

The Funeral

Wes Schatz

First Prize Winner

BSFS 2004 Young Writers' Contest

Two frail old figures, weeping softly, stood alone amidst profound emptiness. The mourners were bathed in pale light; from their ragged white beards and dapper black suits there shimmered an inconstant glow. It was countless stars, forming and dying, whose light diffused bravely into the unending void. And perhaps one may be forgiven for imagining that, in such a surreal place, there could be something more to this mysterious nimbus—not only light, but composed too of a child's prayer, a dream breathed silently into the well of the night. . . Only the shining beings, the universes Staface and Monface, were possessed of the truth on the matter.

And what had brought these two together, what could move a universe to tears? Two different questions, each with many different answers, and yet all related—questions, answers, and universes—because that is what a story does.

“Woldface is dead.” Startled by the stark observation, Monface raised his bowed head, and one bushy eyebrow, to see Staface peering levelly his way, waiting. Staface's tattered hat-brim partially obscured his face, but his eyes, Monface could see, shone with more than tears.

Lorenzo felt like bawling. He'd routed the bestial hordes guarding the lair of Lord Dragular, the fearsome and evil king bent on world domination, and cornered the devious mastermind in the keep's innermost citadel. He'd reached the ultimate test of all his hours training, perfecting his skill, and. . . he was vanquished by a power surge.

Just as the final battle had begun, the TV and video game abruptly shut off, and every light in the building flickered. Worst of all, when Lorenzo tried to restart the game, his greatest fear was realized: his file was gone. He'd have to start all over. The poor boy was a whimpering mess.

“What is this?” Monface's voice was imperious, but he sounded intrigued despite himself.

Staface paused the projector, freezing the image of the bespectacled youth, the cluttered bedroom, the bare winter trees beyond the small window. “What do you mean, Monface?”

“Why is it that you are showing me this memory now?” He gestured to the stream of color emanating from Staface's eye, strands of rainbow hue resolving themselves into meaningful forms, using the void like a stage to reenact the events of days gone by. “We are here to pay respects to

Woldface—“

“Please don't judge me so hastily.” Staface spoke out of the corner of his mouth, keeping his head still, so as not to distort the frozen frame. “I think that if we watch the rest of this memory, its relevance shall become clear. . . it was his last request that we do this, you know.”

“Woldface. . . then this is his memory?”

“He transmitted it right before. . .”

“Oh.” The silence was painful. “Oh, then by all means, let us fulfill dear, eccentric Woldface's last wish.” Staface nearly smiled. The memory began to play once more.

Though he took the loss of his project hard, Lorenzo wasn't one to dwell overmuch on unhappy matters. Not fifteen minutes after the disaster, there he was, swaddled in a favorite green sweater, playing ninja in a quiet spot. He'd chosen, on this occasion, the tree-tangled gully behind the apartment complex where he and his mother lived. The little boy's dark curls were an assassin's hood, masking his stealthy movements in the moonlit bamboo forest. Ninja Lorenzo wielded a twig whose keen edge served him well in many a harrowing battle, no matter the outrageous odds against him. What agility, what skill, wha—KABOOOOOMM!!—“What was that?!”

The adventure-conducive Orient valley was once more simply a bottle-strewn copse on a chilly, bland Saturday afternoon. Nevertheless, Lorenzo grasped his twig tightly, his wide eyes darting about, seeking the cause of the horrendous crashing noise. . . There! From within a bush, a particularly brambly one only a few paces away, there rose a thin plume of smoke. Lorenzo furtively wiped his palm on his pant leg, then, gripping the twig with renewed vigor, he crept forward. Slowly, quietly, brave Lorenzo inched towards the mysterious bluish wisp.

So intently did he focus on this bush, trying to ascertain the nature of the smoke's source, that Lorenzo failed to notice the rock until he tripped over it. With a strangled yelp, Lorenzo tumbled right into and through the prickly green mess, landing on the fresh crater within. He nearly scared the two little people there to death.

After their shiny, lunchbox-shaped spacecraft crash-landed, the beings had been dazed, but the bumbling apparition of Lorenzo left the poor creatures downright shell-shocked. Lorenzo was in slightly better shape, able to straighten his glasses on his nose and take in his discovery before the aliens recovered their senses.

One alien looked basically human, although it was orange, and about the size of a lego-man. The other looked like a fox the size of a bumblebee, and was green and very graceful. Both wore what appeared to be little yellow bathrobes, but which were actually sophisticated space suits.

Lorenzo, in those few moments, also noticed a strange device set up by the hatch of the ruined lunchbox ship. Some sort of elegant music box, it seemed, now damaged and sparking fitfully. He heard a snatch of music before it gave out entirely, though, a bit of piano he half recognized. Before he could recall where he'd heard such a song before, Lorenzo was distracted by the revived aliens trying to talk to him.

The lego-man and the fox gibbered at him eagerly, pointing to the broken music box. "What?" said Lorenzo, looking confused. "Can't you speak my language? The aliens in all my video games do." At this, the aliens turned to one another, looking confused themselves, and said something to the same effect about Lorenzo. After a brief conference, the fox disappeared into their ship. Meanwhile, the lego-man and Lorenzo nodded and grinned uneasily at one another, the former occasionally casting nervous glances towards the sky. It was almost sunset, but Lorenzo couldn't see anything that might cause his companion to look so frightened.

Presently the fox was back, toting yet another strange machine. He passed it to the lego-man, who spoke into it in his squirrel-chatter language. What came out of the machine was, "As you may realize, this is a language-switcher, and will allow us to communicate more easilier. I am called Doug, and this is my associate Rug. We come from a distant land, but our mission and benefactors shall remain confidentialisious. Please to tell us your name." The monotone, vaguely Russian voice stopped, and Lorenzo, obligingly, said "Lorenzo Abeluo is my name," and then, without prompting but because he was an inquisitive youth, "What were you looking for earlier, Doug? What's so special about the music? Why'dja crash? What's..."

After the machine's recording space had filled and it had relayed the translation, Doug scowled, and Rug smirked. "Rblgchkpzachleyb!" Doug spat angrily; "Mind your own business, whelp!" Lorenzo and Rug chuckled heartily, then Rug, for the first time, spoke through the language-switcher.

"Please don't mind Doug. We shouldn't keepingk you completely in the dark. That music caused our crash, you see; it distorts the natural orderness of things. We must stop this evil, but malignant forces are tryingk to prevent us. They'll tell you we're intergalactic space pirates, but don't let 'em trick you. The fate of the universe depends on our

findingk this musician."

Alas, Lorenzo was lost. Rug had read him too well. "I could help you!" he said, practically hyperventilating. To be the real hero of the world... a dream come true!

"That would be wonderful," said Rug, sharing a wink with Doug, who was finally catching on. "Please to tell us, comrade Lorenzo, what you know about that song."

"Well, I'm not really sure... I just get the feeling I've heard it. It's funny, though... it doesn't seem like something dangerous."

Doug began wagging his minute finger, opened his mouth to harangue Lorenzo some more, when a harsh voice interrupted. "Dougulus and Rugvitch! Caught you at last!" The voice blared from a sleek lunchbox craft over Lorenzo's shoulder, first in the alien dialect, then in his own once the language-switcher picked it up. It startled Lorenzo quite badly, but his new comrades took it much worse.

Doug and Rug lost their composure most spectacularly. "BurakleglorpfadHugShupar!" (*Curses, it's Intergalactic Police's Detective Hug, run for it!*) they shouted, dashing off with the mysterious Hug in hot pursuit. Initially, Lorenzo was tempted to give chase, but then he imagined Mama's reaction if he was late for dinner... universal harmony and space pirates would have to wait. He gathered up the aliens' lunchbox craft and various devices, including the language-switcher and broken music box, before trudging home.

Staface paused the memory once more. "Just to give my eye a little rest," he explained to Monface, who was in deep, beard-stroking thought.

"What the devil is the significance of that music," he murmured to himself. "...hmmm."

Staface shrugged. "Wasn't it was quite beautiful, though, even that little bit? Our friend's intentions should become clear soon enough." Monface merely grunted. "Though its obvious why the little boy is his medium," Staface went on.

"Truly, the resemblance *is* uncanny."

Woldface's memory flickered to life once more.

Later that night, Lorenzo told Mama he wanted to see if he could find out where the fire flies hid all winter. Instead, he looked for Rug, Doug, and Hug (not that the secrets of fireflies did not intrigue him, for he liked fire flies very much). To his dismay, Lorenzo didn't see the aliens anywhere around the apartment complex. He decided to expand his search, taking a bus and looking out the window on the freeway overpasses, squinting for evidence of an alien chase. That was when he remembered.

A long time ago, Mama and Papa and him all together, listening to the pianist lady's lovely song... Lorenzo wondered if that place was still there.

At the next stop, Lorenzo described the place to the driver, a chubby man who smelled like pine cones, but, despite this incredible talent, always frowned. The driver nodded and started giving him directions. When Lorenzo said “Thanks” and made for the stairs, the driver grabbed him by the shoulder and plopped him in a seat. The bus lumbered into motion.

Muttering to himself about getting off schedule, but ignoring the other passengers’ protests, the driver didn’t stop for several miles, when he pulled up at the curb by a grubby wooden sign inscribed with the flowing letters “Lee Park.” This time he shoved Lorenzo, who couldn’t believe his good fortune, off the bus. Lorenzo saw him hiding a smile, though, and waved until the kindly, rickety bus was out of sight. That didn’t take long, as it had gotten quite foggy and damp.

Lorenzo stuck his hands in his pockets, snuggling deeper into the folds of his favorite sweater. He walked towards a soggy pavilion. It loomed out of the mists like an angular monster, but Lorenzo wasn’t in the mood to play. In the distance he could hear the river sloshing around; he supposed it had become awfully polluted and unpleasant. Lorenzo also heard cars on the nearby streets and bridge, the breeze rustling dead leaves, and the phlegmy cough of an old man on a pavilion bench.

“Where’s the music?” Lorenzo asked as he approached the man, who was wearing an old-fashioned suit and a red scarf. He had lots of wrinkles, and a white beard.

Without turning around, the old man answered, “Be patient, young ‘un. Nichole will be back shortly; she always plays, even if I’m the only one who listens anymore.” The man’s voice had a strange timbre to it, oscillating erratically through various moods as if he hadn’t figured out how to use it properly. It seemed he didn’t have long to live.

“Hey, I came too, so cheer up.” The dying man chuckled, weakly slapping his knee. He then rose, and a light clicked on in the fog, shining fuzzily from the direction of the riverbank. He shuffled slowly towards it. Lorenzo followed, marveling that the old guy had known just when the light would come on.

Then there it was, just as Lorenzo remembered. The funny yellow concrete of the stage, the shell-shaped wall covered in a mural of graffiti, the puppets in the shadows, the mellow light on the lady sitting at the piano... Lorenzo forgot about saving the universe entirely, so content did he feel in that place.

“Good evening, Nichole,” said the old man to the pianist. She nodded her greeting as he took a seat in the front row.

“Um, hi,” said Lorenzo, suddenly shy—Nichole was a

vision of youthful beauty, yet there was something about her that made her seem much older, as old as her faithful regular. In fact, the more he considered it, the more similarity Lorenzo saw between the two, the geezer and the pianist: not just a quality of depth, but more like a whole other dimension... they were special, and meant for one another.

Nichole began to play, just simple warm-up techniques, looked right at Lorenzo, and smiled.

“You’re out late,” she said, “but I’m glad you’re here.” Her tender voice shouldn’t have been audible over the piano’s yawning, stretching medley of sound; nevertheless, Lorenzo miraculously heard every word. “So, what brings you back to Lee Park after so long?”

Almost without conscious effort, he related all of the day’s unforgettable adventures. She was very easy to talk to, the best listener he’d ever had. By the time he’d finished his tale, the piano had fully woken up, and he realized he was listening to the song. He also noticed that the old man had sunken into a dreamy trance. Lorenzo hoped nothing was wrong with him.

“Don’t worry,” said Nichole, though her constant, reassuring smile was strained. “He is in pain, it’s true, but you shouldn’t be sad. It’s the way he’s chosen, Lorenzo.”

“He doesn’t want to die! We have to take him to the hospital, c’mon, help him!” Lorenzo couldn’t save the old man by himself, but Nichole didn’t move to help. The song played on.

“It’s okay, Lorenzo. Try to understand.” The desperation in her voice pacified him.

“Today’s uncanny events were not run-of-the-mill accidents. Many unnatural disturbances have been occurring recently, in your case the malfunction of a video game and a spacecraft, the encounter with clever pirates and a cynical bus driver. Such phenomena are the outcomes of that man’s choice.

“His name is Woldface, and that dying body is what his physical form has come to. The universe is within, so that it can be near me, and listen to this song, and try to understand what it is feeling. Woldface’s original body, your universe, is crumbling as a result.”

“But it’s okay, Lorenzo,” said Woldface thickly, stirring. “We’ll be gone, but love’s forever... after the end of time, she’ll be there... smiling...”

And she was, then and always.

But this universe lives on.

The Power of the Pen

J. Lindsay Brown

Second Prize Winner

BSFS 2004 Young Writers' Contest

Isadora bit the back of the pen, chewing on it thoughtfully as she stared at the blank sheet of paper in front of her. She sighed a little, gazing up at the rain that was falling around her, blocked from getting her wet by the covered part of the café.

"Blast it all," she muttered, for about fourth time in ten minutes. "I don't know what to write!" Slamming the pad and pen down on the table she took a long sip of her coffee, shaking her head as she set the cup down on the table.

"Oh yes, you always did want to be a writer, Isadora," she told herself as she waited for the check to come, "the catch is that when you get a chance to write something you get writer's block."

She paid the check and walked out into the rain, sticking the pen and pad of paper in her bag. Sighing a little as she realized she had no umbrella, she pulled her coat a little tighter around her body, half listening to the people speak French around her.

After about twenty minutes she reached her hotel, rather wet. She trudged up to her room and unlocked it. Grabbing her suitcase, she wondered what she was going to do if she didn't get an idea soon. She didn't find an answer as she went down to the lobby.

She rang the service bell and leaned against the desk, waiting. A young man, about her age, walked up behind her and also rang the bell, smiling at her a little, saying cheerfully, "Hello."

"Hello," she said back, noticing his English accent. "How are you?"

The hotel manager, hurrying out of the back room to help Isadora, cut off whatever answer he had.

"Bonjour, je m'excuse, madame." (*Hello, I'm sorry Madame.*) Isadora started to point out that her French was terrible and it would be easier just to speak in English, but she didn't need to, as the woman abruptly smiled, remembering that Isadora wasn't French.

"Sorry about the wait," she said, "here to check out?" Isadora nodded and the woman smiled at the man standing beside Isadora. "I'll be with you in a minute," she said and looked back to Isadora.

After Isadora finished she walked out of the hotel

and searched for a taxi. She glanced at the sky, and saw that it was still raining. Several taxis simply flew past her, drivers not even glancing in her direction as their cars sprayed her with water from the puddles on the street.

"Heading to the train station by chance?" said a voice behind her. She turned, brushing a strand of wet hair out of her eyes, looking at the English fellow that she had seen a few minutes before inside. He had an umbrella in his hand, and a small suitcase by his side.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am. Or at least trying to." She smiled a little. "As you can see, I'm not getting very far."

He chuckled. "Well, why don't we share a taxi? It will be easier to get one as opposed to two." Without even looking away from her, he stuck his hand out in the road and gave it a small wave. In an instant a taxi stopped in front of them, as if by magic.

Isadora blinked, watching as the driver got out of the car to put her luggage in the trunk along with the man's. The English man spoke French with the driver for a few minutes, and then he was holding the taxi door open for her. She slowly got in, murmuring a thank you as she sat down. He got in next to her and smiled. "So, I take it you are from the US? You sound like it."

Isadora nodded. "Yes, New York, actually. I'm a writer. Or, at least, I'm supposed to be." She sighed slightly.

"Really? I own a small shop in London," he said, his smile never seeming to fade.

"That's where I'm going now," Isadora said, finding his smile almost contagious, smiling now herself. She decided she liked this man, and hoped he might be sitting beside her on the train.

"Ah, then I expect we are on the same train," he replied. The taxi skidded to a stop in front of the station. The man got out and held the door for her, closing it after she stepped out. After retrieving her suitcase Isadora started towards the doors.

"Will you wait a moment, Isadora?" he said after

her and she stopped quickly. "How do you know..." she began to say but he swiftly walked to her side, putting a finger to his lips to make her fall quiet. "That's not important right now," he said and motioned for her to follow him.

She raised an eyebrow, but walked behind him. He walked hurriedly down several stairs and turned a corner, Isadora trailing behind him.

He stopped then turned to look at her. "I don't have very much time right now, so I'll do it this way." He glanced at his watch, and the next thing Isadora knew she was on the train in one of the seats, suitcase placed above her and the man in the chair beside her.

"You are the one I've been looking for," he said, smiling and looked again at his watch. "Now take this." He took a nice blue fountain pen from his pocket and put it in her hand. He muttered a few words, and Isadora's sight wavered, becoming hazy and out of focus. A few minutes passed before it went back to normal.

She took several deep breaths then looked at him with wide eyes. "Who are you? You...have magic," she said, staring at him, "that's amazing." He started

to smile but stopped, looking down at his hands, which had started to glow. Isadora's widened again as the glow seemed to surround him, and he closed his eyes for a moment.

He looked back at her and smiled. "Yes I do. You already know who I am, you just think about it." He inhaled sharply, as if in pain, the glow flickering. "You have my story, your story Isadora, now write it. You only need to make the ending."

His eyes met hers. "And make it a happy ending, please." With a final smile at her he disappeared altogether.

Isadora gaped at the now empty space, and then slowly looked at the pen in her hand. On it were the words "The power of the pen is great, it enables the writer to create a new reality." She read the words several times and started thinking.

It was clear now, and with shaky hands she pulled out her pad of paper. She had her story now, and she knew what ending was needed. "I'll have him back before the week is over," she said out loud as she set the pen to the paper, and began to write.



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This Place, This Day

Christian Klarner

Third Prize Winner

BSFS 2004 Young Writers' Contest



Cail stepped out of the lush green forest just under the Pass of Three Blades into the light of the full moon. He looked up a few hundred feet, up the partly snow covered, smoothly sloping hill to the monument of the battle the pass was named for. Dwarves had made a monumental tomb before they left, burying their dead “in good proper stone.” How ironic, he thought, that the only race that came near this place anymore were men.

Now the tomb sat under the watchful gaze of a human tower. The stone tower was a place for Stalimite Paladins to worship and guard, and it saw few other travelers besides the occasional Dwarf.

Cail strode up the hillside, his crimson cloak parting only for his legs to carry him further and faster. The blood-red cloak otherwise clung to his tall, muscular frame. All paladins were muscular, and all were basically priests as well. The Temples had long ago found paladins much more efficient at converting people than monks, friars or clerics. And much cheaper, since friars and monks couldn't defend themselves at all well, and clerics took too long to cast their spells.

So the paladin was created, a warrior-spellcaster whose only magic was used to amplify his own abilities in combat. Some were born with other abilities, such as sorcery or the Writing, but most were merely Magos, or self-enhancing warriors. They could defend themselves where the others could not.

Cail stopped halfway up the hill and made a glowing Sign in the air. He was one of the few paladins who used

the Writing, the magical language used to make the most complex of spells. The Writing had to be done with one's fingers or some other pointed object, like a pen or even sword blade, and could be written on any surface, be it dirt, stone, wood, water, or air.

His Sign, the crescent moon symbol synonymous with his temple, the Temple of Laros, Lord of the Moons, sat in the slight breeze, unmoving. When no answer came from the crenellations that crowned the tower, Cail scrawled a lengthy sentence in the Writing and left it hanging under his Sign. It essentially said he wished to pass by the tower, and that he needed clearance as all travelers did to cross the pass.

A few sparks flew from the top of the tower, and the crossed Sign of Ibala, the Healing Mother goddess, floated above the tower. The cleric guild's sign for help.

Cail opened himself to the magic that flowed around him, making it flow through him. Its sweet pain, like boiling honey, flowed into his limbs, saturating his muscles, making him more than human. Sweetness, to represent the ability to do Good. Pain, to represent the ability to do Evil. Only his temple used this mix. The pain wasn't really bad, merely a reminder. The joy of magic far outweighed the pain.

His superhuman speed carried him up the hill faster than the non-magical eye could follow, faster than the arrows the enemy fired from the top could follow. His long swords flew from their sheathes to his hands, his cloak billowed behind him. A final astounding leap landed him over the crest of the hill, behind the line of enemy archers. Dark Orcs! But they were subterranean, and never came to the surface without...

A crash to his left announced the arrival of the Dark Orcs' allies. The tower's wooden double doors lay in splinters, the battering ram tossed aside to afford easier entry to the tower. A group of true Orcs stood in the ruined doorframe, axes held at the ready. Seven-foot greenskins, muscled into obscenity, the Orcs wore only minimal leather armor on their torsos and metal skullcaps to defend their heads. They spilled out of the tower, huge machines of carnage, roaring defiance and bloodlust.

Cail smiled.

His blond, curled hair began to glow ever so faintly, and his eyes went from blue to yellow. Now the true carnage

would begin.

He rushed towards the Orcs, moving so fast they could not hope to follow him. At the last instant he dodged to his left and jumped, jumped just high enough so that the archers saw him. They instinctively fired at him, forgetting about their comrades in between. Cail smiled at the irony of the Orcs being cut down by their own allies' arrows.

Cail now blurred towards the archers, swiftly inserting his blades into two of their number before they had realized he had moved. As he danced his deadly waltz down their line, none had time to draw a bead on him.

Archers dead, Cail bolted to the tower.

As he ascended the spiraling staircase up through the tower, it was not long before more Orcs, both Dark and surface, found themselves spitted on the twin long swords Cail carried. The Moonblades glowed fiercely, forever thirsting for more Orc blood.

Cail burst into the room just under the roof to find the prisoners the Orcs had taken. Women, children, and wounded priests filled the far end of the room. They were all staring at the huge beast that guarded them. The Black Orcs, largest of the goblinoid races, were easily eight feet tall on average, and were far more intelligent than their green skinned cousins, and far stronger than their subterranean relatives. Always they wore full plate armor, and always they carried huge axes. The thing that truly disturbed Cail about this one, though, was the rune on his helm. Only an Elven mage could have put such a graceful, and powerful, rune of speed on this beast's brow. No wonder there had been so few other goblinoids here. No more had been needed.

"*Mok fizbor bandar, Lunaman.*" Die in honor, Little Moon. He knew Deep Elven. O joy. This proved the involvement of the Drokmon, the Dark Elves, the Deep Elves. No time was left to consider this development, however, as the first ax swung toward his head with blinding speed. Ducking backwards to dodge, Cail used that momentum to flip all the way, bringing his foot to meet the facemask on the huge Black Orc. The mask bent sharply, coming to a point sharp enough to cut. Cail's second foot drove the mask into the creature's face. A howl of pain and rage erupted from the helm, and the Orc withdrew, taking this new opponent more seriously.

The Black Orc brought his axes in a wide sweep from either side, a maneuver known as the Twin Scythes. Cail leaped up and landed on the axes flat sides, bringing his legs together with the axes. The ring of metal from under him signaled the Orc's latest freedom of movement. Leaping once again, Cail thrust both of his long swords in

at the beast, one level with its face and one just below its neck. Twin axes swept up and knocked the swords up with such force that Cail himself flipped with the momentum. Only Cail's supernatural senses allowed him to land on his feet, just in time to bring both swords up to block a Double Waterfall, when both axes came down as one. Simple moves, double attacks weren't going to work here, and one blade at a time wouldn't do enough damage. That left a few options, only one of which would finish this for sure.

Releasing another few mental blocks, Cail let much more magic flow through him than before. Instead of only in himself, he also put two flows into his blades. They began to glow a faint yellow-white, and hummed faintly. Cail lifted both straight out perpendicular with his body. He mentally ran through the attack routine once more, and then began to implement it. Slowly, Cail lowered his arms, keeping them perfectly straight, notching the air every second, and concentrating on those notches. When his arms were at his sides, the notches in the air began to glow, faintly at first, but stronger and stronger every second. The Black Orc watched, perplexed, as the little human made the air glow. Each notch gradually spread, all of them growing into the shapes of little half foot crescent moons. They began to move, spinning around Cail in a circle, leaving streaks so that Cail was partially obscured by the rotating energies.

"What was your name?" Cail inquired calmly.

"Grok is my name, puny human!" The beast raised its axes above its head in another Twin Waterfall.

Cail smiled once more, and began to spin. The energy blades began to spin with him, blurring into streaks of rotating light, and after a few seconds it was impossible to see Cail through the cyclone of light. It glowed like moonlight, turning purest white in its gyrations.

"Know that The Bladestorm of Laros descends on you now, Grok." Cail kept his voice perfectly neutral and emotionless. As he stopped spinning, the energy continued rotating around him. He could feel where Grok was in the room using his magical senses. Cail ran toward Grok, the Bladestorm staying around him. To Grok it appeared that a tornado of shining death came towards him, and he instinctively brought both axes to bear in front of him in a crossing parry.

The Bladestorm hit the Black Orc's twin axes and shattered the blades first before burning through the shafts. As the shards of the axes fell, they reflected the light from the attack, making the whole room fill with the glow of moonlight. The Bladestorm hit the beast's arms next,

burning through plate gauntlets and onyx flesh with equal ease.

Grok had begun screaming, the long, pained screams of one unused to pain. Cail thrust both of his words into Grok's chest, the glowing blades easily piercing his plated mail and sinew.

As the gigantic corpse fell to the ground, Cail let his attack dissipate, and the storm of energy spiraled out of existence. He let all but his tiniest bit of magic go, leaving him feeling tired and empty, and then looked at the stunned people in the other corner of the room.

"You're free to go," he said with no more emotion than he had used for Grok, "but those among you who can fight should get to the armory and help cleanse this place." He turned to see a man in chain mail holding a greatsword step into the doorway. He was a good-sized fellow, not so tall as Cail, maybe a little younger than Cail's twenty-six, but almost twice as wide and much more rugged looking. His short-cropped red hair marked him as a Woad, and his green eyes sparkled with intelligence at the same time they seemed saturated with sadness. He walked over to meet Cail with the flowing stride of a trained fighter, seeming more predatory with every step. A dangerous enemy this man could be, and a powerful ally as well.

"Solam Dragoon, Drakemaster 1st Class of the Darelite Infantry, 7th Squad, reporting to assist the Tower defenders. A substantial force of Dark Orcs recently attacked the town, but they were beaten back by my men and some of the mercenaries moving through town. The mayor was concerned that the pass would have been attacked as well. Judging from the corpses littering this place, they did. We'll help clean up. My men are encountering some stiff resistance on the roof, so let's get going, if you'll help."

"Your men are on the roof? How did they get past without me hearing?" Cail said, slightly ruffled that he had missed a squad of men moving up through the halls.

"This close to the northern borders, men in the army are trained as rangers. They can move quietly when they wish, and you were... otherwise occupied." Cail knew this was true, but still, he should have sensed them. Grok *had* been a very noisy opponent. Just to make sure, Cail ran a Sense Truth spell on the Drakemaster's words. The residue of the words in his mind rang true, instead of the dull thrumming of a lie. The Drakemaster was trustworthy, it said. Good.

Cail smiled. It was good to find a man who simply stated his true opinion instead of dancing around questions from a paladin. "I am Cail Moonblades, Paladin of Laros, Keeper of the Guard."

The Drakemaster's eyes widened at this last title, because it said Cail was not only a skilled fighter, but that the upper ranks of his Order thought it best for him to remain in the field rather than teach others his knowledge. The title Moonblade said that Cail carried two actual Moonblades, blades made of adamantine steels and of spells so ancient they were lost to all but the Elves of the Towers. The honor of wielding so powerful a weapon was only given to the greatest of fighters, and the dead Black Orc proved that Cail deserved them.

"To the roof, Cail. I defer to you."

"Don't, Solam. I am not a leader of men, merely a good fighter. And you must not be bad either, gaining the title of Drakemaster so young."

As they strode up the hall to the stair landing, a crash sounded from above. Cail let more magic flow into him, and felt Solam do the same. A Drakemaster always had to be a Magos of some ability, but Solam was almost as powerful as Cail, a rare claim.

The stairs were strewn with corpses, Orc and human alike, and Cail emerged cautiously onto the roof through a shattered trap door. The scene was chaos. Orcs and men swung at each other randomly on the thirty pace wide tower top, and a Mage-priest of Wikal exchanged fast and violent spells with a Dark Elven counterpart. That was the first objective. Cail swiftly carved his way to the mages. The Wikalite saw Cail and made one last attempt at defeating the Elf, which gave Cail time to run the Elf through with little trouble.

Cail turned away to witness the final Orc fall. The tower was theirs. As the sun rose over the horizon, he looked out beyond the forest to the Steppes of Rakan. To the shifting, twitching mass of Orcs that was crossing it. Banners fluttered in the breeze, and the dawn light reflected dully off thousands of weapons and suits of armor. Some Orcs rode the great lizards of the Northern Wastes, and other sat in huge balcony-like constructs on the most massive of these lizards. Each giant lizard towed a siege machine of some sort, be it catapult or ram.

One hundred years ago the Shadow Elves and Dwarven Ironkin had stemmed the tide of Orcs from the north here. Cail looked around to his new allies, his companions, and wondered if any would live to tell of this place, on this day.