



NOT EVERYONE DIES

BY DOUGLAS SEACAT

The outskirts of Fellig, at the end of the siege

With a bellow of unbridled rage, once more Orsus Zoktavir swept his axe in a sweeping blow, sending Stormguard flying back as its hungry edge severed weapons and limbs with equal ease. Even before he surpassed his limits, the battle seemed a fevered dream, like the landscape from some madman's painting where the only colors were the vivid hues of sundered flesh and gore. His rising fury was a joyous anthem in his mind that pushed aside all other thoughts, with the pounding of his heart serving as drums that maintained an irresistible rhythm. He knew that few battles in history could claim a similar distinction as this, where so few had brought about the annihilation of so many.

He felt a grim but visceral satisfaction to know that any Cygnaran defenders who survived by cringing behind their city walls would never forget the sickly sweet stench of fear and death. Despite the delight he took in the fray, some part of him had begun to realize that victory was no longer likely, if indeed it ever had been possible. The warnings of his officers had been accurate, even though their words had struck him as cowardly at the time: there were simply too many enemy soldiers garrisoned here.

For a while his men had fought alongside him to prove their

steadfastness, Iron Fangs and veteran Winter Guard alike. One by one they had fallen or been picked off by the cowardly rifles or the lightning. Even as the battle started to turn, he saw scattered pockets of his soldiers, separated and cut off amid the chaos. The sight of the carnage left by every swing of his axe and piled around him in bloody heaps inspired them and they tried to rally back toward him, but this became difficult once the enemy counterattack began in earnest. Their fighting took on a desperate intensity, showing resolve the Butcher would not have expected from southern dogs.

Immediately after his warjacks had smashed the gate and torn it down, he had let his doom reavers loose so their own unique breed of madness as they hacked men down with their howling Orgoth blades would terrify the opposition. This had pushed back the defenders for a short time. The doom reavers soon also fell to bullets, one by one. Orsus was dimly aware that mercenaries had joined the battle on the western edge of the city, where a different segment of his divided force was pinned down. A report must have been delivered to him on this topic, but he could not recall which of the Khadoran corpses lying near him had brought that news. No living allies stood near to him now, only enemies. The living were outnumbered by the dead, and in the Butcher's maddened state he saw the fallen battling on as ghosts. It became difficult for him to separate the real soldiers from the phantoms.

Never did it enter into the Butcher's mind to call a retreat. His attack would have meaning in its horrifying drain upon the enemy. Lives cut short here would not be easily replaced. Survivors of this battle would not mock him in victory, but only wheeze wide-eyed, holding their weapons with trembling hands as they wondered how they had evaded being piled up among the dead. He hoped they would wake in terror for years to come after nightmares of a giant wearing the Anvil of Khador.

The Butcher's own marvelous dream of slaughter was coming to an end. Fellig's defenders kept pouring forth without surcease, and even his mighty arms began to tire, with only his inner fires of rage keeping him going. He grinned in savage appreciation for the stupid courage of the Stormguard and Stormblades who hurled themselves at him repeatedly, only to be mowed down like wheat before a scythe. Sword knights joined them, nearly as enthusiastic to meet Lola. Each kill only increased his desire to slay the next. Sometimes he killed with his blunderbuss, sometimes with sorcery, but mostly it was Lola who sang. He did not notice his own injuries until the toll of his seeping blood began to slow his arms and narrow his vision. His last 'jack had fallen ages ago, torn apart by cannon fire from the walls. Fenris had galloped off earlier, chasing the enemy. The Butcher was truly alone.

The flow of war pulled him away from the breach as lesser men and their feeble weapons surrounded him, battering away. In the aggregate they exerted a certain pressure, like the tide. His power field emitted a constant whine as its energies deflected bullets and blades. He staggered from some heavy impact that had penetrated the field. The smell of ozone jarred him out of his trance-like state to spot the Stormblade who had landed the blow lifting his glaive for another strike. Orsus yelled in renewed rage and lashed out at the offending knight with such strength that the man was cloven down the center. The red haze returned to erase his rational thoughts.

He lost touch of the flow of events but kept swinging. His fighting instincts were deeply ingrained; he did not need to oversee his body to remember how to kill. Awareness returned as he stood knee-deep in a muddy creek, surrounded by trees and helmeted knights bearing the hated yellow Cygnus. They paced around him, just out of his reach. The knights gleamed in silver steel, faceless behind their visors like emissaries of some arrogant but impotent higher power. He

blinked at them and felt his breathing labor. It was shameful, this weakness. Lola was heavy in his hands, and his fingers were cold and numb, slippery with blood. Realizing he was at his last strength made him even angrier, both with himself and with his enemies.

A brief moment of blackness came again, and he shook his head to discover he had fallen to one knee in the water. Staring at him from the mirrored surface was a face more gaunt and pale than he remembered, filthy with mud and gore. Ribbons of red wound among the rocks of the stream. He tasted nothing but copper and smelled nothing but smoke. He saw movement reflected on the water and looked up to see one of the sword knights summon the courage to make his move. The adversary raised his Caspian battle blade in both hands.

The knight clearly hoped to deliver a coup de grâce, and this thought gave a surge of strength to Orsus as he bellowed like a bear and swept the stout haft of Lola sideways so its back crashed into the man's knees. The knight toppled with metallic clanks onto the large stones near the bank and groaned in pain. Orsus grinned once more as he stood back to his full height and raised his axe. The knight twisted to face him and raised his sword to block, but Orsus chopped down with all his strength to shatter the thick blade easily and pierce through the man's shining breastplate. The tension went out of the body as it collapsed awkwardly, like a puppet with cut strings. Blood welled forth from the rupture in a froth.

Orsus' senses were too muddled to hear the others come, but he knew they would take their chance. He swung around to see the other four charging forward with their blades ready, trying to overwhelm him from behind. Dimly, even as he watched them, Orsus realized his warcaster power field was gone. He was out of coal. No wonder his armor felt so heavy.

He took Lola in both hands and bellowed as he executed a wide

and powerful swipe. Spots erupted before his eyes, and he ignored the numbness of his fingers. His vision blurred and he felt no resistance, but he heard the eminently satisfying sound of metal clashing and the splashing thuds of bodies falling into the stream in eight parts where four bodies had been. Lola's blade was beyond drenched in blood. The gore had caked in layers. Blinking even as he staggered on his feet, no longer capable of even thinking about what he was doing, Orsus tore loose one of the fallen knights' cloaks to wipe the blade clean, but he did a poor job.

As he looked around, the spots in his eyes multiplied like flies on rotten meat. He saw no other sign of his enemy or of the city itself. It was only rage that kept him going. He gritted his teeth and put one foot in front of the other, dimly hoping he went toward the city to resume his fight. He did not know what direction he had picked, but once set upon it he did not waver.



The girl took it upon herself to escape the household whenever she could get away with it, a small act of rebellion. It was difficult to find the time between her endless chores, but she could sometimes manage a short reprieve if she rushed her other tasks and the mistress was distracted. If she was gone too long she would suffer even worse punishment when she returned, but after many expeditions she had become well versed in just how long she could vanish before she was missed. She particularly enjoyed slipping away to the unused areas beyond the fields of the main farm, nearer the great, looming forest. She had invented countless tales in her mind of the horrors and wonders amid those foreboding trees.

Every time she walked this way, past the castellan's expensive cattle penned in their enclosures, past the outer edge of the field, she tried to muster the courage to go closer to the forest. It was a battle of

inches and yards, but she doubted she would ever make it. The others in the household insisted anyone who went into those trees never returned, and they described gruesome tales of what happened to them. She listened to these stories from the corners and the shadows with frightened delight, although she knew wagons sometimes came down the old road from the nearest section of the forest and that there was a large town just to the northeast, so the stories could not all be true.

One of her favorite places was a thick old tree that her mother had first pointed out for her, and she always used it as a landmark for her explorations. As she rounded its trunk she gave a start and stopped in her tracks. Lying still as death against the massive trunk was a giant of a man, someone far larger than anyone she had ever seen before. Even the cook, master and tyrant of the kitchen, was not so large. She inadvertently made a noise in the back of her throat and then slapped a hand over her mouth and stepped back, trembling. Yet the huge figure did not move or make any other sign that he had heard her. In fact, as she started at him apprehensively, she became more certain that he really was dead. This forced her to ponder whether being dead made him more or less frightening as she examined him from a distance.

The giant's armor was blood red, and she felt fairly certain it was actually covered in real blood as well, caked and dried in places, and in others covered in mud. He was slumped with his back against the tree as if taking a nap. Across his lap was an enormous axe, the sight of which caused her to shiver and remember terrible tales about executioners chopping off heads. Mixed with her fear she felt an intense curiosity. He was very different from anything she had ever encountered. How had he come to be here? What could have killed so frightful a man? She found herself creeping closer to him before she even realized it.

It was when she had gotten within several yards that she saw the huge rent in the side of the giant's armor. The edges of this violent tear were blackened as if scorched. This seemed to have been the fatal blow, as below it was blood that looked fresh. She saw a single red drop gather and fall onto the grass. His armor was like nothing she had ever seen—not that she had much exposure to fighting men beyond the simply attired men of the castellan's estate guard. Peculiar brass pipes attached to the lower section of the great overlapping plates covering his chest and stomach, while his tremendous shoulder pieces were ringed with brutal iron spikes. A shining steel collar surrounded his neck and hid his mouth from her sight, and about his shoulders was a furred collar that she had at first taken for hair. From this distance she could see his head was bald and covered in ugly scars. Straps hung from the haft of his axe, and something dangled from each. Her stomach clenched as she recognized they were skulls; their bone-white surfaces and empty eye sockets convinced her more than anything else that this was no man but a monster.

Suddenly the giant gave a wheezing sputtering breath and then coughed, his hands twitching where they rested on the haft of his axe. She practically jumped out of her skin and fell backward, tripping over her own feet to land in the dirt. Frantically, she scrambled backward on her hands and feet, pushing herself behind the shelter of the tree to hold her breath.

He did not actually awaken. She stared at him for a long time, feeling somehow different now that she knew he was alive. She could now see more clearly that he was, in fact, breathing. His skin was very pale, and his breathing did not seem altogether easy.

Slowly—very slowly—she crept back toward him. She felt terrified, and yet her fascination had only increased. He was so obviously suffering. She remembered her mother nursing her back to health that time she had fallen in the lake and nearly drowned. It

was one of her most cherished memories. How lonely it must feel to suffer like this alone.

With a trembling hand she hesitantly poked a finger against the side of his nearest hand, where the armored gauntlet had fallen off to the grass below. She steeled herself to bolt, but he did not move at her prodding. Even more slowly and carefully she touched the skin of his hand and found to her surprise that it was extremely hot, even feverish. Her brow furrowed as she considered what she should do. She knew her freedom time was nearly at an end, and she must hurry back before she was noticed. She did not want to face the lash again. Even so, she was reluctant to leave, but eventually she turned and left him where he lay.



The girl entered the house and was immediately greeted by a switch across her calves as her mistress, the angry fat old crone, glowered at her for being late. "Truancy will not be tolerated!" the woman yelled in her grating voice. "Perhaps a night without supper will make you more responsible."

She found it impossible to stop thinking of the giant while she continued her chores, fretting about whether he would die before she could return. Her mistress seemed to delight in the repeated grumbling of the girl's stomach as she worked, but despite her discomfort, she herself thought only of the man in red.

She did not entirely understand why the sight of him had captivated her so strongly. It was almost like she had stumbled into some grymkin tale all her own, and she took a special joy in having a secret from the others, with their smug looks and condescending cruelty. She was the smallest and one of the youngest of the kitchen servants and was frequently given the worst chores as a result. Throughout the evening it sustained her to think that none of the

others knew about the wounded giant slumbering beyond the field.

As the household activities wound down and she was supposed to be asleep, she crept like a mouse into the kitchen. She had never stolen from her masters before and knew all too well there could be dire consequences, but she felt compelled. She took the largest basket she could find and crammed it with what items she could think of: a lantern, a large needle and coarse thread, a flagon of water, a bottle of cooking wine, a stack of recently cleaned cloth napkins, and several large pieces of bread and cheese left from the evening supper. Her stomach grumbled again and she felt her mouth water as she packed these away, but she refused to take even a single bite for herself.

The girl had no particularly elaborate plan, but she found she could not let the chance pass. Always before she had lacked the courage to reach the forest. She was determined this time to be brave. It was a challenge she had given herself, a dare.

Walking out to the tree at night was even more frightening than in the day, as there was a chill on the evening air and the familiar path was cloaked in shadow. An owl hooted ominously, and she shivered. The walk seemed farther than she remembered it, but then suddenly he was there, a great form in the darkness. She stopped, straining to hear his labored breathing over her own. There; he still lived. Her hands trembling, it took her longer than it should have to light the lantern. She kept it half-hooded, focused it downward toward her feet, so its light would not shine back to the house and betray her.

She crept closer, but when he did not seem to notice her, she became bolder. Biting her lip, she came right up next to him, and still he did not stir. At last she decided she would accomplish nothing if she did not start to think of him not as a strange person but more as a challenge. First, she had to get to the wound in his side. This turned out to be even more difficult than she had anticipated, and soon she was prying at the metal armor with her small hands trying

to find a way inside. He was like one of those shellfish such as she had heard they ate on the coast! She painfully tore the nail on one of her fingers while prying loose one of the leather straps nearest the bloodied rent in the armor, but eventually she got it open enough to see the wound itself.

He smelled bad and the wound was grisly, but she had chopped heads off chickens before, gutted fish, and cut fat from fresh meat, so she had seen worse. She tried to keep that thought foremost in mind as she examined the bleeding gash and threaded a needle as best she could in the dim light. Peering up past the enormous torso, she braced herself for the biggest risk yet. His face was obscured in the darkness. Certainly if he was going to wake, he would have done so by now? Her fingers shook and she was so tense she almost jumped back from sheer reflex after she made the first stab through the skin. She forced herself to stay still, but the giant did not even flinch. It was like the needle was nothing to him, or he was too far gone to feel it. Emboldened, she got to work, putting more focused concentration into sewing his flesh than she had ever done with her household work.

By the time she had finished sewing the wound she had entirely forgotten she was working on a person. Indeed she had begun to remember what it had been like sewing as a very young girl with her mother, before she had died from the coughing sickness. After tying off the final stitch the girl dampened one of the napkins and did what she could to wipe off the crusted blood, and then she packed in several more to staunch the blood seeping from the newly sewn wound. Working with cuts was not unfamiliar to her, as they were a regular kitchen hazard. Earlier in the year she had opened a long slice along the inside of her palm while peeling potatoes. She had been whipped brutally and fed only scraps for several days because the injury prevented her from doing her work. The lesson

had certainly served to make her more careful since.

There was a sudden touch on her face, and she froze. She looked up with wide eyes to find the giant's gaze upon her. The hand that had brushed her face was strangely gentle. She made a gurgling noise and fell back, stumbling over the basket as she once again backed toward the tree. She almost fled entirely but stopped at the thin croak of his voice. She reached out and reclaimed the lantern, pointing it toward him more so she could see if he lunged toward her. His expression was strange, almost hurt. He gestured toward his throat. He opened his mouth but nothing came forth. She stared wide-eyed and wondered if he might be mute, like her. It was only when he coughed weakly that she came back slightly to her wits. She realized with a start that he must be very thirsty, of course. She had thought of this earlier but had forgotten. Her eyes went to the basket, lying on its side where she had pushed it in her retreat.

She scrambled for the basket and was relieved to see the water flagon had not lost its stopper. Hesitantly she brought it forward, opened it, and raised it up to the giant. He seemed unable to take hold of it, so she was forced to come closer to his face, still trembling, and pour the liquid into his mouth. He coughed and sputtered and she backed away once more, but eventually he settled and she tried again. This time he swallowed several mouthfuls and seemed satisfied. She bent down to find the bread for him, but when she looked up again, he was asleep. The girl realized her heart was beating painfully in her chest, and she thought she had taken all she could this night. She placed the bread near his hand alongside the bottle of cooking wine, extinguished her lantern, and fled back to the house.



The next time she visited, she brought a heavy tarp she had found discarded in the barn after realizing he was probably terribly cold

from sleeping on the ground under the tree. It also occurred to her that such a covering might make it more difficult for anyone to spot him. The castellan's estate guards were lazy about patrols, but the risk of his discovery seemed particularly keen, as the household was in a state of high activity in anticipation of an important gathering in a few days. Guests of the castellan would be arriving, and everyone had been told that mistakes would not be tolerated. The kitchen mistress and the cook had become even more shrill and belligerent than usual. She was not certain if this was a general feast, a wedding, or something else—no one told her such details—but clearly something important was happening. Ordinarily this might have caught her interest, but now she felt entirely absorbed with her secret project.

On arriving at the tree, she felt gratified to see the giant had eaten almost all the food she had brought and the wine bottle was empty. She even thought maybe some color had returned to his cheeks; at least, in the lantern light he no longer looked pale as death. His skin was still hot to the touch, and the wet cloth she had draped across his steaming head was dry. She had briefly considered trying to get more of him out of his armor to help him cool, but the prospect seemed impossible without several grown men to help, and maybe an ox.

As she wet and replaced the cloth, there was a sudden rumbling noise. It took her several long moments to realize he was speaking to her, proving he was not a mute. She backed away, more startled than panicked this time. His eyes were open again, although they wandered and did not focus on her. He spoke in low tones in some language she could not comprehend. It was definitely not Ordic, and from the little she had heard she felt reasonably confident it was not Cygnaran either. The rumbling noise was strangely hypnotic.

An expectant pause prompted a familiar spark of helpless shame until she realized he was not waiting for her reply. He continued to speak, almost as if he had heard an answer from someone who was not

there. The only thing she understood from the Khadoran words was the name “Lola,” and she wondered whose it was. To her bafflement, a single tear trickled down the giant’s cheek. His expression looked so doleful it made her chest hurt. He spoke more words and then fell asleep, and the entire experience left her oddly calm and at peace. He had not even flinched when her needle had pierced his flesh, but clearly some inner hurt bothered him. She felt a sympathetic echo of this feeling, a resonance with a pain she had buried inside her since her mother died. Could a monster like this feel something similar? As she changed the napkins soaked with blood at his side, she tried to imagine the person with whom he thought he had been speaking. Was Lola as large as he was? She tried to imagine her mistress three times her actual size and wearing red armor and shuddered at the thought.

Over the next two nights she returned again, with more food, to change his dressings and listen to his incompressible, fevered ramblings. Ordinarily it caused her distress when people spoke to her at any length beyond barked orders. She had learned early not to try to speak, particularly after enduring the laughter of other children. It was a relief to listen to someone whom she could not understand and who clearly required no response. She dreaded the thought of returning to the house and the chance of being caught, and she felt safer here with him. She went under the tarp and folded herself up on the inside of one of his arms and fell asleep there, comforted by the heat radiating from him like a furnace. She barely managed to wake in time to sneak back to her room before daybreak.

That morning she overheard the cook screaming at the kitchen mistress about the missing supplies. Hearing her own tormentor being punished caused her a spiteful sense of satisfaction, and she became bolder with her theft. No one would suspect her, anyway; she was too meek for such a plot. Despite this, the rising risk of what

she was doing distracted her as she hastened back to the giant that afternoon. With the events in the household, her increased duties would prevent her from visiting this evening, and she felt compelled to go early.

She was thinking about this as she rounded the thick tree and came to a halt in startled surprise to see he was standing. He did not look particularly steady, leaning with one hand against the tree trunk, but he was on his feet. His axe was set up against the tree next to his hand. The sheer size and mass of him terrified her anew; upright, he seemed to tower above her like a mountain. This changed everything, and suddenly she felt entirely lost, with no idea how to interact with him.

His eyes seemed different as they fixed on her, and her blood ran cold. It was as if he was seeing her clearly for the first time and did not recognize her. As they stared at one another, his brow furrowed and it seemed that perhaps there was a glimmer of recognition. He pointed abruptly at her arm and made a demand in a tone she had not heard from him before. She looked down and saw only bruises there, as she always did. His eyes widened and his nostrils flared as he glared at the marks, and she felt her apprehension deepen. Had she done something wrong? His lips curled in a snarl and he said something particularly sharp and biting that she could recognize as a curse even without knowing the words. His fists were clenched, and he seemed to be getting angrier by the moment.

His intensity unnerved her completely. Without thinking, she dropped her basket of food as she gave a choked noise and turned to run. She heard him call out behind her, and she heard the name “Lola” again, but she did not slow down.



She came back to her senses after running most of the way to the

estate, and inside her head she chided herself for being a cowardly fool. She did not truly believe his anger had been directed at her, so why was she racing like a rabbit to its burrow? Suddenly she slid to a stop as she saw the kitchen mistress standing in her path, glaring directly at her with her hands on her large hips.

“You, girl!” the woman screamed in her shrill voice pointing imperiously for her to come forward. The old crone was nearsighted—a fact the girl had often used to her advantage—but not blind enough to avoid now. Her face was redder with anger than the girl had ever seen, and her yellow teeth were clenched. The girl felt her world disintegrating around her, but she had no choice but to obey. As soon as she came close enough, her mistress seized hold of her arm in a vise-like grip and hauled her roughly back toward the house, screaming at her the whole way.

She was dragged into the kitchen and hurled to the floor, where she skidded on the rough stone even as she crumpled. “Dirty little thief! Wretched, ungrateful dog!” All that sank in was that her pilfering had been discovered. The exact words of her mistress washed over her, but the woman continued to scream. This attracted the attention of the cook, who entered the room with an alarmed expression. The girl raised herself to look up, and somewhere in the back of her mind she wondered why he seemed more worried than angry. Then the lord of the house entered the room behind him. All the blood drained from her face. She knew all too well the reputation of the master and his lack of tolerance for inept servants, let alone those who stole. Last year one of the farmhands had been flogged to death for theft. They all knew the story.

The castellan was a wiry-thin Tordoran with jet-black oiled hair and tailored clothes far finer than anyone around him. His beard and mustache were perfectly trimmed and groomed, his fingers adorned with rings. He exuded self-assured authority and wealth. The girl had

always been invisible to him, and finding his eyes upon her now, she was pinned in place. He barked at his cook, "What is this? Can't you control your people?"

Until she had met the giant, the cook was the largest man she had ever seen, but he quailed before his master as he stammered, "M-m-my lord, let me handle this, do not c-concern yourself . . ." It was very rare for the castellan to enter the kitchen; his presence now was likely only to check on some detail for the imminent gathering. Unluckily for her.

"What did she do?" the castellan demanded, and the cook glared in turn at the girl's mistress, who was still too angry to act demure or cowed.

"She's a thief. Stole from the kitchen! Food, wine, linens, who knows what else?" After she spoke she seemed to realize whom she was addressing, and her tone became less shrill. "She's just a stupid mute, my lord. Addled. Even a dog can be trained. I'll deal with her." Was there a hint of concern for her in the kitchen mistress' voice? This possibility more than any other frightened the girl.

"A thief?" The castellan's eyes had turned cold. He walked up to her where she cowered wishing she could say the words to plead or apologize. He raised one of his clean and manicured hands, as if to let her see it clearly, and then closed his fist and crashed it into the side of her face, knocking her back to the floor. The pain was a white explosion in her head, and she was so stunned she could not even react except to feel the tears leap into her eyes unbidden. The castellan's calm voice contrasted with the violence as he said, "Sometimes it is best to attend to these matters personally." Curled up and cradling her head, she did not see the lord rolling up his sleeves tidily. He spoke again, this time to the cook. "Bring me a lash. Let us be sure the rest of your help pay heed."

Gasping, the girl instinctively cast about for some way to evade

her fate, though she knew she could not escape. When her eyes fell on the window nearest the back door, she saw the giant looming there, peering inside. His face looked angrier than ever, and she had no doubt he had seen her being struck. His eyes were fixated upon the castellan with that frightening intensity. A wave of dread and excitement arose in her, and she realized she was sobbing.

There was shouting outside, but the ringing in the girl's head muffled it so that it seemed to come from a long distance. A metallic sound pealed but was cut short, followed by a wet noise like a bucket of slop thrown against the wall of the house and then a sudden shriek from the kitchen mistress.

She had already started to cover her head when the door exploded to cordwood under the kick of his armored boot. Peering between her folded arms, she saw several estate guards lying unmoving and bleeding on the path leading up to the door. She quickly rolled under the nearest low table and huddled there, watching with wide eyes. This was not supposed to happen.

The giant pushed his way inside, his bulk tearing sections of the doorframe loose. He had to duck beneath the lintel as he entered the dark kitchen, and as he passed through the door he seemed like some dark shadow blocking the sun. His eyes looked maddened, and his teeth were bared. He walked without hesitation directly toward the castellan, axe in hand.

The Tordoran took a step back but looked up at him with some small shred of defiance, as if his status made him exempt from violence. "Hold there! This is my house! Who are you? How dare you—"

The girl looked away just in time as the great axe descended. It did not prevent her from hearing the sickening sound; it was like the one a cleaver made hacking into a cow's carcass. She heard her lord gurgle something and then the sound of his body hitting the floor.

Despite her treatment in the household, all she could think of was the horror. This was not what she had wanted, none of it. The giant soon turned on the cook and even her mistress, and she could only squeeze her eyes shut, clap her hands over her ears, and pretend it was not happening. This had to be a nightmare.

As silence descended on the room she realized she was sobbing again and that her cheeks were wet from her tears. Outside she could hear shouting and the sound of approaching people, but inside there was only quiet. She opened her eyes just a crack and was startled to see the giant leaning down toward her, peering under the table with a strangely innocent expression. In his left hand his axe dripped blood. He frowned and shook his head, and then wiped his other bloodied hand across his jaw. She yelped wordlessly as he awkwardly reached in to pull her forth. She did not fight him, numbed by horror as he slid her out into the open. She huddled on the floor, only moving to squirm away from the nearest puddle of blood spreading toward her.

The giant turned away for a moment to return to the horrible ruins of what used to be a person: the castellan. He reached down and seized a thick silk lined pouch from the man's waist. It jingled as he pulled it loose.

As if reaching a decision, he suddenly scooped her up in one hand with odd tenderness. She was so small she easily tucked into the crook of his arm, and he walked out of the kitchen. He took several long strides and then turned back toward the house. The girl could see a number of people rushing about in alarm, although the estate guards at the fore halted uncertainly at the sight of the enormous man in his blood-red armor. The spears in their hands seemed feeble indeed.

The giant pointed his axe to the building, shouting in his rumbling voice. The girl felt a sensation like a wave of heat passing over her, and then, inexplicably, the ground beneath the grand house buckled

and heaved with an explosion. With a muffled boom, the expensive structure folded inward and collapsed into churning dust and smoke. Several fires ignited amid the wreckage. She buried her head in his arm to hide from the sight, shaking; it was the only home she had ever known. The estate guards dropped their weapons and fled.

The giant seemed satisfied with this and walked for several minutes along the path. Then he stopped and, after a lengthy pause, carefully placed her on her own feet. He took the pouch he had taken from the castellan and pushed it toward her. She grasped it in both of her hands automatically and looked blearily down at it with no comprehension. It felt surprisingly heavy for such a small thing. The giant pushed her hands together around it more firmly, so she would not drop it.

She could not meet his eyes, although she could feel his upon her. He reached down with a bloodied hand as if to turn her face up toward him but stopped and let his arm fall away. After a time he turned and without another word walked heavily in the direction of the dark forest.