

The Demon's Wreath Chronicles

The Upstart

"Reilie - Armoury, Northwestern Battlement!" shouted the Sergeant of the Guard. "And don't forget your cloak this time..." he added with an insult although softer in tone, not meant to be - "fool."

Languishing in a state of uselessness Thehren Reilie had always been the butt of all the jokes, victim of many practical jokes and an oddity amongst the Royal Guard. Were it not for his father, once a commander of the royal guard the boy would never have been allowed to serve with the "Select of the Thousands" as they were called. His transfer to the Guard of the Prince Regent, the "Blue and Gold", at first he considered a move out the door.

"Prince Vincenzo will never put up with Reilie's stupidity." he had overheard the commander of the guard tell his sergeant the day of his transfer. "I'd say he'll be dead inside of the week; I'll finally be rid of Hanse Reilie's memory."

It was no secret that Alanse Bravios had nothing but enmity for the former Captain Emeritus of the Royal Coventarian Guard. They had fought numerous times, verbally of course, for Alanse was well aware that Hanse Dietrich Reilie was fully capable of defeating him in a combat for the right to command the guard. This did nothing save aggravate Bravios even more. The ultimate in humiliation was the day that Reilie left the service of the Duke to name Bravios' very own nephew as his successor. Of course he knew full well that Bravios would be forced to kill his own nephew if he wanted the title, it was just petty revenge for all of the trouble that Alanse had given his former commander. Upon defeating and killing his nephew in combat for the position, Bravios swore to all present that he would someday avenge the death of his nephew.

Knowing the feeling held within the heart of the sinister man Thehren had always been wary of service in the royal guard. Although an accomplished master of weaponry he was aware that he must keep his eyes open at all times. Within the first week of his assignment there were three attempts on his life on the practice field and one dishonorable attempt to slit his throat while he slept. It was clear that he was to be the target of everyone's frustration as long as Commander Bravios was in charge. It was knowing this that he began to wear down and his nerves became all too taut. One day a trooper scares him with a prank the next one nearly kills him with the same prank, twisted to become lethal. Indeed Alanse Bravios was correct in his assumption. The way that Thehren had become, edgy, forgetful, distrusting and quick tempered with all he met it was only a matter of time before he would make some grave mistake in the presence of the Prince Regent - not known at all for his tolerance - and that would be the end of Thehren Reilie. Better still that would be the beginning of Hanse Dietrich Reilie's suffering and there would be nothing left for him to do except stew. He would be defeated by the very people that he had given his entire life in service to. Indeed it was Bravios' best plan of manipulation to date.

It was too far this time. Even the lowly sergeant of quarters was aware that he had no desire to be part of a manipulation that involved the most vindictive member of the royal family. It could be that a reward would be present in the end of this thing. It was certain that the hatred which Commander Bravios poured out upon this fool, Reilie was destined to doom all who had seen its formation. Indeed the Prince Regent is not a man to be used in someone's plot.

"Lord Prince Regent, I requested this audience that I might reveal a plot to use you, and remove myself from this deed." begged the sergeant, hoping that this was one of the prince's "good days".

A brow went up on the prince's forehead, but he didn't reach for a weapon, the sergeant took this as a good sign and continued. "As I'm certain my lord is aware of the open hatred between house Bravios and the house of Reilie." The prince sat still his eyes narrowing as the sergeant added "Commander Emeritus Bravios informed me that the best way to rid himself of Reilie was to have Your Majesty do it for him". It was a blunt statement of the facts. The Sergeant had seen the prince kill lessers for being verbose and wasting his time.

For a moment the sergeant half believed the prince had either gone into a trance or simply was ignoring him. He quickly lowered his head and averted his eyes the instant the prince's eyes flashed to meet his. Moving evenly at each arm he brought his hands together at the fingertips just below the dark hairs of his goatee. "Do you know why I shall sit the throne of Sclericc on the morrow; the throne of Coventry Proper at length, sergeant?"

"You are powerful, Lord" he said with much bravado "our enemies fear your might and our allies know of your wisdom!" Surely this small added compliment will place me in good stead for promotion, thought the sergeant.

"You don't need me" Quibretktho injected reclining on a couch nearby, "this one kisses your ass far sweeter than I ever could."

"Yes. You are both correct" replied Vinnie. "More importantly so are my senses, and they tell me, sergeant, that you are one that changes sides. I am not sure whether or not you change sides out of loyalty to your king or to your own hide, but I will know. You will show me, sergeant".

So that's the way it is to be thought the sergeant. Well, if its to be death then it shall be death with honor and boldness. Not everyone gets into the royal guard, the prince will see just what we are made of. "Majesty I kiss no man's ass, and I hold in contempt anyone that says otherwise - man or chamber-wench. I respect your right to lead in the powers that you possess. I have always served house Scarlotti and will continue to do so, if allowed, but those that break our laws or plot against our rulers cannot be trusted."

Such condescension! It was more than she could bear. Before she could begin to control herself the black dragon beneath the captivating woman emerged in the hybrid form; pushing to the surface brought the terrible fury of the renowned black

drake temper. The deafening roar was more than simply a loud bellow, for with it came all of the mystery and wonder that make up the dragon. The very bones of all present vibrated as if at resonance as the transformation came to completion.

The overpowering urge to run madly from the room was nearly too strong to combat. Were it not for the fascination of the horror this creature manifested through its transformation surely flight would have taken the sergeant. As the female head tilted back emitting the cavernous shriek, the front of the beautiful face began to stretch and acquire a scaly surface to it. The head of this now unimaginable horror continued to mutate and inflate. The body became more burley and robust, still maintaining the overall form a woman, however repugnant. From the once lithe and delicate arms turned scaly and muscular grew numerous protrusions that ended in sharp silver points; at the ends of what must be fingers grew similar silver claws. As the wail of ferocity died the transformed head of what resembled a black dragon turned toward the Sergeant, now attempting to pick himself up from a fall, and the eyes popped open.

“Noooo!” cried the sergeant, one hand on his partly removed long sword as the black slitted green eyes of the creature came within inches of his own. The beast was fully astride him and although not much larger than the size of a large man felt as if it was much heavier. The lips of the creature parted and as the fangs rotated forward as a hinge in the front of the mouth he could see gelatinous saliva beginning to form about the inside of the mouth. One such bead of the viscous solution ran down one tooth as it was apparent the monster was guiding it directly to the sergeants exposed face.

“Enough, Quibrettktho!” boomed a voice from behind the hideous form. The dragon turned its head as the droplet of saliva fell causing it to impact on the floor. A puff of fetid vapor rose from the floor nearby as the acids ate through the carpet into the stone floor. “The sergeant is our guest, and we can’t very well have you devouring our guests,” he continued. His eyes narrowing as his gaze bore down on her “now can we my dear?”

As he reluctantly turned to his antagonist he noticed that the demonic head had already become significantly more human than before, the body had “deflated” and the claws and the spines were just now withdrawing into the now olive fleshy skin. Those eyes. They still maintained those dark black slits in them, and they completely enveloped him as the shell surrounding them spoke. “Sergeant, I am a princess and no sort of “wench”. I would appreciate your treating me with the proper respect.”

He was so enthralled by those eyes that the voice was like a second entity. He felt as if a bright light was shining directly onto his own face. It was all he could do to make a primeval grunt in response to her attentions.

“I’ll take that as a yes. I must also insist that you keep this incident to yourself, sergeant. I would be forced to kill you and all that you might tell of my true nature.” Vincenzo is too complex, she thought to herself, why not simply dispatch with this useless turn-coat and be done with him. Knowing the Prince Regent, however, gave her pause as all too often he would see something in these humans that she failed to detect. Having him better her in the detection of character was “painful”. For

that matter having him, or anyone else, better her was a distasteful prospect at best. In time she had learned to pretend to notice this greatness also. It was easy since he had never deceived her and he had never been wrong about someone in all of the years that she had known him.

“Yes, Majesty.” replied the shaken sergeant, now noticing that something felt quite wrong to the rear of his armor.

“Sergeant,” replied the Prince, “you may wish to retire to your barracks to clean yourself up a bit.” Smiling he added “we will all talk later and, sergeant, we’ll be watching you.”

Quickly removing himself from the room the sergeant was gone in an instant with much more spirit than he had entered.

“You must learn to control your emotions Quibrettktho you realize that it is not to our advantage to have every person in the castle realize your true nature.”

“Perhaps,” she said as all of her human beauties completed their transformation, “but I refuse to allow anyone to talk to me as if I were a mere mortal.”

“Forget your woes and put on some clothes. I need for you to go to my knights and get this Therehn Reilie and bring him to me. Tell his superior that I have heard of his screw ups and will be letting him know that they will not be tolerated, personally.”

“An audience with a new conscript”, she replied pulling her leather jumpsuit over her hips. “Isn’t that a bit generous for you Vinnie? Why do you waste your time?” She would give a little to get the answer more quickly, besides she would know more if she were to be involved.

“This man’s father was my father’s Commander Emeritus of the Royal Coventarian Guard. He was a loyal and honorable man who profited us well. In addition it is painfully obvious that Bravios is attempting to use me and, you know how much I despise being manipulated.”

“So kill him. Your powers exceed his easily” she said knowing full well the response that he would give.

“You know that I cannot simply challenge the leader of my father’s men. It would undermine the entire rank and file system. It is extremely important for the outsiders to see that everything is done by the code. That we live by this code and tolerate nothing less from those beneath us!” Why is she trying me he thought she knows the code and she is incapable of forgetting anything. “Besides I have a much better plan than that of the Commander. His plan will trap him and mine will destroy him once and for all.”

“My lady, then you are Mistress Quibrettktho of Prince Regent Vincenzo?” Noticing the frown that quickly came over the beautiful woman’s face he quickly added “I mean’t no implied disrespect my Lady it’s just that I have been attacked a number of times and to have the charge of the prince’s consort makes me nervous.”

To look at him no one would believe that he was a winner of the ruby ring, worn by the veterans of the Royal Coventarian Guard. Not one of the ringbearers had ever been killed in single combat with anyone other than another ringbearer. Even the "righteous" Knights of the Enclave from Caradia had never beaten the representative of the Royal Guard at any sanctioned event. Indeed the harried look that he had seemed to shout "I need rest!". Vinnie has his work cut out for him if he expects to rebuild the man that had fallen from once greatness to this pitiful state.

"I must thank you for your concern, but I feel that the chances of us being threatened are very slim, Sir Thehren."

The walk back from the billets of Vincenzo's guard although uneventful found the Knight jumping to defense at every shadow and noise that they encountered. Unbelievable, she kept thinking, he is very large yet jumps like a mouse in a cats lair. His armor of charcoaled thormic and gold leaf in a state of low polish, surely Vinceso will tear him apart when he sees this. Possibly the worst of it all, the way that any creature could detect him by smell at forty paces!

Upon their arrival and announcement the Royal Guardsmen on duty ushered them in to the Prince Regent who was talking with his close friend Stephen Adrano. The cleric is with him she thought. Although she liked Stephen she found her intuitions reminding her that he was a priest after all.

Thehren's entire life he had trained and served as his father had instructed him for the day that he might be brought before a member of the royal family. Of course there was the ceremony in which he was commissioned into the Royal Guard and given his ruby ring of servitude and honor in which the King himself presided. This time, however, he could actually see the prince's face as if they were talking one to the other. In fact that was what he seemed to be about to do. At that moment it all came over him as if the past months events were a dream that had been forgotten. His state of disorder. His shame that he was passing on to the prince's guard.

"Your majesty, Prince Regent, I am not fit to come before you as a guardsman or a man." he said as he came to his knees.

Finally beholding the sad creature before him Vinnie was outwardly inclined to agree. "Your father once served my father with honor, today your service to me falls in shame. My question to you is will you allow this to continue or will you allow yourself to regain honor and defeat the man that seeks your death for his own cowardly revenge?"

To answer the prince's question simply with yes or no was too much for him to attempt. It would be like trying to sum up the entire knowledge of the multiverse in one sentence. If I thought I could stop it I would, of course try, he thought. The past months of torturous catnaps and looking over his shoulder at every turn had taken a severe toll on the young knight; no to allow that agony to continue would be madness. Honor. The word is what every Coventarian lives and dies by. There is nothing left of a man with no honor. The Priests of Death state even this in their fourteenth verse of the fifth chapter of their Necromantic Verses, "...Though even the man without honor has less force than that of the animated corpse. For in that

corpse lies the magic of the animator but for him there exists not even the icy breeze of Caina.”

Yes. I choose honor and the code. To defeat my true enemy is to lay the axe at the root of the tree that chokes out my very existence. It is the Commander Emeritus of course. His father had warned him not to seek the Royal Guard as a posting, warning that he and Alanse Bravios would always be mortal enemies. That any son of his would be likewise an enemy to Bravios. To end the tyranny and torture Bravis had brought on would be a very sweet thing, but even at his best he could not defeat the commander in open battle. Then it came to him. Of course he could not do it alone, but the Prince Regent must have a plan for him otherwise why mention these things to him? Yes. He will defeat the cruelty put upon him by this coward hiding behind the shield of the ranks.

“Your Majesty, my life is yours, I have but to serve you and to do so I must say no.” he said looking up from a kneeled position. “I will not allow these deeds to continue, and yes I will reclaim my honor at your mercy.” hesitating for a moment ; casting himself out upon the prince as if he would allow trust in a monarch to brace his fall. “I am not yet capable of defeating the commander - without your help, Sire.” Watching the prince closely he tried his best to maintain a respectful glance to the future king of his homeland.

“To assist you in defeating a member of my father’s Royal Guard would be a crime and more importantly” he paused, leaning forward from his great chair, “a deviation from the code, without honor, Sir Reilie.”

Before the young knight could speak he continued, “I am prepared to offer you a form of training that few start and few which begin live through.” The prince noticed the knight’s eyes narrow as if he had already been betrayed. “A form of training that once mastered will make you one of the most powerful fighters on Maenatae.”

There could be only one method of discipline that the prince was describing. Not a form of fighting in and of itself it had become the whispered, sought after skill of master assassins throughout Coventry. It is the driving force behind the power of Coventry’s greatest fighters and killers. It was the death of 98 out of a hundred that had ever tried it. No demi-human had ever lived through its rigorous disciplines. The prince was said to be the master of this form of self enhancement, creating disciplines that no one else could even imagine let alone attempt.

Slowly the prince continued “Amustos Flenore, or ‘Am-Flen’ as its users have called it. I can attempt to impart it to you, but know this - on your first attempt to contact the required ‘contact discipline’ of Am-Flen you will be rendered unconscious. Whether you ever wake up again is up to you.” said the prince half smiling at the grim picture.

“Is it true that only 2 out of 100 that try it ever wake up again?” the knight asked, slightly shaken.

“No, it’s closer to one in one thousand, but don’t let that stop you.”

Half opened eyes showing the whites; the cornea pressed far back against the roof of their sockets. Perspiration beaded and broiled up to the surface of the now

glistening skin. Tremors of anxiety rocked the prince's body as his second sight began to come to the foreground, the hidden man was beginning to emerge from its niche in the deep psyche. In an instant of racing vision the second sight sprang into play and all that was the prince slipped into a pool of skills to be drawn from by the id if it so desired. As the vision of the second sight, or Flen-see as it was referred to, adjusted itself down to the confines of the small room the prince began to perspire and shake less. As was his habit he had brought his Flen-see into being out of body giving him a third person view of the entire room. As he trimmed it back he could no longer see through the walls but was using them to gauge his powers and define his workspace. Within the room he could see his friend Stephen Adrano, Quibrettktho, and the knight Thehren Reilie awake but lying prone. He could see that the young knight had been bound well by the priest. He could also see that the knight was equally nervous as the prince had become more in control of his capabilities.

"Stephen," whispered the prince, in a voice that echoed from many different places about the room "you and Quiee-bee must leave the room or fall victim to the connection that I am about to make. Do you understand me?" he finished in a ghostly tone.

"Si Vincenzo, I will leave now and Quibrettktho will accompany me." He knew enough not to scan the room looking about. Surely if his eyes were to fall upon the point of his projection it would be a living nightmare. "We will wait in the anti-chamber" he said as the pair exited the sparsely furnished chamber.

As the door came to the knight seemed to gather his resolve and simply stared up to the ceiling. "I am ready master".

"Then, look up to your left and we'll begin.", echoed the voice from what seemed like everywhere within the small chamber.

As he caught the first glimpse of the anomaly it seemed nothing more than a spinning wave of heat, floating about the upper reaches of the ornate room. It almost blended into the frescos of evil creatures battling one another in the Blood Wars. As he began to focus on the affect he realized that the images of the frightening Blood War were beginning to become more and more three dimensional and vivid. The multi-faceted eyes of the great Ice Devil were filling out and taking on a realistically horrifying form, as were the fangs of the eight legged horror that the Devil was attacking with its barbed minions. It occurred to him that he should turn from this event as he could feel that further viewing of the spectacle would surely draw him into this war without end. That he would never return.

Smells of death began to waft from the depiction. Appalling scents that carried the warm, humid smell of blood spilling upon ground colder than humans dare tread. The fetid smell of bile as a barbed creature was slashed in two to the right of the battle. Snapping his head back from the cruel battle brought an even greater horror for behind him no longer lay the marbled and gold inlaid floor of the prince's audience chamber but the rest of a battlefield from a nightmare gone awry. As a myriad of misshapen creatures hacked, clawed, and ate their way through one another the battle raged about him as if he were the painting and the combatants were reality. For all that he was Thehren was sure that they were real; the acidic

burning sensation across his face, brought on by the splashing of some hideous Deamons blood upon him was the final nudge into a realm reserved for combatants damned to an eternity of strife and excruciating torture at the hands of those which extract pleasure from the same. He began to scream frantically-loudly, "Enough, that is enough!"

Instantly all was quiet, and it became apparent to the knight that he was lying upon his face upon a highly polished floor. The room seemed rather well lit, but there was the feeling that for all the light coming into it the true force illuminating it was indeed an incredible power of darkness. The force of the dark being so powerful it had come full turn casting form upon all that it struck, in turn twisting the bad to good, the dark to light.

Looking to the sides of the room Reilie began to attempt to navigate to some opening that he had not seen for sure but believed to exist somewhere near the source of the evil glow. But the room contained no bound and the sides did not exist and he wandered alone for days in the direction of the evil.

"Which way is it?"

"Are you going the right way, fool?"

It was not him, quickly he had turned on many occasion to face his antagonist. Too slowly as the image slipped quickly off to either the right or the left anticipating his moves as though it read his mind.

An incredible thirst began to overtake him as he approached the end of what he guessed must be the third day. As it was the thirst was to be quenched, for on the horizon of the room lie a body. At first it was merely a grayed dot on the never ending floor of this complex torture hall and as he began to focus upon it he could draw his eyes in tighter pulling the figure to him as though it were that he were running at an incredible speed directly toward the spot on the floor. Drawing closer he saw that it was the form of a man, perhaps in tarnished armor, lying in a tightened ball upon a sword. A canteen lie nearby. As his perception and focus of the event drew closer to the body it began to move at a staggering pace. The lines and strange markings in the floor that had, by now, become mundane and commonplace flashed by so quickly that they seemed to peel up from the floor and bob toward the sky as he passed by them. At once his vision brought him to a frighteningly abrupt stop not two feet from the body. If only it were true. If only he truly were right next to that canteen of cool fresh water. He sadly closed his eyes, relaxing them for the journey that lie ahead. As he opened his eyes he realized that he was actually there next to that wonderful canteen of cool water, the sword that had held none of his interest now caught his eye for he realized that he had no weapon and this seemed to be an unfriendly place at best.

To take the water and drink, or the sword for protection. It became obvious that he was being toyed with but it was as if he were out of his own body with no control over his movements. As he was about to try to warn himself he felt the presence of the antagonist again sneaking up to toy with him. Turning abruptly he caught the fellow off guard as it whispered to him "take the sword fool!"

Shocked he stared face to face with his own spectre. Its expression told that it too was unaware of the identity of its companion. As quickly as the image came it departed and before he could form a second thought he bent down and picked up the sword and the scabbard with one smooth motion.

“A wise choice, mortal.” boomed a voice from directly in front of him; where a moment ago there had been nothing.

Jerking his head up in surprise he saw the base of a massive menaestic colored throne there upon the great plain of marble. Great pillars rose from this marbled base, these pillars seem to be like those of the Zamostians in style, he thought. About 9 feet up the stairs in the middle of the throne sat a giant of a man some 18 feet tall, best guess. Dressed in a leather of some sort he appeared to be wearing pants and boots of black leather with a trail of purple coloring that seemed to snake its way about the pants as though the color itself were alive. Looking at the blouse the creature wore he began to realize that it was indeed Drakeskin that the fellow wore. There were ornate and intricate patterns in the blouse, the cut was one that must have taken quite some time to create. Indeed, this “man”, this giant was the epitome of finery, fashion, and good grooming. Obviously one so rich in taste and in class could not belong in this place. He had not one long dark hair out of place upon his perfectly formed head. Likewise the goatee he sported was trimmed to perfection with no part out of symmetry with the other. Reilie came to the conclusion that he must be a god. At once he noticed the points of two horns peeking from beneath the hair on the top of his head.

It was at that very moment that the giant began to speak. “I should like to have watched my minions rip your pitiful carcass to threads.” A grin of delight developed upon the giant's huge face; its eyes began to narrow as it continued. “But I find myself compelled to allow you to amuse me in service, further.”

This was too fantastic, he thought! How could he have come to this place. How could this creature be talking with him. If this were whom he suspected surely he would be writhing in pain in some torturous pool of molten lava or on some sub-zero frozen plain. Of course! If this truly is the Prince of all Devils then he can read my mind and knows everything there is to know about me already. Perhaps he knows that I am now fully ready to go home. The test!

Asmodeous spoke before he could consider further. “Yes, the test. That is why you have come to see me, to answer my question or wander my lands for eternity.”

Reilie backed away the very force of the devil's voice coupled with the realization of his situation nearly made the knight bolt in the opposite direction.

“Stand fast and tell him of me.” The voice of the specter had returned and although unseen represented a compatriot. Someone that could and would stand to the death if need be.

Asmodeous smiled a knowingly evil smile. It was as if there was no hope of the knight ever comprehending much less answering the question. He leaned over slightly and said in the softest of voices, “Who battles the man, invisible and clever. Who cuts you deep yet bears the wound?”

Though Prince of Devils bit off the last of his words they lingered on still in the mind of the knight. Over and over he could hear them repeat. Not out of panic, fear or even understandable terror, but some other force held them up as a reminder, as a taunt. It was as if they were all being repeated to him in an effort to goad him into answering prematurely, spoiling the answer, damning his soul for eternity.

But even as he began to speak he noticed that the edges of his vision was beginning to change and to blur. Where the overwhelming vastness of the chamber once covered the horizon and the black fog laden sky there was what seemed to be the edges of some type of brick. Perhaps some type of marble, it half occurred to him.

“It is the inner man, in him lies my future and my power, Devil!” His resounding shout seemed far more powerful than possible. Even the devil, Asmodeous recoiled from the announcement. The hall shook and from the edges of his view came more bricks as in an instant an utter darkness filled his field of vision. “We will talk later human.” the voice assured. “Perhaps more.”

As he began to awake he saw the Prince reclining on a nearby couch, the Lady Quibrettktho ministering to him. Someone too close for him to focus upon spoke. “He’s coming out of it Vincenzo, I guess your notions were right again.” He guessed that it was Stephen, the priest. A terrible pang called out from his stomach and the knight realized that he was extremely hungry. Perhaps there would be breakfast too.