

SACRIFICE

Alli Prince

“**KOSMOA WILL BE** pleased with your sacrifices,” Orlan, a priest of Kosmoa, announced as he strolled down the silver ramp. The ship stood like a sore thumb against the deep brown rock of the desert wastelands around them. Soft puffs of steam rolled from the ventilation systems along the side of the ship. The glass viewing ports along the top were tinted black.

Stefan looked up from the corpse of the beast, its body broken and slumped on its side. Even now, dead and sitting in a pool of sickly green ooze, the beast towered a good three feet above Stefan.

Stefan knelt to the ground and pulled out his 400-Plasma-Knife. He clicked the small brass switch on the side. White light flickered along the serrated edge of the blade. He slipped the knife into the beast's flesh and slowly began to carve away long strips of hide. Smoke drifted away as the white electricity cauterized the surrounding flesh, keeping the blood from soaking into the fresh hide.

Orlan stepped off the silver ramp and onto the cracked desert floor. He kept his hands clasped together and hidden inside the long

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swooping sleeves of his robe.

“Tell me, who killed the creature?” he asked.

Stefan wiped his brow with the back of his hand, then held up two fingers. “I did, with their aid.”

He jabbed a thumb towards the other outlaws, the men who traveled with him on business trips such as this. They stood back against a scraggly dead tree, awaiting their turn for a cut of the meat.

Orlan’s shaved head shone in the light. He smiled. “Stefan... Thank you for protecting the lands from this creature. Kosmoa is pleased with the sacrifice of your time.”

Stefan huffed. He clicked his tongue and looked back down at his work. He adjusted the rifle strapped to his back and wiped the sweat from his brow, leaving a dark green streak of ooze along his forehead. Orlan strolled around the beast and then stopped, stooping down to a crouch next to Stefan.

His robe splayed in the dirt around them. Stefan kept his face turned firmly towards the beast. He sawed another strip of hide from the creature. Orlan swallowed. His pale nose scrunched as the stench of burnt and rotting flesh wafted from the fresh slice.

“What do you want, Orlan?” Stephan asked.

“Will you be sacrificing to your god today?”

“No.”

Stefan braced himself as he felt the eyes of his group swivel towards him. He wiped his brow again and folded the new piece of hide over his left arm. He stood and began to shove the pieces into his leather satchel.

“Perhaps,” Orlan lowered his voice and leaned forward. “If you did give up a sacrifice...your god would speak to you.”

Stefan turned and strode away from the creature. He stepped over the long, hairless tail of the beast and over the gravel and rock of the desert. Behind him, Orlan struggled over the rough terrain.

“Stefan, I’m sure Donumdonair would—” He stopped and tugged the edge of his tunic from a scraggily bush, then rushed up the rest of the incline and fell into step with Stefan. “Nothing big—something small! The size of a small dog would do! I’m sure Donumdonair would initiate you back into your tribe, were you to appease—”

“No.” Stefan stopped and turned to face Orlan, his teeth barred. Orlan faltered. “My tribe made their choice—and I’ve made mine. Now leave me alone.”

Orlan sighed and folded his hands back together inside the sleeves of his robe. Stefan turned roughly towards the setting sun, adjusted the rifle, and stalked away.

“When you are ready!” Orlan called. “I’ll help you!”

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Stefan strayed on the outskirts of the Journeymen market. The sounds of chatter and haggling clattered from inside the dusty, wooden stalls. The squeals of children laughing and playing pierced the air. The Journeymen were known to have the fairest price—*if* they’d buy from you. Stefan adjusted the red bandanna that concealed the bottom half of his face. He swallowed and shoved his trembling hands deep into the leather pockets of his coat, then took a step into the market stalls.

The smells of spices and freshly cooked meat enticed a deep rumble from his stomach. Slowly, he approached a stall and set the long strips of hide on the counter.

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The man on the other side of the stall looked down at the hide, then up to Stefan. He was short, with a protruding stomach and receding hairline.

“What’re we lookin’ to trade?” The man leaned against the wooden counter. The wood creaked and shifted at the weight.

“What’ya got?” Stefan asked.

The man sighed and looked at the crates behind him. He motioned with the stump of his arm, cloth wrapped tight around the wrist where the hand should have been.

“Plenty... Let’s see,” the man sighed and scratched the back of his neck with his good hand. “I got rations, bandages... Hmm, well, I see you got a 900 Lite-R on your shoulder there. I got light cartridges?”

Stefan nodded. “What would you give me for all this?”

“Hmm...Well, trading those pelts...That’ll run you, let’s say twenty light cartridges, seventeen rations and three bandages.”

Stefan nodded. A fair price indeed. “I’ll take it.”

The man grinned and began to collect the tiny metal boxes with his one hand and set them atop the counter. Stefan scanned the perimeter. Sitting on the top of the crates a few feet behind the man sat a doll. Small, with braided black hair made of yarn and two simple buttons for eyes.

“How much for the doll?” The question popped out before Stefan could stop it. The man hesitated.

“You got a little girl?”

Stefan nodded. “Born a year or so ago.”

“I got two at home, both boys,” the man set a handful of light cartridges on the counter. “My little girl got herself a nice man—married off last spring.”

Stefan smiled and leaned against the pole. “Congratulations.”

The man wiped his brow with a cloth, then grabbed the doll and set it on the counter.

“This used to be hers...” The man sighed. He held the doll’s hand between two meaty fingers, then let his hand slide to his side. “I’ll just add this in—consider it a parting gift from one father to another... May it be kept by your daughter till the day she is wed.”

Stefan bit his tongue to keep the gratitude out of his eyes. He swallowed and nodded.

“Many thanks.”

The man grinned, turned, and grabbed another handful of light cartridges.

“Say, which sect are you from? I don’t think I’ve seen your face ‘round these markets before—”

“Do you know who it is you’re serving, friend?” A deep voice spoke from behind Stefan. He grit his teeth together as a hand came and rested on his shoulder.

The man behind the counter glanced from Stefan to the man. “Ah, greetings to you, Aldore, and uh, I don’t say I had the pleasure of making his acquaintance.”

“This is Stefan...of *Orson*.”

The man’s eyebrows raised, then in a barely heard whisper, “*the whore’s son?*”

“That’s right...” Aldore grinned as he came to stand next to Stefan, his hand still gripped Stefan’s shoulder. “Say, how’s life treating you, Stefan? It’s been, what... Six months since your wife left you for that Desperado?”

Stefan shrugged the hand off and faced pointedly away from Aldore.

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“Oh—” He slapped a hand against his forehead. “I forgot—you never married her, did you? Heh, took a page out of your old man’s book, I guess.”

“What do you want, Aldore?” Stefan whispered. Aldore grinned, his tiny eyes like black beads as his skin folded and creased.

“What do I want from *you*?” Aldore shook his head. He patted Stefan on the shoulder, a cloud of dust puffed out. Aldore took a step back and motioned to Stefan’s figure. “Nothing, Stefan...*nothing*.”

Stefan glowered and watched as Aldore shoved both hands in his pockets and strolled off down the market lane. He took a shuttered breath, then turned back to the man across the counter. He reached for the light cartridges—only for the man behind the counter to rest his hand on the pile.

“The pelts’ll run you *eleven* rations and ten light cartridges.” The man narrowed his eyes. “And no doll...sorry.”

Stefan’s cheeks darkened with color. His throat warbled as he swallowed, then in a voice barely above a whisper, “*I’ll take it.*”

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The half-moon had risen high into the sky by the time Stefan had traveled back to his homestead. He looked up as he walked the rough desert terrain. A chill wind ruffled his coat as he approached a large, wired fence. Barbs and spikes clung to each loop of wire that ran along the top of the rusted metal poles staked into the ground. His boots crunched the loose stones of gravel and dirt. He stopped just in front of a large, metal archway. Red lasers connected in the metal archway to form a gate of angry light.

Stefan slipped out a small metal card from his belt, which was attached to a string. He swiped the card against a small metal box on the gate. The lasers flickered, and the hum of electricity died as the lasers, one by one, powered off. A box on the other side of the gate whined as a whistle sounded off, announcing his presence. Four cows looked up from where they grazed on the scraggly brown patches of weeds, their eyes sunken and their ribs protruding from their sides.

He walked through the gate, reached behind him, and pressed the card against the whistle. The lasers, one by one, powered back on behind him. Stefan shoved the card back into his belt.

He'd not walked five feet down the worn sand path and towards the wooden shack in front of him before he could hear the excited squeals from inside. He pulled the bandana down and grinned.

"*I know!*" A woman's voice traveled down the path from inside the shack. "I know—Daddy's home, isn't he?"

Stefan pushed aside the worn blue cloth they called a door and stepped inside.

"I'm home." He coughed. The wooden shack had no rooms and held just the necessities Stefan could afford.

Mary looked up from the ground by the small fireplace. Her deformed legs twisted under her at an odd angle. Her hair was tied back into a bun with loose strands of golden blonde hair falling to frame her young face. Kaelee sat in her lap.

"She's always so excited to see you," Mary whispered as she held up Kaelee, who wriggled and pumped her arms. She let out a squeal and kicked her legs. Stefan slipped the rifle from his shoulder and leaned it against the wall, then took three steps forward and scooped the child into his arms. The child all but disappeared inside

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his thick arms, so tiny and small compared to the mountain of a man that held her.

Kaelee's mouth parted into the shape of an oval as she stared up at Stefan. Her hands lightly patted the stubble on his chin. She squealed and kicked her legs. Stefan chuckled and moved to the wooden chair by the fireplace. He sat, the wood creaking under his weight.

"How'd the day go? Is she still choking with the solid foods?" he asked quietly. Mary winced as she shifted her legs out from under her and leaned against the rough wood wall.

"No, she ate very well today," Mary whispered. Deep lines were set in her cheeks and around her tired dark eyes. Stefan looked up.

"You didn't give her your rations again, did you?"

Mary pressed her lips together. "She's a growing child, Stefan—"

"*Mary.*" Stefan set Kaelee on his knee and lightly bounced her up and down. "I need you to eat—for her. If you—hey!"

Kaelee had shoved his fingers into her mouth. She gnawed along his dirty thumb. A small drip of drool dribbled off her chin and onto her knee. Stefan winced and pulled his hand away.

Mary shook her head and smiled. "We sat in the front yard today, and she stood all on her own... She's growing up. She needs the food."

Stefan grunted and leaned back in the chair. He sucked in a breath. The fire crackled to his left. Mary slowly shut her eyes as Kaelee reached forward and played with the fraying edges of his bandana, still tied around his neck.

"Besides," Mary whispered. "A little hunger is a small price to pay for what you've done for me."

Stefan looked up. He set his mouth in a firm line. "I did what any moral man would do. To take advantage of someone who can't even run—"

“It was more than *most* would do, Stefan,” Mary cut in. She smoothed out her skirt, pale and blue and dirty from the ground on which she often dragged herself. She smoothed a lock of blonde hair from her face and blinked away a shine that had taken to her eyes. “I’d gladly give up food for weeks to repay you.”

Stefan leaned back. He untied the bandana with one hand and let it slip into Kaelee’s grasp.

“You do enough, Mary... You do enough.”

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Stefan jolted from the chair. Dust fluttered along the wooden floorboards. The sound of a ship touching down roared, and the dirt-covered windows shook in their frames. Rays of light seeped in from the cracks in the ceiling. Mary and Kaelee had retired for the night to their place in the corner. A metal pole with a shower curtain separated them. Stefan cracked his neck as he stood. He ran a hand over his face and walked towards the door.

“Stefan?” Mary whispered from the corner. “Is everything alright?”

“Got company,” Stefan roughly responded. “Stay inside an’ keep Kaelee quiet.”

He grabbed his gun and pointed it out the door. With the barrel, he moved the blue cloth and stepped into the morning air.

The sun rose just over the large rock formations in the distance. His boots crunched the gravel.

“Hey, Stefan!” Aldore called from behind the fence. Stefan blinked. Three ships stood behind Aldore. Two were small and scrapped together with spare sheets of metal. Rust and dirt caked the

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exposed metal parts. The third ship, in the middle, was the same silver ship from the morning before.

“What do you want, Aldore?” Stefan called. He took a step towards them.

“To return something that was taken from you!” Aldore rapped a hand on the metal gate. He shifted to meet Stefan’s eyes past the angry red beams. “Mind comin’ out for a discussion on the matter?”

Stefan swallowed. He glanced behind him and into the shack. Mary had peeked a head out the curtain. Kaelee still slept, nestled in her arms. Mary pressed her lips together and slowly shook her head.

“Put your gun on the ground and we’ll see,” Stefan called back. Mary narrowed her eyes. Stefan watched as Aldore, with great show and flourish, removed the pistol from his belt and set it on the ground. Stefan slung his rifle over his shoulder and walked down the path towards the gate. He stopped, just in front of the lasered defense.

“I’m surprised you own cattle.” Aldore nodded toward the four beasts that stood to the right, grazing on the dead shrubbery. “Cattle often provide well for a family—”

“Provided that family can trade for fair prices,” Stefan bit. “Why’re the Elders here? I thought Journeymen were banned from mingling with the priests of Kosmoa—”

“You know Donumdonair’s rules, as do I,” Aldore bit. “He detests joining with each other. This is pure business, not social pleasures... You killed a great beast yesterday, didn’t you?”

Stefan nodded. Aldore suppressed a sigh.

“There’s a beast similar in stature. It’s threatening the region.”

Stefan raised a brow. “You need to get to the part where this is *my* problem.”

Aldore ran a hand through his hair and glanced back at the ships.

“Listen... You kill this beast for us, and I’ll talk to the Journey-men. We’ll forget the soil on your reputation, and you’ll be welcomed to fair price and wage in the marketplace again.”

Stefan let out a breath. He sent a quick glance back to the shack.

“Donumdonair will be pleased with us?” Stefan lowered his voice to a low whisper. “My family and I will be welcomed?”

Aldore scoffed. “Yes, you, your daughter, and the unmarried wench that resides with you. I’ll handle all of it—*If* you kill the beast.”

“Why?” Stefan clenched his fist. “Why not go kill the beast yourself?”

Aldore sneered. “I don’t do work with deranged lunatics that believe in a false god... Besides, The Kosmoa priest requested your help by name.”

Stefan looked at the ship. He stared up at the tinted windows. The sun glinted off the metal and blinded him. Stefan looked back to Aldore.

“Well?” Aldore asked. “Will you go? The elder is waiting inside his ship for you. Together, you’ll pick up their warrior and then go slay the beast.”

“I’ll do it.”

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Stefan shifted as he stared at the market around him. Pristine stalls set in symmetrical and perfect order. The stone ground contained barely a scuff of a boot or a granule of sand as robed figures quietly did their shopping. Stefan shoved his hands deep into his coat and fol-

lowed Orlan at a distance as he took in the perfect surroundings of The Order of Kosmoa's market.

"Stefan—keep up, you don't want to get lost." Orlan called from in front of him. Stefan shook his head.

"How could I get lost with your shiny head leading the way?"

Orlan's ears reddened. "I sacrificed my hair to my god—it's not funny! The high priests said it was what Kosmoa required."

"What god wants *hair* as a sacrifice?" Stefan chuckled. "Seems useless once it's off your head."

Orlan straightened and dusted off his robe—for show, of course, for they were in perfect order. "Come. We must retrieve Kade and then make way for the beast before dark... Besides, look around. We're in Kosmoa's territory. Many here go without their hair."

Stefan looked around. More than half the crowd had a cleanly shaved skull, including the women.

"Where are the children?" Stefan asked. Orlan raised a brow.

"What do you mean?"

Stefan jabbed his thumb towards the sparse market. "There's no children playing in the market."

Orlan placed a hand over his heart. "*Children* in the market *playing*? Why, you Journeymen are...very interesting. Here in Kosmoa's territory, the children play in their designated play areas. Now, come along, we don't want to be late."

Together, the two men walked from the crowded market down a clean stone pathway.

"What are those?" Stefan asked as they passed large square buildings, made from white metal and decorated with intricate white and golds.

“Those are our homes—each member of The Order of Kosmoa receives one upon their fiftieth sacrifice. Do you Journeymen not receive such honors from Donumdonair?”

Stefan stayed silent. He watched as a sleek silver ship hovered above one home. A dog in the yard howled up at it, the hair raised on the back of it’s neck.

“Wait.” Stefan said. He watched as the bottom of the ship opened. Puffs of air blew out as the metal doors slid open. Three men slipped out, connected to the ship with long metal lines. They held long, black guns in their hands. They landed in the yard, their guns clicked and began to whir as the light bolts on the side powered on.

“What are they doing?” Stefan stopped. Orlan glanced from Stefan to the farm, then hurriedly back to Stefan.

“Keep moving—” he hissed.

Stefan shrugged off Orlan’s hand and lowered his rifle. “What are they—”

Bolts of light shot out of the guns and blasted into the metal of the house. A scream from inside pierced the air as the metal turned red and began to melt in on itself. Stefan’s eyes widened. Metal curled and the roof caved, dropping to the ground. Dust flew up in a thick cloud of smoke as the men continued to fire upon the home. Stefan took a step forward.

“No—*No*, there’s people in there! They—”

“Didn’t pay their sacrifice!” Orlan hissed. He stopped in front of Stefan, his hands raised. “That man promised a sacrifice and refused to keep his word. You’re a Journeymen. You understand the importance of honesty...”

Stefan clenched his teeth. He gripped his rifle and watched as they

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continued to fire at the house. Orlan tugged on the sleeve of his jacket, and he tore himself away. He followed Orlan down the path, the sounds of the mutt barking and the metal shrieking behind him.

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Kade of The Order of Kosmoa was a tiny man. He stood half a foot shorter than Stefan, his eyes narrowed into a continual squint as though staring up at the sun.

“So, you’re Stefan Orson, killer of beasts?” Kade asked as Stefan and Orlan walked up the pathway to his home. “We’re in fine hands, then.”

Together, the two men loaded up their weapons and supplies, and boarded Orlan’s silver ship. The inside of the hull dripped with luxury. From the soft leather seats that lined the sides, to the shelf in the back that held the finest liquors and crystal glasses. Orlan swept inside, his hands clasped together in his sleeves, and chose a seat.

Stefan glanced down to Kade, who shrugged and trudged after Orlan. Stefan followed and sat across from Orlan.

Stefan grabbed the shoulder straps and tugged them around his shoulders. He clicked the metal pieces together and sat back. The ramp to the ship lifted and closed off the sun. Orlan sat across from him, already buckled and hands clasped tight together. The ship shook as it lifted from the ground and blasted into the rough desert air.

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Orlan broke the silence. “You know, I do not judge you Journeymen, despite what you may think. I think Donumdonair is a fine god, really.”

Stefan raised his bushy eyebrows, his arms crossed.

“Really?” Stefan asked.

“Really. I just... It confuses me why he makes it so hard to be of any worth. I mean, if he accepted what Kosmoa accepts as sacrifice, it would be much simpler.”

“You’ve got it wrong,” Kade grunted. Stefan glanced at him. He sat, his legs dangling a couple inches off the metal floor of the ship, swinging them back and forth. “Y’see, I married a Journeymen woman. How she explained it to me was like this. Donumdonair values his people above all else. He calls them to live above the others.”

Orlan scoffed. “Above the others? How pretentious—oh, no offense, Stefan.”

Stefan grunted. “Sure.”

The ship jolted to the side. Stefan glanced out the window. The desert wasteland sprawled out as far as the eye could see. Outcroppings of rock formations jutted up from the serene sands. He watched as the ship descended to the ground; his back cushioned by the soft seats of luxury.

“We’re here—the beast was last seen in those mountains,” Orlan said. Stefan unbuckled his belt and stood. He slung his gun off his shoulder and into his hand. The ramp whirred as it slowly descended. Harsh rays of desert light burst into the comforts of the ship.

“Stay safe, you two,” Orlan muttered. Kade and Stefan glanced at each other, then nodded to Orlan. They collected their guns and walked off the ship.

The hot desert air hit Stefan as he left the comfort of the cool ship behind him. The two walked from the ship to the rocky mountain formations in front of them.

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“Ready?” Kade inspected his guns. Two, small, handheld pistols with electric white light on either side. The gears inside hummed as the gun powered on. Stefan shifted his hands to the side of his rifle and pressed down on a small brass button. A sight popped up on the top of the gun as the lights along the side flickered on.

“Don’t die,” Stefan huffed. Kade nodded. Together, they crouched low. Their boots crunched against the sand as they moved towards the large cropping of rock. Stefan looked down at the sights and towards the mountainside.

“There’s a cave,” Stefan commented. “My guess? That’s where the thing hides.”

Kade nodded, then silently moved towards the cave. Stefan followed a foot behind him.

“So,” Kade whispered as they made their way over the rough terrain, “what’d they threaten you with to get you out here?”

Stefan gave a wary glance. “They didn’t.”

“No?” Kade huffed out a laugh. “God, I wish I were a Journeyman.”

“What do you mean?”

“I failed to give up a sacrifice last quarter,” Kade muttered. “The Elders wanted my wife for the night. She refused. So, here I am.”

Stefan was silent for a moment. They paused as they approached a drop-off, the jagged cliff traveling down ten or so feet, then a valley of sand and just across from that, the mouth of the cave.

“The tribe I was born into has forsaken me, for the sins of I, and my father,” Stefan muttered. “I was born as nothing. I do this to prevent the same fate for my daughter.”

Kade hummed. “And what does your god say on how your people treat you?”

Stefan shrugged. “I do not know. He does not speak to me.”

“Do you speak to him?” Kade asked. Stefan glared, hard and cold, then silently pushed his rifle over his shoulder and climbed over the cliffside. Kade huffed beside him and followed. The two crouched low to the ground, their feet sinking into the sand.

“Bad terrain,” Kade muttered as he lifted his boot. Tiny granules of sand tumbled from the crevices of cracked leather.

Stefan held onto the rocky cliffside next to him. He slung his rifle off his shoulder and gripped it in his right hand. With his left, he clung to the cliffside. He aimed his rifle forward and stared down the scope towards the cave. Kade stood and struggled forward through the loose sands. Stefan narrowed his eyes as he stared at the mouth of the cave. From this angle, it looked shallow.

“The cave’s been clawed,” Stefan said. “Do you see it, Kade?”

Kade paused halfway through the sand-field. He stared up at the cave, his eyes narrowed.

“It looks unnaturally formed,” Stefan continued. “Like the beast dug—”

The sand shook. Deep ripples formed in the middle of the field, around Kade. He turned to look at Stefan, his eyes wide, mouth parted to say something. Then, like a whale bursting from the sea, the creature burst from the sand. It’s snout to Kade’s left and its bottom jaw to his right. With a sickening snap the jaw closed and Kade disappeared inside the beast’s maw.

Stefan pulled the trigger. A bolt of electric white light shot across the sand-field and seared into the creature’s skull, inches from its beady black eyes. The rat-like beast clawed up from the ground. It shook. Sand flew from the matted black fur. Stefan threw the rifle back

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over his shoulder and scrambled up the cliffside. The beast shrieked into the air, a piercing sound that trailed off into a hiss.

He hoisted himself up, digging his hands into the crevices. The rocks sliced his fingers as he scrambled up the cliffside. Tiny red beads of blood slipped from the bed of his fingernails past his knuckles and into his sleeves.

The sand-rat screamed again. Sand showered through the field. His hand cleared the top of the cliff. With a final grunt, he leapt up and threw himself up onto solid ground. He twisted around and brought up his rifle.

The sand-rat stared at him with its mouth parted. Its large furless tail stood straight up behind it. It cast a long dagger-like shadow along the ground. Twice in size compared to the beast Stefan had slain the day before. Blood smeared its yellow-stained teeth. Kade's cracked leather boot was lodged between two incisors. Stefan sucked in a breath, his teeth clenched, his nostrils flaring. The beast's nose twitched. Stefan's hands shook.

The sand-rat screamed. Stefan clenched his teeth and pulled the trigger.

Light burst from the tip of his rifle and seared into the back of the beast's mouth. It wrenched its head back. Its paw hurled towards Stefan, and he lurched to the side. The paw slammed into the rocks next to him. Stefan grunted as he scrambled to his feet, gun raised. He fired a series of light bolts, singeing the sand-rat's underbelly. The creature howled as it backed away. Smoke rose from the fresh wounds.

The sand-rat's nose twitched. Its beady eyes narrowed. The hair on the back of its neck rose and its mouth opened. Saliva mixed with blood and clung to the bottom jaw as it shrieked.

Stefan knelt to his knee, lifted his rifle, and stared down at the sight. He narrowed in on the black eyes and fired.

The bolt sizzled as it left the barrel of the gun. It flew, past the dust and the debris disturbed and thrown about from the fight and seared directly into the eyeball. The beady black orb burst upon impact. Tiny bolts of electricity flickered and seared the surrounding flesh.

Stefan didn't move as he fired three more shots, one after the other, in the same spot. Each bolt burrowed further into the skull.

The creature howled as the shots hit. Its paw blindly came up to pat at the burning flesh, its green ooze soaking the surrounding fur. The creature crumbled to the ground. The muscles in the beasts' shoulders spazzed as the final burst of electricity from the light-bolt sizzled through its body.

Stefan lowered the gun. He tore the bandanna away from his mouth and sucked in a greedy breath of air. He ran his hand over his head and smoothed back his hair.

Stefan's hands shook as he took a step towards the edge of the cliff and looked at the sand-rat. Its tongue protruded from its clenched jaw, swollen, and dripping with a sickly green liquid. Stefan swallowed.

"I did it," he whispered. He covered his mouth to keep in a laugh. "*I did it!*"

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Orlan stood as Stefan entered the ship.

"So, it's dead?" Orlan asked. Stefan's face split with a piercing grin.

"I did it—" He stepped forward and clasped his hand on Orlan's shoulder. "Orlan—I've earned back my place with the Journeymen."

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“Then we celebrate!” Orlan clapped his hands together. Behind the priest, nestled in the corner of the ship, sat a shelf lined with fine crystal glasses. “Here—take a drink! The finest refreshments in all of Covenant!”

Stefan strode forward and grabbed the first cup. He filled it with the dark brown liquid, pressed it to his lips and threw it back in one giant gulp. Stefan leaned against the side of the ship. He slipped the rifle off his shoulder and set it against the wall. Orlan swept towards him and grabbed the glass bottle. He tipped it and filled Stefan’s drink once more.

“Now, tell me, Stefan, Killer of Beasts and pride of the Journey-men,” Orlan set the glass bottle on the shelf. The liquid swirled inside. Stefan looked for a moment at the glass and grinned. Orlan folded his hands inside his sleeves. “What will you sacrifice in celebration? Perhaps crops?”

“I’ve no crops—not yet. But once I’m reinstated in the market I’ll plant a garden—a huge one.” Stefan pressed his drink to his lips and took a long sip. He wiped his chin with the back of his hand and let out a sigh. “Mary shall tend it and Kaelee will play in the strawberry fields.”

“Hmm, perhaps furniture or wealth then.”

Stefan shook his head. “No. I’ve none of that...”

“Then what can you sacrifice?” Orlan’s eyebrows scrunched together. “As tribute to your God, surely you must give him something.”

Stefan pressed his lips together and stared down at the shiny silver floor.

Slowly, he pushed himself away from the wall, his shoulders pulled back. He swayed briefly, then looked into Orlan’s dark eyes.

“Whatever walking thing I first see on my property,” Stefan said and raised his cup. “For I am Stefan *Orson*, Killer of Beats, Hunter of Monsters, and *pride* of the Journeymen!”

Orlan grinned, grabbed a crystal cup and clinked it against Stefan’s. The drink spilled over the top and sloshed onto the silver floor. It mixed with the dust and mud from his boots and turned into a thick, goopy, paste.

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Stefan walked up the dirt path. With one hand he fished out the gate card, in the other, he held a doll. Small, with braided black hair made of yarn and two simple buttons for eyes. He swiped the gate card against the access port and watched as the red beams of light, one by one, powered off. Orlan kept a close pace behind him as the two walked through the rusted metal archway and the beams of red flicked back on.

The whistle sounded and Stefan turned, swiping the card over the whistle.

“Stefan!” The shout came from the front door. Stefan turned. The cows had moved to graze behind the shack, the sound of the bells around their necks the only indication they were still on the property. In front of Stefan, a small, pudgy figure stumbled out of the shack and onto the path.

Kaelee’s arms pumped up and down, excited gasps escaped her gaping grin as she stumbled towards him. Stefan froze. Mary’s voice echoed from inside the shack. “Stefan—look! She’s walking! She’s walking!”

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Orlan rested a hand atop Stefan's shoulder and stepped around the man. Sweat clung to the top of Stefan's brow and his gun slipped from his shoulder and clattered to the ground. Stefan blinked, then snapped his attention to the priest on his left.

Orlan smiled, his dark eyes gleaming and clasped his hands together inside his sleeves.

"Donumdonair will be pleased with your sacrifice."

This story is inspired by the Biblical book of Judges. Find the story of Jephthah in Judges 11.

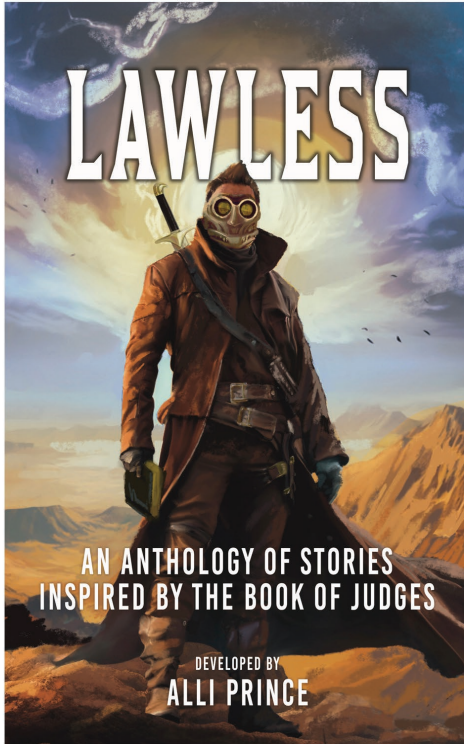
This story will be included in Lawless, an anthology to be released by The Pearl on January 18, 2024. To pre-order this book, please visit lawlessbook.com/order

To be included in the project, please apply by September 11. Find more information at Lawlessbook.com. Subscribe to the free newsletter to stay in the loop.

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