

Unsung

By Pardeep Singh

Snyril's pockmarked face was awash with terror. Wide-eyed and wheezing, he was far too stricken to sneak a peek around the ancient oak that hid him.

Here was a man severely out of trim, with a bloated gut that announced his arrival before the rest of him entered a room, and a surplus of densely stubbled chin that blurred the border with neck. His lank hair was so depressingly sparse it made one heatedly question why he didn't just shave his pate.

A career scoundrel was what the magistrates in Obenvale labelled him; 'thieving shit' being the preferred term of the townsfolk.

His accumulated crimes had garnered enough ire to warrant a bounty, the timing of which couldn't have come at a better time for the victims, or a worse for Snyril, as the famed knight-errant, Haarlan Gildbrun, just happened to be in town. Two hours is all it took for Haarlan to track and capture Snyril at the ruined cathedral where he sheltered.

The celebrated adventurer's sundry and astounding exploits were the things of song and theatre. Where he went, men bowed, women swooned, and children cheered. He was a

walking demi-god in the eyes of the adoring masses... and now he sat slumped against a column of cold, lichen-blotched stone, greasy innards coiled loosely atop his head--unattached between his thighs--in a gruesome parody of a wig.

Nightgaunts were sadistic like that, possessing a cruel intelligence uncharacteristic of simpler beasts. Vaguely human in shape, with inward curving horns, bat-like wings and blank countenance, they were seldom seen, but muchly feared. There had never been reports of anyone having slain a nightgaunt, only of those snatched away by them--usually children in their sleep, or an unfortunate lone traveller.

Snyril had but recently been subdued by Haarlan when displaced gusts announced the nightgaunt's arrival, urging both captor and captee low behind fallen stonework as the onyx demon alighted, shrieking infant in-hand, centre of the cathedral's yard.

Given to heroics, Haarlan left Snyril shackled and trembling as he drew Lightshear, his fabled blade, declaring death to the foul thing as he leapt into valiant action.

Snyril watched as the nightgaunt swept Haarlan's feet from under him with a whip of its barbed tail, then pounced atop the hapless hero, whose confused yelp was cut sickeningly short once the thing set to twisting his head off his shoulders.

Snyril could say naught of the grisly particulars thereafter, busy as he was belly-shuffling away for dear life, though the auditory details were sufficient to churn his stomach.

You wouldn't believe a man of his sorry physicality could exhibit such haste, especially given his restraints, yet he was away and behind the oak before the nightgaunt had finished making a macabre art piece of the late, great Haarlan Gildbrun.

And so here he was, quivering with fear, wet with perspiration and possibly other fluids, hands and feet bound by manacles, with no idea of how he might escape. The infant's continued wails made focussed thought a trying endeavor. He couldn't walk let alone run with his feet fettered, and even if he tried, and assuming the nightgaunt didn't wise up to his presence, the surrounding forest contained countless other nasties eager to greet him. Shuffle was all he could manage, be it for fight or flight, and he'd never heard of anyone shuffling another to death. He needed the key that Haarlan yet carried on his mutilated person. Then he could take the eqix the hero had rode in on, his own having fled due to lax tethering and general contempt for its rider. He didn't like the plan, but it was all he had.

As his breath returned so did a modicum of courage, enough to spur a tentative snoop around the broad trunk.

The winged demon stood upright, taller than most men, with an emaciated physique, skin like oiled rubber, and a slim face of vacant flesh. He watched it retract its wings and approach the infant, which it lifted with clawed, long-digeted hands, cradling the wee one tenderly, the way a loving parent might their newborn, a gesture Snyril found deeply unnerving. It sauntered beyond Snyril's line of sight; the suckling's receding cries giving the shit-scared convict a sense of the distance.

Now? he asked himself, then thought for a lengthy moment. Now! And off he hurried, shuffling as fast as his shackles permitted.

Arriving back at the fallen masonry, he took a moment to catch his breath and reassess the threat. The child could still be heard crying closeby. He could smell Haarlan's freshly exposed innards from here. The pungent pong licking the back of his throat. Stifling a cough, he pressed on.

The infant had stopped crying. In fact, it was making no sound at all. Surely dead. A thought that troubled Snyril, for the nightgaunt would be looking for its next victim. His urged pace tugged on his likely purloined pantaloons, loosening their cord about his stout waist, and after several more

movements, they began a rapid retreat towards his ankles, revealing pale, goose-flesh legs. "Fucking 'ell!" whispered Snyril through grit teeth.

He did his best not to gag at the mess of his former captor's glistening, fly-festooned viscera, but so staggering was the odour that his cheeks ballooned with vomit. Before he could release the up-chuck, a black, barb-headed tail curled around the column beside Haarlan, snaking over the hero's corpse. Snyril swiftly clasped shackled hands over his mouth, preventing himself from committing fully to the expulsion for fear it would alert the nightgaunt. He mostly succeeded in suppressing the discharge, though some escaped from out of his nose and between his stubby fingers. Deathly-still he kept as the obsidian appendage reared then thrust deep into Haarlan's chest, wresting the body up and around the column, the key gone with it.

Snyril remained frozen, listening as the nightgaunt withdrew with near-noiseless footsteps.

Disturbed by the sudden removal of the body, Haarlan's head swivelled on the earth, stopping with mouth agape, tongue lolling, and eyes fixed on the rattled thief.

Confident the nightgaunt was sufficiently distant, Snyril swallowed the unpleasant contents of his mouth and exhaled in temporary relief, loosing a sour burp in the process.

He studied Haarlan's frozen expression for a moment. He'd never actually been around a dead body before, and despite the obvious unpleasantness, he couldn't help but feel oddly privileged that his first should be that of the famous Haarlan. Wiping his puke-slicked fingers in the hero's luscious locks, Snyril reviewed his options, What now? Perhaps I oughta just do one, manacles or no. The notion was instantly rebuked by a not-too-distant howl--a howl that was followed in quick succession by a not-too-distant roar, then the not-too-distant sound of the howling creature being savagely mauled by the roaring creature. "Nope!"

Snyril pushed against the weathered stone column to upright himself, carelessly punting Haarlan's head in the awkward ascent. He looked nervously around the stone, catching sight of Haarlan's legs disappearing into the murk of the cathedral proper.

Snyril really didn't want to go in there, truly regretted camping here, wished deeply that he hadn't been caught. For a fleeting moment he even regretted his crimes, but that thought was quickly shooed.

Hoiking up his pants, he steeled himself as he made cautiously towards the entrance, manacles allowing only hurried half-steps as he moved from the cover of one erect column to another.

Though a skeleton of its former self, the cathedral still retained a partial roof, through which sheets of blue-green moonlight shone down into the benighted nave, colouring black the wide streak of blood that led into the shadowed left aisle. Placed on the altar towards the back was a bundled white rag: the dead infant.

The abrupt flapping of large wings dropped Snyril behind a toppled pillar. The nightgaunt soared from out the dark where Haarlan's dragtrail led, up through moonlight and a yawning break in the roof to perch upon a stony jut, a pair of severed hands in its own: Haarlan's hands.

Snyril looked up at the monster, then back to the darkness, then back to the monster, then back to the darkness, repeating a half dozen times before finally braving towards the area where what remained of Haarlan would be found. His eyes adjusted to the dark the closer he got, until finally the desecrated carcass of his short-lived captor revealed itself.

Snyril took a confirmatory glance to ensure the nightgaunt was still upon its perch--it was, preoccupied with Haarlan's hands, turning them over and touching them against its own face with an odd tenderness.

Satisfied the demon was sufficiently distracted, Snyril groped for the key. Barely could he look upon the corpse as he tamped down his revulsion, relying mostly on touch to find

that which would set him free. His search turned up a small pouch of tobacco, a hand-whittled pipe, a few gold coins--he pocketed the lot--and finally, the key!

An applause rang out as if on cue, echoing off the barely-there walls of the battered cathedral. Startled by the sound, Snyril fell into a fist-raised squat. Looking up, he saw the nightgaunt clapping together the severed hands, amusing itself it seemed, but ignorant to the crook's presence.

Snyril unbound his feet, then wrists. He had only one left when one of Haarlan's hands splashed into a moonlit puddle centre of the nave, the nightgaunt touching down after. Snyril backed up against the wall, slowly sinking till his rump touched cold stone.

The nightgaunt appeared bemused by its reflection within the water, as if seeing itself for the first time. It touched at its face, the gesture seemingly sorrowful, then viciously clawed the liquid, distorting the image that agitated it so.

Snyril used the distraction to abscond, holding his breath as he crossed the threshold from hall to yard, keeping that breath held as he withdrew with long, tip-toeing steps, again using the cover the columns provided, then silently exhaling once he was at the edge of the ruins.

The hero's grazing eqix came to sight; moonlight gleaming off the steed's ribbed, back-curving horns.

A yellow-toothed smile grew across his face. He'd made it! Escaped the long arm of the law, the irons of a renowned hero, and the prehensile claws of that nocturnal terror.

Then he heard it... an infant's cry.

Snyril stopped and looked back to confirm the sound's direction.

The ruined cathedral.

For a long moment Snyril did nothing. Not move nor blink. Then, with a determined shake of his head, he carried on for the eqix... but that cry. That damn infant's cry.

Don't.

Calling.

Fuckin' eqix is right there!

Pleading.

Pack it in sappy bollocks!

Guilting.

Fuck!

Snyril stopped again, glancing back at the threatening clutter of stone. He turned to the eqix, then back to the cathedral, then back to the eqix, then back to the cathedral, repeating a half dozen times before scrunching up his face in a sour cocktail of frustration and counter-intuitiveness.

He turned and headed back towards the cathedral.

Between him and the entrance lay Lightshear, Haarlan's magnificent, diamond-bladed sword, a weapon equal in renown to its wielder. Snyril had only ever waved a poniard during stick-ups on those too frail or inebriated to fight back. Regardless, he took up the shimmering blade, acknowledging how ridiculous he looked with it, but feeling slightly safer for having it.

All manner of alarms rang in his head as he neared the cathedral entrance. What the 'ell am I doing?! Why the 'ell am I doing this?! How much d'you reckon this blade's worth? I could be halfway to Longvale by now! Or hanging out the back o' that blonde piece in Obenvale! Fuckin' whelp'll be the death o' me!

Snyril peered around the entrance. The nightgaunt was nowhere to be seen. He looked to its previous perch: empty. The infant was still where it was though, very much alive, as evident by the shrill wails haunting the ruins. Snyril shook his head at his own stupidity as he entered.

He held the manacles still affixed to his right wrist taut and garrote-like, lest its jingling give him away. His gait was impractically wide, stance uncomfortably low. He paused between each ridiculous step to scan about in all directions. Clearly he'd never done anything like this before.

After far longer than needed, Snyril reached the bawling bairn.

The barely-year-old child calmed its noise and frowned as if to question what had taken the thieving shit so long.

Snyril frowned back, "Yeah yeah, I'm 'ere now, ain't I?" He took up the child, turned back to the entrance, and promptly froze.

The nightgaunt stood on all fours in the center of the ruined church. It's stygian silhouette clear against the greater gloom. A shaft of moonlight separating the crook and winged demon.

Snyril dared not move. Was this a trap? Had it known he was out there this whole time? That he would come back for the child despite his selfish nature? Know this before even he knew? These questions were quickly put aside as the nightgaunt took a few predatory steps forward, its head entering beneath the beam of cyan light. Snyril inhaled sharply as it did, for within the moonlight he swore he could make out the ghost of a face upon the thing, and in his mind that face was twisted with ill-intent.

Snyril instinctively held out the child to the thing in hopes of appeasement, and whether because of this gesture or despite it, the nightgaunt began a rapid advance towards the trembling crook.

"Fucking 'ell!" shrieked Snyril as he drew back the child and spun to bid a hasty retreat.

He found a break in the real wall, low but wide enough to crawl through. He set to the task, struggling with the awkwardness of carrying the sword and child, the latter vocally expressing its displeasure once again. Rising to his feet on the other side, Snyril made for the direction of the exit.

A terrified "Nuh!" escaped his mouth at the sight of the nightgaunt peering creepily around the side of one of the many stone columns that occupied the cathedral's yard, further fuelling the panic in Snyril's legs. He was no less shocked at the sight of it doing the very same thing several columns ahead, and on the opposite side. A single clawed hand and half its blank face visible around the stone as it took a sly shufti like some nightmarish peeping Tom.

He couldn't fathom it; how was it moving so fast? Was it moving so fast? Or was his own fear-addled mind betraying him?

He stopped dead, his heart in his mouth. The nightgaunt leered down at him from atop another column, a faceless gargoyle made flesh.

The tableau held.

Snyril edged back a step, a gesture met in response by the nightgaunt snapping open its bat-like wings, their membranous skin glowing amber in the moonlight.

Snyril knew that whatever direction he tried to run the creature would be on him before he could land a second step. He looked hopelessly down at the child, its small face looking up with wet, uncomprehending eyes and a snotty nose as it casually blew spit bubbles back at him.

Snyril let out a resigned sigh. "Fuck's sake..." He lifted his head and, in a display of bravery that surprised even himself, raised the sword at his foe.

He kept the blade pointed, arm quivering from the weight, as the nightgaunt descended the column lizard-like, approaching with insulting casualness.

Snyril backed slowly to a collapsed buttress and--keeping his eyes fixed on the monster--placed the infant on the further side.

The nightgaunt paused its advance as he did this, torn now between seizing back the child or killing the crook. Snyril half hoped it would go for the child, allowing him to flee, but it continued for him, an action that quickly unravelled the already frayed veil of bravery he wore.

Snyril tightened his grip on the sword. He'd seen one swung before. Seen heads lopped off wiv one swing. S'all it takes, right? "Fuck a' you doin', Snyril?!" he whimpered.

The nightgaunt closed on the yelping crook, who scurried sidewise into centre yard.

Begrudgingly accepting there was no hope for escape here, Snyril gave a wild swing of Lightshear. "Come then!" He swung again, left to right and back in a frenzy of fear-fuelled attacks, the lambent blade leaving transient trails with each stroke. "Let's be 'avin ya, ya fuckin' nightshite!" His next swing was so forceful, his hands so clammy, that the sword was mistakenly flung aside. "Ah fff--" The nightgaunt swung its barbed tail, taking Snyril's legs out from under him. The felon landed hard on his back with a grunt. Knowing what came after this manoeuvre, he immediately rolled aside and scrambled away from the demon as it pounced upon empty earth.

Snyril heard the flaps of wings; the next thing he knew, the fiend had seized him by what scant hair he had, lifting him skyward, heading straight for the stone column it previously perched upon. His terrified cry was cut off as his body smacked stone with such force that the column shifted slightly. He hit the ground, nose crushed, teeth blood-washed, scalp mostly hairless, senses struggling to steady a wobbly

world. As his eyes refocused, he saw the nightgaunt arch up and away before gracefully banking back towards him.

The sword! Which way had he flung it?! He couldn't remember! He looked for an alternative – for any fucking thing! All he had on him were the manacles still dangling from the wrist of his right arm. Could he use them somehow? Maybe twat the thing around the face? His desperate scheming was interrupted by the nightgaunt landing atop the column, which shifted again under its weight.

Snyril swung the free end of the manacles at the creature, a move it easily dodged and countered by grabbing at Snyril's throat, lifting him towards its featureless visage.

The pressure was instantly crushing. Snyril's legs beat frantically against the stone. He tried for a punch, missed, his right arm landing across the monster's forearm. His left hand found the free end of the manacles and, in desperation, struck it weakly against the creature's gripping hand. Upon the third strike the iron band closed around the nightgaunt's wrist, startling it such that it released its hold and became concerned only with freeing itself.

Snyril dropped to ground, pulling the nightgaunt with him, the two landing in a tangled heap. Shoving the flailing mass of winged horror off himself, the crook scurried, gasping and wheezing, around the column. His escape was rudely denied

beyond that, yanked back as he was by the chain still connecting him to the fast-recovering demon. He fumbled in his pocket for the key. Finding it, he hastily freed his wrist of the restraint.

As he moved to retreat, the nightgaunt shot its shackled arm around the right side, claws puncturing the screaming Snyril's shoulder as it jerked him back against the stone. Snyril beat and tore at the ebon hand, even sinking his rotten choppers into the bony mitt to free himself.

The nightgaunt whipped its barbed tail around the left of the column, impaling Snyril through his left shoulder, and again he screamed.

In the midst of the searing pain and manic fear, Snyril noted the manacles dangling from the nightgaunt's wrist. He reached for the free end and grit his teeth through the pain as he closed it around its tail. Again the creature panicked, instantly removing both its tail-tip and claws from Snyril, providing him with a precious second to slip away.

The nightgaunt shoved, swiped, beat panicked wings, and ran frenzied circles around the column it was now awkwardly chained around, desperate to undo the restraint that tightly bound its right arm to its tail.

Seeing the column shift back and forth against the creature's efforts, Snyril strained to his feet, sucked up a

lungful of air, and charged with a wavering roar, throwing both feet forward to drop-kick the stone with all his might. It was enough to tip the masonry over and onto the desperately thrashing nightgaunt, squashing it with a splat that painted the surrounding earth a dark shade of green, an awkwardly bent leg and twitching wing poking out from under the stone.

Snyril lay supine, chest heaving as he gulped air, his limbs weak and heavy, clothes sweat-sodden. As his adrenaline ebbed, he heard a by now familiar cry. "Oh yeah."

He found the infant where he'd left it, and with a sigh of relief, lifted the crying child, "Oi! Less a' that." As if comprehending, the infant ceased its wailing. "There's a good sprog."

Snyril felt an odd rumbling within the tot, and before he had a chance to react, was recipient of projectile vomit upon his face. He blew acrid sick from his lips as the infant laughed in satisfaction.

"Yer welcome."

The harsh gruff of an eqix turned Snyril about to the sight of five armed and mounted soldiers.

"We have you now, scoundrel!" spoke the unit's captain. "Where be Haarlan Gildbrun?"

Before Snyril could speak, attention turned to a sixth soldier rushing from the direction of the ruined cathedral, pale and distraught, Lightshear clutched to his bosom.

"Captain! I-It's Haarlan, sir... he's..." He communicated the rest with a mournful shake of his head.

The others gasped in disbelief.

The pale soldier presented his superior with Haarlan's sword.

"The... the child," instructed the crestfallen captain.

The soldier took the infant from Snyril's hands, a gesture that had it crying once again. Snyril offered no resistance, though his face could not hide the contemplation of it.

"What happened here, thief?" The captain demanded.

"Captain!" interrupted a soldier by the fallen column, "A nightgaunt. Just as the village folk said."

"Is it truly dead?"

The soldier nodded.

The captain thought for a long moment before his face hardened with some new revelation. "It's clear what happened here." His men turned to him, eager to hear the truth.

"Haarlan surely slew the nightgaunt, for only a man of his caliber could hope to be the first to achieve such a feat.

Then, having saved the child, he was cruelly murdered by this

deviant, no doubt by dishonourable means." His men grumbled their agreement. A hand gesture formed them into a semi-circle around Snyril, crossbows poised.

"Thief whose name I care not, you are hereby charged with numerous counts of robbery, of child abduction, and of the murder of..." He struggled to speak the words, "H-Haarlan Gildbrun." Some of the men began to weep quietly at this. "Hero of the seven realms, champion of the people, and... and--" It was too much for him.

"And slayer of nightgaunts!" put in one of his men, a declaration met with cheers from the others.

The captain nodded, reasserting his composure. "Indeed... a triumph that will go down in the annals of history." He turned his attention back to Snyril. "Thief, what say you in defence?"

Snyril glanced about himself. Exhausted, incredulous, and oddly amused by this entire ordeal. Air whistling through his broken nose, he reached into his pockets, producing the pipe and tobacco pouch he'd nabbed off Haarlan's corpse. He poked a generous pinch of tobacco into the pipe bowl, blew away some lingering vom, then put the mouthpiece to his lips. He patted at his person in search of a means to light it. Nothing. Grunting his annoyance, he cast the pipe away, the exertion dropping his pants to his ankles. Unfazed, Snyril blew away

more of the infant's parting thanks. "Don't s'pose you got any cord?"

The bemused soldiers looked to their captain who--busy admiring Lightshear--suddenly remembered himself, "Mm? Ah yes. Your confession will be noted." He gave a hasty wave.

The soldiers aimed.

The crossbows twanged.

The bolts flew.

THE END