with a butcher’s cleaver in her hand. The two men stood slowly and raised their arms in mock defeat.

“Leave!” Her face was hot with rage.

The two men chuckled and strolled out the front of the stables toward the road outside, sniggering amongst themselves.

“Fin! Are you okay?” She ran over as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Get away from me Maude!” He blinked fast to hold off the tears welling in his eyes.

“Fin!” His name rang again. This time it was his mother standing in the doorway. The look in her eyes was heart-crushing.

She was a slim woman in her mid-thirties with delicate features. Thick blonde curls with chestnut streaks fell to her slender shoulders. Water began pooling in her piercing blue eyes and she brought her hands to her mouth in a gasp when she saw blood running from Fin’s mouth.

He couldn't hold back the tears now that he saw her. He ran out the back, escaping as fast as he could, stopping only when he was behind the inn, out of everyone's sight.

I could kill that man. I'll kill both of them! Their words had torn at him, and Fin knew the man was right; he couldn't have her for a copper, but that smelly, little, drunk man could have his mother for two silvers if he wanted. He pounded his fist against the wooden wall as he thought about it. Splinters dug into his knuckles. He sat back against the wall where no one could see him, put his knees to his chest. He slowly pulled the splinters from his hands and let the tears fall freely.

A cool breeze cut through the wet heat that had hammered the village all day, lightly whipping Fin's short pale hair. He was sitting halfway up the west side of the hill, in a thick patch of grass. The whole village was settled around the bottom of the hill, in the meagre shadow of a crumbling fort that crowned it. Made of grey and brown stone, it was awkwardly designed, and reached no more than fifty feet in height. It belonged to Lord Maurin, who had held the land the village was built on for generations. Having seen the death of his daughter and his wife, he was the last of his line.

Fin looked over the rest of the village circling the hill, stout wooden structures were arrayed beneath him. Excluding the inn, none of the six buildings reached more than a single story. They were con-

nected by a web of rocky footpaths that cut between the dried-out grass. A dozen or so small hovels with straw roofs sat around the outskirts of the village. Beyond the hovels were tight rows of crops, adjacent to a small stream that ran along the dirt road. One could see straight across the entirety of the village even on flat ground.

Fin let the relieving wind ease the pain in his face as he watched the colors shift slowly across the sunset, just as he did almost every night. The sunset made even this town look beautiful. A handful of thinly branched trees were silhouetted by the dying light. The clouds were orange streaks across the soft blue sky, lit from beneath by the fiery glow of the sun which was just kissing the horizon.

Fin loved this spot because he could see for miles; grassy land unraveling into low hills before his eyes. When he was peeking over the horizon, his back to the inn, he felt hopeful. *I'll find a way out of this town eventually. I'll take my mother with me and we'll finally be free.*

Light footsteps and heavy breathing caught Fin's attention. He looked over his left shoulder to see Ned and Wil bent over, trudging up the hill. "Fin from the inn!" Wil yelled as they approached. Fin hated when people called him that. He took it as a jape at his mother, but he knew Wil meant no harm. He stood to greet them as they settled in front of him, blocking his view of the sky.

Wil was a head shorter than Fin but had thick shoulders from working in his father's forge as a blacksmith. He never

missed an opportunity to point out how strong he was from swinging a hammer all day.

Ned gave Wil a nudge to shut him up. Ned was the Baker's son, he stood close in height to Fin but was thin and lanky with a thin mop of brown hair. Ned was the great conciliator of the town, making friends out of everyone. He even brought Fin and Wil together years ago. When they were younger Fin couldn't stand his conceited nature, but Ned helped him see through that facade.

Fin went to say something, but lost his thought as he heard an odd thumping in the distance.

"Do you hear that?" he asked, putting up a finger to keep them quiet. The thumping grew louder and closer, until it turned to a thundering sound that broke the light whistle of the wind.

It was a column of armored knights, at least twenty, riding two abreast, and a hundred or so foot-soldiers and archers marching to a low drumbeat in their rear. The ricocheting orange light bounced off their armor, making it look like a low glow was emanating from the steel itself. The shields slung over their saddles were painted a hundred different colors; bright reds, deep blues, dozens of shades of green, and orange, and purple, all with glorious designs and sigils.

"Wow," breathed one of the boys.

Fin kept his stormy grey-blue eyes fixed on the spectacle. They watched in silence until the knights turned to silhouettes in the distance.

"I've never seen anything like that," Fin finally said.

They both gave him an odd look. Fin was confused. "What?"

"You didn't see the knights pass through earlier today?" Wil said, "They were hard to miss, Fin."

Two columns of knights in one day? What is happening? Fin's face flushed. After the fight, he had walked far from the village, and spent most of the day in some nearby forest before returning.

"I was, uh, out most of the day on an errand for Maude," He said.

Ned gave him a pitiful look. "You don't gotta lie to us Fin, we heard about the fight from your mother."

"You talked to my mother?"

Wil jumped in, "We had to! We couldn't find you!"

"And ya know if we had been in the stables with you, the gods wouldn't 'ave been able to save those drunks." Ned said.

Fin grinned.

"I have been spending a lot of time in the forge," Wil said, flexing his arms, "They wouldn't have stood a chance."

Fin let out a chuckle, "And what good are all those muscles, when they're all the way down there." He squinted down at Wil as if he were two feet tall.

"HA! But seriously," Wil said, "We got your back."

"I know, I know." Fin said with a smile waving them off, "So, what'd you need me for?"

The two of them shared a big smirk. "Well?"

“Fin, why do ya think there are so many knights ridin’ through?” Ned’s muddy eyes were beaming.

Wil jumped in before Fin could respond, “We heard the butcher say there’s some issue goin’ on with the big lords! And those knights were ridin’ out to fight!”

Fin’s eyes grew wide, “and...?”

“Annnnnnd we’re gettin’ outta this town!” Wil yelled.

Fin’s stomach tingled, “Ned? What’s it mean?”

Ned jumped in with a steady, but excited voice, “Butcher said they’ll be roundin’ up troops, so me and Wil sat at the bottom of the hill all day watchin’ for Maurin”

Fin felt his heart beat loud, he felt the grass under his feet, he felt the steady breeze, and his smile grew as he sensed where this was going.

“We saw him a few hours ago,” Ned continued, “He and his squire were runnin’ all around carryin’ spears and swords out from the armory. “

That was enough to confirm what they all had prayed for; they were going to war. Fin didn’t know how to fight, and neither did Ned nor Wil. They didn’t know what the lords were fighting about, or even what their names were. But they knew war happened at least once a generation and everyone knew what it meant. It meant glory and adventure. Fin could feel that new life hanging right in front of him.

His eyes were sparked with excitement. He didn’t know what to say. Before he could think of the words, a laugh

escaped his mouth. The others laughed too and soon the dying day was renewed with their joy.

The boys shoved one another, talked about what weapons they’d use, and how hard Maurin might train them. They talked dreamily about the famous knights they might meet, the enemies they might slay, and the wonders they would see. Every song and story they had ever heard told of boys from humble beginnings, rising to a heroic destiny. Why should real life be any different?

Even after darkness fell over the sky, the boys yelled battle cries and laughed, lit only by the pale moonlight. Stars specked the sky one by one until the wind finally grew too cold and someone suggested they go home. But as they walked down the hill, they could feel the air in their little town teeming with excitement.

Fin was euphoric on his walk home, his mind racing with excitement. But as soon as he stepped back into the inn, that energy crumbled. The main room was lit by torches set along the low walls. A few travelers were eating or drinking in the common room, all sitting on benches at one of the four long tables. The smell of lamb was drifting in from the kitchens, but Fin wasn’t hungry. Maude gave him a sorrowful nod as he entered, but he ignored her, heading straight for the stairs.

When the inn wasn’t full, he was allowed to sleep in his own small room instead of with his mother. He took the steps two at a time to reach the landing,

turned down the hall, and headed towards his door. He slowed a bit when he passed his mother's room, fearing he might hear a man's voice, but he didn't stop, just continued down the hall until he came to his own. He pushed a long iron key into the lock and twisted it. The door fell open with a screech from the hinges. He walked across the dark room and lit his single candle. The light revealed a bone bare room. There was a bed with a lumpy straw mattress with a small table beside it.

Fin closed the door, then immediately pushed the bed aside. He went to his knees and ran his hand over the wooden panels. He found the loose plank and pulled it free, revealing his only possession of value tucked safely into the floor, wrapped in a white linen cloth.

He picked up the bundle, sat on the bed, and laid it next to him. He unwrapped it slowly, enjoying every bit of the ecstasy rising in him. Tossing aside the cloth, he stared admiringly at his weathered short sword. The flickering light outlined a few chinks in the edges, and some patches of rust, but Fin treasured it all the same. It was a proper weapon for a proper soldier. No one in town, save for Maurin, had a weapon like this.

Fin had cherished this sword since the moment he got it, but it had always been a sobering reminder of how disappointing his life had been. He would wonder long into the night if he would ever get the chance to wield the beautiful weapon. But he knew now that he would have that chance, and this sword was no longer a sad

reminder, but a means, to snatch the life he wanted. He basked in the light, bouncing off the steel, deep in his imagination.

He thought of the night he had received it. He was just a boy, playing with his mother and some stranger in the common room of the inn. The man was telling him stories of adventures he had been on, battling pirates across the seas, fighting as a mercenary in foreign wars, becoming a knight defending the kingdom. Fin was entranced by the man. It gave him hope to hear that someone in *his* inn was so accomplished. Why couldn't he have a life of adventure, too? After a few hours of stories, he presented the sword to Fin as a gift. It was a brilliant moment. He charged Fin to use it to defend the weak, and Fin had treasured it ever since, waiting for the moment he could stay true to his vow.

Two light knocks on the door broke the image in his mind. "Fin?"

It was his mother. He sighed and called back, "Come in".

The door swung open to reveal his mother. Even in the dim light, her blue eyes seemed to shine. He noticed some cracks in her beauty; wrinkles around her eyes and the few extra pounds she had gained on her hips.

She crossed the room and sat next to him on the bed. He flinched as she touched his bruised face.

"Fin.."

"What do you want?" He wouldn't meet her gaze.

"I heard news of the war." His eyes widened, he had expected her to ask about

the fight.

“And?”

“And I’m worried.” Her voice drifted softly through the air as if her words were plucked from the strings of a harp.

“Of course you are.” Fin shook his head with disgust. He sensed where this talk was going.

“Fin, I don’t want you to go, you’re too young. “

“Too young? I’m stronger than every man in this town. “

“You’re too young to understand what you’re getting into. “

“Ahhhh, I see what this is...” Fin stood up and paced across the room, sword in hand, “you need me ‘round here so you can have someone to control in your life,”

“No Fin, I need you here because I love you. “

He rolled his eyes. “You love me? If you loved me, you wouldn’t be trying to stop me! You would be happy that I’m finally about to win some glory, to have a good life!”

She stood now, and with a sorrowful edge to her voice, she yelled, “You’re a naïve boy! There is no glory where you want to go!”

Fin couldn’t even speak through the rage that was building in him. *How dare she try to take this away from me!*

“I have met men who have seen war Fin! There is no—”

“Oh, I know you’ve met plenty of men.” Fin interrupted.

Her bottom lip began to quiver. She sat back on the bed and took a deep, shud-

dering breath.

Fin ground his teeth nervously. “Mother,” he said with a softer tone, “I have a chance to be a hero or a knight. Don’t you want that for me?”

His mother steadied her breathing and assumed a frosty look, staring through him with glistening sapphire eyes. He began to shift nervously, waiting for her to look away, but she didn’t falter. Finally, after long moments, she spoke. “If you leave here, you will die.” Her steady tone cut deep. So deep that Fin could feel the blood pounding in his temples.

His hands curl into tight fists and his face turned red. Fin stammered through the rage, then spit out, “And how would a *whore* know that?”

His mother gasped as if a knife had pierced her. Her whole body seemed to slump under the weight of that word. Her eyes found the floor, no longer able to meet his gaze. Fin’s heavy breathing was the only thing that broke the silence.

“Fin..” she muttered quietly as tears ran over her cheeks, “Everything I do is for you.”

“Get out.” He almost choked on the words.

Tears were falling fast over her cheeks but Fin just waited in silence for her to leave. Instead, she stood and closed the distance between them. She reached up to touch his cheek, and for a moment, he let her. He felt the warmth of her hand and closed his eyes.

“Fin... please...” she said through light sobs.

She let out a painful groan as he pulled away and walked over to the bed, sitting with his back to her.

She hesitated for a moment between the bed and the door but realized anything else she could say would only make it worse. She left the room defeated without another word, leaving Fin in the cold silence, running his fingers over the flat of the blade.

The street in front of the inn was crowded with all the townspeople, cheering and crying, giving a proper send-off to their brave troop of twenty-four young soldiers. Most of the men were younger than thirty, a few were older, though still fit enough to fight. Maurin was the only one on horseback. He rode a grey shaggy warhorse. The animal was slow and well past its prime, much like Maurin himself.

Shoulder-length white hair streaked out from under the knight's half helm. His armor was solid steel but a poor fit for his deteriorating figure; his muscle had faded to fat in his long years alone. His green cloak trimmed with yellow silk did, however, give him an air of regality.

The boys and men were outfitted with mismatched steel from Maurin's armory, most wore thick leather vests, and dented great helms or half helms, a few pairs of greaves and gauntlets were dispersed among the group as well. About half had spears with dull steel or wooden points, and a few, including Fin, had rusted swords with deep chinks. The remainder used whatever they could get their hands

on; hammers, kitchen knives, shovels.

Fin was placed next to Ned in the middle of the pack. He stood proud with his chin high; his half helm was an ill fit and fell over his eyes when he shifted, his leather vest trapped all the heat from the oppressive sun, and his sword, looped through his rope belt, had not been properly cared for over the years, but still, he felt a proper knight. The crowd was cheering for him. He was no longer a stable boy, no longer a boy at all. He was off to fight for all the people that couldn't protect themselves. He was going to fulfill the vow he made all those years ago when he had received the sword. His eyes were glittering with pride and he did his best to look enigmatic as Maurin said his final words to the townsfolk.

The aged knight unsheathed his sword, holding it to the cloudless sky. The sun bounced off the steel in every direction, and at that moment, Maurin was no longer the old man on top of the hill. He was their leader.

"It's with a heavy heart that we leave our home!" He boomed through the feeble cheers, "But we leave to defend the crown from evil! To stop usurpers from reaping what we have honestly sowed!"

"Fin!"

His mother's sad voice cut through the humming noise; Fin heard it off to his left but he remained stone. There was no space for emotion where he was headed, no space for doubt, and she thought he was going to die. Fin didn't spare her another look, he kept his eyes on Maurin.

“We will defend our town! We will defend our country! And we will return, blades running red with the blood of our foes!”

Chills ran through Fin as the words filled him with a deep purpose, an unbreakable ambition. He looked over and locked eyes with Ned. His friend was holding a wooden spear carved into a splintering point. A kitchen knife hung at his waist, and he wore an odd assortment of armor. He had a great helm from Maurin with its visor turned up, a leather vest like Fin’s, and a kitchen pan tied to each shoulder. The look on his face matched Fin’s.

Ned pounded his chest with his spear hand, Fin returned the gesture.

“On me, men!”

Maurin turned and spurred his horse into a proud trot. The men fell in line, marching in erratic order, leaving the cheering crowd and the desolate little town in their wake. They headed for the clear horizon, a brave band of warriors, off to claim their glory.

Fin was no longer the proud knight as he stood ten rows back from the front line. Knights and commanders were riding through the rows, chaotically ordering their



men. Fin felt a deep ache in his legs from the leagues he had walked over the past two weeks. He had eaten nothing but salt beef and had slept scarcely four hours each night. It had taken a noticeable toll on him. The bags under his eyes had grown darker each day, his shoulders were constantly slumped, and he started standing with his back slightly hunched over.

A warm wind was picking up from the east, snapping at the long green grass between the two armies. He could make out dozens of banners as he stared at the enemy across the field. Most were red, but they fluttered so quickly in the wind, he couldn't make out the device. When he squinted, he thought he could see some splotches of blue on the red field but it wasn't clear enough to recognize the enemy.

The knights under those banners were much easier to see; sitting tall on their dreadful steeds, archers with bows as tall as they were, and heavily armored foot-soldiers. Fin couldn't see the extent of his own army, but he doubted they looked half as fierce.

He felt his hands shaking and forced himself to look across his body to his left, hoping it would calm him to see his allies. Out towards the center was the heart of their forces, hundreds of mounted knights, heavily armored cavalry, and well-equipped foot soldiers. They looked formidable, but as Fin examined the surrounding men, he noticed the glamor fading as the edges fell away to the common folk. There were lines of archers standing in the front, expertly

ordered, wearing matching light armor. They seemed skilled enough as they were tightening their bow strings and nocking arrows. But behind them was a ragged force of pikemen and footsoldiers standing shoulder to shoulder, forming an unbalanced shield wall.

A deafening horn electrified the air, sending a tingling shot through Fin's spine. The enemies started marching forward, slowly overtaking the horizon. Their first line, directly in front of him, was on horseback, with lances so tall, Fin didn't understand how they didn't tip over off their horses.

"Stand tall men!" Some lord on horseback was riding in circles yelling, "Don't give a foot! You are the last line between those usurpers and the crown! You are strong men! You are immovable!"

Fin didn't even hear the roar from the surrounding men. He certainly didn't feel immovable. Maurin was riding around their own group, making sure everyone was in a tight line. Fin looked back to his left, as he turned his head down the line, he locked eyes briefly with Wil a couple of feet away. The look in his eyes scared Fin. Wil was always confident, usually cocky, but he looked like a child in his oversized helm. It seemed as if he were silently pleading to Fin for some kind of help, but Fin didn't know what to do, so he just looked away.

Two horn blasts cut the air again and the lances across the field lowered, sharp points aimed at their shield wall. The cavalry knights across the way spurred their

horses, quickly forming into a tight wedge, and began closing in on them. *Why are their knights not riding at our center? Shouldn't they be going after our knights?* He didn't understand the tactics, but it was too late now for doubt. He shook the thoughts from his head and told himself to focus on what was in front of him. He tried to put aside his fear, to get his blood pumping, "COME ON!" he yelled, "COME ON!" A couple of tears were welling in the corners of his eyes as he screamed. The enemy was getting close, booming across the field, kicking billows of dust into the air behind them.

A thousand loud snaps filled the air, followed by a haunting whistle, Fin looked around startled. He noticed everyone was looking up. He followed their gaze and saw a volley of arrows striping the sky. They inched across the cloudy backdrop, seeming to hang in the air for long moments, then they tipped back to earth and fell like rain all around the enemy; horses screeched as they flipped across the ground, throwing knights from their backs. Loud crunches sounded as men in heavy plate smashed into the dirt. Some horses veered off course, their riders slumping in their saddles. Screams sounded throughout the battlefield as the tight wedge turned to disorder.

The second volley took flight, igniting some hope in Fin. *They might not even make it to us!* And that hope grew as the steel rain fell again over the enemies, causing more damage. But as fast as his confidence had blossomed, it faded; Fin heard trum-

pets sound from behind, and the archers quickly retreated behind the wall. *No! What are you doing? They're still coming!* The oncoming wedge was reforming now; in a matter of seconds, it was as if the arrows had never taken flight. The approaching wave grew so close that Fin could make out the sigils on their shields. The pounding hooves rang in his ear. The ground shook beneath him. They got closer and closer until the laces punched into the shield wall.

Horses wailed as they were stuck with spears. Knights were pulled from their horses and savagely stabbed. Fin was forced back as the line in front was pushed onto their heels. He looked all around, waiting for the enemy to reach him. He peered to his left and saw Ned doubled over, a spear sticking out of his stomach.

That's my friend. He wasn't able to comprehend the scene, he didn't know what to do. Wide-eyed, he shot his glance forward; he saw a knight covered in blood swipe off the arm of a man grabbing his reins. The gap was widening in front of him as the shield wall lost all order. Men were yelling and punching and stabbing and screaming. Blood misted in the air and cries of pain were ringing. All the glorious armor was dripping red, the beautiful shields were shattered and splintered.

A man on horseback broke through the line in front of Fin with a bloody warhammer hoisted in the air. Fin was standing in the ready position that Maurin had taught them, but barely moved as the hammer came down on a man in front of

him. His helm cracked and his skull caved in, sending a cascade of blood splattering across Fin's chest. The horse was just a few feet from Fin, and the knight was still trying to pull his hammer free, so Fin stepped forward, brought his sword back, and thrust it into the horse's neck. A nasty, high-pitched screech erupted from the animal's mouth. Fin pulled his sword free just as the horse reared.

The knight on its back eyed Fin immediately as he tried to gain control of the reins. The man looked like a demon in dark armor, the sun illuminating swollen rivers of blood tumbling across the black field of his chest plate. His eyes were hidden in the shadows of his visor, but Fin could feel them on him all the same. Fear clutched him as he eyed the two-handed hammer; the fine wooden shaft was at least four feet in length, reinforced with metal rings. The head of the hammer was a beastly chunk of heavy steel. One end was blunted, made to deal out crushing blows, and the other was carved into a deadly spike. Fin doubted he could even lift something so heavy.

The warrior freed his feet and jumped skillfully from the dying horse. He spun the hammer in his hands and strutted straight for Fin, forcing his attention to shrink to nothing but the distance between them.

The vision of the fearsome knight was too much for him, so he turned to run. But the crowd was being pushed together, creating a suffocating wall of bodies behind him. Unable to retreat, Fin turned back in

time to see the hammer coming across at him. He covered his head with his arms and the blunted edge of the hammer crushed his left shoulder. The force knocked him from his feet, slamming his body hard against the rocky ground.

Dazed, he tried to pull his sword free, but it was pinned under him. He looked up, expecting to see death hurling down on him, but the enemy had moved on. Chaos closed around him as he tried desperately to push himself to his feet, but two struggling men tripped over him, flattening him on his stomach. He lost the strength to turn over as the pile grew on top of him.

There was nothing to do. His left side burned with pain, and he couldn't move. With a dismal sigh, he stopped struggling. His face was flat against the dirt, he could still see the bloody scene sideways before him. His head was pounding, and he just couldn't take it anymore, so he closed his eyes and let the nightmare fade to black.

Fin woke with a streak of pain down his arm. He couldn't breathe under the immense weight on his back. *Where am I?* Blood was dripping all over him, he didn't know from where. *The war.* Terror took hold of Fin and he frantically shook, trying to get out.

"AHHHHHHHHH," he screamed through the pain, "HELP ME!" he pleaded with a hoarse voice.

His cry was answered a few moments later as the weight was lifted. His lungs gratefully filled with air as light broke through. Fin turned over to see a blurry

man bending over him.

“You’re ok, lad.”

Fin sat up slowly and looked out over the battlefield. His vision was shaky but he made out some shapes. Bodies were everywhere; lifeless eyes staring in every direction, an arm sliced clean off at the elbow, a horribly crushed skull leaking red. Men were wandering around, picking the bodies clean of armor and weapons, stabbing those who still clung to life. And there were crows everywhere, squalling a shrill noise, pecking at eyes.

The stench overwhelmed Fin, causing his head to swim. The man who had pulled him out was saying something, but he couldn’t hear over the ringing. He felt a water skin pushed to his mouth, and he sipped deep, then he pulled away, threw up, and fell backward, closing his eyes.

Fin roused again as the sun was setting. The striking orange sky did nothing to ease the horror of the scene. Arm throbbing and head pounding, he remembered what had happened. One thought cut through the pain and fear, and he pushed himself to his feet as fast as he could, snagging his sword before he went. He stumbled around the carnage, tears in his eyes, looking for Ned.

He was looking deep into every face he passed, trying to find his friend. He staggered towards the spot where he knew Ned was, kicking over soaked bodies as he went, staring into their faces. He couldn’t find him.

“NED!” He screamed as if he could

answer.

He fell to his knees in anguish. As he looked through the veil of tears he spotted a body that caught his eye. He crawled to it, it wasn’t Ned. It was a young boy though, probably around Fin’s age. The boy had fine charcoal-colored armor with detailed silver metalwork adorning the edges with a sprawling design. The shield strapped to his arm was heavy oak, dotted with iron studs. It was painted a deep purple with dual white chevrons. Fin wracked his brain to place the sigil, but he couldn’t. *Was he an enemy?* Fin had no way of telling which side this boy had been fighting for.

Why am I here? Fin realized he didn’t truly know what this war was about. He heard that they were loyalists, but he never really thought about what that meant. He had heard that the other side was evil, but he couldn’t remember why. He had been dreaming of killing these people for weeks now, and why? Because they were from a different town? Served a different lord?

Fin heaved as nausea pounded him, but his stomach was empty. He had to get away from all this. He stumbled to his feet and ran, fast as his legs would take him, tripping over bodies as he went, clinging tight to his sword. He ran in the direction of the camp, hoping he could find Wil, or Maurin, or anyone he recognized.

He heard loud noises rising as he approached the sea of canvas pavilions. Sounds of music filled the improvised town of tents and spitfires. Fin was puzzled as he looked around to see men drink-

ing, singing, and cheering. *Why were they so happy?* He was astonished, they were actually *celebrating*. Fin couldn't believe it. They were celebrating as if it were a victory.

Fin wandered through the town for what felt like a long time. He bounced between tents, some were ragged and small, some seemed as large as the inn at home. He slipped between groups of rowdy men covered with grime and ale stains. He was approached by women in flattering clothing who seemed terribly interested in him, until they realized he had no coin. A whirlwind of cursing, wagering, cheering, and fighting swirled around him. The revelry trapped him like a strong wind, hammering at his senses; it was all he could hear, all he could see, he was desperate for shelter.

"Fin!"

The sound of his name startled him. He looked all around, *Someone from home is here*. He turned in a frantic circle but saw no one. *Had I imagined that?*

"Fin!"

Ned?

No, it wasn't Ned. He eyed a figure running towards him, stocky and short. It was Wil. Relief filled him as his friend wrapped his arms around him, pulling him tight.

"I thought you were dead, Fin."

"Me too," Fin said in a shaky tone, he wrapped his right arm around his friend, letting his left dangle at his side. Wil tried to pull back, but Fin wouldn't let him go, just as you wouldn't leave shelter during a storm.

Wil eyed the arm hanging at Fin's left side, "Oh Gods," The look on his face wasn't reassuring, "what happened?"

Fin didn't answer, just bit his lip. His adrenaline was starting to fade. The pain flowed into his body like a river poking through a dam.

"Come on, I can help," Wil said without his usual confidence.

The two boys were sitting against the trunk of a thick ash tree in the woods just off the edge of camp. Wil was tying a stick to Fin's left arm with loose pieces of rope, trying to set it so it would have a chance at fully healing.

"Have you seen anyone else? Maurin?" He paused for a moment, scared to ask, "Ned?"

Wil noticed tears well in Fin's eyes and understood what it meant. He shuttered but kept his tears in.

Fin stared off to his right, looking down at his sword. He began to sob as he thought about his mother.

"It's okay Fin. You're okay,"

"She tried to tell me," Fin said through the tears

"Who?"

"She tried to warn me and all I did was hurt her." Fin let the sorrow pour out. It was all gone. His new life was poison and there was nothing left for him at home.

Wil patted his back. Then noticing the sword, he tried to start a conversation. "Is that from Maurin?"

Fin sniffled, "No, it's mine."

"It's yours? Where'd you get that?"

"It was a gift."

"From who?"

A silence fell over them until Fin spoke again. "Years ago a man came to the inn. He talked with me and my mother. He had these great tales about his adventures. And he gave me this sword."

"He just gave you a sword?"

Fin had never thought about how unlikely a gift this was. Forged steel was expensive, but he had always assumed the man was just chivalrous.

"Do you think it was payment?" Wil asked.

"What?" Fin shot a questioning glare at Wil. *Payment? What is he talking about?*

"Nothing, never mind,"

Fin thought for a moment, then he shuddered as he realized what Wil had meant. The sword was *payment* for his mother.

"No." Fin looked at the sword again with a twisted face. It was a lie. And it always had been.

He sat there, unable to move or speak for long minutes. Wil said something, but Fin didn't hear. He couldn't hear the noises coming from the camp, he couldn't hear the crickets singing in the forest. He just looked at the sword that he had treasured for so long. He put his head on his knees as waves of embarrassment and shame crashed over him.

A shrill screech cut through his trance and Fin shot his head up. The sound had come from the edge of camp. He got to his feet, grabbed the sword, and ran toward

camp.

"Fin! Wait!"

Fin slipped between a row of tents, and immediately saw a man, twenty yards away, laying on top of a woman. She was screaming, pleading for help. *He's forcing himself on her.* Fin looked around, a few people stood close by, but no one made a move to stop it.

Anger engulfed every other feeling in Fin. He strutted over to the man with reckless abandon. This was no grand adventure, but he wouldn't stand by and watch *another* person get hurt. The woman looked up at him from the dirt with fear-stricken hazel eyes as he approached.

"Help me, please!" she cried.

Fin pointed his sword at the man with a fire burning in his glare. "OFF OF HER! NOW!" His feet were planted firmly into the ground, he breathed heavily as the man looked up at him.

"HA!" The man stood up, he was half a head taller than Fin and twice as wide, "Be careful with that thing!" The man swayed as he tried to stand, grimy black hair was plastered to his forehead and a sweaty smell wafted off of him. He looked down at Fin with flickering eyelids, the smell of ale was strong on his breath. The crying girl squirmed, her tangled hair clutched in his meaty right hand.

"Walk away now!" Fin felt no fear. He had nothing to lose.

The man smiled, displaying crooked yellow teeth, his head bobbing up and down as he fought to stay upright through the drunken haze. Without warning, he

threw the girl down and brought around his right fist. He missed Fin's jaw by a couple of inches and lost his footing. He stumbled a couple of feet before hitting the ground. The man turned over on his back and Fin stood ready to defend the girl. But the man just rested his head in the dirt and closed his eyes. Laughs from a few bystanders rang.

Fin stood still for a moment in shock. He looked from the slumbering drunk over to the girl and his senses came back to him. He quickly helped the girl to her feet and dragged her away from the scene by her arm.

"Where can I take you?" He asked her.

She couldn't get the words out through her heavy sobs. Fin stopped and put his hands on her shoulders, "Take a breath."

"Come on, let's get out of here!" Wil whispered forcefully looking behind them.

Fin put up a hand, signaling him to wait.

The girl took in a shuddering breath, then said, "I have a tent," She sniffled, "back with the camp followers."

She started to lead them away, but Fin stood still. He took a moment to look down at his sword. He turned it slowly in his hand, looking at every dent, every shining patch of rust. Then he let it fall from his hands. It clanged across the ground before resting in the dirt.

"Let's go," he said. She led the way, Fin at her side. Wil followed nervously in the rear checking over his shoulder.

They finally stumbled into the follower's camp after ten minutes of walking. It was mostly women, but also some older men following the army to sell wine, ale, armor, food, or other goods to the soldiers. They found her small white canvas tent, erected over a patch of packed dirt. Wil waited outside while Fin made sure she was situated inside.

"What's your name?" he said, trying to calm her down.

She sniffled, then choked out, "Alice."

"I'm Fin." She wouldn't meet his gaze. "You're safe Alice, no one's goin' to hurt you."

He spotted a metal bucket of water in the corner of the small space with a few wooden cups stacked next to it. He scooted over and filled one up. She was sitting in the opposite corner, knees pulled to her chest. Her eyes were red around the edges, and she was trying desperately to mat down her tangled, light brown hair. He was startled by how young she looked, she couldn't have been older than he was.

Fin handed her the cup and settled in next to her, wincing as he situated his left arm.

"What happened to you?" She sniffled.

He looked down over his arm, it was stiff and bent in an odd way.

"The battle."

"Are you a knight?"

Fin let a sad chuckle escape his mouth, "Do I look like a knight to you?"

She looked up at him, and after a moment he met her gaze, he noticed mossy green specks in her hazel eyes. "Well, every

man I meet tells me he's a knight, so I'm not exactly sure how they look."

Fin rose his chin, smiling slightly. "You know, I thought if I went to war I'd become a knight." He picked up a twig from the ground and rolled it in his fingers, "But I just lost my friends, and my arm. And my mom..."

"You lost your mom?" She asked. Her voice was soft and calming. Sitting with her made him remember the hill back home, the light blue sky, the golden clouds, the cool breeze.

"She told me not to come here." He paused, "and I said some things, some horrible things, to her."

She scooted closer to him, "What'd you say?"

"I thought she just wanted to hold me back," He kept his eyes on the ground, "so I called her a whore." He flinched as he said the word.

"Why would she want to hold you back?"

"I don't know."

"So why can't you go back to her?" She put a hand on his shoulder, "You had a fight is all."

He cracked the twig between his fingers, "You don't understand..." He paused, his ears felt hot, "She's a prostitute."

He felt a heavy weight on him as he said it, but Alice just chuckled.

"What's funny?"

"I'm a prostitute," she said through an empty smile. "I've been called worse."

Fin looked up at her wide-eyed, his face turning red. He should have realized

that before. "Why do you do it." He asked her, "Don't you think you could do something better?"

A confused, angry look twisted her face. "Do you really think I chose to do this? You think that I enjoy it?"

"Well no. But you're giving up your dignity."

She scoffed at him, "I bet you'd be starved to death by now if your mother had her dignity."

He was silenced.

"I don't have any parents. I don't have a husband. I can't read or write. I'm not lucky enough to have dignity."

He touched her shoulder, "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

She grew tense under his touch, "We aren't just whores," she said weakly.

"No, there's nothing wrong with you." He meant that.

His stomach twisted in guilt. He pulled his hand away and just looked at the ground, letting a deep sigh flow from his lips.

"I have to leave," he said, "Are you goin' to be okay?"

She smiled slightly, though there was no light in it. "Yes Fin, thank you."

He pushed himself to his feet and ducked under the canvas flap of the tent. Wil was bouncing up and down on his toes, arms wrapped around himself outside. He glanced up at Fin with a questioning look, "So?" Wil said, "What now?"

"Follow me." Fin said with steady determination, "I know where we're supposed to be."

“Where are you going!?” Wil yelled as he followed Fin towards the forest.

“I’m leaving,” Fin said through a smirk. He had a canvas sack hoisted over his shoulder filled with bread and water he had scavenged from the follower’s camp. They were at the edge of the forest now, near the ash tree they had sat under.

Wil chased after him and turned him by the arm, “They hang deserters, Fin.”

Fin pushed the arm off and continued to walk, “They aren’t goin’ to notice we’re gone, Wil.”

“We? I’m not coming with you!”

“Yes you are, I packed food for you.”

“Fin! This is serious.”

Fin turned with a fiery look, “You don’t think I know that? Ned is out there dead, buried under piles of bodies.” Fin choked on his words. He took a breath, gathered himself, and continued, “Do you know why we are trying to kill those people, Wil, do you know what Ned died for?”

Wil just looked at the ground, “We have a purpose here Fin.”

“What is that, Wil? To kill innocent people so we can be knights? Is that what you want?”

His silence was a loud enough answer.

“We had family back home, we had Ned.” Fin pulled the bag over his right shoulder. “We’re leaving this place.”

“Yeah? To go where?”

“We’re going home. I still have my mother. You still have your parents.”

“You want that life back? Wil yelled at him.

“Yes. I do.” Fin said with a steady tone.

Fin turned and stared off into the black forest. He stepped forward, trudging into the shadows of the thick branches. He didn’t know where to find the road, only that Wil was at his back. He pushed on, deep into the darkness, hoping they would find their way home. ❖

END TRANSMISSION