



Pilcrow & Dagger

Action

Adventure



CHEF

HANGER

You Won't Believe
What's Between
The Covers!

A Nuclear Blast with
David Harold Hanks

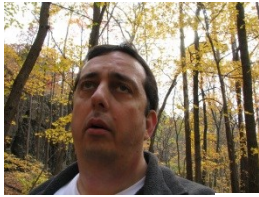
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Roger Schumacher - Roger's early childhood was consumed by comic books, Creature Feature Presents, Star Trek, and Clint Eastwood flicks. In 1980 he attended the School of Visual Arts earning a film degree and then spent the rest of the 80's and 90's working on small film projects, screenplays, and other AV projects. Roger has been working with prose since 2003 and has taken some classes in order to better learn the craft. He is currently working as an Inventory Analyst.

Coming of Age

"The Wood has enjoyed many years of peace since the time of the Witch Wars. But those whose destiny it is to maintain a vigil against evil know no rest. Their work moves through the changing of the seasons like the ticking of a clock.

The transition of spring into summer can bring about both good and bad. Those once young, grow into adulthood under the bright sun; right alongside the encroaching darkness of an all too familiar evil."

-Chief Historian Kaylyn of the Brotherhood

Darkstar's hooves hit the ground running. Gracelyn's single braid of raven hair bounced off her shoulder. She wore the standard uniform of a cadet in training, a simple brown tunic with sleeves and leggings with leather boots. She rode with focus around the obstacle course. This was one of many attempts at completing the course successfully. Her thoughts revolved around the recent past.

With the beginning of the New Year she announced that she would be entering into the Brotherhood's Military Academy. Having reached the age of eighteen she was now eligible, a goal she's considered for some time. Surprising her parents, and especially her uncle, with this decision, it was agreed she'd be allowed to try.

No female had ever entered the academy before. Her uncle expected success and decided to personally train her. Because of the stature of her parents, and the expectations of her uncle, she felt she immense pressure to

succeed and knew nothing less than perfection would be acceptable.

Her uncle monitored her progress. He dressed in his standard training uniform, black with the crest of the Brotherhood on his chest. Rem stood waving his staff in the air as she passed. Suddenly he swung the weapon low aiming for the horse's legs.

"Jump Darkstar!" Gracelyn called to her horse.

He obeyed her command and his dark form leapt over the obstacle Warlord Rem provided. The horse's legs folded under themselves as the staff passed harmlessly beneath them.

Rem watched, with approval, as horse and rider went by.

Gracelyn then came to a series of hurdles in a row. This is where she struggled; she felt the doubt creep into her as she approached the first one.

Each of them was made of two fence posts with a crash bar balanced between them. There were three jumps, at different turns in

the course, each with a crossbar placed at a higher point than the one before it. She cleared the first one easily.

She continued to circle onto the next impediment; she felt her doubt festering just below the surface. This exercise had been her only setback in training to this point.

Her father, Meletaure, a wise and charming leader with a powerful frame in spite of his advanced age joined Rem on the sidelines. He watched his daughter with pride as Rem stewed.

“So Warlord, how is she doing?” Meletaure asked.

The Warlord’s face remained dour as he observed his cadet.

“An improvement from her earlier runs. But this is the first time she’s rode a military horse. It requires more skill than just a training horse. This is a whole new experience for a novice as you well know.”

“True-,” Meletaure watched as Gracelyn cleared the second hurdle with no difficulty and circled around toward the third. “But she seems to be adapting well. For a novice-,”

Meletaure smiled at his old friend. Rem said nothing; his face was a mask. Though he would never admit it, he was just as proud of her as her father.

They watched as the black stallion moved along the course dodging poles and zigzagging through barriers of bundled hay. Horse and rider were picking up speed as they approached the last barrier.

Gracelyn looked up at the approaching obstacle, the sun shone momentarily in her eyes. In that moment her fear of failure consumed her.

She pulled up Darkstar’s reins within a few feet in front of the obstacle and changed direction. Gracelyn forced the horse around the hurdle instead of jumping over it.

Darkstar spun and stepped off balance as they rounded the barrier. Gracelyn regained control of the horse stopping him from going any further. Her moment of frustration and breakdown was followed instantly by a barrage of anger coming from her uncle.

“You purposely avoided completing a military exercise! Why didn’t you jump the hurdle? Do you realize you could have injured that horse?”

Both men ran over to Gracelyn. She was already off the horse and checking the animal over. She rubbed his front legs with her hands, checking for any injuries.

“It looks like Darkstar is okay.”

Meletaure bent over and examined the horse for himself. He stood up confirming his daughter’s examination.

An angry Rem approached directly after him.

“You still haven’t explained yourself Gracelyn.”

She looked to her uncle not wanting to admit she faltered under the pressure of their expectations. She merely gulped under his stern posturing.

“Cadet.”

“Rem that will do, it is well enough that no one was hurt.” Meletaure interrupted.

“I beg to disagree, sir-” Rem began. At this point Warlord was all business. This was an issue that was beyond the bounds of friendship and strictly Rem’s area of responsibility.

“I have a cadet that has not explained herself with satisfaction as to why an exercise was not completed. Military protocol requires an explanation followed by disciplinary measures, if need be.”

Meletaure knew Rem was right. He could not show any favoritism toward his daughter. The Brotherhood had been founded on many principles; one of the most important was equal opportunity for all. He and his daughter, though of the first family, were not above those laws.

She looked to both men.

“The sun got in my eyes at the last moment. I hesitated unsure of the distance...”

“Are you trying to tell me sunlight is responsible for almost injuring a military horse?”

“No sir, I couldn’t complete the jump.”

“Why?”

Gracelyn weighed her next words carefully.

“I froze up. I was scared to jump that hurdle.”

The Warlord relaxed a bit knowing she was being truthful.

“At least you didn’t disappoint me a second time today. But as you well know, there are consequences for your actions. I’m putting you back a grade, your title of cadet will be rescinded. You’ll assume the rank of plebe. You’re standard instruction will continue on training horses, until such time you can prove that you’ve conquered your fear.”

Gracelyn looked away unable to meet her uncle’s eyes. She refused to cry in front of them and simply nodded.

“Gracelyn,” Meletaure began. “Go to the stables and continue with your chores. The Warlord and I will walk Darkstar over to the medical building and have him examined.”

Gracelyn brushed at her leggings shooing at the dust with one hand as he turned toward the stables. While in her mind, she continued to berate herself over the innocent.

“Yes Father.”

Both men waited until Gracelyn was well on her way before speaking.

“Was that really necessary?” Meletaure looked to his friend as he took up Darkstar’s reins.

“You know it was. She left me no choice. The structure of command...” Rem began.

“I’m aware of command structure Warlord.” Meletaure said with venom he instantly regretted. “I know the laws, but I still see my daughter as just my daughter.”

The Warlord nodded.

“Any parent would feel the same. But we can’t make exceptions. Once that door is opened, there’ll be no closing it. It was her choice to take on the military training. She must bear the consequences of that decision.”

Both men walked in silence a little further, Meletaure leading Darkstar as Warlord walked just behind them.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. But it doesn’t make this any easier.” Meletaure thought aloud.

“No it doesn’t; for either of us.” Warlord concluded.

The sun rose once more over the Wood of the Brotherhood. Its pristine rays of golden light bristled through the trees letting all know another day has begun.

Gracelyn finished feeding the other horses in the stable. She now worked with Darkstar as her father entered the stall they were in. He watched her place the feed bag over Darkstar’s mouth.

“Well at least he shows no grudge against you.”

Meletaure smiled as the horse nuzzled his head up against Gracelyn’s shoulder as she stroked his mane.

“I’m glad he wasn’t hurt, I never would have forgiven myself.” Gracelyn said.

Some moments of silence followed as father watched daughter.

Meletaure then asked the question he had on his mind since the incident.

“Do you regret optioning for military training?”

Gracelyn continued to stroke Darkstar’s mane before answering.

“No, I just wish things could be different. Uncle Rem is a difficult,” Here she paused looking for the right word. “-Taskmaster, He wants perfection.”

Meletaure laughed out loud.

“I see your uncle Zendara also has influenced you. The lead diplomat of the Brotherhood has always had a way with people. You describe Rem with a diplomatic flare. I’m sure others under his supervision aren’t as kind. He is probably pushing you harder than his other cadets. You are the first of the family to directly train under him in the Military Academy.”

Gracelyn got to the point. “You mean the first girl.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “And that brings its own stipulations both good and bad. That is something we can discuss another day. I’m here to ask if you’re up for a special training exercise.”

Gracelyn stopped in mid-stroke. She turned on her father with a smile but was leery of something else going on. Her progress through the academy had gone reasonably well up to this point. But she didn’t want to risk another blunder.

“Plebes are not allowed to partake in special training exercises.”

“True,” Meletaure confessed. “But this is different, it’s an unofficial exercise. Something a friend and I think you’d be perfect for.”

Gracelyn beamed brightly.

“Is this friend of yours stubborn with an arduous disposition?”

“Why spoil the surprise.” Meletaure smiled and offered his hand to her.

She felt she was getting too old for such things but didn’t want to ruin the moment. She accepted his hand only because it was her father and didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

Three horses galloped over a small rise in the late afternoon sun. A large grass meadow was between them and the woods line.

Rem rode his old brown stallion warhorse Spawn. Meletaure rode his military horse, a large bronze steed named Noldohir which had a white mane. Grace rode Lakefire, her training horse. His ivory skin shone against the sunlight.

“So what are we doing out here?” Grace was riding in-between the two older men.

“Stealth training,” Her uncle said. “I hope you’ve learned something more since last winter when you followed me.”

Grace remembered the trip to his birthplace last winter and her uncle’s personal tragedy. She also remembered his acceptance

of her, of that knowledge, and wanted to further gain his trust.

“I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

With that comment her father shot an eye toward Rem and smiled.

“Still, humility continues to elude her, no wonder considering her bloodline,” Rem smiled back at his friend who continued to laugh.

“First girl in the Military Academy Warlord, I think that is humility enough.” Meletaure shot back.

“First woman,” Gracelyn corrected much to the astonishment of the other two. She smiled at both and urged her horse on ahead.

She was only twenty yards ahead of them when suddenly a thin line of black smoke rose from the grass between Gracelyn and the others.

The line began to thicken and turn darker with each passing second. A scent arose from the smoke, a stench most unpleasant, a foul musty odor which began to cover the small field with its influence.

Rem and Meletaure reared their horses immediately. Their eyes telling them something their minds wouldn’t accept.

As the smoke dissipated, Rem and Meletaure saw the creature left in its wake. One talked about in the Chronicles of the Brotherhood and described in lore as a Wankor beast, a servant of the evil Queen Asil. The creature stood over six feet and had long lankly limbs with hands and feet. Each had three appendages that jutted outward, which served as fingers and toes. All had a sharp tip at each end.

Its head sat at an angle from its torso. The beast’s mouth set low in its face, the mouth opened exposing pointed teeth. Above the maw, two glassy green eyes and a short snout completed the face. The beast’s skin was flaxen against the sun. The beast turned and faced the two old warriors and pointed with one elongated finger. His speech was a mix of slurping sounds and guttural tones.

“Today the time of peace ends old fools. Her Majesty has sent me forth to end your

rein. After which the Queen Asil of the Dark Mists will come forth and have her revenge!”

“Gracelyn stand down!” Her uncle shouted.

Without hesitation, the two warriors drew their swords and charged at the foul creature. Gracelyn hearing the speech, turned back around toward her father and uncle.

Rem arrived first at the foot of the beast and swung his sword striking the Wankor in the shoulder. The monster’s hot sticky black ooze drained out covering Rem’s blade. But as his horse galloped past, the beast reached out with its other long arm and struck the horse in the midsection. Its claws dug deep into the horse’s flesh. Spawn whinnied and tumbled to the ground.

Rem was trapped on the ground under the weight of his horse. Spawn struggled to get up again but soon stopped moving all together.

Meletaure watched in horror and urged his horse forward as Gracelyn put Lakefire between directly Rem and the Wankor. The fiend approached Rem. The Warlord’s legs still pinned under his horse.

“The queen will reward me greatly when she hears the tale of your death!”

Warlord said nothing. He saw Meletaure’s oncoming charge as Gracelyn got between himself and the Wankor. The Warlord assessed the situation and knew Meletaure would not arrive in time. In that instant he made his decision. Rem held his sword up as the creature drew closer. At the last possible moment, he threw his sword high into the air. The blade spun clockwise in the air and well over the creature’s head.

“You have grown pitiful with age Warlord.”

The beast smiled as he raised its clawed hands to shred Warlord to pieces.

Rem’s blade refracted in the sunlight until Gracelyn’s hand closed upon its hilt.

With neither hesitation nor delay, she brought her horse to bear directly upon the Wankor. The creature, so sure of its prey, didn’t see the encroaching shadow of Gracelyn and her horse until it was too late.

Gracelyn swung the sword with expert skill striking the beast in the chest severely wounding the beast as it turned to face her charge.

The creature screamed in pain as it lashed out wildly trying to strike at her with its elongated claws.

“Veer off and don’t let its claws touch you! They’re poisonous!” The Warlord shouted.

The creature swung a limp arm out but missed Gracelyn and her horse as they passed him. The creature fell to one knee bleeding, struggling for breath.

Meletaure’s image occupied the creature’s eyesight. He stood over the beast swinging his broadsword Angrist, cleaving the head from the beast’s body killing it instantly.

Gracelyn turned toward her father immediately. She stopped her horse just short of him and jumped from the saddle still holding Rem’s bloodied sword. She ran to her father and hugged him tightly.

“Father, are you all right?”

He smiled at his daughter and returned her embrace with equal vitality.

“Yes I’m fine and glad you are too.”

They stayed like that for a moment longer before both looked to Rem who knelt at the body of his dead horse.

“Warlord,-” They said.

Meletaure reluctantly released his daughter as both walked over to Rem. He nodded in recognition of them but said nothing as he continued to mourn his loss.

Gracelyn began to tear up as she watched her uncle. He looked much like she remembered him from that winter day when they journeyed to his birthplace.

“Spawn was my second warhorse, his father my first. I raised him from birth in those dark times. I lost another friend today.” Warlord lamented.

Gracelyn wanted to embrace her uncle more than anything at that moment. But his eyes said; No.

Meletaure put a reassuring arm on her shoulder telling her it was all right.

“I am sorry my friend for your loss.” Meletaure began. “We will be sure and see that Spawn is brought home and given proper respect so he can join his departed kin in the afterlife.”

Warlord rose and nodded to Meletaure. He said nothing but his eye caught the bloodied sword his niece held.

“You haven’t cleaned your blade.” Rem commented.

Gracelyn looked down through welling tears at the sword she held. She used a torn sleeve from her tunic to wipe the blade.

Once the sword was spotless, she held it out to her uncle, hilt first. He took the blade and briefly inspected her handiwork. Satisfied, he returned to his own sheath.

For the first time he smiled at her. With one hand he reached out and wiped a single tear from her face.

“Today you have overcome your fear. I don’t think that hurdle will be an obstacle any longer. Tomorrow we’ll restore your former rank and get you back on a military horse.”

Rem started walking back in the direction of home.

Meletaure and Gracelyn followed guiding their horses by their reins. In honor of Spawn, all agreed that they should walk home instead of riding.

With their home in sight, Meletaure broke the silence that had lasted till then.

“So it appears the peace is over. Asil has once again returned to the Wood. I’m sure there will be more evil following close behind.”

Warlord looked to his old comrade for the first time.

“You should gather the council. We must make plans and prepare.”

“You are right my friend,” Meletaure reflected. “But it saddens me that for the first time in many years we will see our brothers

not because of the holiday, but because of times of war.”

They walked further still until Gracelyn’s question focused them again.

“If that creature was the first, then what is to follow?” she asked.

Warlord cast an eye westward toward the darkening sky with the setting sun at its center.

“It’s the end of peace and the beginning of another dark age in the Wood.” He answered.

“Well at least there is still time before then;” Meletaure broke the mood between them. “The current class of the academy is almost ready.” Meletaure looked to his daughter with pride. “And that class will have the first woman ever to graduate.”

Gracelyn laughed. She told herself she would enjoy his words only for a moment, But she delighted in the thought at his realization that she was growing up.

“I will be the first, Father, to graduate from the Military Academy.” She proudly stated.

A photograph of mossy stone steps with a metal railing. The text is overlaid on the image.

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