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The Great Hall of Ahkurst

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Abstract

Tarak limped along the long corridor, muttering to himself beneath the flickering florescents. The subterranean passage stretched out before and behind him, a serpentine artery curving gently beneath the surface of the planet.

The Great Hall of Ahkurst

By

Lee Clark Zumpe

Tarak limped along the long corridor, muttering to himself beneath the flickering florescents. The subterranean passage stretched out before and behind him, a serpentine artery curving gently beneath the surface of the planet. Once bright and full of life, the grimy channel had fallen into disrepair and contemptible neglect over the years. A wave of systems failures, a spate of irreparable malfunctions and a generation of mechanically inept slackers had sealed the lid on this coffin.

Tarak knew this place would be his tomb. The underlings would eventually find a way through the network of sensors and automated battle stations, overrun the passages and kill anyone they found. The underlings would have their revenge upon him, if age itself did not lay claim to him first.

The old man cursed bitterly the fate that had befallen his beloved home.

Tarak tugged nervously at his mangy beard. His great-great-great grandfather had worked on this very corridor, sweating in the grim darkness and chipping away at the stone with his pickaxe. As a boy, Tarak had heard stories dating back hundreds of years – stories proudly retold generation after generation by his family, over tea, after dinner. His grandfather spoke of the wars his ancestors fought to claim their empire, and of the horrors they found deep in the earth.

Tarak caressed the steel buttress with a

trembling hand. His pudgy fingers tapped the reinforcements anxiously, taunting them to admit the weakness of their age. Behind the thick metal casing, beneath that veil of fortification, the solid rock of the earth's crust bristled with hideous life.

Tarak wondered how much longer these walls would stand.

*Weakest of all are those castle walls
Guarding nothing but shadowy halls.*

An old proverb, one Tarak remembered from childhood. No one read the scriptures any more, of course, but those verses had a way of surfacing at appropriate moments to unsettle the soul.

Tarak opted to remain behind when most of his kind willingly chose to forsake the realm. Only a handful remained now, wandering the lonely passages, dreaming about past glories and reliving ancient battles through song and story. Old men like Tarak – too stubborn or too proud to relinquish their heritage – now haunted these halls, breathing the last few breaths of musty air in their lost world.

Tired and cheerless, the little old man propped his stubby bones against the wall, pressing his furrowed brow against the cold steel plates. He had been old when lasers had replaced swords, when drills had replaced shovels, when antibacterial ointments had

replaced folk remedies. He had watched as the handwritten tomes of his ancestors had been digitized and stored on computers. He had watched as the crude artificial intelligence of machines had been substituted for soldiers along the watchtowers. Like a creeping tumor, technology had eclipsed everything that had been, had swallowed his birthright, and had devalued the legacy of his people.

Technology had even seduced his children away from him, into different lives on another world.

A faint whisper echoed through the corridor. Behind him, the shadows writhed timidly. The old man shuddered and picked up his pace.

The corridor soon gave way to a vast enclosure – the Great Hall of Ahkurst. Tarak immediately felt soothed by the warmth of torchlight. The sparkling glow of the flames illuminated the hall, peeling back the shadows to reveal the magnificent painting spread across the ceiling. The fresco recorded the history of his race from the time they had been driven underground. It depicted the most renowned of their leaders, revealed the most triumphant scenes of their wars with the underlings, and chronicled the slow but steady progress of their empire.

No more than a dozen Elders sat at the Long Table. Tarak recognized Aziz and Ezra, the brothers from Tahlmot Bottoms. On his right hand sat Luranus of Toth; on his left he found Bohr.

“Tarak, old friend – it is good to see you.” Urik, a decorated warrior in his youth, nodded and smiled. “We were just speaking of the Kobalds. Have you seen any?”

“No...but,” Tarak took a seat at the table, warily glancing over his shoulder. He could not shake the feeling that something had followed him. “Something is out there, something must be out there. The halls aren’t as still as they once were.”

“Aye,” chimed in Aziz. “And something

smells out there.”

“That’s probably Ezra’s feet!” Luranus retained the worst qualities of his ancestors. He chuckled though no one else found his witticisms particularly funny.

The Elders spoke of Kobolds encroaching on the outermost perimeters. They spoke of disappearances amongst the residents of the outlying communities – the small, unshielded villages whose inhabitants shunned all forms of technology. Their numbers had been in decline for some time, but now reports suggested only a few dozen remained.

“It’s the Kobalds, it must be,” Ezra barked. “They’ve always been just outside of our walls, waiting for an opportunity.” Coal-black and mindless, the Kobolds lumbered through the darkest hollows of the world. Legends claimed they feasted on solid rock, and drank lava like water. “They’ve come to reclaim the territory they lost in the wars...”

“And if they have...how long before the other underlings become their allies? How long before the rock wraiths and the orcs and the dragons stir from their nests?” Tarak accepted a goblet of ale offered to him by a servant. “How long before we are faced with more formidable threats than those bumbling oafs?”

“We have sufficient weapons to...”

“Sufficient weapons? Our laser canons have no energy to power them. Our plasma rifles are scattered across hundreds of miles of tunnels, gathering dust in storerooms and closets and kitchen pantries. Our dilapidated android sentries all short-circuited years ago.” Tarak wrestled his dagger free from its sheath and thrust it into the stale air of the room. “This is the only weapon I trust...”

Even as Tarak’s words echoed through the hall, an exceptional blast of wind flooded the chamber, extinguishing all but one of the torchlights. Formerly managed by mechanized climate control mainframes, such uncontrolled currents of air had become more and more

common.

"Can't someone look into that blasted weather system?" Luranius tugged at his cloak, pulling it close to his stout body. His folded his stubby arms across his chest, hid his shaking hands beneath the material. The cold bothered his thick, stunted bones. "Perhaps we should have joined the others. Perhaps we should have given in and left all this behind."

"No..." Bohr, who had been silent until now, spoke. "I do not blame those who migrated – this is a dying world to them, and they had whole lifetimes before them. But for us – for the Elders – we would not fit in well with the surface-dwellers."

"We could have, had we chosen to," Luranius reminded him. "The DNA restructuring procedure would have given us the appearance of the surface-dwellers..."

"Aye," said Bohr, "But we would never be surface-dwellers." Bohr's face crumpled into shadowy ridges as he fought back emotion. His three daughters had gone to live on the surface, and the old man missed them. "Those who left were of a different generation – they accepted the marvelous gifts of science and technology without question, without hesitation. We prefer the old ways – though some of the comforts of the modern age appeal to us, we still favor to live our lives as our ancestors lived theirs." Bohr smiled as he tilted his head back and eyed the painting overhead, now barely discernible in the thickening shadows. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I also prefer to die here with my ancestors – nestled in the warm earth, and not upon some roofless, grassy pasture beneath endless skies where beasts can ravage my lifeless corpse."

Silence fell upon the room as each of the Elders nodded in agreement. Unlike their children, the Elders remained shackled to the customs and traditions of their forebears.

"Enough of these shadows – let us have some light again," Luranius said.

Aziz and Ezra grudgingly took leave of their comfortable chairs and began relighting the firebrands.

"Wait," Tarak said, turning and peering down the corridor that had delivered him to the Great Hall. He sniffed at the still fluctuating stream of air. "Do you smell that?"

The Kobalds shambled out of the shadows like a slow-moving rockslide, their stony pitch-black hides interrupted only by the crimson fire of their eyes. The dark, dim-witted things howled as they approached their ancient enemies.

"BREACH!" screamed Luranius, and he leapt to his feet and scampered across the Great Hall to the far end of the room.

Tarak jumped up onto the face of the table, brandishing his blade with no less courage than his ancestors had in the wars of old. Urik stood by his side, a laser pistol gripped firmly in his hand.

"Does that thing work?" Tarak snarled out of the corner of his mouth, never once taking his eyes off the loathsome Kobalds.

"It used to...haven't had any reason to use it in a hundred years."

"Aziz, Ezra!" Tarak and Urik edged across the table until they stood in the center. Tarak spun his head around, scanning the shadows. "Where are you two? Find something to defend yourselves with and get up here!"

"They left." One of the Kobalds lethargically hobbled over to Tarak's chair and sat down in it. "Looks like you two," the Kobald sputtered, "Have been left to defend the realm on your own..."

"You...you speak?" Tarak's eyes had grown wide with astonishment. Nothing in the history of his people had indicated Kobalds had the capacity for intelligent dialogue. "What...what do you want?"

"Well," the Kobald said, "An apology would be nice; but, short of that, we'd like to reclaim some of our property taken by your ancestors."

"But we..."

"Look: You don't need it, there's hardly any of you left." The Kobald leisurely extended an arm and clasped Tarak's goblet of ale. He drew it to his lips and sipped at it casually. From the expression on his gritty face, he appeared to be pleased with the taste. "We've gotten tired of living in caverns, sleeping on rocks. We'd like to fill in some of your vacant lodgings."

"You want to live with us?"

"Why not? We'd like to learn more about how you built this place." The Kobald smiled, its crimson eyes narrowing into narrow slits. "It would be fair compensation for what your ancestors did to mine, don't you think?"

"I suppose..." Tarak gradually lowered his dagger. Urik, standing beside him, scratched his head.

"Maybe we could even help you get some of your equipment working again – seems like things have started to fall apart around here."

"Maybe..."

"I know all this is rather sudden – and I'm sure you need to discuss things with your

governing council." The Kobald stood, bowing in respect. "We will take our leave now, and we will give you some time to think things over."

"Fine..."

"Our attaché will be in contact with you to negotiate a settlement." Moving at a snail's pace, the band of Kobalds filed back into the corridor. "It's been a pleasure meeting you."

Moments later, Tarak and Urik still stood shaking on the long table beneath the vast painting in the middle of the Great Hall of Ahkurst. The other Elders had apparently scattered throughout the network of tunnels, and probably cowered in the shadows awaiting gruesome and violent deaths.

Tarak sheathed his dagger and sat down on the edge of the table.

"So much for the glory of battle," Tarak mused.

"It's a strange, new world," Urik admitted, sitting down beside his friend. "Do you think the dragons have ambassadors and mediators, too?"

<End>

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

L.C. Atencio holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Creative Writing from the University of Central Florida, with scholarly emphasis on illustrating literary works. Atencio's poems, "Believing in words, not in whoever," and "Staring through the cracks of reality," were published in 2012 in *Nota Bene*, an anthology by The Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. He has edited and judged college journals such as *Phoenix Magazine*, *The Cypress Dome*, and *The Florida Review*. His poetry and short stories have been published internationally in *Westview*, *Perspectives*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *The Penwood Review*, *The Storyteller*, *Space and Time Magazine*, *Grey Sparrow Press* and others. His illustrations have been featured in college magazines such as *Aries: A Journal of Art and Literature*. Atencio is proud to be an experimental novelist for the everyday person, and a book illustrator. To get in touch, he may be contacted at <http://creativewriter0.wix.com/lcatencio>.