

TWENTY-FOURTH INTERLOGUE: A KNIGHT'S ARMS



The sudden press of the dark startled Jason. After he had made such a mess of opening the door, he lost the ability to see the lights going out as a coincidence.

“Hello?” he whispered.

No answer. Jason took a few tentative steps forward, old boards creaking under his feet. His eyes slowly adjusted to the deeper dark. Long shoulder-high shelves ran the length of the long room’s center. Around the room’s walls were mounted shelves and floor cases with glass lids to view an assortment of items. He spotted everything from globes to antique children’s toys. There were things with exotic designs from foreign lands, the purpose for which he could only guess.

A sudden flash of light from across the room caught his eye. It was faint and ever so brief, but he was sure he saw it.

Licking his lips, he dithered over what to do. Something strange was happening, and after the night he’d had, his imagination happily supplied any number of horrible things that could be awaiting in the darker areas of the shop.

After a few moments, he heard one of the fiends chasing him call out from next door, “He’s not in here.”

I have to get away from the shop window.

Risking the deeper dark, he crept among the shelves at a crouch. Toward the back, he spotted something out of place. Amidst pots and other odds and ends was a weapon—a sword.

For several seconds, he just stood there, staring at it. It looked to be a dusty old saber, something from almost a hundred years past. It had an ornate hilt with some kind of etchings along the blade and handguard. Peculiarly, Jason felt the compulsion to grab it. His hand reached for it before he even realized he was doing so. He hesitated, hand hovering over the hilt as the intense pull to lay hold of it raced up his arm. The sensation was so potent it startled Jason. Was it just his imagination, or had the air around the sword grown warmer?

It wasn’t his imagination. The longer his hand lingered, hovering over the hilt, the hotter the air became until it felt like he was warming his hands beside a fire on a winter’s day. The pull to take hold of the sword intensified in equal measure until he couldn’t help but brush the tips of his fingers across its aged leather grip.

He gasped. The moment his hand touched it, little streaks of light dashed along the length of the blade. It would have terrified him if he had never witnessed something like this before. But he knew exactly what he’d found, and he tightened his grip on the hilt, lifting it from the shelf and holding it up as flames raced with a rush of heat and brilliance to cover the entire blade.

“A spiritsword,” he murmured. Tilting it back and forth to examine the glowing inscriptions, he realized he had never held a spiritsword before. If he had, he hadn’t known it. In school, he had been required to learn a bit of fencing, and with his family

being what it was, he had held more than one blade in his life. None had felt like this.

The heat traced up his arms, burning through his sinews and enwrapping his bones. The sensation should have been torture, but the closest thing Jason could come to it in description was delicious. This was the cold drink of water on the hottest Zilnen midday. This was the shelter of Falkirke's sturdy walls in the blustery gale of a summer storm. It calmed and exhilarated him in one.

"Magnificent," he murmured aloud and let out a contented sigh.

"It is indeed," a deep, clear voice agreed.

Jason spun to find a tall man watching him. Clothed in a heavy overcoat that reached to his knees, the speaker was well-tanned and had dark hair. His clean-shaven face seemed taut with a gravity of person Jason had always imagined the Emperor of Rehalcyon possessed. But it was absurd to think the Emperor, or anyone of near echelons, was in this modest antique shop. More likely, it was the owner of the shop, and this was how he expressed being piqued.

Trying to clear his throat to offer an apologetic reply, Jason found himself cut off.

"I see you have found the spiritword. It burns brightly for you."

Jason hesitated to reply, unsure whether he could admit to such a thing without being identified as a Knight of Light, new to it though he was, and possibly tossed into the street without. Once more, the other man spoke. "I know you are one of the *Palatini Lucis Aeternae*. I see clearly how the blade burns in your grasp."

Jason took a step back and straightened as he did. Only two groups of people, such as he understood it, could see the fire of a spiritword. Those who pledged themselves to the High King

and those who utterly rejected him and instead sided with the Dark Prince.

Which is he?

As soon as the thought formed, however, Jason regretted it. For some reason, it felt painfully foolish to imagine this man as a servant to the dark. "I'm a Knight of Light, yes," Jason agreed. "I came in for safety from two terrible men. I apologize for the intrusion."

"The two men are just outside and waiting to rend you to bits. I suggest you claim the armor as well."

Jason's attention snapped to the window. He could see two dismal shadows lurking just beyond, their forms blurred by the dark. It seemed to him the night had grown deeper and colder.

Turning his attention back, he found the other man looking past him. His gaze was so fixed he may well have been looking beyond the city itself. The sensation of that thought was unnerving. "I, uh," Jason faltered. "It isn't my armor. That is, I can't pay you for it."

"It is not mine to require payment," the man replied once more, looking directly at Jason. "But if you fret over it, check your right pocket."

Confused but feeling compelled to comply, Jason reached into his pocket as he watched the man with anxious fixation. His hand found a cloth with something hard wrapped up. Producing it, he unbound it and gasped. There were two gold solidi from the days of Rehalcy, before the Empire's rise. Such currency was prized, and one was worth enough to purchase the shop, let alone the old arms and armor.

Brow furrowed, Jason looked up at the mysterious man. "How? Where?"

"Don't you know?" the other prompted.

"Cinaed," Jason murmured, suddenly recalling him passing the handkerchief to Jason to wipe his brow after being rescued

from the Sombra in the burning Ziljafu desert ksar, Sayeh. “It’s a miracle my brother’s thugs didn’t take this from me.”

There was a contentment about the man’s face, but he said nothing. Suddenly, his expression darkened. “You must ready yourself. They are coming.”

From across the shop, the sound of the door opening drew Jason’s attention. Peering around the shelves, he saw the two brutes clomp heavily in.

Turning back, he found the other man was gone. Looking around the back edges of the shelves nearest him, Jason gaped. The man was just completely and utterly gone.

“Come out, little Wernstrum. We can smell your stench. You had to know you can’t hide from us.”

At the end, the words became mixed with a gruffness akin to a bestial growl.

Taking in a shaky breath, Jason slipped the armor off the shelves beside him and put it on piece by piece as quickly and quietly as he could. He had just grabbed a modest buckler shield to complete the suit when he heard a low whistle at his back. One of the two enforcers stood at the head of the aisle. “Look here, Sven. This one fancies himself a knight.”

All Jason’s muscles tensed. What stood before him was a weirdly stretched version of the enforcer, his eyes remote and dark, his voice gravelly.

“Isn’t that sweet? Playing pretend at his age,” another equally gruff-toned response came from behind Jason. “Where’s your horsey, little knight? Did it run off with the rest of your armor? That’s a right shame.”

Jason scrambled away from the looming and equally grotesque version of Sven. This earned a throaty chuckle from both attackers.

Undertones of something sinister rumbled from deep

within them. Their cruelty galled Jason, stirring up a new sort of indignation in him and, with it, courage.

Rising to his feet, he pointed the spiritsword toward each in a slow arc, back and forth. Flames crackled and swelled from the blade, flooding Jason with warmth and strength.

The two men leaped back and snarled in near unison. Jason could see the dark pall marring each man in the light of the sword's fire. He imagined these two were much like Mr. Keeper from Cinaed's stories. At this point, the facade was the human form and the reality, the monster underneath.

After years of living on the streets and traveling to survive on his own, Jason had heard a pretty broad range of curses. Many leveled at him. The ones spewing from the fiends on either side of him were by far the vilest he'd ever heard.

As they spat them, they each began shuddering, their profanities blurring into inhuman growls.

It's just like Cinaed's story from Bracken. These two are werebeasts!

Not giving a moment longer in wait, Jason vaulted the shelf beside him and dashed out the front door. To his surprise, he moved so fast that it only took seconds to be outside, turned, and standing with his spiritsword held at the ready.

By the time his pursuers sauntered out of the building, Jason had caught his breath. The two fiends wreaked with swagger. They had abandoned normal human mannerisms and were now half crouched, moving opposite each other to try to flank him.

With each step taken, Jason could see them twist and warp from human toward their beast form. Tales he'd heard about Anargen and the others having faced such creatures conjured horrible images of their ferocity and prowess for wanton carnage. Jason stepped backward to keep himself from being totally flanked, but he was running out of space. The row of

buildings behind him had no alleyways nearby, and this was the start of an unusually long block.

His guard faltered, and he started to lower the spiritsword. With wobbling steps, he shuffled toward the way he came down the street, hoping he could get there if he ran. There were canine-like chuckles from the two thugs, and their eyes showed ochre now.

They can tear me to shreds. What am I doing?

In his hand, the spiritsword dimmed. The change drew his eye, and he caught upon a few familiar words. “Perfect love casts out fear.”

Anargen said that so many times. In moments like these, when he felt overwhelmed, he trusted in the High King to deliver him ... and the High King did. The stories tell that the werebeasts are terrifying, but they also tell that the fiery blade of a Knight of Light can slay them.

Jason’s grip tightened on the spiritsword, and once more, the heat of it danced up his arm, coursing through his veins. He stopped edging away and stood stock still.

“You should rethink your allegiances,” Jason called out to them. “Me ‘playing’ Knight is more worthwhile than a thousand centuries spent bound by the dark sorceries you’ve given yourselves over to.”

One of the creatures snarled at Jason, and he realized they’d stopped transitioning. They were covered in a fur coating, and their faces were twisted with sharp teeth sticking out at odd angles from lupine snouts, but they were hardly the beasts he’d been told of. It was like they were unfinished.

Suddenly, Jason’s eyes leaped to the sky, where he realized the moon was only in its waxing quarter.

“New moon’s bane, full moon’s gain ...”

Should what he remembered from the stories be true, then these werebeasts were created on the recent new moon. They

had never yet achieved their full monstrous state and so were far from that strength and prowess. “You’re just pups, aren’t you?” he blurted out. “Werebeast pups. Or cubs. Or whatever you’re called.”

“We’re called death,” one of them warbled out throatily, his voice keening with petulance. It sounded as though human speech was becoming difficult to maintain in his current state.

Before Jason could call out a retort, the other beast charged. Pivoting, Jason threw up his buckler to deflect sharp claws swiping at him. They raked across the buckler’s burning surface, and the creature squealed in pain. It leaped back a good five feet and shook its singed hand.

A whisper told Jason to jump forward, but he hesitated, feeling confident he could similarly handle the next such charge. That’s when he noticed the other creature had wheeled around and was attacking from the side to scratch him. It had broken a chunk of a support to a building’s portico off and lobbed it.

The chunk of heavy wood hit Jason square in the chest and sent him tumbling to the stones of the street on his back. Shaking his head, he struggled to get up, but the first beast was on him. Leaping over to take swipe after swipe at him, battering his desperately thrown-up defense.

Help me, my King!

Furious blows rained on him as the thing sought a weak point in his wavering guard. Jason realized the whisper had been help, if he’d only listened.

I’m sorry. From now on, you lead. I follow!

A whispered instruction to roll came, and Jason wouldn’t have hesitated, but he was pinned between the clawed feet of the monster.

At that moment, the creature jumped up, and Jason rolled along the stones and scrambled back up to his feet. Across

from him, the fiend landed with a terrific crash onto the street.

Another whisper told him to duck and then roll to the right. As he did, he saw the wild swipe from the other monster cut through nothing but the air of where he'd been. As he came out of the roll, Jason surged back up into a slice that caught the werebeast across the chest, sending small smoke tendrils spiraling off the creature.

It whimpered and retreated several steps, nursing its smoldering breast and abdomen. The other must have seen because it let out something between a roar and a howl and charged.

Jason stood still and dove right at the last second, just as the whisper had guided him. He caught the werebeast across the back, leaving a glowing line from shoulder to hip.

Both creatures fumbled about on the ground, whining and whimpering. As Jason advanced on the one freshly cut, it let out a shriek, got to its feet, and ran back down the street away from Jason.

Seeing his comrade flee, the other let out a pitiful semi-bark and bolted after.

Standing there, almost too stunned to breathe, Jason watched them until they were out of sight around a corner building. He drew in a jagged breath and let it out slowly.

Thank you, my King.

Sheathing the spiritword, Jason rubbed his face. Was his first fight with genuine creatures of darkness really over so soon?

"Well done," called someone from across the street. Jason's benefactor from the shop was standing there. In his hand was a gleaming sword.