

Harvesting The Boneflowers

By: Joe Lunievicz

Loomer Tomp poured water into his mouth and down his snapping jaws. The tin cup he carried for just this purpose banged against his teeth and knocked some of them loose. He didn't notice. The ecstasy of filling up with tilted neck, knee deep in cool liquid made him forget. The sand colored the large pool a murky brown and his bones gasped as the water soaked them, the marrow absorbing its moisture and the promise of renewed life. Thousands around him filled the oasis and poured water down their empty throats, lost themselves in the vision of flesh sprouting from bleached bone.

Loomer didn't know how long it lasted. He never did. He knew it was over when a ball of hot wind and sand smacked into his head and chipped off a piece of hard bone from his skull. He held on to his vision a moment longer. The whip hit him again and he returned to the water and the crowd surrounding him. He heard the whips from the priests on the shore lashing through the air and he ducked. The blow missed him but smacked into the shoulder of another in front of him. He saw the joint shatter. The arm fell off into the water. Those around him scattered and fled for the shore. Loomer kept low, his open jaw dipped in the water, tasting it even as he scrambled with the others towards the beach. When he was out of the pool and standing on the rise that surrounded the oasis, he took a second to count his fingers and toes.

That's how you go first, he thought to himself. *First you lose your digits and then you're left for the sand to cover. Someone else takes your place in the column.* He had most of eight fingers including both thumbs and all his toes. He turned his head upwards to the sun and gave

thanks. The light entered his eye sockets and filled his soul with new warmth. "I'm going to be one of them," he said firmly to himself. "The flesh *will* come back. There *will* be a harvest." It was what he always said after he drank from the waters and counted his digits.

In the long valley behind him the fallen from the battle were being awakened by the priests. The dark figures passed quickly through the bodies lying in the sand, whispering their prayers, touching the flesh. Men and women, reborn in their wake, took their first faltering steps and joined the back of the column. The remains of those who had lost their places or couldn't be reborn were left to be covered by the sand and eaten by the scavengers. Fragments of their crushed and splintered bones littered the valley like new fallen snow.

Loomer pulled at his shoulder belt. He adjusted his shield and scabbard, checked the hilt of his sword and joined the forming ranks on the shallow dunes below him. He pulled himself into step next to two that he recognized. They both wore mail shirts with ragged holes in them that showed their exposed ribs. Spiked helmets covered their heads. Thick oak spears were clenched in their hands. Loomer counted their fingers quickly and saw that they had passed through undamaged.

"Roth, Shannon," he called to them. His jaw moved slightly with each word and they heard him even though all three had long since lost the flesh from their faces.

They turned their heads towards him and nodded together.

"We were wondering if you had made it through," Shannon said, slapping the bones of her hand against his back in greeting.

"Yes," Roth agreed, tapping his shoulder at the same time. "We lost you at the first clash in the valley. They separated us into two and we were swept to the right. You must have been with the left part of the column. They lost so many. We thought you were one of them."

"I was," Loomer said laughing, "I was. But I've told you a hundred times; I'll be with you at the final battle. I've been charmed. I always have been and I always will be."

"Wagner thought we was charmed too," Shannon said. "But now he's face down in the sand. He always swore his flesh would grow and his bones would flower."

"Wagner was reckless," Loomer shouted as the wind picked up around them and the sun began to set. "He thought he was immortal. That's the first mistake the new ones make. He was reborn with us and should have known better. I know I'm not immortal. I know the path is short. I'm just charmed. There's a difference"

"And what's that?" Roth asked, leaning forward into the gusts of sand that sprinkled past them.

"I'm still walking with you and he's not," Loomer shouted.

They all laughed, their jaws creaking in imitation of the living. Their column spread before them one hundred thick and endless to the horizon like darkened soldier ants marching towards a new hive, following the outline of a storm. Around the outside of the column moved the priests, their whips snapping at the heads of the weakest, turning them into bone dust. Crawling bodies followed the column with hands outstretched, shrill *take me alongs*, mixing with the sound of the wind whistling through their frames.

Loomer glanced behind him at the column's debris. "What do you think happens to them?" he asked.

"They lose their place," Shannon said keeping her eyes fixed on the earth in front of her.

"The sands cover them," Roth added quickly, completing the ritual.

Loomer nodded his head slowly and repeated the words to himself. He found himself glancing back again even as the night closed around them.

The column moved across the desert, the storm blanketing the passages of the sun and the moon. The days passed as seconds or years. Loomer Tomp couldn't tell the difference and didn't want to. The storm disappeared. The southern sky glowed with the lights of a far off city. Loomer Tomp wondered at the luminous horizon and the stars that blended into the sky above it.

"Do you think this could be the final battle?" he asked.

"No, it's not," Shannon said.

"How do you know," Loomer asked.

"Because we'll know when it's the final battle. The priests will tell us."

"They gave us birth," Loomer said.

"And the air that we breath," Shannon completed the saying.

Loomer Tomp had long ago forgotten what breathing was and what it was like to smell, but he nodded his head in agreement with the words anyway. It was part of the ritual.

That night one of the newly born joined them. He stepped up beside them, some flesh still covering him, sheltering his skeletal frame.

"What will happen?" he asked.

"We'll join battle," Roth said, not looking at the man.

"We'll cross the sands," Shannon added.

"Why?" the man asked.

"Because we always have," Roth said. "We move forward, following the storms."

"But the storms are gone," the man said.

"We'll find them on the other side of the city. It's the sign the priests look for," Roth said. "It's the passage of eternal life. When we reach the final battle, our bones will flower and the harvest..."

"... and the harvest," Loomer broke his silence, "will be the quenching of our thirst. Our limbs will swell and our lungs will fill with air again. Until then we'll find water inside the city and we'll have our dreams."

"What dreams?" he asked.

"Of the bone flowers," Loomer said sharply losing patience.

"How long have you been waiting?" the man asked.

"I don't remember," Loomer said.

"A long time," Roth added quickly.

"We were reborn together," Shannon said.

"No," Loomer said. "Not just the three of us. There were twenty."

"What happened to the others?" the man asked.

"I don't know," Loomer said and gazed at the glowing horizon.

"They lost their place," Shannon said.

"And the sands covered them," Roth added.

They marched through the darkness until they stood on the dunes surrounding the city's walls. They watched torches flicker and bob along the parapets as messengers darted between shivering archers and crossbowmen. From the dunes the torches seemed like a line of shimmering fireflies. The city behind the walls whispered with closing, bolting doors and wooden shutters. A baby's wailing cries carried over them and across the sands to Loomer Tomp.

"Watch above for the rocks when you get to the wall," Shannon said.

"Keep your shield on your back and your body close to the wall," Roth added.

"Right," Loomer said and flipped his curved sword to his right hand. Its silver edge glistened in the moonlight where rust hadn't turned it brown.

A priest stepped in front of them, its body seeming to appear from the sand itself. It was wreathed in grey and black cloth, tightly wrapped from its head to its feet. Loomer watched as a gloved hand adjusted a wrap of shoulder cloth. Sand spilled out like crystallized blood until tightening made it stop. The priest raised its hands above its head and they all stepped forward. Loomer unhooked his shield from his back and strapped it to his right forearm. The priest turned towards them and gazed with eyes that sparkled like emeralds. They stepped forward again smacking their spear hafts and swords against their shields. The crackling of arms rang in the darkness like the shattering of thunder as they stepped forward again and started down the hill. More torches lit on the city's walls. The priest stepped with them and the clamor of weapons quickened as they increased their pace. At five hundred yards they began to run. Loomer screamed and the others behind raised their voices with his. The soldiers on the walls in silvered mail and hardened leather heard nothing but the striking of steel and a low humming as if flies were pricking at their ears.

At two hundred yards the first flight of bolts rained down on them, the arrows bouncing off their shields and nicking their bones. The air filled with their whistling hafts and their black-

feathered clouds dimmed the stars. Roth's helmet took two blows and a third passed through his mail coat chipping a rib. A fourth passed through his eye socket and cracked the back of his skull. His step faltered and Loomer ran past him not looking back.

"Come on Roth," he yelled.

Shannon stepped next to him, leaping over a fallen pile of bones, its skull shattered from a crossbow bolt.

Tightly stretched bows added their arrows to the clouds of stinging rain. Loomer reached the wall, slung his shield over his back and hooked his sword into his harness. Reaching up he stuck his fingers and toes into the crumbling masonry. He started climbing upwards, his bones finding holds that flesh could never find. Earthen bricks and flaming oil spilled down upon them. Loomer clung close to the surface of the wall and climbed as fast as he could. Arrows ricocheted off his shield again and again, the harness holding it close against his back. A few feet from the top Loomer glanced up and swung his body to the side as a spear plunged down into the space he had been in before. The second time the spear jabbed, he grabbed the spear and pulled hard, tearing the owner forward over the wall and into the darkness below. He scrambled over the top and ducked as swords sliced the air above him and to his side. Others joined him at the top of the wall. He pulled out his sword and grasped his shield, hacking in a circle around him. Within minutes the wall was overrun and the parapets were slippery with blood. Men, screaming, dropped their weapons and ran into the streets of the city.

Loomer saw Shannon and waved his sword in the air, following others into the streets in pursuit of the fleeing men. Bolted doors were splintered with sword and ax cuts as more souls were gathered for the following priests to rebirth. Word passed from gaping jaw to gaping jaw that water was near. Loomer could almost smell it. His thirst grew and his step quickened the long passage across the sands already forgotten. He passed street after street catching shadows of armored skeletons, hearing the rattling of dried bones and the screaming of the living. Loomer followed a pack in front of him and ran down two more streets until he heard a baby cry. He stopped running and crouched. Muffled voices came from a doorway to his left, the adobe

walls cracked near the shuttered windows. He pressed his head against the door and heard the cry again. Stepping back he slammed his body against the door and pushed it inwards, the lock snapping. He rushed in his body low, shield to one side, sword held high. There were four people huddled against the back wall, their eye whites glowing like small moons suspended in the darkness. A baby cried again, and one of the figures glanced downwards at a bundle in its arms. Loomer stepped forward and they shrank back against the wall, gasping. The baby cried again.

"Please," a woman's voice called out to him. A pale white hand reached up from the shadows of their robes. "Please," her voice quivered, "leave us alone. There is a child."

Loomer stood slowly and lowered his sword and shield. His shoulders seemed heavy. He worked his jaws to speak but no sound came out.

"Please," the woman said again.

He didn't feel the spear pass through his rib cage from behind. He saw it come out in front of him as it snapped off the tip of a rib and jerked his body forward. The spear withdrew quickly and Loomer spun around raising his shield in time to block the second blow. He could hear the warrior's heavy breathing. In a second he spotted the outline of the figure thrusting the spear. Loomer rushed the figure crouched in the darkness behind the door, cutting with his sword from left to right. He felt the blade meet flesh just before his shield did. He held the figure against the wall then released it when it stopped struggling. The body fell, the spear dropping to the floor alongside it. Loomer stepped back and looked down at the figure on the floor. Blood was already pooling at his feet. The figure was small, about the size of a young boy. Loomer didn't look any closer. When he turned around the room was empty, the women and baby gone. The door to the back courtyard swung loosely on its hinges.

Shannon appeared at the doorway and yelled to him. "There's water in the center. Come quick and we'll be there with the first."

Loomer stepped over the boy and followed, his feet leaving red prints like the sharp lined tracks of a prehistoric bird.

In the city's central park Loomer and Shannon soaked their jaws and spines and ribs with well water and dreamed of the return of their flesh. Loomer didn't bother to count his digits this time.

That night they left the city behind, flames burning the sky red with its orange and yellow fingers. The newly reborn stumbled behind the column. The priests followed them, their whips releasing the flesh of the living and baring the bones of the undead.

"There were twenty of us originally," Loomer said.

"I don't want to talk about it," Shannon replied. The wind had picked up again and the top layer of sand whipped in tall bilious sheets across the desert floor. The storm had returned.

"There were twenty and now that Roth is gone there are only two left."

"I said I don't want to talk about that," She yelled against the wind.

"I watched you take a spear through your chest when the column came for us," Loomer yelled back.

"I don't remember," Shannon said.

"I saw you die. I remember, because we held you before we were slain. You were in our arms and Roth was crying. He sounded like a child. He loved you. When he died I was the last one left. I held you both."

"They gave us birth," she interrupted.

"I remember the rebirth. I remember waking up and seeing you both with me. The others were alive again and we walked into the desert together."

"... and the air that we breath," She continued.

"I don't remember any of them since that moment."

"... and the bones will flower with the spirit of the flesh."

"Roth is gone. I didn't look back when I saw him fall. I didn't stop."

"... and the bones will flower with the spirit of the flesh," she repeated.

"Soon you'll be gone and I won't remember you. I won't stop for you either."

"... and the bones will flower..."

"I don't want to be the only one left again, quoting ritual to the newly reborn and pointing towards the glowing horizon as if it were the pathway to eternal life."

"Shut up Loomer Tomp," She screamed. But Loomer wasn't standing next to her anymore. He had dropped to his knees and fallen face down in the sand. Shannon glanced to her side once then faced forward into the wind and moved on with the rest.

The column passed over him, leaving him behind as part of the debris. When he was sure they were gone he pulled himself out of the sand and sat up. He could see their shadows in the light of the fading moon. The storm drew a veil around them and made them disappear. Loomer drew his knees up to his ribs and let the sand cover him.

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