



“Flotsam”

by: Ellen Eubanks

Two scarred men on their way to a war sat at the edge of a bluff, weary feet covered in dust from the long road hanging over the rim. Their curious eyes watched a dark figure beneath them.

“D’you fancy the Walker’s just lost?” the younger of them said, breaking a quiet of some minutes.

The other cuffed him on the shoulder. “Skel’s hand, Nom, course he ain’t lost! That’d ruin all the tales about him! ‘Sides, that’s a mighty big maze down there, but it ain’t no forty years worth of lost. He’s got a reason for bein’ there.”

“Yer daft, Akker. Why would he stay down there fer forty years iffn he weren’t lost? What sort of reason does yer ugly head think he has?” Nom grumbled, rubbing his shoulder.

“How should I know? Could be he’s just crazy. Could be he’s got an epic quest and this is a task he’s gotta do. Mebbe he’s a priest of some god of mazes. But that maze ain’t big enough to be lost in for that long,” Akker replied.

“Ain’t nobody asked him?”

“By Mavu’s beard, don’t you never listen to stories? Nobody can get to him. They always fail in some uncanny way. Sometimes they can’t find the place, even them that know full well where it is.” He stopped to cough for a bit, lungs damaged in the last war. “Others know where to go, might even can see the maze, but can’t get to it. Things like gorges and rivers keep poppin’ up in the way. Once a man got close to the entrance, but started shrinkin’ when he got closer. He got bigger when he backed up. Got scared he would disappear if he got too close, so he gave up. Throwing messages don’t work neither. No one can get to him.”

A heavy silence fell over them. From below, where the figure still walked the maze, a breeze strayed up, twisting their graying hair into a semblance of life’s motion. The pack mule that carried their belongings wandered over, hoping that the break in the walking meant its burdens would be removed.

“Wonder iffn we’ll ever see the farm again,” Nom sighed.

Akker rolled his eyes. “You’ve said that every time we’ve passed here on the way to one of the Empire’s gods-cursed wars. The Walker make you sentimental?”

“I dunno. I s’pose I just wonder where he come from and it makes me think iffn we’ll see where we come from again.”

“Like I told you every other time, not likely,” Akker said, not

harshly. "Exceptin' even less likely this time. We're too old for this. We're worn out. That past time was s'posed to be our last war. This one must be bad if they're draggin' in used-up reserves like us. Look at us. We're takin' more breaks, goin' slower. We don't normally stop here for a rest. This war'll be the end of us."

Nom looked at the pack mule nosing at some dusty grass a few paces away, then down at the sword strapped to his hip. "We farmers or soldiers, Akker?"

"What?"

"Just, our family is farmers. Have been for generations. We grew up farmin'. We done some farmin' in between wars. We's only reserves in the army, not regulars. The regulars say we got hay in our britches. Only, we been called to war so much we ain't hardly lived on the farm since we was eighteen. We done a lot of soldierin'. So, we farmers or soldiers?"

Akker frowned. His gaze turned from Nom and fell upon the unmoving figure of the Walker. "We're lost, Nom. Lost."

The man who had been the Emperor paused for a moment, resting from his task. The sounds of a battle, preternaturally harsh within the stillness of the labyrinth, rang in his ears. He longed to raise his eyes from the sights within the walls, but he would not look at the two figures on the top of the bluff, the two men on the path to war. He was in this place for the sake of such men. He faced enough of them dead. He could not face them still living.

He had been so different once. Sending armies to conquer other lands, careless of the cost. As his successor was now, he believed. But something had shown him the cost. He had run from his empire, searching for a way to pay for the lives he had so heedlessly wasted in his endless campaigns. After a time he had come upon this labyrinth, made by some god or powerful mage. It was the only way to repay the hundreds of thousands of soldiers dead by his orders. He entered, beginning his long absolution. Oh, how long.

That had been years upon years ago. He barely remembered his former life, the person he had been. He clung to the reason he travelled this path, but even his purpose sank beneath the horror sometimes. Still, he kept walking. Every time he walked the whole path of the labyrinth, he relived the life of one of his soldiers. Life, and death. This was how he

paid. He came to know each of his soldiers, what they had lived through, even unto their dying moments. He would walk the path of the labyrinth until he lived and died as every one of his soldiers.

Whenever he arrived back at the beginning of the labyrinth, he saw their faces lining the walls. He would grasp the hand of the next soldier in line and become him for the remainder of the path. The soldier would disappear at the end, and the next would come forward. On and on until all had gone to rest. And then, then may Skel take him from this world.

He took another step forward, seeing not the walls of the labyrinth, smelling not the green grass, feeling not the cool breeze. He felt only scars and the crunch of bone beneath his sword, smelled only sweat, blood, and death, saw only the face of the enemy whose life he had just taken and whose face had haunted this soldier of the empire for the rest of his life.

A mile past the Walker, Nom and Akker were travelling again up the dusty road, the pack mule following morosely behind. The stop had been a short one, so it had not gained a short rest from the saddlebags. Nom squinted up the road towards the horizon, rubbing an old scar. "Akker, who's this war against, again?"

Akker paused for a moment. "Y'know, Nom, I got no idea." They continued walking.