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## A DRINK AT TRALE'S END

*By D. Thomas Mooers*

Sin was a good dog.

He kept a fine point, loping through the tall grass just within sight, as I trailed along behind. Silvery coat darted between the shifting blades, stopping here and there to ferret out whatever the animal's unseen nose found interesting. That day, all the beast had scented was an old, dead crow. Maggots had taken most of the choicer pieces, so Sin was left to be content worrying the stiff little corpse, tossing it in the air a few times before moving on.

Neither of us had eaten anything substantial in several days. There was a rabbit that the dog had trapped the night before, but it had been little more than bone and sinew. And nothing even close to the true *refection* I required.

Far ahead, the red arc of the moon was beginning to rise over the distant trees. It would be full that night, a complete, blood red disk soaring into the sky. The *vollen* would be happy, I thought, and, as if on cue, a mournful bellow echoed from somewhere distant.

I made a clicking sound, and Sin trotted to my side. He was large, even for a *huan sidhe*, and as I laid a gentle hand on the peak of the animal's back, tall as I was, the dog's cold nose came up to nuzzle my cheek. I ruffled the thick white fur on top of his head and was thanked with a slurp of the beast's rough smelly tongue before he sprinted away to take up the lead once again.

We had been traveling for what seemed like years, wandering through the deep woods of the Scantlands, avoiding anything except to feed. Truth be told, there was not much else left in the world to do after the Big A, the Great Afflatus that brought about the dominion of the whispering god. The ensuing age of darkness ended what some had called the new order of civilization, and in its wake there was no war. There was not much left to fight over and not many left in existence to resist the *Embraced*, the whispering god's minions, let alone to take up arms. The degenerate nihilistic peace endured for centuries, and I had more than my fill of enduring it.

There were those, others of the *Embraced*, who tried to work out something close to normal lives. They settled in groups, some even large enough to be considered towns or even cities, and herded their feedstock. All the while they pretended to exist in some semblance of the old days, but all of it was as much an illusion as anything else.

The *Embraced* needed refection, that was a part of the whispering god's gift of eternal being, and with it came a price. One I knew well.

Sin barked, shaking me from introspection. I looked up, and I saw him waiting for me on the top of a low hill. He was glancing over his shoulder, and shifting his head back ahead in a way that told me to catch up. I quickened my pace and in several strides climbed the small

incline. Sin stood patiently, his heavy breaths steaming in the brisk night air, as I scanned for the cause of the dog's concern.

Beyond the hill, the ground fell way to form a wide valley. A narrow road cut through it, and about a mile down in the direction I judged was southeast, I spotted a building, two stories with smoke drifting out of the chimney. In the windows I could see lights.

Despite the solitude, one that I had so carefully maintained over the previous months, the sudden thought of a roof overhead, and a drink, and more honestly the drink, sounded appealing.

With something akin to anticipation, I descended from the edge of the frontier down to the little road below. Sin lumbered forth at a trotting pace, and in a short while, before the moon had fully cleared the tree line, we reached what a weathered placard proclaimed was the "Trale's End Inn."

I left Sin to hunt the surrounding fields and pushed open the building's wind blasted door. Dim oil lanterns lit the interior where I could see makeshift tables with rough cut benches scattered about the taproom. A worn bar lined the back, behind which several wooden kegs were racked against the wall. To the left of them a rickety looking stair coiled up into a wide hole to the ceiling. To the right, a steady fire was burning in a wide stone hearth set into the wall.

For all appearances the place could have been a cozy, roadside affair; were it not for all of the vollen. A dozen or so of the wolfish creatures that had once been men had trapped a family of feedstock in the middle of the room. They were playing with what remained of their victims on a smooth paneled space that once probably served as a dance floor, had anybody ever wanted to dance.

No one did that evening. The entertainment this night was going to be somewhat more esoteric.

Two of the vollen were toying with a young feedstock woman. Others were huddled over one of the tables, fighting over the choicer pieces of a fat man's corpse which I surmised had been the girl's father. On the floor still more vollen were taking pleasure from an older woman, probably the man's wife.

Such displays were all too commonplace, so I ignored the shaggy beasts for the moment. Leaving the vollen to their twisted deprecations, I was considering how I was going to take my own refection, as I walked up to the bar.

An *enscribed* servant with the gnarled, telltale scar of a pentagram branded onto his forehead, awaited my request.

"We have ale and frost wine," the man said in reply. He had a large-veined nose and narrow weak chin, and paid just the minimum amount of respect owed to me as one of the Embraced. I suffered the man's standoffishness, assigning it to the locale as much as insolence, and made my choice.

"Do you have *keir*?" I asked. His eyes widened, and he swallowed before answering with a touch more civility.

"A few bottles, Embraced, but it will cost you."

"I will pay," I said, taking out a coin from within my dark cloak. I placed the silver viper on the bar. The purity of the metal brought a burning chill to my bare fingers.

The barman left the coin where it lay, as if it were going to bite, and retrieved a tall, clear glass bottle from under the bar. He pulled the cork and was about to pour the drink into an old earthen mug, when I stopped him.

“Don’t you have anything decent to put that in?” I asked raising my voice to overcome the growing noise from the dance floor.

He paused staring at the viper, before finding something else under the bar. The new cup was made of glass, low-stemmed and inlaid with colored beads made to resemble jewels. The barman seemed as nervous about it as he had been with the silver coin. I nodded my approval, and he poured.

Pale green liquor dribbled into the glass until it reached half a finger below the rim. I lifted the keir to my lips and sipped. Liquid fire, scented with wild flowers filled my mouth and burned pleasantly down my throat.

After all the days and nights roaming the empty wastes of the Scantlands, a good drink and a well lit room should have lifted my spirits, and it surely would have, had it not been for all of the screaming.

The commotion in the center of the room drew my eye back to the vollen and their corrupt games. Most of the noise seemed to originate from the girl whom I judged to be little past womanhood. Her feet were bare, and her dress was little more than shredded rags covering her pale skin.

The vollen were having their sport, tossing the girl among themselves and taking exaggerated snaps at her with their monstrously fanged jaws. The girl shrieked each time she

passed those terrible maws, but then fell silent when she caught glimpses of the horrors the creatures were inflicting upon the adults.

At the table a large vollen with broad shoulders and russet colored hair had secured one of the dead man's arms for his supper. He tore the limb from the corpulent body with a moist ripping sound, while the other vollen around him howled their frustration at his prize.

Louder, and suddenly more desperate screams brought my attention to the older woman on the floor, where I saw the vollen preparing to start one of their more repulsive practices. One of the beasts, a sandy colored female with hairy, flopping breasts, had the woman's arms pinned in front of her at the wrists, as another, a filthy brown with mange, gripped her from behind. I had unfortunately witnessed such gruesome spectacles once before, so I knew what would come next. With a sickly, snapping sound, the gray vollen twisted and pulled at once, severing the woman's spine.

The whole scene, as disgusting as it was, was typical of their kind, and it reminded me of a sentiment I had been content to forget during long weeks I spent alone in the wild.

I hated vollen.

The lupine monster howled in his sick triumph. Chortling guttural laughter, the other pair began to fling the girl about them with even more violence. Yet by then she seemed to have lost the will to fight back. Staggered limply, she offered her tormentors no resistance despite their attempts to provoke her into crying out.

Soon frustrated, the vollen threw the girl face down to the floor, and pushing up what remained of her soiled clothing, made ready for another round of their debauched game.

I had seen much more than enough.

Stepping behind the bar, I shoved the enscribed keeper away, as I reached for one of the kegs. Gripping the iron rim of the first one available, I hurled the heavy vessel out into the center of the room. Nearly full, the keg burst open, gushing out frost wine, yellow and sour, all over the floorboards.

Strong smelling wine washed up over the clawed feet of the vollen and seeped onto the stretched out form of their last victim. The scrawny gray, clearly aroused, had been just about to mount her, when the creatures as a pack, turned their focus toward the bar.

Glittering red-rimmed eyes locked onto me. The barman issued a low moan of fear. He ran to the foot of the spiral stair, before scurrying up and disappearing into the hole in the ceiling.

I moved out from behind the bar, and one of the vollen, the russet who had taken the fat man's arm, stalked towards me. The muscles of furry body tensed, and his long clawed fingers clenched and unclenched as he tried to check his rage.

"You overstep, Embraced," the thing rasped as much as spoke between its pointed fangs. "The catch was ours, the slaughter is ours to do as we wish. What business do you have to interfere?"

"My business is my own, and I do not share it with vermin."

Growls of anger grew with the insult. The vollen fanned out to circle me, as the russet spoke again.

"The quiet one may restore you, fool, but not until after we are finished cleaning your bones."

"You have your kill," I replied, not gracing his threat with a direct response. "Take the woman and the man, and have your fill. I claim the young one for myself."

“You claim, Embraced?” the reddish beast said inclining his head to better show a jaw of ragged fangs. “You have no claim.”

From a pocket within my cloak I withdrew a long hunting knife. The heavy polished blade was as long as my forearm and engraved on one side was the word “Obedience.” On the other, it read “Sacrifice.” The obedience was a command to heed the whispering god. The sacrifice was not intended as guidance toward asceticism or self-immolation. It too was a command, to kill in the name of the whispering god, and for ten centuries I had heeded it well.

The vollen recognized the weapon immediately. Their circle widened, retreating at the sight of it in my hand.

“The *Benighted* will harrow you for carrying that,” the vollen threatened, hissing in disbelief.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Yes, they will, but not this night.”

With this it might have ended. I sensed acquiescence on the part of the large russet vollen. He wanted nothing to do with one who carried a blade of the *Benighted*, by right or otherwise, but it was not he that made the first move.

From the edge of their ring, the sandy female leapt out. Howling, claws bared, the creature lunged for my head. By reflex, my right hand shot up. I plunged the knife deep into the vollen's chest, piercing the bone between her fur covered teats as cleanly as if it were flesh. The beast shrieked in rage and agony, as I twisted out the blade and pitched the hairy creature aside. She impacted the front of the bar, and slid to the floor in a flaccid pile of lifeless fur.

The other vollen wasted no time. They set upon me in vengeance. The wiry gray came next. Foaming jaws open, claws splayed, it dashed over the slick floor launching itself across the remaining feet. I slid as much as stepped to my left and slashed through the creature's gullet. Its head fell to my feet as the body flew past me, smashing into the foot of the bar, dead as the first.

The mangy brown coiled and was about make his move when from behind me there came a crash. A sudden gust of wind burst through the window to my right, and turning I saw Sin standing atop two of the vollen. The huge dog bit out the throat of one, before tearing into the muzzled face of the brown.

Despite myself, I grinned. The animal always did have uncanny instinct in knowing when he was needed. But there was little time for such sentiments.

An amber-furred male, heavy set and snarling, went for my legs. I leapt into air, cloak splaying out as I avoided the attack. The vollen missed, its claws scraping the floorboards under me. Falling back, I took up the knife with both hands and stabbed downward, driving the blade into the creature's spine up to the hilt. The hapless thing shook twice, before I wrenched the knife back out.

"You have no RIGHT!!" the russet leader wailed.

My hiatus in the wilderness must have slowed my reactions, for the beast landed upon my back before I could counter. Long fangs sunk into my shoulder. Searing pain flared from my neck down to my legs.

I tried to find some angle to cut, but there was none. The vollen's hind claws ripped into my back, while its forelimb pinned my knife hand to my chest.

Suddenly, the beast's jaws began to worry the flesh around my collarbone, and I screamed. Kicking back frantically, I dragged the vollen, reaching the edge of the bar and hitting it hard.

I felt the creature grunt into the shredded flesh of my wound, but the jaws did not slacken. In desperation I somehow caught one of the thing's hind limbs with my left hand, and pulled its claws free to within reach of the Benighted blade.

With a heartless slash I took off the vollen's foot. It cried out relaxing its bite enough for me to reach back and flip the beast over my head. The vollen hit the wooden floor hard, cracking the boards of the dance floor, before it turned back to me.

Blind, mindless rage burned in the thing's eyes, as it pulled itself across the floor panels, dragging its useless stub behind it. The last vollen came within a yard, maybe two of me, desperate for revenge of any kind, before Sin attacked.

The huge dog pounced, sinking its own razor sharp fangs into the back of the creature's neck. With a hollow cracking noise, Sin's jaws locked down. The russet twitched once and then was still.

The dog released the vollen, and shook his fur. He began to lick his paws, but otherwise refused to feed off the tainted beasts. As with every other time I had watched Sin encounter vollen, I sensed in him both revulsion and a odd feeling of betrayal.

The feedstock girl was just getting to her feet, as I cleaned my knife in the fur of the brown. My shoulder throbbed as I moved my arm, but I was able to replace the blade in its special pocket inside my cloak.

The barman had not yet reemerged from his nest in the ceiling, but my keir, I noticed, remained on the bar, amazingly undisturbed. I went over and picked up the glass, draining it in one swallow. The liquor did more for my nerves than for the pain. My shoulder was a mess, but the Gift would remedy it in a day or so. Especially, if I had refecation.

It was then that I turned to my ulterior motive.

Refilling the beaded glass with ale, I brought it over to the feedstock girl. She was standing in the middle of the room staring at the carnage around her. Through what was left of her clothing, rags that barely covered her white body, I could see the curve of her small breasts amid the dirty strips of fabric.

She was older, I realized, than I first had surmised. Her small stature had been deceiving, but I guessed she still could have not been much more than twenty. She had greasy auburn hair and pale green, almost jade-colored eyes that seemed too large for her small round face. Scrawny arms hugged her body and spoke of both the trauma and privations she had endured.

I handed her the glass. She took it without protest, but her eyes continued to shift among the several corpses strewn about the floor of the inn.

That close to her, with the blaring pain of my wounds, I felt the need for refecation, one that had been subdued by the weeks in the Scantlands, growing inside me. I could have taken her by feeding right then. She was in no shape to resist me, even if she could have. I could have called it mercy, if such a thing could be said to exist anymore, an act of kindness, euthanizing a distraught girl forever hysterical from the horrors she had witnessed.

But that was not what she was. Ragged, beaten and almost violated, she was not hysterical, and I saw she was not in shock. Her eyes, those washed green eyes, displayed instead a sadness.

“So much killing,” she said holding the yet untouched glass.

Her calmness further stirred the craving for refection, to feed on her life. Yet there was something else. Worthiness was what I began to feel. There was another way. She deserved it, I decided. She had earned it, but she would have to agree.

“It comes with the vollen,” I responded. “They were made for it. Without mind, without reason.”

She nodded once gravely, before raising the glass to her thin lips. A look of disgust twisted her features.

“It burns,” she said swallowing hard.

“It’s the keir,” I offered, trying to sound in control. The hunger to feast upon her life raged on inside of me. “There must have been some left in the glass.”

She nodded again before drinking more. “You are of the Embraced?” she then asked.

“Yes.”

“So, you must kill me too, so you may live on.”

“It is called refection, but it need not be as you say.”

I took her gently by the shoulders, and she looked up at me. Her pale eyes showed no fear, but I had not entranced her. I could have. I could have reached into her mortal mind right then and planted the seeds of yearning, of desire, even fear, had I wanted. But it was not needed.

“Will you accept the gift of the whispering god?” I asked her.

The question failed to spark any sign of apprehension. She stood before me half naked and unshod. Dirt, streaked with dried tears, covered her face; yet she shied away not an inch. The green eyes tightened, as if peering into my mind, and the strength of her carriage made my desire to have her an almost uncontrollable longing.

“I would then become as you,” she observed. “I would need... refection?”

“All things feed,” I said quietly, the storms of hunger wracking my body.

She paused, considering my words, and the delay only fanned my searing desire. She turned her glance from me, and eyed the slaughter around us. Through my haze of murderous lust, I noticed Sin had moved to the hearth. He was lying in front of what remained of the fire, huge white muzzle pressed to his paws.

“You have avenged the deaths of the elders in whom I was entrusted,” she said finally bringing her attention to me again. “You have shown me respect, if not outright kindness.

“I have debt that I cannot pay. Ask once more. I shall say yes.”

Overcome by the craving for refection I struggled to say the words again. “Do you accept the gift of the whispering god?”

“Yes,” she said firmly.

Her acceptance was a glorious release, and it took every ounce of self-control I possessed to keep my promise and not completely ingest her life. With agonizing restraint, I lowered my head to her lips. Soft and warm they were as I pressed mine against them, and I kissed her gently. I saw her eyes roll back, as I slid my mouth over the skin of her neck. I could smell the odors of dirt and sweat, but under these was something else. There was a sweetness. Not perfume, nor flowers, it was the delicate musk of who she was, the scent of her person.

With satisfying joy I opened my jaws, and felt the ache of my teeth as I bit down hard into the white flesh. Warm rich liquid suddenly poured out of her neck, filling my mouth with a sweet, metallic taste.

Shocked, I pulled away from her, swallowing awkwardly. I touched my hand to my lips in frightening disbelief, and feeling moisture I lifted it to my eyes. Slick red smears covered my fingers, and a shiver washed over my spine. With stunned panic, I turned back to the girl.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

She said nothing in reply but instead pressed her long fingers against the place on her neck where I had fed. I could see more red, dripping from the edge of her palm in crimson streams down to her shoulder.

I then stared back again at my own hand, still doubting what I was seeing. Sure enough, the stain was there. Red and becoming viscid; it was something no one had seen, let alone fed upon, in nearly a thousand years.

With growing awe I realized what it was, what I was touching, what I had tasted.

It was human blood.