

*The Chief's Hunt***Part 1: Melek, by Josiah Norton**

Melek came to rest against a willow overlooking a stream. Unlike its surrounding, this tree had plum pigmented leaves. He was eager to get this hunt along. Power was within his grasp and soon he would wield it.

Melek dove into a pocket. His hand brushed against strips of jerky. He noted little remained for the return journey. Withdrawing a single strip, he severed the sliver down the middle. He tossed half in his mouth. The other, as if rehearsed, Leif swooped down from the sky and relieved him of the other.

"Find the psylym?"

"What about the troll?"

By Leif's silence, Melek assumed failure.

Hmm...I wonder where he is. Did he turn back? Surely rogues are cowardly, but I thought of Zuzu to be in greater standing compared to his peers.

Melek felt a tickle. He looked down and found a vine crawling into his pocket. Looking for jerky.

Melek leapt away and gained a bit of distance. He turned back out of curiosity and noticed an odd placement of a salmon pigmentation in the bark. The vine pursued him.

"Leif there!" Melek pointed. He withdrew his dagger and sliced a vine that sought his throat. The severed vine fell to the earth. Within a blink the segment dissolved into nothing.

The psylym screeched and all color faded. When Melek's vision returned from monotone, he spotted Leif, who had taken to the sky. The psylym pursued, now having taken the form of a one of the ancient winged serpents of old.

Good. Keep that thing distracted.

Melek sat a brass cage on the ground. The elders wanted this demon slain, but why slay such a potential asset? Melek whirled his bow around, assured his hold, and spoke an arrow into existence. The tip of the arrow swirled with matter that Melek knew not of its origin. Static tickled the arrow's tip and Melek felt a numbness as a result. The irritation was manageable and not too distracting.

He caught a glimpse of the odd coloration underneath a scale and drew back the bowstring. Melek need not worry about gravity, this type arrow broke silly rules like those.

Melek released his shot. Something stung his thigh. Melek brushed his hand against himself and whatever it was fled. A tingle lingered as he watched the psylym collapse to the ground.

The worst was over. Now, Melek had to decide what to tell the elders of I'ksha. What proof could he provide that would abet his ruse? Melek could not bring himself to enact what the elders asked of him. True power lay within this creature and who knew what greatness could be achieved if given the chance to study...perhaps even *tame* them.

Melek shoved the paralyzed un-shapen bob into the cage. He called for Leif but all he emitted were pathetic manipulations of breath. His vision pulsed and Melek leaned forward, bracing himself on the cage. His brain became idle. He collapsed witless and withered.

Melek faded.

The Chief's Hunt Part 2: Zulu by Micah Kinard

Thunk

"My, my, gotta hand it to dem dwarves. Dey know deir way around a blade, don't dey, Flicka?"

Zuzu peered down, his needle-like dagger pinning some poor thing to a log. He appraised the cozy branch he lounged on and the 30-something feet down to his kill.

He'd just gotten settled, the sun about to rise and a distant stream babbling him to peace, he could pass out right now... but he was hungry... plus his kill and blade contradicted his efforts of stealth so he sighed,

"If only you could fetch like dat Greenskin's whelp, eh Flicka?"

He rolled off the branch, lazily flipping in the air and landing crouched over his dinner.

As he reached for his blade he paused,

"Hey wait da minute..." a flash of brilliance hit.

He surveyed his accoutrements and stopped on his rope bracers, a tusky grin broke his sneer,

"Dis could do..."

He unwrapped one, pilfered a string from the braid and looped it through the eye of Flicker's hilt.

After pacing back he gave the string a tug.

It launched at him with speed and he caught it inches from his eye,

"Woahahohh dere, Flicka!" Zuzu laughed, dangling the dagger in front of him, admiring his genius.

"Dis right here? Dis why dey chose you, Zuzu."

Getting Flicker to return made possibilities whirl through his head.

He tucked the stringed blade in his boot, snagged his kill, rewrapped his wrist, and returned to the treetops to eat and sleep. Tomorrow held the potential to bring much needed change to the lives of he and his people.

A screech jolted Zuzu awake, “Tusk of Ba’ji, what da...?”

Zuzu peered through the canopy and couldn’t believe his eyes.

A... wind serpent? He’d only heard stories of them, ancient terrors... it was battling something... That pesky whelp!

“Da psylymb! He’s on it!” The troll leaped from his branch, swinging and flipping from tree to tree. He couldn’t lose this challenge, his people had suffered green law long enough, he had to be chief.

Zuzu came to perch on a willow near the fight, the orc already aiming his bow, some sort of flashing arrow knocked.

Zuzu grimaced,

“Dat hunta don’t miss...”

He paused... another flash of brilliance... dark dark brilliance. His hand slid to his boot and found the string,

“but neida do you, eh Flicka?”

His other hand fished a vial from his pouch, “You gonna need help dough, he’s a big boy.”

He dripped a tincture on the blade that smoked and hissed. With a whip of his wrist, Flicker took flight and bit the Orcs thigh. With a tug of the string, Flicker returned, “Hah!”

The hunter loosed.

The serpent fell, bubbling into pinkish ooze.

His rival caged his rightful trophy and staggered... then slumped over, confused and lifeless.

Zuzu dropped from his branch and retrieved the trapped psylym,

“Sorry, Chief, we need dis more den you.”

He started back to l’Ksha, Zuzu had a throne to claim.

*Birthday Party***Rex by Ben Orthey**

The king could always sense intruders
well before they came
He'd lay his plans and pace his halls
And sharpen every blade
He'd look out from the windows
He'd growl foul schemes
And count up everything of value they might try to seize
His royal guard collect him as the raiders pound the gates
Stow him to the dungeons where they promise he'll be safe
And lock him in a cage
He prays he hasn't been betrayed
He prays they leave his home unscathed
Powerless
Hours pass
The king grinds his ivory
CLINK. STOMP. CRASH. CACKLE.
The jubilation of the intruders boils in maddening continuity
There had to be some way that he could get free
The king spits and screams
And suddenly, he hears a creak
Through the dark some creature creeps
One of the invaders plumbs the deep
They'd found the king now, what would they do?
Would this day mark the end of his rule?
Would his execution be swift?
Would it be cruel?
The intruder sloshes water in a bowl

And unlatches the gate
What game is he playing?
He runs to a corner - he watches and waits
This must be a trap - and the bowl is the bait
He's hoping the king will be thirsty and drink
The king steps out and takes a sip
One eye cast back
Vigilant
Sure enough, the cur draws near
And grabs the king's ear
And that will be his last dishonor
The king spins
knocks the intruder on his back
and brandishes his knives
Only now does he realize
With the intruder prone and whimpering
just how young and weak he is
pity it has to end like this...
CRASH! And in a flash
The king has someone on his back
Before he has a chance to see
The world is turned to black

River by Nathan

INT. MIDDLE CLASS HOUSE - DAY

We see a plastic fork picking at a half eaten piece of vanilla birthday cake. Tilt up to reveal RIVER (7), with unkempt red hair wearing clothes that look like they came from the local Good will.

River's eyes wander the room.

River is surrounded by a table of other elementary kids laughing, climbing on each other, and

playing with their food. Among them is BILLY, eight years old. Billy wears a gold crown, a baseball jersey that still has the tag on it, and some freshly inflated Socker Boppers.

BILLY'S MOM (30s), a classic soccer mom, enters through the back door.

BILLY'S MOM

(speaking over the loud kids)

Okay. Okay. The games are here. As soon as you finish your cake, come outside and we're going to play some games.

Billy HOWLS and throws off his boppers. The kids immediately drop their cake and run out the back door. The remaining parents collect themselves.

River trails the other kids to the back door before stopping. He turns to Billy's Mom.

River

(politely)

May I use the rest room?

Billy's mom

Oh. Sure.

She points.

Billy's mom

Last door down the hallway.

HALLWAY

River makes his way towards the bathroom.

Parent 01 (O.S.)

Whose kid is that?

Parent 02 (O.S.)

I don't know.

Parent 03 (O.S.)

I think he's new.

River enters the bathroom door.

HALLWAY - LATER

River exits the bathroom, wiping his hands on his shirt. He looks outside a nearby window.

He sees the kids playing outside. A parent is standing on a chair trying to hang up the pinata.

Billy takes some practice swings with his wooden stick.

River leaves the window and moves down the hallway. He hears a WHINE echo through a door.

BASEMENT

River creaks down a set of wooden steps towards a flickering white light. The WHINE grows louder.

River steps onto the basement floor. The basement is filled with neglected old tools. A rusty wood saw. A pile of pliers.

The HOWLING streams from an old crate sitting at the edge of the stairwell's shadow.

River approaches to see REX. Rex's jaw peaks out from the shadow. Drool seeps down his face as he CRIES out.

River sees an empty water and food bowl.

He grabs the water bowl. Climbs up to a sink. Fills it with water. Sets it down.

He unlatches Rex's crate and runs to the other side of the room.

Rex's door slides open. A paw steps out. Then another as he makes his way across the bitter room.

Rex goes in on the water bowl.

River smiles. He moves from the far side of the room towards Rex and his feast.

River lifts his hand.

Rex sloshes in the water.

River's hand comes down to Rex's ear.

Rex SNAPS at River with his bubbling white teeth.

River's eyes widen as he falls backwards. Rex GROWLS.

Crestly by Perry

He better not bark, thought Crestly, bolting the crate. "Good boy, Rex. Quiet." Tiptoeing away, Crestly maneuvered up his basement's switchback staircase. He instinctively avoided the creaky steps. Opening the basement door to the hallway, the sounds of the party washed over him. *I'm sure Billy's having a great time already.*

Outside, the other adults were standing around chatting. One of the dads was on a chair, hanging the pinata. Crestly noticed Billy coming up behind the man; yellow-paper-crowned, stick in hand, eyeing the candy cocoon. He's going to have to tie that off, thought Crestly. Sure enough, Billy started wailing on the pinata. The man was caught off balance, his foot slipping to the edge of the chair. Crestly held his breath. The pinata rope... just hold on to the rope...

The man tottered on the chair, looking like a drunk.

Like a drunk woman, shouting into her phone, pacing, too close to the edge of a metro platform.

Crestly's thoughts were interrupted by a cry. "Billy, WHAT the Hell! STOP that!" It was his wife, Dottie. Billy turned, guffawing, and scampered off. Dottie walked over to Crestly. She crossed her arms. "Kill you to step in once in a while?"

Crestly shrugged. "Didn't seem like it was going bad," he offered.

"Fine," snapped Dottie, "Well, go inside and clean up a bit. Just throw away any cake left out."

Inside was a mess. Crestly meandered, picking up a few plates of cake, empty soda cans. He tossed them into a bag. His ears perked to a hushed conversation in the other room.

"Yeah, the kid's dad. Just last year."

"Jesus. I heard about it on the news. But I thought, I didn't hear that someone tried to save her."

"No that's the thing, he just stood there..."

The conversation went on, but Crestly had noticed another sound. Creaking from the basement steps. And Rex's low whine. Crestly went to the basement door. He opened it slowly, and crept down the stairs, skipping the creaky ones.

From the staircase, Crestly saw a red-haired boy lower a sloshing bowl of water from the sink to the floor by Rex's crate. *Does he feel bad for Rex?* The boy opened the latch, then sprinted to the back of the room. *Just to give him some water? I wonder how he'll get Rex back in.* As the dog drank, the boy inched forwards. *The woman on the platform... moving closer... approaching the edge, and then suddenly, the boy reached out, and Rex lunged.* The boy sprawled backwards and Rex growled, advancing. The boy's mouth worked soundlessly. Rex howled. With a sound like an oncoming train. The boy looked around desperately, and his eyes locked onto Crestly's. *Just like the woman had, right before...* And Crestly was running. He was down the stairs and across the room before he could think. Throwing the trash bag over the dog's head like a net, he grappled Rex back into the crate, slamming shut the bolt.

*Dream Cadence***/Father by Tim**

I awaken with lurching breath and the sound of death rattling up my throat. Trembling violently, I reach out into the bleary void, searching for something solid to anchor myself to. A warmth envelopes my wrist, anchoring me. I feel something stroke up and down my inner forearm. It's a familiar, measured pace, tugging at the sands of dusty memory.

Oh! The Dream Cadence! The Banisher of Nightmare!

Relief washes over me, febrile tears creep over the rheum about my eyes.

Esparoth, my boy! My son!

I try to mutter a word, but my breath is whisked away by zephyr winds in the desert of my throat. My tongue cleaves to the roof of my mouth, life a newborn to its mother. A wheezing cough shudders through me. Breathing has become a full-body exercise. My lungs, bellows to a wildfire. The world within me is burning. I am returning to ash.

The boy holds my hand, rubs something cool and moist on my forehead. I hear semblances of sound, but the revolt inside me tears apart the tones and dulls the fricatives. I do not understand. I try to speak, but all is in rebellion. I gasp like a fish. Pitiful! It wasn't supposed to happen like this. Not now. There was too much left unsaid. And now no way to say it. I strain my tongue, peel it back from my teeth, will the words through my throat, collapse into shivering coughing. My head lolls. I am a stringless marionette. My lungs fill with fluid, as I drown in words.

Esparoth, I have failed you as a father. I have chided and commanded and given nothing but rebuke in return. You have made my heart well with pride, but its overflow never crested my tongue. I dammed it, demanding more. Because you ever exceeded expectations. You surpassed me a dozen times over. I feared a balmy word might put out the fires of your heart. What a foolish thought! I remember the night the Dream Cadence died. Night after night you had been chased by dragons and ambushed by scrala. The great enemies of our people hounded you. I would wake each night to your screaming and calm you with the Cadence. Then one night, you shook me awake. "Dad! Dad! I did it, I did it!"

"What?"

"I stopped running. I stood and faced them, dad!" Zwhip, ziiip. An imaginary sword whirled through the air. "I cut them all down!"

You needed the Dream Cadence no more. Now you haunted nightmares. I didn't even say I was proud of you. I just told you to go back to bed and get some sleep. The abyss claws at me. My heart falters. I don't remember the last time I said I love you. I strain. I yearn, coaxing my dying declaration into the air. My mouth froths with their excretion. Bubbles in blood-flecked phlegm.

I perish. The words entombed in ruby-red foam.

/Son (Esparoth) by Anna Marie

“Father! Father!” I shout as my feet slam into the familiar mud of my home village. My heart pounds as though the news will burst out of it. I did it. I faced the dragons and scrala. I slew them all! It was my father’s own courage and resolution that gave me strength to do it. Without his example, quietly defending me from the enemies of our people, comforting me with the Dream Cadence, I could never have found it in me to heft my greatsword and fight. I owe it all to him.

My skinny, adolescent shoulders still ache from the effort. But it is the proud ache of accomplishment. I don’t hear Father’s voice. I knew he was sick when I left on my quest, and, since we lost Mother to the dragon raid three summers ago, he has had none but me to take care of him. With me gone these two weeks...I fear things have taken a turn for the worse.

A hacking cough emanating from Father’s room confirms my suspicion. I push the bedroom door open wide.

Father lies buried under twisted, mounded covers. His skin is yellowed, his eyes reddened, and he wheezes. Pity seizes my heart. I approach him. Grip his arm. I concentrate and summon the Dream Cadence. The bringer of comfort. The least I can do to repay all the nights when I was afraid and trembling from the frightful visages of scrala, when he summoned it to calm me into sleep, relief from terror. Dream Cadence to restore my strength.

“Dad, Dad. I did it, I did it!” I shout. “I cut them all down.” I pretend to swing a sword through the air, hoping this display of theatrics will make him laugh. Something to make Father forget his pain. He only stares at me, and his watery eyes grow wetter.

Father wheezes again, coughing blood. I wipe his mouth with my sleeve. He looks up at me pleadingly, as if he wants to tell me something.

What? That he is proud of me? This I already know, Father. This, the fight, this was what you raised me for. You wanted more, more, more from me, and I have forgiven you your demands. You only prepared me for a dark and bitter world that requires as much bravery as I can muster, and then more.

Or that you love me? What is the Dream Cadence but the essence of Love unspoken? You didn’t have to say it. As I grew to manhood, I learned to know what you meant all along.

Father...

Father’s mouth foams and my heart sinks. But now is not the time for tears, but action.

Father, you taught me this. I close my eyes and summon the Dream Cadence once more. Know I understand what you mean. Pass in peace.

I will fight on for you, Father. Always.