

So It Begins

Tuesday, 10 December 2013

Last Updated Friday, 14 March 2014

Â Winner of the 1st place in the 2013 Literature Competition

So It Begins.

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Flickering lamplight cast it's meagre illumination throughout the interior of the humble room, creating rippling shadows that trembled across the yellowing walls. The oil in the brass clad lamp was near gone, forcing the wick to sputter and filled the small peasant hovel with the acrid stench of it's burning. The watcher however, paid it no heed. A part of him unconsciously knowing that somehow the guttering flame would last long enough for the passing to take place.Â

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Broad of shoulder and built as a bull, Leoric the Smith continued his brooding vigil. Dressed in his tan leather treads, sweat-stained cotton shirt and still wearing the much scorched leather apron that signaled his trade . Around him, the mark of his character touched every part of the single-roomed dwelling that had been his home these last twelve years. The furniture, all fashioned from straight-grained ash, was strong, durable and practical. Plainly adorned, yet crafted with skill and care. All was made to endure, to last. As was the stool on which he sat, as was the bed on which his son lay. His only child, Luc. And he was dying.

Leoric's cool blue eyes, red-rimmed from both lack of sleep and crushing grief, stared at the lad's face, covered now for days in a sheen of sweat, contort as a fresh wave of pain passed though him. Leoric's eyes filled with unbidden tears that refused to fall, watching helplessly as his son writhed in silent suffering. Leoric had been here now for three, perhaps four days, and had prayed to every diety he could recall, even those he did not, to spare the boy's life. Beseeching the gods themselves for a miracle that had never come. Now, when all of his expectaion, hope and faith had shrivelled to nothing, he asked only for his boy to pass swiftly. To be spared this dreadful torment that should not have been his to bear.

Leoric balled his brused and battered hands into tight fists as the memory of that day rose once more within him. The Autumn had been late this year. The leaf fall that marked the season was not yet in full divestment and the trees still clung jealously to their mantles. Leoric had just finished tempering the newly forged plowshare for Old Alryn the day before and was currently in the process of sharpening the piece. The noise of running footfalls suddenly sounded, announcing the lad was coming quickly to him. His eager young face, flushed from the nipping cold, declared in his youthful voice that his chores for the day had been completed and asked if there was anything else he was to do. Leoric knew what the boy was about. He had seen the lad waxing his bowstrings the night before and had concocted his own plans.

After rising early, the Smith had been smothering his coals for most of that morning, not wanting to let the fuel of his precious coals to be wasted. And while Luc had been checking the charcoal mounds in the back paddock, Leoric had been swiftly packing a luncheon of bread and cold quiche into two knapsacks. Later, after a further cursory glance through the window to make sure the lad would not return too soon, he also laid out both of their hunting bows and arrow quivers. Smiling happily to himself, Leoric had then returned to sharpening the plowshare just in time for the lad to return and make his request. He had made a good show of considering giving the lad yet more chores, before laughing at his son's downcast expression and declaring that they would both be a-hunting that day. Ruffling the boy's golden hair, they had hastily garbed themselves for travel and set off decked with bow and arrows apiece.

Together, they made their way through the bustle of the village, greeting and offering pleasantries to their fellows as they made their way to the paved pathway that served as the road to the Keep. Following it for but a short while, they soon branched off of it, making for the reds and yellows of the Autumnal leaves of the distant trees. They had set a quick pace and had soon left the brown smudge upon green pastureland that was their village far behind and soon making the edge of the forest. Smiling at each other's keenness for the day to come, they hurriedly lowered their hoods, tied back their cloaks and fitted strings to their bows. After making sure that both Luc's and his own bow was in order, Leoric nodded to the lad. Each then had taken a final moment to compose and still themselves before heading into the forest proper.

As one, their demeanours and stances changed. Where before they had marched with a confident purpose and easy manner, now they were crouched, moving forward in a stalkers gait with their weight balanced upon the fronts of their feet. Arrows were skillfully knocked to bows, the hazel shafts held loosely betwixt first and middle finger. Barbless missiles, ready to be loosed as fast as their trained reactions allowed. They had spoke no more after that. Each of them fully focused and concentrating hard on the job at hand. Eyes were now narrowed, carefully scanning the leaf strewn forest floor for any sudden flash of movement. Leoric took a moment to watch his son and pride swelled in his breast as the boy nimbly leapt from step to measured step. Thoroughly searching the loamy ground for any animal spoor sign or trail that showed promise with his competent young gaze.

Unlike his own powerfully squat frame, the boy was lithe and agile as his mother had been. Though she he had died in the birthing of the boy, all that was and had been good in her, had been passed onto Luc. From his gymnastic build to the kindness and grace the boy showed in all things. Even to the golden hair and warm brown eyes he bore, it seemed to Leoric that a part of his Gwen were still with them, even now. Only twelve Summers old and already the boy was a far finer hunter than Leoric himself had ever been. Indeed the lad was perhaps the finest the village had to offer and had been noticed by the Huntsmaster of the Keep more than once for his obvious skill.

The significance of that had not been missed by Leoric, who had taken every opportunity to encourage his son. Nor had it been missed by Luc himself, for when not allowed to course the forest and his chores for the day were done, the lad would practise his marksmanship long into the evenings. Leoric had even made the boy a straw target that was set out in the back paddock to practise those nights he wished to. That had soon become every night and more than most with a small audience of villagers in attendance. His dedication and obliging nature had won Luc many friends, young and old, from the other residents of the hamlet. Leoric's own character, added to the fact he was the Smith brought him a good measure of respect from his fellows. His boy however, had become something of a symbol to them. That one of their own had so much promise and potential, meant they too shared in Leoric's pride for his son.

When his boy suddenly held his free right hand up to signal a halt, Leoric dutifully obliged and sank to a half crouch and waited. Luc stood for a time, his shape silhouetted far, far behind him by the Noon day sun that had filtered through a break in the forest canopy. Leoric watched Luc take a deep, steadying breath and adjust the angle of his bow upwards. He knew his son was watching not just the prey he had sighted but also the speed and strength of the wind that moved the leaves. Gauging and adjusting his shot. Luc had paused for but a single heartbeat, when finally his first two fingers

opened to let the arrow fly.

Leoric's older eyes were able to watch the white wood shaft as it sped its way to its target, but not the strike. When Luc raised a single finger, he knew then that the boy's aim had been true. Rising from his crouched stance the Smith ambled after his son who had already made for his prize. As Luc reached down to lift the arrow along with the pheasant whose breast its point had pierced, a cry suddenly came. Defensive for the merest moment, Leoric and Luc soon stood easy as Darnell, the Huntmaster of the Keep appeared from behind a stand of Elder. The grizzly old man however, waved frantically to them, face flushed and eyes horrified as he desperately signaled.

Flee, the hand sign warned them to flee. Luc had looked to Leoric then, questioning what course they should take. His father simply nodded to him and they had both made to depart. With a mighty crash, the Elder thicket behind Darnell exploded in a shower of brown leaves and red berries, as something suddenly burst forth. The steed was massive. Black as night and lathered in sweat. It seemed more like a statue carved from pure Jet and infused with life, than any truly natural beast. Its chilling dark gaze had held them, forcing them to stand stock-still awaiting what next was to come, when Leoric noted that it bore a rider. At once, the Smith felt the colour drain from his face and made to grab his captivated son when the cutting imperial voice of Mayhew the Lordling called them to hold.

Dressed in the finest hunting garb of embossed leather and embroidered silk bearing the Deer of Gisoroux, the bastard son of the dying Lord Maynard approached. Urging the black steed forward, the lordling slowly circled the two peasants. His amused dark eyes twinkled coldly and calculating as he stared at the two peasants. Cold. Leoric had grabbed the shoulder of his son and hurriedly pushed him down to his knees, whilst he hastily did the same. Each doing their best not to stare at the lordling's sneering visage. On the third pass of the horse, a small retinue of un-mounted men-at arms arrived following in the wake of the lordlings steed. Halting as one, they took a moment to take in the scene of Darnell the Huntsman wringing his hands nervously, whilst the noble hemmed in the two peasants. They stayed frozen that way for many minutes before the Lordling called for his guards to seize the commoners. Leoric had growled to his son to stay quiet as he awaited the lordlings judgement.

Mayhew, his face flushed with cruel excitement asked which of them slew the pheasant. Instantly, Leoric claimed it was he who had fired the arrow. And when asked if he was sure, confirmed it again. With a nod, the lordling signaled to the men-at-arms who then proceeded to beat the restrained Smith. Strong as he was, he accepted the blows in grim silence. Ignoring them as his worried eyes followed the lordling who had now begun to take an interest in his son. Leaning forward in the saddle, Mayhew had asked Luc not to lie as the other had done and speak truthfully. For he could see that Luc's bow, had no arrow knocked to it. Glancing at his father who shook his head helplessly, Luc bravely declared that it had indeed been he that had slain the game-bird and that he should be the one to be punished.

The evil smile upon the bloodless lips of Mayhew was chilling as he confirmed that the lad would indeed be punished. Leoric, struggling with the men who still held him cried out. Demanding to know what supposed crime they had committed. The bastard had then declared them poachers. In fury, Leoric had roared that deer, boar, swan and duck were the prohibited game reserved for the noble class. Stating that a pheasant could be taken by a lowborn. That there was no crime committed. Mayhew's answer had been that he had a quite curious craving for pheasant that day. And on those days when a noble craved a pheasant, a pheasant was for the nobles alone. Growling in frustration, Leoric had called to the Huntsman, begging him to intercede. When no protest was voiced, the lordling signaled to a waiting guard, who took a long-knife from his scabbard and began to approach Luc. Knowing what was to come, Leoric had fought, striving to get free. To protect his son. Blows had rained around him, some from fists others from knife pommels and clubs. It was in the midst desperate struggle, that he heard the first cry from his son. Then the second.

Mayhew, his voice strained, almost passionate called out that the boy had paid for the crime of poaching from the lord

and land. Yet, he had not owned up to his deed when first asked and so, a further punishment was due. As Luc began to scream hysterically, Leoric became fenziend. Throwing the guardsmen off, he had ran at the surprised man who held his son and whose knife was now covered in blood. Something had hit him then, dull and hollow sounding upon the side of his head. Leoric suddenly felt his left leg give way and next he was on his knees as fists, sticks and feet began to land upon him once again. His hands had clawed at the dirt at that, frantically scrabbling through the churned loam to reach his screaming son when darkness took him.

When he had woken up, he must have lifted his unconscious boy and carried him in a drunken gait back to the village, though he had no memory of it. Numb and unseeing, Leoric had cradled his poor son like a babe, ignoring the concerned villagers who flocked to his aid. Some had tried to take Luc from him, but he had denied them. All had asked what had happened, concern animating their fearful faces. But he could not speak. Every attempt he had made had come out as a choking sob. When he had eventually made it to his Smithy, Leoric had laid his son upon his workbench, wildly scattering all of his tools upon the floor to make room for the boy. Turning to the forge, Leoric then began to stoke the coals and stir up a hot flame. The people of the village crowded around, each craving an answer. All needing to know what had happed to their Luc. When leoric picked up the white-hot forge stoker and turned to his son, they had their answer. Eyes blurred with tears Leoric had drawn the glowing brand along the still bleeding stump where his boys right hand should have been. Cauterising the wound and calling for the Herbwoman to come.

Now here he was, with his son's only remaining hand clasped tenderly in his own calloused paws. Listening intently to each of his sons laboured, pain filled breaths. All at once hoping and fearing the the next breath may be his last. Outside, the villagers were making ready, they had worked furiously for all the time that he had been nursing his son. Each throwing themselves into their tasks to keep from thinking about what was to come. Leoric had watched the infection take hold during that time. Watching his lad burning up with a fever that stole the muscle from his wiry frame. The youth from his face. His son, his beautiful son. His hope, his life, his everything, gave a final judder that ran the length of his body and was at last still. Leoric, with his tears now finally beginning to fall, stood up from his stool, gathered up Luc and began to rock him back and forth. Howls of anguish and despair were torn from the broken man as he clutched his child so desperately to his chest. The villagers who waited outside, heard his lamentations and they too began to share them with him. Until at last, Leoric laid his son upon the bed once more and reverently covered his sons face with the stained linen sheet he had lain on. Pausing only to lay one last sorrowful kiss upon his dead child's brow.

In the village, the people who had heard him cease his mournful cries began to chant. softly at first, but growing louder and bolder all the time. Voices that had moments before been full of heartache were now filled with purpose. With anger. With fury. Leoric stood and made his way to the front door of his home, lifting the large forge hammer that rested against the jamb of the door. His mighty hands curled around the shaft of cold iron, gripping it with all the strength he could muster. The villagers chants now became a roar. Hundreds of voices crying the same name Leo-ric, Leo-ric, Leo-ric. Nodding to himself, the Smith threw open the door stepped out and looked at the army of villagers that surrounded him. All were armed, as he was. Each with the tools of their trade. And many with the tools of others and still they cried his name. Leoric raised his hammer to the sky and bellowed,

"So It Begins!"

Behind him, in the depths of the room where the body of his son lay in peaceful repose, the guttering lamp gave one last flicker of flame and went out.

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Thank you for reading.