

'No Beast So Fierce'

By T A Newman

The frozen air made every breath out a relief from the one in. The only distraction from the piercing pain consuming his lungs was the constant slapping of wind and snow against his face, delivering an icy rawness upon his cheeks. Even though the snowstorm was reaching its peak, he would not move. Perched upon a ledge looking down the valley where his concentration focused intently, putting him in a meditative state. Listening for the sound he had been tracking for days, the sound of the beast.

His eyes dart from one side of the valley to the other across the leafless trees and branches. His glance freezes on a mountain goat, struggling with its collar that keeps it chained to a post. The goat pulls the collar with no avail; it has neither the strength nor the life to continue the struggle. The goat, sliced on either side of its neck, not enough to bleed it, but enough to float the scent of its blood on the air for miles around.

The ferocious wind dies a sudden death, trees right themselves and the snowflakes fall so slowly they almost hover above the ground. Silence drops upon the entire valley, the goat limps around its post sensing the un-natural silence as it lies down on the ground, tucking its hooves beneath its chest and still the man does not move. A faint but chilling noise floats on the last gasp of a breeze that escapes through the motionless branches carrying a howl.

The goat screams, pulling and twisting at its collar as the chain thrashes around. A burst of snow explodes into one of the trees in the valley; the next explosion hits a closer tree. Again and again the explosions of snow get closer until it hits a tree above

the goat and stops. The snow drifts away as the beast becomes clear in the man's eyes, as does the mountain goat in the beasts.

The glowing yellow eyes fix on the goat as its pointed ears twitch with every shiver the goat makes. The dark wet nose flares its nostrils, stealing in the smell of its helpless prey. The yellow eyes roll around their sockets savouring the panic in the scent of its blood. The beast drops from the tree, landing on the goat. One foot clamps around the hips and the other sinks its claws into the scruff of its neck, then the beast throws it to the floor with a thud that making the statuesque man flinch.

The beast unknowingly mimic's the man and becomes frozen, only moving to tighten its grip on the goat's neck. Holding for a moment, as if it were waiting for another flinch that would confirm his instinctual suspicions. There is nothing. Turning its head to survey the valley with its nostrils wide, it pulls in all the smells and scents on the air. Again, nothing. In one small movement it twists its left ankle, snapping the neck of the goat, cutting through the silence. It throws the dead and broken goat into the air in front, only to catch it within its ferocious jaws.

The goat is forced back to the ground, a prisoner of death within the beast's mouth. Impacting with the snow, ripping and tearing at the goat's throat, it paints the snow in dark red. Removing its face from the goat's intestines it pauses for a breath before returning to its prey. The man seizes the opportunity and from beneath the snow-covered cloak wrapped around him, hiding his scent more than his appearance, he reveals himself. Within two strides the hunter puts his hand to his sword, the beast unaware of his presence, its teeth crunching through bone masking his movements.

Unsheathing his sword and sending an unmistakable noise to any man or animal ever to join the hunt, the sound of metal gliding against metal followed by a flash of steel

through the white snow and black garments. The beasts yellow eyes turn to him and fix their gaze, its dark chasms dilating to the size of a pinhead. The beast throws itself low to the floor positioning its hind legs ready to pounce, but the hunter is quicker.

Within three giant strides he closes the distance between hunter and beast without a blemish to the snow. The grey fur of the beast disappears in a flash of steel, a split second later and the flash is lost in a red spray. The beast howls in the guise of a scream, it grasps the back of its ankle where lifeblood pours onto the virgin snow.

The hunter disappears from the beasts view and perches himself between two branches high above the beast. Holding himself, motionless, not even breath escapes from his statuesque form. He cannot afford to let the beast enter its fury and focus it upon him. The beast's howls are thrown around the valley, rolling over each other in waves. The hunter uses this distraction to unsheathe an eight inch silver knife from inside his right boot. The beast, now regaining what control it has of its instincts drops to its dead prey on the bright white and dark red ground, glaring at the tree line that surrounds it on all sides.

The hunter poised, watching his prey to see how he has the beast beaten at his own game. He pauses for the half breath it takes for the beast to turn its face away, as he needs all the time he can get. Raising the silver knife and flicking the blade into the air, he catches it by the tip whilst sheathing his long steel sword and through his nose he inhales a deep breath to steady his nerves and his aim.

The beast hears and those wild and furious yellow eyes turn in the hunter's direction. Whether he knows it or not, he has committed himself and his opponent to a confrontation that only one will walk away from.

Snow drops heavily and the forest falls un-naturally still once again. There is no sound to be heard and no wind to carry even the faintest of noises, except for one. A single drop of blood crashes through a layer of fresh snow, shattering the silence. It soaks into the innocent white, forcing itself into the very fibre of the forest. The hunter reaches down into the glistening snow and scoops a handful out, pressing it to his torn left shoulder to numb the pain. The freezing snow being crushed into the burning bite wound becomes too much; letting out an almighty roar full of agony he awakens the forest from its slumber.

The forest breaths, as the snow falls and the birds sing; their calls floating on the wind, informing the rest of the forest that the hunt is over. A flurry of cold air helps to bring the world back into focus. Knowing it is time to move, he claims his proof and his prize.

Tearing off a piece of his black cloak he is able to wrap it under his arm and over his shoulder to stop the bleeding. Every step through the snow takes more effort as his breathing becomes shallow and painful. After ten agonising steps in snow reaching above his ankles he finds his fallen opponent, there he drops to his knees. Removing his hand from his torn and bloody shoulder he reaches out to the broken and bleeding carcass that lies before him. Grabbing a handful of the beast's bloodied fur, his other hand reaching for the silver knife handle protruding from the beast's chest. The knife glides from the beast, as if it were composed of nothing but silk. He cuts free a handful of fur caught in his grip and stores it in a small pouch hanging from his belt. That was the proof, now for the prize.

The hunter grabs the head of his prey turning it to look at him. The beast's cold dead eyes stare into his own pale and green, neither moving. Opening the bloodstained jaws with one hand he spins his silver knife stopping with the blade pointing away. In

one swift and violent move the pommel comes crashing down into the beast's jaw, then again, cracking pieces of jaw. Finally breaking his gaze with the beast he looks to its huge jaws, which had until recently been wrapped around his shoulder.

Sheathing his knife back into his boot he reaches into the mouth of the beast feeling through the broken teeth and bone looking for his prize.

The day welcomes an end to the bloodshed by giving birth to the night, and with every breath he takes he is consumed by an agonising pain and an inescapable exhaustion. Dropping to one knee he slides his sword to his back after two painful attempts; the searing pain from the teeth marks is too much and he prays for the pain to subside and dull itself. Forcing himself up onto his feet; he begins ploughing through the ankle deep snow knowing he cannot afford to stop again, not only has the scent of his lifeblood been on the wind for some time, but also he has lost too much and cannot risk losing consciousness before he reaches the monastery.

Forcing himself on through the forest he begins to feel the crunch of pebbles beneath his feet and relief washes over him knowing he has reached the trail that leads towards the river. Adding to his pain he pushes himself harder to reach the riverbed, knowing when he gets there he can let the river take him the rest of the way.

Reaching the river bed and with it an ornately carved one man boat, he drops down the side catching his breath as a smile breaks through his shoulders torment. Knowing his task is nearly complete; he reaches into the boat and grips an oiled sac tight and pulls it over the side down onto his lap. Untying the sac he pulls out two bottles that are identical, except for the colour of their corks, one red and the other blue. Opening the blue-topped bottle by gripping the cork with his teeth he pulls until he hears that satisfactory pop. Gulping until the bottle is empty and exhausted from his ordeal, he

wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and groans as the pain resurfaces in his torn shoulder.

Knowing his wounds are infected, he puts both bottles on the ground and pulls out a small bowl dropping into his lap. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes and reaches down into the pouch on his belt. Pulling out a few of the beast's hairs from the tuft of fur, he drops them into the bowl. Reaching into another pouch, causing himself great pain, he retrieves a fang as he takes his silver knife with his other hand, unsheathing it from his right boot.

Spinning the silver knife on the palm of his hand so he is able to use the pommel with ease, he drops the beast's fang into the bowl. Popping the red cork from the bottle with his teeth, he spits it away and begins to pour the brown liquid into the bowl. The fang smoulders with the liquid as a thin smoke rises from the dissolving tooth. He grinds the remains until the smoke disappears and the contents take form; the smell intrudes upon his nostrils, chalky, dry and potent enough to swirl around in his mind. Immediately his arms feel light and his eyelids drop heavy, as the smell becomes intoxicating.

With his remaining strength he scoops up the paste with his fingers and rips off his bandages, not feeling the pain as he should, because the paste has numbed him too much, too quickly. The putrid smell of rotting flesh blurs the chalky scent up his nostrils, already turning his stomach; he rubs the paste vigorously into the teeth marks.

Forcing himself up onto one knee to sheath his knife back into his boot he feels the numbness swimming through his body, pulsing from the wound of his shoulder, he grips the boat as tight as possible and throws his weight forward pushing the boat

towards the river. The sound of water echoes loudly, as all other noise drops into the ever-growing veil of nothingness creeping upon him.

The river's current pushes towards the monastery, the water flows over itself fighting to get to the top. The tip of the boat now touches the water's edge, his eyelids almost shut. Realising the paste is quick to work he looks down to see his boots in the water. No feeling in his legs any more; he just knows that he has to keep them going.

Glancing behind to see how far from the riverbed he is, he can see the current massaging the tip of the boat and can feel himself slipping away to the waves rhythm.

With his last ounce of physical strength he thrusts himself from the side of the boat up and over the edge. Landing on his back without feeling the impact on the hard wood beneath him, his eye lids begin to win their battle with his consciousness as he falls into a deep sleep, deeper than anything he has experienced before. He dreams of a harsh wilderness, of a fearless hunter, and of a ferocious beast.

In the lightless stone hall of the monastery, stand rows of shelves filled with parchment on philosophy and old magic from the ancients, their Gods and belief structures. A man of the church sits alone shrouded within his robe. Candles spread around the room illuminating the parchment in his hand. The flame dances in Brother Vincent's hazel eyes as he studies a manuscript composed of incantations of the old magic. The type of sorcery deemed too dangerous and volatile. Only a few dabble in the forbidden arts, and even fewer master them.

From the back of the study hall a younger man than Brother Vincent, but wearing the same blood red robe and golden rope tied off at the waist, comes bursting through the arched oak doors from the back of the hall. Nervously shuffling his way down through the aisles, he stops suddenly seeing the candlelight emanating from the next aisle. Swinging himself around the corner to address Brother Vincent, he stutters on

his words as he looks into the two hazel glints deep within the shadowed hood. “M-m-my brother . . .” Brother Vincent looks from his book to see the young disciple’s face drop as he focuses the full attention of his hypnotic hazel orbs granting him a reply from his soft, lyrical voice. “Brother, you need assistance?”

“Um, I have been sent to tell you . . . that . . .” His nervousness turns to forgetfulness as he becomes enchanted by Brother Vincent’s smile, replacing his manuscripts on the shelf as he speaks “Take a deep breath Brother.” His gaze lingers. “Now, what have you to tell me?”

“. . . to tell you that, Lord Wilhelm, he has r-turned.”

“May the Gods be blessed.” Brother Vincent clasps his hands together, but turning to his disciple he asks the more relevant question. “And where is my Lord Wilhelm?”

“He has b-been taken to the visitor’s chambers, he is . . . with fever.” At this new revelation Brother Vincent understands the underlying nervousness in the message.

“Who is tending to his condition?” Brother Vincent asks with an inquisitive yet somehow tranquil tone to his voice. “My brother, I’m here to . . .” Brother Vincent cuts in to save the embarrassment on both of their parts. “Are you here to ask me to tend to Lord Wilhelm?”

“Y-yes my Brother.”

“Very well, I shall see to our Lord immediately.” The stuttering priest disappears through the oak doors and passes into darkness. Brother Vincent blows out his candle and leaves the study hall at pace, heading straight towards the visitor’s chamber and his friend in his time of need.

Picking up a small wooden stool on his way over to the bed, he sits next to Wilhelm’s unconscious body, reminding him of the great fallen titans who once fought in the

names of the Gods. Peeling back the bandage across Wilhelm's shoulder and inspecting the torn flesh that has not only begun to heal, but has started to scar. Brother Vincent picks up one of the cloths next to the candle, dipping it into the bowl of fresh water. Cleaning each individual tooth mark in awe at the enormity of the wound he wonders how Wilhelm ever survived the battle. It is then he notices a white encrusted lining around the damaged flesh, becoming suspicious with worry he delicately picks off a small piece between his finger and thumb to inspect without aggravating the wound.

He finds the white encrusted paste could be one of many old and potentially dangerous remedies and his fears are confirmed. Picking up the small piece he has on the tip of his finger, he raises it towards his nose to detect any trace of its scent, suddenly he stops. Before nearing his face he detects the chalky smell of ground bone, and considering the beast Wilhelm hunted, he recalls the various remedies that he could have administered to himself.

Kneeling down next to Wilhelm's bed he takes one of his hands in his; feeling the high temperature from his palm. He closes his eyes and begins to pray to the Gods, not for the life of his friend, but for his sanity. "I call upon all Gods able and willing . . . I am nothing but a loyal servant who prays to you on behalf of the honourable Lord Wilhelm De Lumainé who tainted his life blood with the essence of the Ulfedinn to stay alive, a beast he hunted to protect the Brothers of this monastery. I pray that within your wisdom you will find the grace to bestow upon him, so that he may save others as he had once saved me." Brother Vincent sits back on his stool as he decides to stay by Wilhelm's side until either the fever, or his sanity breaks.

Looking deep into the beast's eyes glimmering in the reflection of the bright white snow, they circle around the ground they have claimed with their blood. Treading

instinctually and cautious of each other, foot, then paw. The Ulfedinn's claws fully stretched, showing Wilhelm the danger that awaits him if he makes a wrong move. In return Wilhelm holds his steel sword in one hand and silver knife in the other, waiting and watching.

The air thickens with tension, filling both hunter and prey with an energy that consumes their senses. Eyes locked on one another, but for a split second they no longer see each other. They see into each other, catching a glimpse of the others soul becoming imprinted on their own.

Clashing mid-air they wrap around each other, tearing and slashing. The Ulfedinn slides behind Wilhelm and sinks his teeth into his shoulder; they stick into the flesh around his collarbone as Wilhelm forces himself to throw the beast off. The beast falls to the red stained arena and Wilhelm feels his shoulder, torn for all time by the teeth of the Ulfedinn. The pain of his flesh being ripped from the bone is so sharp and sudden he lets loose a roar of his own that fills not only himself, but also the Ulfedinn full of shock.

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Wilhelm jolts up in his bed screaming like an animal warding off the predator that haunts his dreams. Brother Vincent flies off the stool scared out of his wits, worried that Wilhelm has awoken more beast than man. He pauses, watching for a sign of some kind. Wilhelm stares into the dimly lit room breathing deeply, and then the pain sinks in and consumes his body. Falling back into the bed, managing to spit out a few words. "By the Gods, my life is my own." Brother Vincent finds this more of a relief than he ought, knowing the risk involved in Wilhelm's hurried attempt to remedy himself. "You should thank the Gods more often and maybe you wouldn't need me to pray on your behalf."

“Vincent? Why do you cling to the shadows?”

“I wasn’t sure what would wake up in your stead, man or beast.”

“And now?” Wilhelm smiles.

“You always were a beast of a man.” Brother Vincent sits down on the stool, allowing himself a chuckle at his retreat to the chamber door. Wilhelm stretches in pain as he questions his friend. “You know what I have done?” He waits for the reply while he concentrates on his breathing.

“You healed yourself with what you had at your disposal . . . The Ulfedinn’s essence.” Brother Vincent takes one of Wilhelm’s hands. “You appear to be healing well and the Ulfedinn has apparently spared you its legacy. Fortune favours you my friend.” He pauses before asking the question that lingers in the back of his mind.

“You killed the beast didn’t you?”

“My dear Vincent, do you really think I would be . . .” Wilhelm groans as his shoulder’s raw pain surges in time with his breath. “. . . gracing you with my presence if I had left the beast alive.”

“No of course not. I must say it does me good to see you and in one piece, more or less.” Brother Vincent grins and gently squeezes Wilhelm’s hand. “Wilhelm, there is something I must tell you before I let you rest.”

“Pray, do not tell me you are in danger by another beast so quickly!” Wilhelm lets out a rasping laugh. Brother Vincent slowly makes his way to the door whilst he considers giving Wilhelm his news. “Maybe you should rest before further tribulations should be undertaken.”

“My friend, who truly deserves that title, I thank you for your kindness.” Wilhelm whispers with a smile as Brother Vincent stands in the doorway looking back at the bed bound warrior Lord who breathes easier with every passing minute.

“You must stop thanking me. Especially with all you have done for us.” With that Brother Vincent removes himself the chamber as Wilhelm lies in his bed consciously taking deeper breaths, testing the strength of his ribs and his chest.

Listening to Brother Vincent walking down the corridor, his footsteps echoing from the stone floor, Wilhelm counts each step in his head to occupy his mind and help relax himself and encourage his mind to fall asleep. Six, Seven, Eight, he ignores the clip-clop of the sandals, counting only each step once. Twelve, Thirteen, Fourteen. He hears Brother Vincent turn the corner as the dust under his heel crunches Eighteen, Nineteen, Twenty. Wilhelm freezes, his eyes the only exception as they open as wide as they possibly can, consumed with shock. He loses count of the rhythmic footsteps along the stone corridor, but that is not the cause of Wilhelm’s shock. His concern is that he can still hear each one of Brother Vincent’s footsteps.

A door opens with creaking hinges and Wilhelm’s glance snaps towards the chamber door, it remains unmoved.

His breathing becomes faster and less controlled, a humming emanates in the distance over the sound of the door shutting. Brother Vincent’s footsteps start once again and the hum becomes louder and ever so slightly clearer.

Sitting up quickly whilst racked with pain he hears the hum as clearly as if he were in the room with it. The monasteries brothers are in mid prayer, reciting he monasteries praise of the Gods. A hollow feeling fills a void in his stomach along with the

knowledge that he has not come from his battle with the beast un-scathed. Reaching up he begins to scratch at the all ready scarring wounds across his collarbone.

The white paste from the Ulfedinn's tooth may have saved his life, but has now also damned his soul. His heart beats as loud as Brother Vincent's footsteps and believes he can feel the beast's essence flowing freely through his body.

Feeling the change in his nature, which has always shone as brightly as any star, he now begins to darken with the desires of the beast. A desire like no other, only for the hunt and for the blood.

A tear rolls from his face carrying with it the choice that Wilhelm has already made. He must either live through his remaining days in constant battle with his own instincts, tearing into his sanity until the beast finally takes dominion, which it will. Or take himself away from the pain and suffering he will no doubt cause for those he has protected over the years of service to his people.

Pushing himself from the bed he grabs onto the frame to steady his failing legs. With one careful step at a time Wilhelm's feet pad closer to the balcony door, pausing for a moment and squeezing his eyelids as tight as possible. Not with a thought of changing his mind to the task at hand but to strengthen his conviction.

The balcony door glides open revealing the pristine white layer of snow before him and with each step he takes another tear falls from his battle beaten face. Two warrior's hands fall on the surface of the balcony's rail crushing the snow beneath. Enjoying the snow being forced into water beneath his hands and the sharp cold sensation filling his mind, he finds himself overwhelmed by a hundred memories drowning his thoughts. In a flood they come back to him, reminding him of his life's deeds, good and bad.

Taking one last deep breath, he turns his head to the Gods above and asks his makers whether the hunter becomes the unspeakable beast he has fought against his whole life?

“Merciful God’s, it appears that fortune no longer favours the brave but punishes them. There is no beast within this land that does not know some pity, unlike you who knows none. Therefore I do not ask for any, and it should be known I am neither God nor beast. Just a man.”

Leaning forward as he closes his eyes Wilhelm feels the sudden rush of icy air force its way past his face. Hands twisting on the balcony’s rail as he lets go, falling through the familiar winter’s breath, as he takes his last.

Wilhelm dies as he lived, destroying the seeds of evil in hope that noble hearts will bear pure fruit.