

WARPSTONE

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TWO TALES

A Short Story by Francis Plunder

Young Jorg pushed the Inn door shut, making sure he had put the latch down solidly. Outside he could hear the horses, afraid of the storm lashing the stone walls. Wiping the water from his face he returned to the bar, where his mother and father were busily serving customers.

'Jorg, The gentleman by the stairs is still waiting for his supper.'

Jorg looked over at the tall stranger, removing his dripping wet cloak to reveal tarnished armour.

'Oh but father, Uncle Theodor is about to begin.' Jorg whined.

'I won't tell you again!'

He was already through the kitchen door as his father reeled off his stock reply. Stuffing a piece of warm bread into his mouth, he took the customer's tray and placed it before him, smiling with a crumb filled mouth. The stranger immediately drank the warm wine, smiling thinly as the heat warmed his bones.

Jorg saw his father talking to the lumpy shape of Hanns Kluge and risked sneaking towards the fireplace. Here Uncle Theodor had begun one of his stories, surrounded by patrons. Jorg sat down under a table. His cousin Lena stuck her tongue out at him, but he ignored it (he was ten now after all) and settled down to concentrate on the tale.

"So our heroes promised the young woman that they would avenge her father's death and find her brother Mannfred, who had been kidnapped by the evil necromancer, cleric of the same foul gods the mutants worship. Some said the foul sorcerer was a mutant himself, his foul horns hidden by dark illusions.

Our heroes welcomed the chance to fight evil and lay the woman's fears to rest. For payment they accepted her hospitality for the night, setting first thing. As always, Anton, the cleric of Sigmar, blessed them before they set out on their brave quest. I have told stories of this brave band before: Alfred Silberg, famous for his skill with the sword, Hotpot Underson, a Halfling of extraordinary skill with a crossbow, and Ter Birchinsun, an Elf of rare beauty and skill.

What was that, Erik? Outhouse? Why! Outhouse Baerow had been sent on a vital mission for the Emperor himself, arranging to meet his friends in Carroburg for the winter festival.

They travelled for two days, telling stories from childhood memories and laughing at Hotpot's tales of life in the moot. At night Hotpot would cook and Ter would entertain them under the clear night sky with tricks she had learnt in the fair.

On the third day, the forest quietened considerably and they could sense evil ahead. As they went deeper into the trees, branches became more and more entangled, tripping their horses. Eyes watched them from the dark shadows, cast by the ever thickening canopy of leaves. Soon they could hear the evil chatter of goblins, bellies full from eating helpless farmers. Anton charged ahead with the battle cry of Sigmar till they came face to face with forty goblins, armed with black poisoned blades.

Anton charged, with Alfred and Ter flanking him. As they hacked through these foul creatures, Hotpot and Flame guarded their backs and made sure none escaped. Soon the goblins' bodies burned so that their foul corpses would not pollute Taal's forest.

The goblins were pawns of the evil wizard, so following their trail led our heroes to his dark tower. Nothing could grow at the base of his construction except for thick, gnarled vines covered with thorns the size of a man's finger and sharp as an assassin's dagger. Made of black stone, the tower twisted to the sky, warped by the evil power that had raised it from the ground. Around the top waited crows and ravens, ready to gorge themselves on the remains of sacrifices.

They approached under these watchful eyes until they stood before the imposing double doors, guarded on either side by a huge gargoyle, placed to warn off those of lesser heart. Alfred stepped forward and charged open the door so he stood inside the base of the tower, surrounded by the bodies of the dead.

But these bodies were not truly dead. Tempted by forbidden knowledge, this was chaos' reward: a life of living torment. Flesh peeled away from their faces and they groaned as they sensed the presence of true followers of Sigmar and Ulric, ready to do Morr's will. Each cut of a heroes' blade removed another foul presence from the world and soon they were making their way upstairs.

On the walls, symbols of chaos had been painted in blood. The air was heavy with death as they entered a room, filled with strange apparatus. They moved across the floor to the staircase when suddenly Ter turned, throwing a knife with total accuracy.

Five men had sneaked up behind but the middle one fell to his knees, Ter's knife embedded in his throat. The others screamed and attacked, fighting like demons - maybe they were - wounding Anton and Hotpot. Just as the heroes were about to dispatch them, Alfred fell to the floor gibbering, for magic had taken his mind.

The wizard had appeared. Dressed in a flowing black robe, covered in dark symbols, crowned with a headpiece made from the skull of the fabled Pegasus. His staff crackled flame and spat lava, its brightness matched only by his red eyes. He floated across the floor, supported by invisible spirits, and struck at Ter, throwing her to the floor. They fought for an hour until his followers were dead. All our heroes lay wounded.

With an explosion he knocked them to the ground and moved in to kill the helpless Alfred, but Hotpot managed to pull himself to his feet unseen. This brave Halfling threw himself in front of the lightning streaming from the wizards' hands. As he writhed in pain, Alfred regained his senses and chopped the mage's head from his shoulders. The vile sorcerer collapsed to dust.

It was too late for Hotpot, for he was dead. Higher in the tower they found the poor woman's brother strapped to an altar, ready to be sacrificed to foul gods.

Leaving a burning tower behind, they returned Hotpot's body to his family and he was buried a hero. Each of the others returned home, spending time in the loving arms of their families before leaving to meet Outhouse in Carroburg, ready to fight Chaos once again.

So ends another tale of this band of heroes. Now, who's got my drink?

"Another!" cried Jorg, drawing the attention of his father.

"In a moment, young Jorg. Let me finish this ale."

"Another warm wine for the customer by the stairs." Jorg didn't believe that having his ear pulled really allowed him to hear his father any better.

He poured the wine from the earthen pot simmering above the fire, trying not to burn his fingers. He placed the flagon in front of the man and made to return to the group.

"Take a seat." The stranger spoke kindly, motioning at the chair opposite. "Jorg, is it?"

"I cannot. My father will scold me, sir."

"I will put a couple of extra crowns in his pocket. He will not mind."

Jorg sat down opposite the man, keeping an eye out for his father. The man was old, older than his father, and his face was hardened like a farmer's from days spent in the wilds. Jorg had seen adventurers like him before - sometimes trouble, but usually free with their coin. The older ones always had the same manner about them - tense and alert.

"I also have a tale to tell you, Jorg."

Jorg was excited. Mostly, adventurers' tales descended into boasting; sometimes, though, they were even better than Uncle Theodor. The man sipped at the wine and began.

"This happened a few years ago, in the time of Baron Heinrich. We had been hired in Nuln by a nervous young man. I forget his name. He was acting on behalf of his mistress. We did not know the nature of the task, but he paid well.

One of our number was missing. Eventually I found him drunk in a bar, thieves eyeing his purse. He said he'd catch us up once the alcohol wore off. It never did, and he never adventured again. He sleeps most nights in the gutter, now.

That left five of us. We arrived at our patron's house, under a brewing storm. There was something unlikeable about this woman but she offered a lot of money, more than we had seen for a while, and the job seemed simple. Her half-brother Kurt had sent thieves to steal a necklace which had belonged to her mother, his step-mother. He was a wizard by trade, spending his hours researching new spells. He was more powerful than she, and rumoured to have dabbled in dark arts. This settled it. Money to be made killing dark sorcerers.

Gorsh and Otto led the way, as both of them were experienced scouts. Gorsh could move like the wind when he wished, which surprised most people - he had quite a girth on him. That second day, we stumbled in to a clearing that Gorsh and Otto had missed, and came face to face with two goblins. They knew we outclassed them and tried to make a break for the trees. They didn't make it. Teartanis took one in the leg with her bow and I cut down the other. The wounded one tried to drag itself away but Alf, who became a follower of Sigmar in later years, just smiled strangely and chopped off its sword arm. It soiled itself in its terror. Teartanis finished it off with an arrow to stop Alf torturing it; he cursed her, but she didn't care. They'd fought many times over Alf's insults.

Otto had spotted a large band of goblins ahead, so we moved out before they could notice their scouts had gone missing. From then on, every sound heralded a new terror and every shadow a possible hiding place. Even eating and other private business was dealt with in full armour.

For two days we stumbled through that forest, eventually finding the place by sheer luck. The wizard lived in the ruins of an old castle, its broken stones overgrown with moss. One of the gate towers had been patched up, and in the gathering dusk we could see a light in the top-most window. Once in, we had to wade through a foot of dirty water to reach the stairs. When we reached the top, two men were carrying a shrouded body across to a line of corpses. They died within seconds, slumping to the ground in a pool of their own blood. Pulling back the shroud, we saw that the corpse had been slit open, emptied of organs. That smell would turn your stomach.

"He died of consumption, but enjoyed a good life and had two fine children." We turned to face the voice, bows and swords at the ready. On the stairs stood two men. One held a crossbow in nervous hands, his young face full of fear. The older man wore an apron splattered with blood, sharply contrasting with his shock of white hair. I could see the family resemblance with our patron. He didn't look like an evil necromancer, but time has taught me never to judge by appearances.

"There was no need to kill them. They had done no wrong." The man spoke with a calm voice which did little to steady our sword arms.

"Followers of dark arts should be cut down" spat Alf.

"No-one here is, or was such."

"Your sister told us it was so. Can we not see the proof with our own eyes?" He gestured towards the corpses with a nod of the head.

The man stared at Alf with sad eyes. We waited for the conclusion of this war of words.

"It is because of your kind that I have been forced to work in secret, away from cities and towns. Yes, it is true I work with the dead, but only to discover what makes us live so that I can help heal others. You are too cowed by superstition to appreciate such concepts."

"Maybe he is right. What proof have we?" Teartanis spoke directly to Alf, who was starting to sweat.

"The bodies."

"But I have explained that!" His temper was starting to surface, tempered only by fear. There was silence while we waited - what for, we weren't sure. Alf spoke up, his eyes shining as if he had found Ghal-Maraz in his belt.

"The necklace, you stole the necklace from your sister."

The man's face reddened and he stepped forward, heightening the tension. The young man with the crossbow was in a bad way, obviously unused to such confrontations - not that we were much better.

"The necklace was mine; she stole it from me. This is none of your business."

"You tell nothing but lies!" Alf spat out the final word. "Necromancer!"

From the stunned pregnant pause burst the twang of a crossbow. Gorsh fell to the ground, the bolt sticking through his side. The young man was probably the most surprised of us all; he still pointed the empty crossbow uncertainly at the Halfling.

The wizard moved quickly, pulling a bag from his pocket and beginning an incantation. Alf and I charged, and Teartanis' cursed as we ran straight into her bow line. Suddenly, we were knocked from our feet by a wind from nowhere. Grabbing the young man, the wizard ran upstairs, almost making it to safety before Teartanis' arrow struck. In spite of the pain, he still managed to cast a spell as we ran after him. Alf collapsed, gibbering nonsense, his eyes blank and uncomprehending.

I leapt towards the prone spellcaster as he began his third spell. The young man whimpered in fear, crouched against the wall. In truth, you know, I believed the man's story, but I knew I had to knock him out to halt his incantation.

Fate is a strange mistress. As my sword flashed out, the young man leapt between us, and the blade impaled him. He sagged, and slumped to the ground, dead. The wizard froze, shock visible on his face.

"Max, my son." He gasped, wounded far worse than if the blade had hit him.

With a yell Otto reached us, but before he could strike, fire erupted from the wizards' hands and caught him in the chest. With no choice now but to protect my friends, I struck out and split his throat. He fell, bleeding, across his son's corpse.

So we completed our task, and we collected our money. Some victory. We burnt the tower as a pyre to the dead, and carried Gorsh home. His injury was bad - he never recovered fully, and he ended his days an invalid, earning pennies by mending boots. I returned to find that my wife loved another and my children did not recognise me. It had been years since I had been home. I fought with my rival and beat him easily, but earned only the fear of my children and the hatred of my wife. With nothing else left, I returned to the road. A road I have seldom since left."

The man had finished his story and finished his wine. Jorg could see his father staring daggers at him.

"You stole some of Uncle Theodor's story."

The man smiled. "So I did. "

A thought was sitting just out of Jorg's grasp and he knew if he grabbed it, something about this tale would become clear. His father was starting to beckon at him, and he stood.

"No offence sir, but think I like his tale better ."

"So did I lad. So did I." And he laughed.