

Short stories

from

The Community Story Team

Drums of War

By Jünger des Xardas

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Aram pulled his blankets over his head and turned over on his rough bedding.

It was no good.

In fact, the thunder of the Orcish war drums felt even louder than before. He had not heard anything for the last days but the hammering of Orcish fists on the troll firs they used for their drums. It was part of their siege tactics. Every town which had fallen in this war had endured the sound of the Orcish drums for several days. It was a gesture of strength and an attempt to demoralize the enemy. At the same time it was some kind of religious ceremony – if Aram had really got this right. But right now, he couldn't have cared less. The Orcs may not be disturbed by the sound of their drums, but Aram wished for nothing else than an end to their siege, no matter the consequences – as long as this damn noise would finally stop, at least for a moment.

He heard a rustling noise next to him as the curtain of the tent was swept aside, followed by quiet footsteps. "Master Moren?" Aram raised his head.

A man in a wide black robe sat down on a small stool, the only piece of furniture inside the tent apart from a crude table. "You should be

asleep.”

Despite his own tiredness, Aram found that it was his master who needed some sleep the most. His voice sounded faint, the already hollow cheeks were fallen and deep wrinkles were visible on his bare forehead.

“What has happened?”

“The same as last night and the night before. The next assault will begin any minute now. And we should hope it succeeds. I will not be able to distract them forever.”

Aram remained silent. Then, after hesitating shortly, he heard himself ask: “With your permission, may I go outside and watch the storming of the castle?”

A bitter smile crossed the old mage’s lips. “Is today’s youth so fond of death and despair?”

Thrown off balance, the young man observed his master’s profile. For a moment, Aram was afraid of having said something wrong, but then he raised his hand and waved as if to swipe at a fly. “Go ahead, boy. Don’t let an old man’s rambling keep you.”

Aram nodded, his mouth half open. Then he reached for his rope, pulled it over his head and strapped the small pouch containing his runes around his waist. Without a further glance at Moren, he left the tent. He could not put his finger on the reason, but during the last few days the presence of his master had been... unsettling. It was nothing about him personally – on the contrary, Moren had always treated him like a son and taught him everything he knew – but rather the helpless state he was in. Yes: his master, who had always seemed so strong, so mighty, now looked more like a frail old man than ever before. Aram knew what had been bothering him lately, and it was the pain of not being able to comfort him that made his presence unbearable.

Stepping out of the tent, Aram’s line thought came to a sudden end. It hadn’t seemed possible, but the drums sounded a lot louder all of a sudden. But that was not all. Aram was looking at a view that made him freeze in awe and shudder at the same time.

Gotha, the fortress of the Paladins, was illuminated by hundreds of

torches. The warriors were gathering at the edge of the ramp leading up to the castle. Aram had always admired the force, the strength emanating from the Orcs and this perfect calm they displayed during battle. If anything, this race had mastered the art of fighting. A voice thundered through the valley, a voice louder than even the mighty drums. Upon the ancient tower at the edge of the encampment stood Varek the Great, Marshal of the Orcs, surrounded by his advisors and veterans and gave out orders to his commanding officers.

Aram's gaze wondered up into the sky. It was black. As black as their god. Not a single star was to be seen through the thick layer of clouds above the camp.

Someone ran into him.

"Oy! At least get out of our way if you're not going to make yourself useful, Morra!"

Aram froze as he looked up and saw the contorted face of an Orc staring back at him, the light of the torches mingling with the war paint to form a gruesome picture, one the young mage had only known from his darkest nightmares.

But then the Orc turned away from him and marched on without even bothering to look back. Aram noticed the large crossbow he was holding in his hands.

All of a sudden, the rhythm of the drums changed. Aram knew this could only mean one thing: the assault had begun.

The same moment, he saw warriors run up the slope. A hailstorm of arrows rained on their formation, countered at once by the Orcish archers' crossbows. The five mighty catapults on the outskirts of the camp also opened fire.

The storming Orcs faltered and rolled down the ramp, pierced by many arrows, tearing their comrades with them and vanishing in the dark of the forest. But this was all the time the first attackers needed to reach the small village at the foot of the castle and find cover behind the solid wooden walls of the deserted houses.

Aram was not fooled. They would also lose today's battle. Up to now, the War had gone well for the Orcs. But after the fall of Montera, the tide had turned. The Myrtans were still defending, but the Orcs had been unable to penetrate the walls of the mighty fortresses of Gotha and Faring and had not won a single foot of ground. Without a miracle, nothing was going to change.

The cries of the Orcs gained in volume as a sortie of Paladins stormed at them and the village was transformed into a battlefield. A horn was blown somewhere behind Aram and four Orcish mercenaries rushed past him toward the slope.

He turned away from the battle. The sound of battle had risen to an almost unbearable level. Aram sped up, almost ran, only to stop near the edge of the camp. Here, humans sat at small campfires between all the tents and carts, apparently untouched by the ongoing battle. They were the people who accompanied any army. Merchants and doctors, cooks and prostitutes. No, he was not going to join them. He already felt their lurking gazes. It already seemed as though the dark figures were huddling closer under his stare.

When the Orcs came, Aram had seen their arrival as salvation of a long life of persecution. There had only been one fate for Dark Mages in the Kingdom of Myrtana: death. Their order had been almost wiped out and Master Moren and his student were forced to spend their lives under long hoods in the darkest taverns in the poorest corners of towns – whenever they actually dared mingle with other people. The Orcs, however, didn't care which gods the humans were worshipping as long as they recognized their new masters. In the hope of a new golden age, an age of freedom, Moren and Aram had joined the long army trek that had marched north from Trelis. They wanted to help overthrow the hated King and build relations with the new rulers.

But meanwhile, Aram doubted whether or not life had really improved. Despite being free, humans still saw him as an exile, an evil witcher who belonged on a pyre or was, at least, to be feared. He saw it in each of their gazes.

Aram realized he was shaking. He was feeling cold, still disgusted by the sound of the fighting. He wished he could run away as far as possible. Instead, he turned tail and returned to their tent. What had made him leave it in the first place? Was it a feeble attempt to escape from the helplessness he felt in Moren's presence? He had almost reached the tent when he paused. Half a dozen Orcish warriors had surrounded it. Two of them were holding his master and had twisted his arms in an obviously painful way. And the Orc standing before the tent and gazing at the old Dark Mage with unsurprised hate was...

"Varek", Aram whispered.

"Enough, Morra!", he heard the Orc say. "Four times you refused. I should have snapped your neck the first time! When you asked to join us, you promised to use your magic against our enemies. Now I see you are but another disgraceful liar, just like the remainder of your people." "This is different", the mage whispered in pain. "What you are planning is madness. You will never be able to controll..."

Varek's mighty fist hit the Dark Mage in the face. An unhealthy breaking sound echoed in the night. Blood sprang from his, now oddly distorted, nose.

"Master!", Aram exclaimed. He felt his lips tremble.

Varek only turned his head for a moment. For the fraction of a second, Aram stared in his cold eyes. Then the Warlord turned his full attention back to Moren. "I am no longer prepared to sacrifice the lives of good warriors, just because an old Morra lacks the courage to use his knowledge", he grunted. "We are Orcs! We will use every weapon at our disposal. That is what has made us strong. That is how we pushed you filthy Morras back this far."

That moment, the curtain of the tent was lifted and another Orc appeared. He was clad in heavy grey robes.

"Did you find it?", Varek asked the Shaman.

He nodded slowly. "Yes." He passed a thick book to the Warlord. Aram recognized it immediately as his master's spellbook, from which he himself had learned so much. "This contains the spell we need to

summon him.”

The Warlord nodded his approval and grinned slightly, his face still distorted by the dancing light of the many torches. “Then you, Morra, are of no further value to me”, he hissed at Moren. He then turned to his Elite warriors and gave them an order: “You are to punish him at once for the treachery he has committed. Hang his corpse where everyone can see it, as a warning to all other Morras!” As the warriors left with Moren, Varek and the Shaman, departed as well. “Come now”, Aram heard the Warlord say, “let us call this Demon and end this battle once and for all.” The two warriors dragged Master Moren past his student. “Master!”, he whispered helplessly.

The Dark Mage raised his head slightly. Blood was still pouring from his broken nose, drenching the old, broken lipps. “Get out of here”, he whispered. “Take whatever you can carry from my things and leave this place.”

The Orcs dragged Moren away. Then he was gone, and Aram was on his own. For a few minutes, he simply stood there, gazing after his Master, the man who had been like a father to him during the last years. Around him, the Orcish drums were thundering.

The mysterious customer

By HerrFenrisWolf

The bartender did no more than raise an eyebrow when the lad ordered another pint of beer.

This man had been sitting in the Angry Boar, Montera's finest inn, for three hours straight and quaffed one beer after another. His clothes were, without a doubt, those of a mage.

The color of his robe, however, was too dark for both the Circles of Fire and of Water. Therefore, the man was definitely not a priest of Innos, let alone Adanos.

The only possible conclusion made every person in the Angry Board shiver. This milk-faced man was a Dark Mage, a servant of Beliar, the God of Death. It had been a very long time since a priest of Beliar had been able to show his allegiance openly in Myrtana.

But under the rule of the Orcs, there were no more Paladins – no one to pursue such people.

It was rumored that these mysterious figures formed the ruling class in the distant country of Varant. But this boy was obviously a Midlander. The barman had heard many rumors about dispersed Beliar cultists in Myrtana during his many years of serving drinks to strangers. And now, all of a sudden, proof was sitting in his tavern – let alone the fact that this Dark Mage was getting drunk before his eyes.

What in the world could cause a Dark Mage such distress that he saw no

choice but to drown it in booze?

Were such problems not restricted to common people?

An unsettling thought. One could only hope that this dark priest would leave town as soon as humanly possible and, most important of all, stay gone.

Making all the effort he could muster, the bartender raised his voice: "Excuse me? You want another one? On the house."

Ugo and the Stars

By HerrFenrisWolf

“Been a long time, long-finger!” Bertha laughed at him before giving him a warm hug. “How’s life? Who did you get your money from this time?” The matron didn’t think much of discretion when talking to her customers, and Ugo was one of her favorites.

“Oh, Bertha! No, I just came from Cape Dun. Had a message to pass on to Marik.”

“Cape Dun? You sure took your time! The girls and I were worried sick. A lad like you doesn’t belong in the wild. What if a boar attacked you? We couldn’t survive without your gold.” The woman giggled like a young maiden why she produced two goblets from under the bar. Oddly enough, the thief had rarely even entered the house. Bertha was a kind soul. This lady could be as scratchy as a troll’s pelt or as soft as that of an Ice Wolf, but she always managed to soften his villain’s soul.

Ugo refused the heavy Archoloss drop she offered him.

“Well, Bertha, I took my time in Cape Dun with good reason. And believe me, it wasn’t about the forest or the sea. People like me are townspeople through and through, no matter what happens. I pilfered the store of that bitchy old warrior called Urkrass. And guess what I found.” With this, Ugo grinned and produced his own bottle of wine. Bertha’s eyes shone in the candlelight as she looked at the label. Her

voice shook: "A genuine Khoriner! Wine from their monastery of Innos. I haven't seen a drop like that in ages."

The signature scrawled on the bottle confirmed its origin: "Master Gorax".

"How much?" In an instant, the wine expert had transformed back into a rough businesswoman.

"Oh, my dear Bertha. You'll have to admit that this bottle is invaluable, really. But let's just say I'll let you have it if you let me in free of charge the next two times."

"Ugo, you horny weasel!", the matron exclaimed. "There's no way I'll let you swindle me! Here's an offer: you'll only pay half the next two times."
"

"Deal!", Ugo replied at once. Haggling with Bertha was pointless; he had already asked for more than the bottle was worth. This was a deal he could be more than happy with. "Always a pleasure doing business with you. But not today, the trip was more than exhausting."

"Nonsense!" Bertha clapped her fleshy hands. "There's no better way to relax than in a girl's arms."

On Bertha's sign, a girl had joined them, giving the mercenary a warm and irresistible smile. "Hello there, Ugo."

The thief suppressed a grin. Bertha sure knew her customers and never hesitated to use her knowledge. She would have been hard-pressed to miss his fancy for redheads. And these hips! No, he definitely could not say No to Magdalena. He sighed, opened his moneybag and paid Bertha, who grinned at him contently. Then he let Magdalena take his hand and lead him upstairs.

Trouble with the Mercenaries

By HerrFenrisWolf

“People, trust me, there’s none left for today!” Flint implored the four grim-looking mercenaries. The lot came every night to his tavern, drank their fill, and turned restless. Ever more restless, day after day. “You’ve been draining my kegs like ogres.”

“Oh, bullcrap! I see a couple of barrels right behind you!” grunted Spike. “Give us some or we’ll stuff you in an empty one and roll you down the street!”

A burst of obnoxious laughter. One of them cried out, “He probably filled the barrel with his own sweat. Not that you can tell the difference — the stuff tastes like troll piss anyway.”

Whimpering, the landlord replied, “They’re not for you. I’ve sold them to the Raging Boar in Montera.”

Spike continued, unfazed, “We don’t give a shit. Who cares about what promises you made? We’re the elite around here, and if we demand drinks, we’d damn better get them.” He leant forward, smirking, propping himself up on an elbow. “If you want our protection, bring us the damned piss already.” Roars of agreement filled the air.

“Have you ever considered why the booze tastes like piss?” came a voice from the doorway. “A threatened landlord might just get the inkling to wee into the tankard.”

Flint drew back while the other men turned their heads to the entrance. Darkness had already set in, dotted by a few sparks of light. The pungent smell of swampweed permeated the air.

“What’ve we here, then, a joker? Why don’t you step in and repeat what you’ve just said?” barked Spike.

The small glint inched closer, and before the mercenaries stood a grimy fellow in black leather armour, his hair ruffled, his boots caked with mud, dirt on his face. The throng of mercenaries tittered. “A jester, huh? You’ve a pretty big mouth for a lousy guy like you,” spat one of them.

Spike flashed a nasty grin.

Flint stayed out of it. The stranger was already in a heap of trouble. The orcs cared little for brawls between mercenaries and tramps. That’s why Spike was the absolute champion of the Faring arena. People had to give him a wide berth before yanking his chains. But the figure under the doorframe goaded Spike further as he stepped in and flicked the smouldering reefer away. “What? Is this it? I’d thought, the ruckus in this place, I’d find some pretty tough fighters in here, but all I see are bigmouths.”

The gladiator’s face crumpled with rage as he drew his blade. “You asked for—”

A hand swept from above and clamped around Spike’s sword arm; a kick to the shin and his balance was toppled. He still stood upright — only just — before a punch to the chin took him off his feet.

“As you were, men. Take your friend and make for the hills before you join him on the floor.”

The mercenaries' courage seemed to plummet at those words; they did as instructed. Flint handed the traveller a wet cloth to dab at his filthy face. After the stranger had rubbed the dirt away, Flint realised who he was. "Raven! I should've known. No-one deals with troublemakers like you do."

"Ah, let's just say I had a lousy day. Thrashing that guy really hit the spot. Too bad he wasn't an assassin," laughed the bounty hunter.

"So? What happened?"

"Ah, well," said Raven, waving his hand, "I'd caught a paladin in Montera, but one of those bloody assassins ambushed me, shot me with a poisoned arrow and made off with the guy." The bounty hunter bent against the counter. "If I'm right, the assassin's on his way to Cape Dun. I'll send Bufford a letter tomorrow. The least I can do is make sure the bastard doesn't get rewarded."

Flint nodded understandingly. He knew of Raven's repulsion with the desert folk and how the Hashishin made life hard for Myrntanian bounty hunters.

"And the swampweed?" asked the landlord. "What's that for? Smoking it will make you slow, and the gods know slow people don't live long in this world."

"For the pain. And, besides, you've seen I'm anything but slow."

"Go wash yourself, then. If you'll stick here a little longer and keep the scumbags from breathing down my neck, I'll let you sleep here for free and give you all the Schnaps you can drink for little money."

"Now that's what I like to hear."

Unbidden guests

By Jünger des Xardas

“Here. That’s all we have left.” With an apologetic glance Magda handed the old piece of cloth over to Jalena. The moth holes were big enough to stick a finger through them. The original color, whatever it may have been, had changed into several shades of grey. Magda was almost ashamed, but it was true: she didn’t have anything else left. The young maidservant thanked the hostess with a weak nod. It seemed she didn’t have the energy for more. No surprise. The poor thing had just arrived and had went through enough on her way to Ardea.

Magda turned away and made her way to the exit of the huge room. The floor of the dormitory was strewn with old mats and blankets. The fugitives bodies lay extremely close to each other. Only with great effort she managed to step over an old couple without stepping on the hand of the woman. She knew them. The man had been a farmer by the road to Vengard. He had visited her inn at least once a week. Now his farm lay in ruins. His fields were burned down. Magda squeezed her way through one of the beds, which hadn’t been enough for a long time, and a man, whose arm was bleeding heavily. By his side, stuck between a sleeping menial and a maidservant drinking from her soup bowl, knelt Agathe. Magda forced herself to smile encouragingly and nodded to the herb-woman as friendly as possible. She didn’t notice it. She was too

concentrated on her work. Just now she was pushing a Healing Herb to the bleeding wound at the mans arm. Magda went on, as fast as it was possible in the crowd. Although there had been many injured coming to Ardea lately she still didn't get used to the sight.

"We should go back. If we don't guard the farm, bandits will burn it down."

"Father, they already did!"

Magda passed by an aged farmer who was tightly wrapped in one of the few blankets and apparently was suffering from a bad fever. A young woman knelt beside him holding his hand.

"We need to feed the pigs!"

"The pigs are gone, father", the young woman tried to explain to him with tears in her eyes. "The bandits took them!"

"Bandits? We should go back. If we don't guard the farm, the bandits will burn it down."

The young woman sobbed loudly.

Magda bit her tongue and swallowed hard as she went on. But that didn't rid her of the knot in her throat.

Then she finally reached the door. For a second she stood still and breathed the cool air of the night. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the silence at Ardea's backdoor. She managed to ban the misery from her thought for a short while. But then she called herself to order. The fugitives needed her. She had to pull herself together! The people in there were far worse off than her.

She went down the stairs at the wall of the inn. At least the snow was gone. Spring was coming. That was a blessing, because else many of the refugees might have frozen to death quite soon. But how were they supposed to survive the next year? Just a few weeks ago the coastal area had still been the granary of the empire, but now the country was devastated, the cattle were stolen.

Magda reached the door. The sign above the door read "To the Black Corsair". It had seen better days, too.

After entering the door, you first couldn't see anything of the misery that afflicted the upper floor and the whole coastal are. At first sight.

At second sight, you could see there weren't any farmers from the region, no shrimpers from Kap Dun and no hunters either, just a few villagers. At third sight you saw the fear and uncertainty in their faces. Nobody knew what was going to happen. They just knew the king had deserted them. The only question they were asking themselves was whether they would be killed by orcs, bandits or the famine that would surely soon begin.

She flashed her husband Wulf, who was standing behind the counter, a glance. She could see her own thoughts in his face: when the first refugees had arrived, Hamlar had ordered the couple to house them. "Just for one or two weeks." And Jon, the commander of the militia had assured them: "Lord Hagen's soldiers are going to bring these bandits to justice. Soon, the farmers will be able to return to their fields." But both Wulf and Magda knew that the fugitives would still be with them when summer came. But they didn't know how to feed them.

The landlady stepped to a huge pot behind the counter and started filling the soup that was simmering in it into small wooden bowls. Calling it "soup" was an euphemism as it was barely more than hot water. But she

couldn't afford putting any more vegetables into it. Not now, with the food supply being worse than ever.

As she was working the wanted poster that showed the former landlord's face caught her eye. Jon had put it on the wall. She didn't know whether it had been his own idea or that of his superiors. But whoever had put up this poster was either very naive or very desperate – or maybe both. The promised money would probably have solved her problems at once, but nobody would have been crazy enough to start a fight with Ortega and his men. When the orcs had arrived at the coast, Ortega had gone mad. Lord Hagen and his men had been able to fight the orcish attack off, but still many smaller farms had been destroyed and Ortega had lost many tenants. It was said he had personally requested men from the king to protect his fields. But not only did the king turn him down, he even sent some of Ortega's workers into war. After that, Ortega announced he didn't feel committed to the king anymore and promised to secure the coastal region himself. Reportedly he even proclaimed the free kingdom Tymoris and declared himself ruler of the coast. But instead of ruling and guarding it, he had taken his servants and fled to the mountains with them. Together with some deserters these bandits had been attacking the farmers and looting the farms which had endured the orcish attack. Lord Hagen hadn't come again, though. The king didn't consider the fight against the bandits important, now that Montera had fallen and the orcs were at the gates of the coastal area. Only the completely overstrained militia tried to defend them from Ortega's men.

Three men entering the inn interrupted Magda's thoughts. They were strangers. This alone was strange enough, now that neither hunters and travelers nor people from ships on their way to Vengard visited Ardea, like it had been in the past. But these strangers would have stood out even in the high period of the "Black Corsair".

At first Magda noticed the bald giant with the thick black beard and

bushy eyebrows. Barely had she turned her eyes away from his face when she noticed the heavy mace on the mans back.

Her widened eyes wandered to the figure on the left side. A rather small and skinny man, whose rapier matched his appearance as well as the mace of his companion. The white shirt, the dark vest, the battered tricorn and the extensively plaited beard gave him a mixture of venturous elegance and exotic eccentricity.

And finally the middle one. Had they been in Varant, he would have been the most unremarkable one. But they weren't. They were in Ardea. And here people weren't used to bent sabers and tanned skin.

The strange party headed directly for the counter. Magda looked at her husband and saw him standing petrified. But he shook it of and asked, his voice a little more high-pitched than usual: "What can I get you?"

"Rum" droned the giant.

"I suppose you don't serve cactus liquor, my myrtanian friend? Of course not." the varantean answered his own question in a tone indicating that only a fool could ask himself such a question. "Well, then it will have to be some myrtanian booze. I assume you will take the same, Magister?" The last sentence had been directed to the third man.

He nodded. "Positive."

Wulf carried out the order in a hurry that wasn't like him at all. Magda realized the bowl she had been filling with soup was already flowing over. Quickly she put the scoop back into the pot, put down the bowl and wiped her hands on her apron. The fugitives would be waiting for there food, but she couldn't go right now. She felt her husband would be needing her. Furthermore, she was too afraid to move or even walk by

the three strangers on her way to the exit.

She was aware who was doing them the questionable honour of visiting their inn. Wulf surely knew it, too. Everyone near the coast knew the wanted posters of the three and their many comrades.

They were pirates. Pirates whose names were well known in Ardea and Kap Dun: Moeller, referred to as Hautot, Shaid, named the Sheik, and Goetke, who was called Magister. By now the three had got what they had ordered, and drank nearly synchronously. Hautot emptied his jar in one draft. His varantish comrade took his time. And Goetke put his jar down after one sip. With a disgusted look he said: "Villainous distillate!"

Magda clearly saw her husband jerk at these words. He threw a glance at the pirates rapier. But Shaid moved his hand in a pacifying way. "Don't be afraid, father of sorrow. We haven't come for you."

Goetke nodded. "Our presence might be terrifying, but is just a temporary state."

The three men silently leaned on the counter. While Moeller was watching Wulf and the magister was staring on the floor, Shaid let his gaze wander across the room. For split second he looked at Magda, but that was enough to send cold shivers down her back.

This varantean was so completely different from every other pirate. He had something melancholic in his eye, something that didn't quite fit a buccaneer. And it was that what made him so frightening, even compared to his comrades.

"I hypothesize there is a man named Marlo residing near this village?", Goetke interjected.

“Marlo? I don’t know a Marlo!”, Wulf hurried to reply while he wiped his forehead with the cloth he usually used to clean his jars.

“The contemplated sir operates in the field of commerce and currently resides in Tymoris.”

“I r-really d-don’t know...”

“Ah, never mind, Magister.” Moeller buzzed. “Waste of time.”

“Maybe you know someone who could help us”, the sheik barged in. “Someone who also works as a... tradesman.”

“Erm... well.. there is Garvin. He manages the warehouse. On the left side just out the door. He...”

“Thank you, son of the kind advice. That’s enough.” Shaid signaled his comrades to follow him and together they left the “Black Corsair”.

It took a moment until Magda could move and finally relax a bit. She stepped to her man and took his sweaty hand. “Now even pirates”, Wulf muttered.

Yes, now even pirates. Until now they had all believed the attack of the orcish galleys had brought at least one good thing and freed the coastal region from that scourge.

When Magda stepped outside some minutes later to bring the refugees their soup, she saw the buccaneers standing in front of the warehouse and talking to the terrified storekeeper.

“The mine out in the forest”, she heard Garvin say. “He has hid there and now winds up his affairs from there.”

“The old Reddock’s hideout?” Shaid stroke his beard lost in thought. “I thought it had been abandoned since the great war with my home country.”

“It was. But I tell you, he is there!”

Magda quickened her steps. She didn’t even want to imagine what would happen to her if the pirates caught her eavesdropping.

She sighed as she went up the stairs to the dormitory and looked at the horizon. The orcs were coming closer, the landlord was looting the barnyards and now even the pirates had returned. “Innos, what will happen to us?”

by HerrFenrisWolf

Darkness had covered the dunes of Varant like a dark curtain. The area outside the towns was only lit by a few fires in the camps of caravans and nomads. In an oasis, remote between some sand-covered ruins, there was a man about to regain his freedom. Plissken leaned against a tent pole in his new master's camp. Around him the other slaves were sleeping on ordinary mats. None of them had any idea that one of their comrades was going to flee. Slowly and carefully Plissken cut the ropes that were restraining him in two, using a sharp shard he had found. His one eye was watching the entrance. While all the other prisoners had come to terms with their situation and fallen into an uneasy sleep, he had searched the sand until he had felt that very shard. When the rough leather of his restraints finally gave in the one-eyed man raised and stretched. He had been in this uncomfortable position way too long. When the barrier had collapsed he had sworn never to become a prisoner again. But destiny had never been kind to him and it had played some dirty tricks on him. First it had brought him into the colony, then it had robbed him of one of his eyes through the hand of one of Gomez' guards. In the end it had been the orcs who had captured Plissken, directly after the barrier had fallen, and sold him to their allies, the assassins of Varant. But these times were over. He'd rather die than getting captured again, he thought. Carefully placing one foot before the other, Plissken slowly made his way to the exit.

He could already hear the desert winds howling. Apparently they had been too loud, as suddenly one of the other prisoners awoke. Pausing in his movement for a moment, Plissken tried to tell the other prisoner: "Don't do anything stupid!" He wasn't successful, the slave began

screaming: "Alarm! The new one with the eye patch is trying to escape!" Plissken had already been afraid that something like this could happen. The slaves had been broken by the assassins, they had become submissive servants to their new masters.

It didn't take a second until a guard stormed into the tent with a drawn saber. It had probably been standing by the entrance. Plissken ducked and tossed sand into the eyes of his attacker. He wasn't someone who cared about honour. Who stayed fair in a fight had already lost. Not losing any time, he punched both ears of his foe with his flat hands, making him blind and deaf for some time, so he was no danger. But someone who had been in the colony always made sure, and so Plissken hit him between the shoulders with the pommel of his own sword, stunning him.

Without wasting any more time Plissken ran out of the tent and sprinted towards the ruin of a wall that was just a few steps from the tent. Standing behind this wall the escaped prisoner awaited to more guards coming from north. They had probably just returned from a patrol. Holding the saber in his right hand, the one-eyed ripped a torch out of its retainer in the wall and tossed it towards his enemies. He didn't hit them, but Plissken used their short distraction well. With a quick stroke, he opened the throat of one of his enemies, and before the other one could react, he thrust the saber into his shoulder, making him stumble. In an instant, Plissken grabbed his enemies head and hit him in the face with his knee. The unpleasant crack told the former bandit that he had broken his foe's nose. But the guard was tough. His face twisted with pain, he managed to strike Plissken with his saber. A metallic taste spread through the mouth of the old warhorse. Spitting out his blood, he kicked his opponent between the legs, which caused the man to scream and fall down. ramming his elbow in the guards face, Plissken made sure that he wouldn't be making any trouble for the next few hours, either.

Plissken thanked the wind for howling so lowly. Hadn't it been that way, the noise would probably already have alerted the other guards. But still, he had to hurry. He turned towards the tent a last time and, directed to the slave who had sold him out, hissed "Pray you will never meet me again!"

Then he disappeared southwards, in the direction of the coast, into the dark desert. He had dropped the saber, as it would only have restrained him on his flight. Plissken would run as far as his feet would carry him. Nobody would ever again catch him, no orc and definitely no human being.