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Tales by Hearthlight

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of Graduate English Studies

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

M.A. in English with a focus in Creative Writing

By

Ronald Pizzini

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Abstract

The following pages are a collection of short stories that fit together to tell the story of a world in peril and a manic wizard doing his best. My ultimate goal is to publish my first novel, and while these stories should work independently of each other, they will also serve as the foundation for a much longer work.

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Before it All

It was dark in the town of Black Hollow and the wind played lullabies with the rickety timbers in Katarina's home. Candlelight danced along the whitewashed walls and the crackling fire warmed the room. It was a cozy home, and tonight it welcomed the children of the village into its bosom. They were gathered around the hearth, some lying down and some sitting upright, all of them looking expectantly toward the matronly woman with her back to the fire.

For several years now, Katarina had been the town storyteller in Black Hollow. She told the stories her Mother had told her, which she had heard from her mother, and on and on it had gone through the generations. Such was the duty of the Lore Keepers—to preserve the histories of Earth. And it was precisely because these stories were actually histories that they must persist. Katarina looked down at her hands, hands that seemed suddenly old and unfamiliar. When had that happened? Her own daughter had long since gone off on her own adventures, and so Katarina had taken to telling everybody that would listen these stories that had taken residence in her heart.

The children of the village didn't know about any of that though. They just liked a good story, and Katarina was happy to give them one. She waited for the murmuring to die down among some of the younger children, the older ones urging them to quiet. The creases at Katarina's eyes deepened as she readied herself for the journey, smiling at her fledgling Lore Keepers. She looked at one—the blacksmith's daughter?—and watched as a drop of spittle ran down her chin. Perhaps that was a bit optimistic. Regardless, Katarina knew that these children would eventually tell these stories to their own children. Surely it would warp

and twist, with each telling becoming something different. But the legend would continue—such is the way with stories.

Before long, all was quiet except for the sounds of the fire and wind. She took a deep breath, sat up as straight as she could manage, and began.

“This is a story about Griffon the Elder and his brother Elric.” She looked out across the children, noting their excitement. She knew how much they loved this one.

* * *

Born of the Earth’s primal powers, Griffon and Elric were it’s Guardians and masters of it’s magic. To Griffon, the Earth bestowed the powers of shaping. Fire, wind, water and earth were all at his disposal. To Elric, the Earth gave the power of creation. With this power, Elric could bend the essence of a thing and create beyond the natural laws of this Earth, building wonders that would stand forever. Many of those miracles still stand today: walls, bridges, citadels. Monuments to tame the wilds. For these gifts, Griffin and Elric vowed to fill the Earth with life.

For aeons, the two worked in tandem, making the world fit for man. They quashed volacnoes, connected the great continents, created the scattered isles. Humanity, still a young species, began to prosper. No longer governed by the untamed world, they multiplied.

Ages came, and ages went. Time became unimportant to the Guardians, and Griffon and Elric continued to work with a common purpose.

Suddenly—or at least so it seemed to the two brothers—humanity had conquered the planet, spreading to the far reaches and filling every corner. For Griffon, this was an ambition

finally realized; the culmination of all of his mighty efforts. And so it was for Elric too, but Elric soon grew to resent their path. Far from grateful for their efforts, the humans fought among themselves.

Kings and Barons and Warlords, the conquest for power was a corruption upon their species. In one southern nation, the humans had toppled one of his marvels. The Great Bridge of Erall—a chasm spanning construct that was sustained by the Earth’s magic to forever preserve itself. It had gone down in a heap of dark metal, the impact so forceful it could be felt in the next town over. It should not have been possible, and yet all it took was a squabble between cities. In all his millenia on the Earth, never before had his powers been conquered.

He brought his concerns to Griffon. “Brother. My powers, they wane.”

Griffon looked at Elric, a wan smile twisting at the corners of his mouth. “I know it.”

“Humans.” Elric spat the words out. How dare they sap the Earth’s magic? The parasites were feeding on the Earth and he would not have it. “We must act now—if we dither I fear we will soon be unable to intervene. I feel the magic ebbing even now.”

“Elric,” Griffon said, his voice hollow but firm. “This is how it was always going to be. The Earth is now full of life.” He closed his eyes and took a slow breath. “It is as the Earth wishes it.”

Elric however, would not be so easily dissuaded. “I can not accept that.” With that, he stormed away.

Unbeknownst to Griffon, Elric had locked himself in his workshop at the edge of the world. and bent his arts to the destruction of mankind. They were an invasive species, in need of a predator.

Griffon had let Elric sulk, but soon discovered his brother's intentions and made to stop him. Elric was prepared though, and hid behind his sturdy walls, laughing when Griffon came calling at his door. "You forget yourself brother. There is no man alive that can make a wall as strong as I can. Your strongest efforts shall amount to nothing."

Griffon replied, his voice cold and stony. "You claim I forget myself but it is precisely because you are unable to forget yourself that you shall fall. Your art shall be your tomb Elric, if there is even any room left for you beside your own ego."

Though the walls of Elric's workshop were impregnable, the earth upon which the structure stood was putty to Griffon's mind. He squared his stance and slammed a palm into the ground. Bits of rock and dirt began circling Griffon as he channeled the powers granted to him by his the Earth. With a sound like the cracking of thunder, he opened a crater underneath the entirety of Elric's fortress. The building sank quickly, and so did Elric. As the maker's workshop began to disappear from view, Griffon hesitated. That was the way of things, for even despite the evil twistings of his brother's mind, he still cared for him deeply. Elric was the only other person who understood what it meant to carry the burden of true power. The only person left who could possibly know what it was to wield magic.

He straightened and the ground settled. "Farewell, Brother." He turned and walked away. For that was the way of things too. It was finished.

* * *

“E-excuse me!” A pudgy girl—just under seven—was standing up now. “Why didn’t the bad man fight back? Didn’t you say he had weapons?”

Murmurs of agreement rose from the gathered children and Katarina noted more than a few vigorous nods and indignant expressions.

Katarina smiled, the corners of her mouth creased like worn leather. “Why yes little one, good on ya for noticing that. Let’s just say that tale has only just begun.” Katarina looked around at the other children, eyes twinkling. She continued.

* * *

Several years passed and Griffon continued helping humans in any way he could. This was his purpose after all, so what else could he do? Humans continued to thrive, constructing cities that grew ever larger and buildings that reached ever higher—his powers, ever weaker. Eventually, Griffon felt a disturbance in the magical flow that bound the world together. This disturbance continued to strengthen, reaching an intensity he had thought no longer possible.

Elric. No other being could have caused such a ripple.

While he pondered, the ripple rose in pitch. A shudder escaped the core of the Earth, moving outwards. Moving fast. As it reached the surface, a rift ripped through the city he was in, swallowing people and buildings alike as it raced across the surface of the world. The sheer scale of what Elric had to do to cause such a massive sundering of the earth sent a chill down Griffon’s spine. This should not have been possible. Not now as their powers grew

ever weaker. He had to go and find Elric before it was too late. And so, he set out. His destination: the field of their fateful encounter so many years ago.

On and on, Griffon walked alongside the rift, hunting for its source. Hills and mountains and valleys and swamps all passed as momentary backdrops to a long and tedious journey. Always forward. One step at a time. The clapping of a staff punctuated the sound of his feet. Brown and scuffed, the stick was nothing special on its own, but he found that it helped him focus his diminished powers. He walked with the step of a man committed to action.

He eventually arrived at the edge of the world. Cracked and dry earth spread to the edge of the horizon and beyond. No life penetrated the barrier into the flats: no bird nor bug nor even an errant tuft of grass. Here at the origin, the rift was so wide that Griffon could hardly see clear to the other side.

Griffon knew he would find Elric somewhere within that vast expanse. Despite the great distance he had traveled, he knew the real journey lay ahead. Well, down to be exact.

At length, Griffon arrived at his destination. He stood on the precipice, a dusty grey cloak billowing out behind him as he leaned on his staff. Hard blue gaze cast downward. Gone was the sunken workshop. Beneath his feet, the yawning chasm had no end.

It wasn't empty.

The rift bristled with the black movement of countless thousands of creatures. In a landscape devoid of life, they reeked of death. Down and down the rift went, lit only by the glowing light of intermittent fires. The stench of sulfur rode the winds and the sounds of

industry filtered upward. Griffon fought through the horror of what he was seeing. This was worse than he could have ever imagined. Down in the dark depths of the rift, Elric was playing architect to a new race, bending his powers toward something unnatural.

Griffon looked on. Shadows danced across the walls of the chasm. Shadows that walked on four limbs. Shadows that swung hammers and held tools. They weren't beasts, but they were far from human. Their heads, too large. Their faces, not quite right. Thin and spindly limbs propelled them forward, too long for their bodies. Like spiders hatched from the egg, they poured over each other, so many that even the huge chasm was blanketed by their churning bodies. Around and around the creatures moved, their movements a cascade of promised violence.

At length, Griffon's eyes found what he was looking for. Elric. His brother stood on a stone balcony cut into the face of the cliff opposite Griffon. His shoulder length black hair shone with the light of the fires and his hand rested on the hilt of a sword. Their eyes met, and the corners of Elric' mouth twitched. He spoke, and Griffon heard the distant words echo in his own mind.

"Big Brother," He spoke the words slowly, smile growing. "How truly kind of you to come and visit me. It has been ages since I last saw you, and you know how much I miss your wisdom." His words were thick molasses, dripping poison into Griffon's mind.

"The time has long passed since I have looked to you as my brother. No kin of mine would ever do the things you have. All this?!" Griffon gestured to the swarming masses below. "For what? Why do you hate mankind so?" Griffon gripped his staff until the knuckles of his right hand turned white.

Elric let out a cackle that split the night. “You ask me why as if you do not already know the answer! Humans are a plague on this world! They build and multiply, carving their fleeting lives from the soul of the earth, heedless of the consequences! Magic is ebbing from this world Brother. I know you feel it too. As the humans have grown, magic has withered. I refuse to let our powers fade until there is nothing left. Nothing left for me. Nothing left for us.” Elric’s voice grew even louder. “Join with me! Help me purge the earth of this sickness!” His hand went to the sword at his waist. “I have the means to do this alone, but think of what we could accomplish with our aims aligned. Think of the power that you and I could wield together!”

“How can you stand there and condemn humanity when you have brought these abominations into the world?” He gestured toward the chasm. “How is it that you can create such creatures with no magic?”

Elric leered. “Tell me Griffon. Have you ever tried to take away that tiny bit of magic that all humans gather from the Earth?” He looked at his Brother, pausing. “No, no. No need for an answer. Of course you haven’t.” It is possible though, and doing so makes them something else entirely.

Griffin fell back a pace, caught himself. He tightened his grip on his staff, eyes a mask of rage. “You have crossed a line Elric—a line from which there shall be no return. Today there shall be no quarter given. No hesitation.”

Elric sneered, his eyes and nose twisting into a mockery of indignation. “No quarter?! Oh Griffon you righteous lion. Do you think that I am so poor of soul that I need your mercy?!” He was smiling again, eyes dripping with anger. “I call them Enders. “Because —”

he stopped short, laughing. “Well I imagine one so wise as you could guess why.” There was a manic twinge now bleeding into his ghastly countenance.

Griffon had heard enough. He held his staff sideways in both hands and crouched down. With a mighty roar, he swung the staff toward the far wall of the chasm. A section of the cliff below shot forward and Griffon leaped onto it, running as the stone continued toward the other wall. Wind tore at his face and he gritted his teeth. “Prepare yourself Elric, this ends now!”

Elric was shaking, caught up in his own laughter. Griffon was almost at the far edge now. Elric stopped laughing. Gone was the insane caricature of the legendary Guardian. In its place, cold determination.

“You never do learn, Brother! What makes you think you can stop me now, when I am so close?! Besides... this time, I brought friends to the party.”

Griffon was upon him now, and Elric leaped into the chasm. Down he fell. Deeper and deeper into the bowels of the abyss. A resounding chorus of chattering welcomed Elric as he fell into the throbbing mass of Enders.

Griffon now stood in the same space his brother had just occupied. It felt strange to him, being this close to his brother again. He didn't hate the feeling, but set his jaw with the iron resolve of a man trying to do better. He watched his brother falling, slowly disappearing into the crawling black Enders. He took a deep breath, steadied himself, and stepped off the ledge. The lights of the glowing forges whipped past him the wind ripped at his clothing as he fell through the rift.

After what seemed like several minutes, Griffon saw the bottom of the chasm approaching quickly. He pointed his staff toward the ground and a gale rose up to meet him. With the grace of a dancer, Griffon alighted on the floor of the cavern. The heat was thick and it was difficult to breathe. Across from him stood Elric.

Two of them, alone. Alone in the bowels of the Earth. Griffon took a step fo-----

* * *

Another child, this one probably ten or so, stood up and shouted. “What about all the creatures? Weren’t they down there too?!” The other children all agreed, and began muttering a litany of other questions.

“Hush child. I was getting to that.”

* * *

Griffon took a step forward. As he did so, Elric drew his sword from the scabbard at his side. It was a long blade, the dull grey metal somehow glimmering in the shadowy depths. If swords could talk, this one would be singing. He raised it above his head for a moment, looking upward with a stony expression. Without even an utterance, he leveled the blade at Griffon’s chest. A frantic and overwhelming cacophony began to fill the air. As if of one mind, many thousands of Enders began to climb downward. They tripped over each other in their eagerness to obey, some falling and others lost under the press of bodies and reeking flesh. They came on like a tide, blanketing the walls of the chasm with the heavy black of impending doom. Elric let out his most villainous chuckle yet and took a step. Backwards, not forward.

Griffon did not look concerned. “Even now you hide behind your creations. I pity you brother.”

Without looking away, Griffon sat down. He set his staff across his lap and closed his eyes. The Enders grew closer and closer, their chittering now furious with the promise of blood. As they were about—

* * *

“No! They going kill Giffon!” The neighbor’s four year old son looked stricken. A murmur of concerned assent rose from the gathered children.

One of the older children looked smug. “Don’t worry, he’s got that magic stick.” Somehow the older kid managed to look triumphant despite the long nightshirt he wore.

“Quiet! Or I’ll find myself a magic stick and smack you silent!”

* * *

As the Enders were about to converge upon him, Griffon opened his eyes. The ground around where he sat shot upwards. Higher and higher the pillar of earth rose, leaving Elric and his creations far below, accelerating toward the light and cresting the walls of the chasm. The column stopped abruptly and Griffon shot upwards into the sky and his speed carried him up and over the edge of the chasm. He landed in a crouch, slamming his staff into the ground. The earth started to shake.

He remained crouched, his body trembling with effort. His grip on the magic was loosening. He couldn’t keep this up forever. He could do this though. He could seal the rift.

Slowly, the gap between the walls of the chasm began to shrink. Smaller and smaller it became. Enders climbed up the walls, desperate to escape. A horrible scream rebounded against the walls and filtered upward. Elric.

Just before Griffon sealed the rift, Elric shot from the gap, sword in hand. He landed in a rough crouch, panting heavily. The two stared at each other, neither willing to speak. Gone were the sounds and smells of the forges, but still the air shimmered, hazy with corruption. Elric stared at Griffon. Emotionless. Unbridled anger replaced with cold detachment.

Elric gripped his sword tightly and held it out. The blade was plain, a shallow fuller running down the length of the straight blade; the only distinguishing mark was the dull grey metal of its construction and stylized E stamped into the widest part of the sword. “This blade, Brother. It is the culmination of my entire existence. My masterpiece. One drop of blood, and it absorbs all the magic of it’s victim.”

The sky bled to dull hues of blue in the fading light of dusk. Wind howled across the plains and dust flowed like water after a rainstorm. The world turning around them while they stood still. It was Elric who finally broke the silence. “Prepare yourself brother. You’ll not find me as easy a conquest as the last time we met. I’ve been waiting for this moment.” He gripped his blade in two hands, and as he did so, a dark blue light engulfed the blade, extending the length of the weapon by several feet. Elric pivoted, holding the blade sideways. Without another word, he charged.

Griffon wasted no time. He raised his staff above his head and began to twirl the length of wood rapidly. Just a little more, he thought to himself. He channeled every ounce of

his remaining connection to the Earth's magic as he spun the staff. Flames began to appear at the edges of the spinning circle of wood. The flames merged together growing larger and larger. They coalesced into a grand orb of swirling colors: orange and red, beautiful and powerful. He stopped the staff from spinning and took it in two hands again. Turning around himself, he whipped the flame toward his brother. Elric swung his sword and the energy of the blade cut through the flames like a scythe through wheat. The flames split, each side continuing past Elric. The twisted Guardian did not even slow.

Elric was laughing again. "You're weak Brother! Nothing but a shadow of your former glory."

Griffon said nothing, but arced his staff the other way. The flames came hurtling back toward him. Just as Elric reached Griffon, the flame that Griffon had conjured had finally caught up with Elric. It hit engulfing the Guardian in a fiery inferno. It burned at his flesh and Elric cried out in agony, launching himself into the sky. Vapors trailed from his greaves, and he turned in the air as his momentum ran out.

Like a heron diving for its prey, Elric fell toward his brother. Griffon tried to move, but Elric was moving too quickly. The dark blue light of the sword pierced Griffon's leg as he tried to dodge. He clenched his teeth and set his weight, allowing the blade to continue through his leg all the way to the hilt. Griffon grabbed Elric by the throat and held him there, half suspended by his blade and half by Griffon's tight grip. In his other hand, Griffon still held his staff. He stamped it on the ground and dust began swirling around Elric.

Before long, the dust began forming around him, squeezing him tight in a rocky tomb. First, it locked his legs in place, and then his arms. Before too long, nothing stuck out

save for the sword, still pulsing dark blue. Griffon stomped his staff again and let go of his brother's throat. The tomb of dust continued to constrict, tightening its grip over Elric. Griffon's little brother began to scream: wails of anguish from a man whose dreams and ambitions had come crashing down. The blade dropped to the ground, the blue power blinking out.

* * *

Katarina stopped talking, and for a moment, only the popping of the logs on the fire broke the silence. After a few moments, the children began talking excitedly.

“Pow!” One of the older children now held a stick of his own. Katarina did not know where she had found it. “Griffon is so cool! That was one wicked fireball!”

“And den wut?” The neighbors son asked, bewildered.

“Tell us the rest!” This cry was soon taken up by others.

“What happened next?”

“Did Elric die?”

“Is Griffon okay?!”

Their voices rose in pitch as they tried to talk over each other and Katarina hushed them all. “You will all just have to wait until next time to find out! I have kept you all from your beds for long enough already. Your parents shall have my hide if I keep you any longer.” She stood up. “Come now, off you go. Even Griffon knows when it is time to rest.”

Some of the older children were protesting; they were old enough that they could stay up a little later, they said. “I know, I know, you’re not tired yet. But alas, it is my own bedtime. I fear that I grow tired sooner and sooner these days.”

Alone now, Katarina was content. The ending of her own story was approaching. There still time though, she thought to herself, for another chapter or two.

The Hunt

It was a misty morning and Rory struggled to keep pace with his mother Rena as she sped through the forest. Like most days, they were off on a morning hunt. Things were different this time though—they were traveling at a much faster pace than usual and Rory knew without asking that his mother was testing him. Their sparring had been going well lately, but Rena kept insisting his footwork should be faster. She had taken to calling him Stone Foot lately, and though she said it with a grin, Rory hated it. Determined to prove her wrong, he lengthened his stride and managed to catch up. His breath was already ragged. Bow held in his left hand, Rory felt the bouncing of the still-full quiver on his back with each jolting stride.

He cleared a cluster of brambles and found his mother crouched low behind a proud, mossy boulder. His mother was tense, body frozen in place, arrow in hand. Something was wrong.

A large hole in the earth yawned in the clearing ahead. As wide as a man was tall, the hole was anything but natural. Freshly turned earth lay at the mouth of the void, the hole sloping straight down into the earth. They could see nothing but darkness in the pit, even where the light from through the canopy should have penetrated.

“What... is it?” Rory’s heart raced as he waited for his mother’s whispered reply.

“Nothing good. Let’s turn back.”

As they turned around, a terrible bleat sounded in the clearing ahead, louder than any animal he had ever heard before. A whining screech that rattled Rory's ears and weakened his stomach. Whatever it was, it sounded close.

Fully alert now, every second passed as an eternity.

A huddled mass stooped in the clearing ahead. Its body was as black as the darkest ink. Rory had missed it at first, its bulk blending into the shadows of the nascent dawn.

It was big.

The thing's arms worked at something bloody and Rory was shocked to see the mutilated remains of some lesser animal. He thought it might have been a deer, though it was getting harder and harder to tell. They watched as it lifted the maybe-deer's head to its mouth and crunched right through the skull. Rory couldn't look away. Its bloody visage a stark contrast to the lush green grass underneath. It twitched and mumbled with a voice hoarse and grating. To Rory's ear, it sounded like a crude attempt at language.

A sword of black and pitted metal adorned the end of a too-long arm, too long fingers wrapped around a heavy hilt. There was something deeply unnatural about the shape and look of the creature. Like a demon from the stories, it gorged itself on what was left of its prey. Here was a creature that should not exist, and yet, here it was. Impossible to deny.

Rena looked back at Rory, her eyes wild but the rest steady. She knocked her bow, and Rory did the same. It had finished its meal and was now looking towards their rocky bulwark. There was no chance they could outrun the thing—if they tried to run, it would surely see them. Better to take it down than risk it.

Rory drew his bowstring back and held it at full-draw. Sweat dripped from his forehead as he took aim. His bow was still new to him—he could only just bring it to full draw. He made eye contact with his mother before she turned away to line up her own shot. They had practiced their timing. Hold. Hold. Loose! Except Rory’s grip slipped before the count, his arrow flying forth from his bow, heartbeats before his mothers. Rory’s arrow flew true and buried itself in the monster’s chest. The thing reacted instantly, roaring in pain and moving just enough that Rena’s shot flew wide.

It looked around madly, but Rory and Rena had already ducked back behind their boulder. It started towards them, terrible yellow eyes bulging at the base of a protruding brow.

The creature had found them. It had found them and it was seething and roaring again and it had found them.

The thing tore across the clearing, sword held high, using all three of its other limbs to increase its pace. His mother reacted first.

“RUN!” Rena screamed.

And so he did. He ran and ran and ran, cresting the many logs and brambles that he had navigated more carefully on the way there. Behind them, the creature continued its terrible sprint. The sounds of breaking branches filled the air. It was gaining on them. Too quickly. They couldn’t outrun it.

Rory knocked another arrow and fired it behind him without slowing down. He couldn't tell if it hit. It didn't seem to matter. They needed a plan. Some way to get out of the path of destruction that this creature was carving through the woods.

Just then, an idea came to him. Back in the clearing. The hole. Maybe if they could get to that, they could hide.

"The hole!" Rory yelled to his mother. She nodded. She understood.

The creature seemed to speed up. It was nearly on top of them. Rory's mother cried out. "It's no use!" There was panic in her voice, a twinge of fear that Rory had never heard before. The tone of her voice chilled him despite the rapid thumping of his heart. "Keep going!" she roared over the din.

Not like this. Rory stopped running. He turned around, just as his mother did the same. Reaching to his belt, he pulled out the hunting knife. The same one Rena had given him for his 10th nameday.

His mother knocked an arrow and pulled back the bowstring. But the creature was faster. It thrust out its blade and stabbed it into his mother's ribs. It bit into her flesh and the force of the blow swept her to the side and the creature let go of his sword, leaving it sheathed in Rory's mother.

Immediately, the thing twitched its head in Rory's direction. Without hesitation, it came at him.

Rory set his jaw and screamed. Screamed for his life. Screamed for his mother's life. He let loose his grief and rage—his entire being. He didn't run. He couldn't run. He leaped at the beast, hunting knife held out before him like the spear of Great Pyhros himself!

The creature came at Rory head first, teeth stained red with blood, spit forming cords between upper and lower fangs. He held his ground and the thing's momentum carried it forward. With a crunching finality, Rory's dagger pierced its brow. The force of the impact tore Rory's blade out of his hands and knocked him backward.

The beast stopped, surprised at the wound that now dripped black blood into its eyes and clouded its vision. With a cry that echoed through the valley, it finally collapsed.

Rory rushed to his mother's side. She was awake, but bleeding badly. He noticed the sword on the ground beside his mother. Despite everything, he stood in awe of his mother. She had pulled the blade out herself.

"Blade..." she stammered in between wheezing breaths. "Corrupted...had to take it out..."

Rory looked at the sword. Even now, a black smoke was drifting up from where it lay on the ground, moss turning brown around it.

He ripped off his shirt and tore it down the front. "You're going to be okay." He tied the shirt around his mother's abdomen. "You're going to be okay."

Blood leaked from the corners of her mouth and Rena reached out a hand to her son. She placed it on his shoulder. "Look at me." Rory continued to tighten the bandage, his eyes wide and watery.

“LOOK AT ME!”

Rory stopped and obeyed. Tears ran down his mother’s face as she stared at him. She was smiling now. She moved her hand up and cupped Rory’s cheek. He put his hand over hers. “No! You’re not allowed to give up! We need to get you back to the village. Come on. Walk with me now.”

“My son... . Death is comin’ for me, and there is nothing in me or you that can halt his march.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“You have to try,” he said. A lump had formed in his throat so big he felt like he might choke.

The situation seemed to settle in around Rory, tears finally breaking through and rolling down his face, dripping onto the bloody ground around them. “You never let me give up and now you can’t either.” Rory, just as helpless to stop the flow of tears as the flow of blood, grabbed his mother’s arm. “Get up. Please get up.” He thought back to all the times she had picked him up off the ground, told him that she was proud of him even when she had no reason to be.

He needed a miracle. A divine intervention. He prayed over her body. Prayed to Griffon the Elder for aid. He said the words aloud, desperate that he be heard.

Rena looked at her son, watching him weep and hearing his prayer. She nodded, blinking away the tears from her own eyes.

“Alright,” she said between ragged breaths. She grabbed a small twig from the ground beside her and clenched it in her teeth. With Rory’s help, she managed to get to her

feet. She let him support her weight as they made the trek back to the village. One agonizing step at a time.

As they walked away from the forest, Rena's life marked a halting, bloody path back to the clearing.

No help came.

The Dwindling Flame

Griffon sat on a tree stump at the edge of the village, legs crossed beneath him. It was dark now, the sun fully sunken beneath the trees of the Darkwood forest. He felt old. Ancient even. Weary beyond his years, which for him, was saying quite a bit. A squirrel moved at the corner of his vision, diving through a pile of fallen leaves and resurfacing with an acorn held aloft, its tail twitching. "I remember when I used to be like you," Griffon said to the squirrel, who simply stared back at him. "I used to think that everything would start to click as I got older and wiser... and I was right! My joints click with every movement!" Griffin paused for applause. The squirrel did not clap.

Griffon pouted. It seemed that nobody clapped for him anymore. Once, humans had worshiped him. Parades sprang up in his wake; he could go nowhere without fanfare and hordes of people petitioning him for a miracle. That was years ago now. Centuries? Millennia? He knew not, and knew even less as the years stretched out.

Once, all the powers of the Earth had been his. Together, he and his brother Elric had tamed the wilds, conjured grand cities and palisades with naught but a thought. They had given sanctuary to humans in this harsh world, and humans had flourished under his doting guidance.

The magic of the Earth was gone. Used up. They had noticed of course, that their powers were dwindling as the humans multiplied. Had fought about it. Fought about it still. And now, Griffon couldn't help but understand Elric's hatred of humanity. He had lived his entire existence in service to these creatures, and they had left him a withered husk, no magic to sustain his weary bones.

His life was coming to an end, his purpose for living now fulfilled. He could feel his body aging again. There was nothing left to him now except to embrace his own humanity—to walk among those he had nurtured and protected—to see for himself the culmination of his life’s work.

Laughter filtered up from the village. It was the tavern, of course. The Tired Oak if he remembered correctly. He stood up, his bones creaking. Using a wooden stave to aid his balance, he began walking into town. A good pint sounded just fine. Say what you will about humans, but they knew how to make a good drink.

He stepped into the tavern, the patrons turning briefly to inspect the new incomer. Without much more than a glance, they turned back to their cups. Oh, how times have changed.

He pulled out a stool and sat at the bar, leaning his stave against the counter. He hammered down a single gold coin—far more than the cost of a pint. The barkeep noticed immediately. “Keep the change, and keep them coming,” Griffon said, sliding the coin across the counter.

Griffon grew increasingly jovial with each pint. After half a dozen—or was it a full dozen?—Griffon was fully grinning. He listened to the life around him. Two large men were arguing in a corner, a set of dice between them, coins on both sides. A couple sat in a corner, whispering sweet nothings across the table from one another. A group of four had taken up a song, singing with drunken confidence the story of some great deed or long-dead King. Griffon smiled even wider, recognizing the name of a legendary warrior he had encountered in a previous century. They were singing lies of course, painting the truth in gilded hues, but

such was the way of songs. For the first time in a while, Griffon was happy. The room was filled with life. So many souls that may not be here if not for all his work.

His musing was interrupted as the door to the tavern slammed open. A man stood in the doorway, his face a mask of terror. Blood was sheeting down his face from a tear in his scalp. He was shouting. “It’s coming! A demon! It followed me from—” but he was cut off. A black metal hammer crashed into the man’s ribs, knocking him from the doorway. Into the void the man left, a monster showed its ghastly countenance.

It’s features were vaguely human, the proportions all wrong. It’s head was massive, brow and jaw far too large for it’s skull. Small black beads for eyes stared at the patrons, unblinking. It’s skin was darker than the blackest ink—small rigid hairs hanging off it’s limbs. Larger than even a horse, it crouched on all four limbs, head twitching as it looked around the room.

Without a warning, it screamed. A piercing wail that thundered in the smalls pace of the tavern. Patrons all around winced with the sound, holding their hands over their ears. With a resounding echo, the Ender stopped screaming.

Suddenly, the tavern exploded into motion as men and women reached for their weapons. Some flipped over tables, hoping to defend themselves against the inevitable attack.

Griffon didn’t move, his brows knit, still in the brief moment that preceded violence . He knew this creature. An “Ender” his brother called them. A Creature born of humanity and perverted through arcane arts. A creature of magic and death. His brother was taking action again, another desperate bid to cull the humans and return magic to the world.

He had to do something. Even alone, the Ender could tear through these people like a scythe through wheat. He reached for the magic again out of instinct, questing into the Earth, reaching for the power that for so long had felt like a part of himself.

He felt it.

It was there, faint but undeniable. He knew not why, only that it was there.

Griffon pulled the power into himself, spreading his hands wide. With a crash, he brought his hands together. Spears of rock and earth shot from the ground, impaling the Ender from all sides.

It howled and thrashed and spittle poured from its mouth. Black blood dripped down the earthen spears, but it could not move. Each attempt to free itself sent a renewed stream of blood down the spears. With a shuddering finality, the Ender stopped struggling.

As the creature died, Griffon felt his grip on the magic slip. He quested out for it again, but once more found nothing. He would have to think on it later. Right now, he had to leave. The patrons of the tavern were turning to him now. He had no time for their questions. Where there was one Ender, there were surely hundreds more.

Griffon fled the tavern, exultant. He had used magic! Something about the way the Ender allowed him to access the flow! This changed everything. He moved with a renewed purpose, a spring in his step.

He knew nothing else yet, only that humanity needed him. And he could finally do something about it.

The Hunted

Mort, Sylas, and Freya marched with the main force. Well, march was a strong word for it. They stumbled along in uneven lines, the gathered forces of the Empire spreading undisciplined across the land. The three of them had been through much, and it seemed like they had much yet to go. Mort groaned aloud, not for the first time. An army is many things, but it sure as hell isn't nimble. Hailing from the North, they had never traveled with camp followers and pack animals before. This was a far cry from the speed of the raids they were used to. Already, a cloud of dust rose in the air from the many thousands of boots and hooves.

Sylas was already complaining. "How comes it that a man like that—" he pointed at a portly officer on horseback—"gets to ride in comfort while I—Sylas the Sorrowful—must dirty my boots with the earth?" Mort cast him a sideways glance. "Can't they tell just by lookin' at me?" Sylas continued, showing off his whole self with the flair befitting a man bringing a ewe to market. He pointed violently at his foot, as he took his next step. "I just bought these shoes and look! They're already holier than the Emperor hisself!"

Freya, tall with pale yellow hair, cuffed Sylas in the arm. She meant it to be a friendly nudge, but Freya was not one for half measures. "Those aren't new! I was there when you took 'em off a Southerner at knife point." She shook her head at him.

Mort, walking slightly ahead, turned backwards and spoke without breaking stride. "Armies deal in meat. Flesh and bone, skin and muscle. To them, we are worth less than the beasts they ride on." Mort said this without inflection. "It has always been this way. Men hate what they do not understand."

There was a pause in the conversation then, until Sylas could no longer stand the silence. “There you go philosophizing all over me again Chief.”

To say Mort was a large man would be an understatement. Mort remembered how those in his village used to mutter under their breaths as he walked by them. Giant Kin, they called him. He hated it back then, hated being different, but it wasn't the worst thing to be the biggest man on the battlefield. On his back, he carried his prized possession; a club so large it might as well be the trunk of a stout tree. He lovingly called it his motherclub, but treated it like his child. Of hair, there was not a strand to be found anywhere upon his head. Instead, the story of his family decorated his scalp— a different glyph for each of his family member. He rubbed his hand over the tattoos. It was painful for him to think about them. His wife... His son... It had been a hard year. The gesture did not go unnoticed, and they continued marching on in silence. Even Sylas had nothing to say. Loss bound them together, a constant companion threatening to drag them down at any moment.

Smoke rose in the distance and the army ultimately arrived at a plateau. Mort squinted in the twilight, looking down into the valley below. He could see the source of the smoke, black plumes of it rising from a small cluster of buildings. A village, filled with fire.

As Mort gazed on, he could just make out dark shapes, shadows moving among the flames. Shadows of death and memory. The same shadows that had taken his family.

A horn sounded. Two short blasts, calling them into formation.

Mort looked down at Sylas and Freya, unlimbering his motherclub from his back. “Looks like we're playing the saviors today.”

Sylas freed his axes from the loops on his belt and Freya drew her sword from the scabbard at her side. Men and women all around them readied steel of their own. The tips of spears glinted like jewels, the light of the fire below reflecting off the metal, so many beacons in the night.

A horn blew again, this time the note long and deep. The army started walking down the slope, speeding up to a jog as the descent aided their momentum. At length, the forces halted just outside of striking distance of the town. Now that they were closer, Mort could hear the screams.

“Enders” Freya whispered knowingly. “And a lot of ‘em by the sounds of it.”

Officers rode up and down the column, shouting relayed orders. Battle lines formed. Soldiers grew nervous, and Mort noticed more than a few spear tips start to flutter in the air, the hands of their wielders shaking with nerves. These weren’t the hardened soldiers of a veteran force.

No signal to attack came. Mort and the rest were quiet as they checked their gear. This wasn’t the Northerners first encounter with the Enders—all they need do was wait. The Enders would come for them soon enough.

Sure enough, it seemed some of the demons had noticed them already. Horrible shapes silhouetted against the fire. Black creatures on all fours with wicked metal instruments bristling out like the quills of a razorback. Their heads twitched at odd angles and back again. Mort heard some of the southerners around them offering prayers to Griffin, the Elder. As if he could help them now.

An officer was standing in their stirrups out in front of the line, towards the center. He was saying something, though it was too far away to hear with any clarity.

Sylas leered at the man, so high and mighty. “Here goes the current shit eater. There’s always one that likes to give some big speech or other right before a battle. Honor this, defenders of humanity that.” He spat out a glob of phlegm. “Never makes a difference if ya ask me. Killing is black work, and no fancy speech can paint it any different.”

The Enders had begun to gather outside the town, forming their own line and belying an intelligence beyond that of a mere beast. There were hundreds of them now and more still emerged from the flaming wreckage of the village. He had never seen so many in one place! Mort couldn’t help but note that the screaming had stopped. Not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

One of the Enders screamed. A dry-throated, grating noise that sent a wave of muttering through the gathered soldiers. Others began to echo the cry and soon, they had taken off, rushing towards the army with frightening speed. They ate up the ground before them. Mort gripped his motherclub even harder to steady his own shaking hands. Three of the things had nearly destroyed his entire settlement back home. What chance did they have against the wave of death that ran towards them?

“Archers! Draw!” a voice bellowed from somewhere behind Mort. “Loose!” Hundred of bowstrings snapped as one and arrows filled the sky overhead. He watched as they began to arc downwards. Enders fell with the arrows, but it wasn’t enough.

“Loose!” Another flight of arrows went up. Mort didn’t have time to see them hit. They were upon them now. The Ender’s vanguard crashed into the line. Soldiers flew into the

air. An Ender leaped, flying towards Freya. Lashing out with a black metal sword. It fell with a crack like a falling tree. Mort spinning about himself, letting the great momentum of his weight bring the motherclub down again and again with a brutal grace. Sylas chopped into the grotesque head of an Ender with both of his axes, kicking the thing backwards as he pulled the blades from its cracked skull.

Another few of the things went down in similar fashion around the three Northerners. Soldiers rallied to them, a bulwark in the melee. Freya was already covered in black blood, howling at the top of her lungs. Her sword gone from her hands. She laid about herself with vicious spiked mace. Mort knew not where she had found it.

The next wave was upon them now and Mort bellowed with his massive lungs. “Break!” Freya and the others jumped backwards, opening up a gap in their line. An Ender, expecting to meet resistance, stumbled forward into the clearing, reeling with the momentum. Mort leaned back, raising the motherclub above his head and bringing it down with an earthshaking strike that flattened the Ender like a millstone pulverizing grain.

“Shield wall!” The cry came just in time. The soldiers about them set their shields, creating a barrier of wood and iron just before an Ender slammed into their line. This one had a spear, and reached up over the top and stabbed at Freya.

She waited for the thrust and grabbed the haft of the spear. Pulling it back, she held the Ender in place. Just for a moment. Her other hand was already in motion. Mort saw a blur of motion and with a mighty crunch, the Ender crumpled under Freya’s mace.

“Heck of a swing!” Sylas cried out, smiling despite himself. This was familiar to them. The rhythm of the battle. The joy of it. They were lost in the madness and the chaos, focusing only on the next swing.

Mort was grinning too, black gore spattered across his pale pate. It felt awfully good to kill the things.

The cries of men grew louder and more ragged. There were too many. Far too many. Death painted the battlefield bloody.

With sudden violence, a crack in the earth ripped through the standing soldiers, knocking men over and pushing outwards from the still flaming village. Before long, a gaping chasm yawned on one side of the remaining force.

“Is that...” Freya muttered.

“Aye” said Sylas. They all remembered with vivid clarity the rift that had cleaved through their home village. This one was bigger though. A lot fucking bigger. The Enders, as if possessed of a single mind, paused their fighting and let loose a cry into the night. A singular cry unlike anything they had heard. Mort and the others were flinching at the force of it..

An arm. An arm, the scale of which Mort could never have imagined broke through the chasm and anchored itself against the earth. Another followed. Dirt flew in the air as the tremendous force of the limbs sank terrible hands into the earth. A titanic skull broke the surface, followed by thickly knotted shoulders. It was vaguely human—more human than the

Enders—but in place of eyes were the same dark pits. It's nose was absent, horns twisted about behind.

It stood up on two feet, roaring. Taller than even the plateau. Reaching across its body, the titan grabbed one of it's own arms in its hand, and with a pop like the cracking of a boulder, ripped it out of the socket.

The monster brandished his arm like some great hammer. It shifted forward. And swung. Mort and the others turned and ran as one. The great arm ripped through the soldiers like a scythe through wheat. It was too close to dodge completely. Sensing it through the rumble in the Earth, he stopped and turned. He raised his own club in the air, hand at either end. The monster's bony appendage cracked into the club, sending Mort flying and knocking him onto his back. Darkness pushed in at the edges of his vision but he held on to consciousness.

The titan strode forward and began swinging faster now, moving beyond where Mort lay.

Mort moved his limbs, one at a time, checking for injuries. He found nothing broken, and planted his motherclub on the ground to push himself back up. He saw a crack running down the length of it and disbelief sent ice through his veins. The weapon had been passed down from Father to son for a dozen generations. The thing was said to be hewn from the World Tree and tempered in the fires of Frost Gate. Unbreakable. Or so he had thought.

Mort thought for a moment. Why not just lay back down? He rolled his head to the side and he found himself gazing into the lifeless of a soldier. He was young. Too young for this. The lad still clutched a spear in his hands, the tip unbloodied. Visions of his own son's

lifeless body swam in his mind and he retched. Bile coating his mouth and dripping down his chin. Not like this.

He had to move. He got up and staggered back towards the plateau, careful not to trip on the many bodies. He almost slipped, the ground muddy with the blood of thousands. He cast about for Sylas and Freya. Where were they?

Something was off. A man walked toward the flames, a rock in the current of fleeing soldiers. Was he whistling? Mort stopped. The man was taller than even Mort. More than that, he had not a drop of blood on him. Mort could hear it now, the man was whistling a strange melody, seemingly oblivious to the death all around. He carried a long walking stick in one hand.

As the man drew nearer, he resolved his meandering melody with a flourish, spinning around in time with the tune before leaping into the air and clicking his heels together, a mockery of happiness. A broad smile stretched across the man's face. "My! You're a big fella! Good day to you!" he said, eyes gleaming. "My name is Griff." He had a scar on one cheek, running from below his eye down his neck and into his clothing.

Griff extended his hand towards Mort who, perplexed, stood there and did nothing. He didn't know what to say. Had he died? The man looked as if he had just emerged from a tailor's shop. He wore a burgundy vest with white sleeves rolled up, striped pants completing the ensemble. Here on the field of battle—a battle that they had already lost—was a man who was dressed as if expecting an audience with the Empress herself.

Griff's white hair was wispy, sticking out at several strange angles. The scruff on his face was mostly white, and he sported a prodigious mustache and goatee.

The titan was dishing out carnage behind them. Not knowing what else to say, Mort introduced himself. “My name is Mort.”

“Well now!” His voice rose a little higher. “Mort is a fine name,” Griff replied, amber eyes smiling. “I don’t supposed you know a good mortuary that is in need of some business?” He waited briefly for a reaction, eyes searching for the hint of a smile. When it was clear that none would be forthcoming, Griff launched into a huge guffaw, clearly enamored with his own sense of humor.

Exasperated now, Mort fought through his exhaustion. “I dunno what that is, but it doesn’t seem the time for jokes.” He looked at the smiling old fool, questioning how somebody could be so jovial in a time like this.

“Of course it is! Besides, ol’ handsome over there isn’t all that scary.” He gestured at the titan. “I decided long ago not to let the little things get to me.”

“You call that little?!” Mort started walking away from the man. “Get out of here while ye can. Who was this cracked old man? Where had he even come from? You don’t look in any shape to fight that monster.”

“Of course I am!” He held up his walking stick in a show of mock readiness.

“You plan to fight with that?! Where’s your armor, your sword?” Mort looked the man up and down.

“That’s not all! I’ve been called hard headed all my life. I plan to put that to the test!”

“...you’re going to headbutt it?”

“Why certainly! ”

Mort left him at that, continuing his halting walk back to the plateau. He looked back towards the battle, watching as the creature hauled the tremendous weight of its severed limb into the air. The blow from the titan must have hit him harder than he thought. He was seeing things now.

Hope fled on the heels of certain death. Why was he even trying to get back to the plateau? Nothing could save him from this.

Just then, the earth rumbled. After a moment, it rumbled again. And again. In a daze, Mort looked ahead. The creature was right where it had been, and he looked around for the source. Surely, there couldn't be another of them coming, not that it would have made much difference in the end. He sighed, thoughts drifting once again towards home and the life he had fought so hard to protect. If he was going to die, he wanted his last thoughts to be of his kin. It was finally time to rejoin them in the place beyond.

Suddenly, a blue light lit up the battlefield. Mort was frozen in place. He turned, seeing the old man from before. Griff was spinning his walking stick in front of him, wispy hair fluttering in a new wind.

As he watched, Griff swung his staff upwards and the blue light hurled itself forward, arcing across the air towards the titan. The ball of flame broke across the creature's face, burning its skin and knocking the monster off balance.

The old man was swinging his stick around at the shoulder, creating the image of a burning circle in the air as he sped it faster and faster. “MOVE!” the man shouted.

Flame filled the air with a buzz that crackled at Mort's hearing. A pillar of blue flame ripped forth and hit the creature square in the chest. The blaze continued, streaming outward from Griff. The titan set its feet and stood against the blast, absorbing the impact.

Still, the old man continued swinging the stick. The stream of fire continued to pour out. The blue flames began to glow red where they met the beast. Incredibly, the massive creature seemed to be losing. Griff stopped swinging and with a jumping sweep of the stave, sent a final, huge ball of fire careening into the shimmering air. It smashed into the creature's chest and sent it flying backwards, back into the hole it had crawled from.

Griff spoke then, his voice supernaturally loud. "Well now!" he exclaimed. "That one certainly had a fiery personality!" His clothes had burned away, and he now stood completely naked. Completely naked among hordes of the dead and dying. Many of the corpses Mort saw had been singed and burned beyond recognition by the very energy that had toppled the titan. He waved at Mort from across the way.

"I saved the day! You're welcome!" Griffon's eyes were closed as he smiled broadly. He opened one eye then, pupil darting around and noting the dead and dying that carpeted the ground. Here and there, a cloak still smoldered. His expression lost its manic twinge and Morth thought he glimpsed sadness there, in the tilt of his eyebrows and crease in his brow. Did he feel bad? Was it worth so much life to save the battle? Would more have died to the titan than died to Griffon's flames? And then it was gone. Any sadness replaced by deeply lined crow's feet and a grinning countenance.

"I guess so," said Mort flatly, numb now that the battle focus had left him. "We could have used your help a bit sooner though. Not much of an army left to us now."

“That may be true,” Griffon said, pondering the thought. “You live to fight another day, and that is what is most important.” He turned around on his heel and began walking towards a distant treeline.

Mort watched as he went, legs lifting absurdly high as he stepped over the dead bodies of men and horse, his pale rear glowing in the light of the flames that still burned. The smell of cooked flesh hung in the air as men moved about, checking for survivors. Mort thought he would be sick and sat down, tears filling his eyes. He opened himself to all of it, sobs wracking his huge frame, allowing the long deferred emotions to crest.

At length, Mort cuffed the tears from his eyes and stood up. He could do nothing for his family now except fight for their memory. He strode off into the field of death. It was time to find his friends.