

QUINTESSENTIAL TALES

This is a sample chapter of Quintessential Tales
by Martin F. Hengst.

For more information on this title, and other titles in the Magic of Solendrea series, visit my website at:
<http://martinhengst.com>

Copyright 2014 Martin F. Hengst. All Rights Reserved.

Warhorse

Flashes of memory. Fragments of life. Thunder like cannon fire. Lighting ripping apart the sky, leaving white wounds that fade into purple afterimages. A wide open meadow, flowers afire with blossoms, years and miles away from the fight to survive. Mother's voice, soft and sweet, enticing. "Just give in," she says. "Give in and all the pain and suffering will be over."

Can't. Won't. Too much to do. Too much that hasn't been finished. People to defend. A kingdom to protect. "Just give in," Mother says again. "You've done enough. It's your turn to rest."

His grip on the jutting wood spar loosens, just a bit. It would be so easy to let go. To listen. All he has to do is follow her voice into the darkness. She'd welcome him home. He knows it.

Splintering timber tears through the howl of the storm like a blade. An anguished scream as the spar tries to wrench itself from his grasp. Somehow, somewhere, he finds the strength to hold on. His knuckles are white as the foam that tops the breakers towering over him. The waves peer down on him with dark, sinister eyes. Leering at him. Mocking him. Whispering that there is no escape but through the final door that death opens.

A wave lifts the foundering ship as if exalting the tenacity of the stalwart vessel. He seems to rise with it, floating for the briefest of moments before a watery fist smashes them into the darkened valley between the waves. At long last, the ship can take no more. Groaning in agony, it splinters, tearing itself apart in its grief.

The spar is yanked from his grasp. His last lifeline torn from him in his moment of need. Falling. He's falling. The sea rises up to meet him, not with the embrace of a lover, but with a devouring hunger that threatens to consume him whole. He struggles to break his fall, but there's nothing to grab on to. Hard as stone, the water knocks his breath away. Brine fills his mouth. He chokes. He sputters. Darkness.

Time passes. It's still dark, but he's warm now. Still wet, but not adrift in the endless sea. Pain wraps him like a blanket. There isn't a single part of his body that doesn't ache, scream, or whimper. Crackling fills his ears, but it's not the splintering of wood giving way. It's a gentle sound, backed by something else. Something that he can't quite place. His eyelids feel like they've been glued in place, but he forces them open anyway.

~

"You're awake." The rich bass voice of his First Lieutenant, Torus Winterborne, sounded as if it was filled with gravel. He was perched atop a rock across from where Royce lay. His close-cropped hair, black as coal, was disheveled. His amber eyes, the color of light honey-wine, grabbed the light of the meager fire

and reflected it back. They were warm, and very much alive. "I didn't know if you'd make it through the night."

With a groan, Royce managed to sit up. His head swam and his vision went gray around the edges before he took a deep breath to steady himself. Trying to pull his legs up caused agony that exploded up through his body, threatening to drive him into unconsciousness. He leaned back on his hands, breathing hard against the pain and nausea that overpowered him.

"I'm pretty sure they're both broken," Torus said with a grunt. "I set them as best I could, but you're not going to be running races any time soon, my friend."

Royce glanced down at his legs, almost afraid of what he'd see. His breeches were in tatters. Ragged edges just below the knees exposed lengths of flesh mottled with the purple and black of fresh bruises and more cuts and scrapes than he cared to count. A relatively straight driftwood branch had been lashed to each leg with strips of dingy gray fabric. His eyes ranged over Torus.

The First Lieutenant wasn't in as poor shape, but he hadn't escaped unscathed from the wreck of the Imperium Naval Ship Warhorse. A long gash ran down his left arm. Judging by Torus's handiwork, it didn't impede his ability to use the limb, but Royce guessed that doing so was incredibly painful. His face was haggard, with a several day growth of beard shadowing his jutting jaw. A splint, similar to what had been fashioned for Royce, was bound around the Lieutenant's left ankle. Torus noted the direction of his gaze and gave a curt nod.

"Yes, Sir. Mine too. Looks like we're both out of the races for a while." He prodded the bandage around his ankle gingerly, but winced all the same. "I don't know if it's broken or just twisted, but it hurts enough that I can't put my weight on it. It won't hold enough weight to fight effectively, that's for certain."

Naked to the waist, Torus shivered as a cold wind blew in from across the sea. The worst of the rain had died away, leaving them to suffer through a miserable mist that seemed to cling to them, robbing them of the valuable heat afforded by the tiny fire.

"Well," Royce said at last. "We're alive." He wasn't sure if he considered that a blessing or a curse. Part of him wished he'd let go sooner. If he'd followed the voice of his Mother, now twenty years dead, he might feel better than he did now. He hadn't, and so now he had to make the best of what was given.

"For what that's worth," Torus snorted, echoing the Captain's unspoken grievances, "I haven't seen or heard another living thing since I woke and found you. There isn't much left of the Warhorse, I'm afraid. Some crates and planks further down the beach. I haven't found much by way of provisions. I didn't have anything to open the crates with, and I wasn't strong enough to force them open by hand."

"No," Royce agreed with a shake of his head, "I should think not." He paused, looking out over the sea. Storm clouds still hung low over the water, making it impossible to see more than a couple hundred feet. The mist similarly restricted visibility up and down the beach on either side. "Any idea where we ended up, Torus?"

The hulk of a man shook his head. "With the way the Warhorse was being tossed about, there's no telling where we ended up. I spoke to the bosun before the gale blew up, and he reckoned we were about two days out of the harbor at Blackbeach."

"Which was two days ago," Royce sighed. "But with the storm twisting us all about, we could be two days back toward Pearlwatch Estuary for all we know."

"Only a fool would argue with you, Captain. I think we're on our own, for now."

Royce said nothing. Three unusable legs out of four and stranded on a strange beach with no way of knowing where they were or how they were going to get back home. The odds were certainly not in their favor. He was fortunate that Torus was untouched by the Quintessential Sphere. If his First Lieutenant had suffered link-shock when setting his broken legs, there would have been many questions to answer. Though if they never made their way back home, those questions might be moot.

Royce tried to slip into the Quintessential Sphere, the Ethereal Realm of living memory from which all magic flowed, and found that the pain in his legs was too distracting to allow him to commune with the spirits and forces beyond the physical realm. Even sphere sight, the spiritual vision that allowed a mage to detect other magical beings and potential threats, was just out of his reach. He heaved a massive sigh and

was thankful that Torus didn't question what was on his mind. The obvious seemed dire enough without piling on.

Pain, deep in his chest, reminded Royce that his magic hadn't abandoned him. It was just beyond his grasp. The forces of magic reacted strangely in the presence of large bodies of sea water. Something to do with the disruption of the ley lines that encompassed all of Solendrea, or so the Quintessentialists said. Royce had always wondered why, then, they chose to build their foundational building, the Academy of Arcane Arts and Sciences, so close to the seashore in Blackbeach. He'd never been given a satisfactory answer, and since he was essentially a rogue mage, he wasn't much inclined to press the matter.

Royce's father and grandfather had passed down to him a family secret. The male children in their bloodline were recipients to a peculiar gift. A 'normal' mage was unable to cast spells if surrounded by iron or steel. In fact, wielding a sword would kill a Quintessentialist, as some strange reaction ate away at the mage from the inside. This ailment wasn't as prevalent in Royce's bloodline. He could wield a sword in one hand and the full power of the Quintessential Sphere in the other. He was a Swordmage. The last of his line. The fire in his blood would eventually demand its full payment, but it wasn't the all-consuming conflagration that all Quintessentialists feared. It was a slow burn that would take decades to devour him.

For all the good that did them now. Royce's father had trained him to be impossibly fast and as wary as a wild animal, using the power of the Quintessential Sphere to enhance his training and abilities. He was a soldier first, a tactician second, and a mage a distant third. He couldn't use his power to spirit them away to Blackbeach or the capital, Dragonfell. He didn't have the knowledge or the skill. Put a weapon in his hand, and Royce could cut through a phalanx of enemy soldiers as if they were straw men. Isolated on a lonely beach, the power he drew from the Ethereal Realm was useless.

Torus got laboriously to his feet, jamming a broken plank under one arm as a makeshift crutch. His face drew back in a grimace as he took an experimental step forward. He sucked breath through gritted teeth, but managed to stay on his feet. Royce had to give him credit. Between the bad ankle and the jagged end of the plank digging into his armpit, a lesser man than Torus probably would have ended up sprawled in the sand at the first step.

"Better get some sort of a shelter built up before night sets in," Torus grunted. He cocked his head at the sky as if he was challenging nature herself. "Could do without this damn mist. Stay here."

Royce couldn't help but chuckle as his First Lieutenant made his halting way down the beach. Many would say that Torus was completely lacking a sense of humor. Those who knew him best, though, learned to decipher which of his dry comments were meant as jokes and which were not. Having served with the Torus since he was barely out of boyhood, the Captain knew his wry wit better than most.

There was no doubt that the industry hurt him greatly, yet Torus toiled until after darkness had fallen. Even with the bad leg, he managed to drag enough crates and planks down the beach to build a crude shelter big enough to protect them from the worst ravages of wind and weather. Royce hadn't let the hours while by unproductively either. He'd managed to drag himself on his elbows, ignoring the pain that made his legs scream in agony, far enough from their meager fire to collect driftwood and fronds of sturdy seaweed, which he brought back cradled between his arms.

The driftwood he set aside for the fire. The seaweed he wove into respectable lines, which Torus used to lash the entire rickety lean-to together. The opening faced the fire, which Torus fed and prodded back into a respectable flame before settling down in the packed sand wallow they'd dug out inside.

Neither of the men spoke for quite some time. Instead, they watched the flames dance in the fire, consuming the driftwood that was offered and threatening to die down to embers unless they attended its neediness. Torus was the first to speak, but he never opened his mouth. Instead, his stomach gave a loud rumble, protesting the lack of food they'd had, both aboard the ship and since finding themselves spared almost certain death.

"Guess we'll need to see about something to eat in the morning," he said with a shrug. Torus produced a stoppered skin from one of the crates he'd used to build the shelter. "We have this though...and that's something."