

Eternal Life

Behind the ancient Galician mill, the sickly odor of death reached up out of the dark earth.

Standing in the mill's doorway, Senator Richard Carp gazed expectantly out across the Bay of Biscay along the northern Spanish coast. A gray overcast sky pressed down against a choppy sea. Carp rubbed his chin nervously, pushed back graying hair, then turned to the other three men sitting around a rustic table. On the table a Coleman lamp hissed and cast shadows about the mill's single room.

"Those gulls on the cliffs sure make one hell of a racket, don't they," said Senator Carp.

"Damn things are hungry!" a second man blurted out nervously. "They're always hungry," his voice lowered, then rose again, "just like us!" He laughed, fiddled with his wristwatch. Dr. William Hackett, expert in medieval history and alchemy, was seldom ever heard to laugh aloud. "Well, let's get on with it, Richard," he called to the Senator. Dr. Hackett's hands shook. Only a month previous, his physician had told him he had Alzheimer's. He had kept the awful news to himself, even though he wished he had the courage to confide in his only son that he was dying. Since the death of his wife over ten years before, his son was the only person he felt close to anymore. The thought of telling him—saying it right out!—he just couldn't.

"Time, Bill," said a third man the others knew only as Marker. "Savor the time." With a broad smile, he quoted laconically, "Age, I make light of it, fear not the sight of it, time's but our playmate whose toys are divine."

Lieutenant Marker was also something of an historian, but of a different sort of history than Dr. Hackett's. Marker was a specialist in the history of communist revolutions and post-communist tribal-ethnic insurgencies. He didn't care what the books said about the fall of Soviet communism. There were still a lot of Marxists, Maoists and socialists out there. They just self-identified as tribal

or religious; but they were playing by many of the same old population-terrorist tactics. He knew it. For decades Marker had written papers and given talks on the subject for such well-known, though growingly arcane organizations as the World Anti-Communist League, High Frontier, and the third Millennium Heritage Foundation. Throughout Latin America, too, the lieutenant was well known: El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua before the Sandinista came and went, their memory already fading among the rank and file of the Techno-Aztec Latino Youth Coalition. The world owed Marker. America owed him. He still wept sometimes at night, alone, at the remembrance of those he'd tortured, those he'd killed. *He was still a man!* he cried inside himself.

Marker saw himself a crusader, a tactical latter-day nuclear-age knight in a time of rampant indecision and small ambitions. A warrior had to be tough—"tough as the law was hard and freedom merciless," he would exhort his audience. He had drunk the blood of peasants and generals. He had slain corporate dragons. And now, in the sixty-ninth year of his life, he sat at a table with three other knights on a barren strip of rocky coast in the north of Spain.

Before him, as before each of the others, reposed a heavy silver goblet filled with a different blood, the fresh warm blood of a *unicorn*, mixed—intinctured!—with marrow and shavings from the slain Beast's shattered horn. This dark red paste was then diluted in a rich *Riojan vino tinto*, a local red wine. In the middle of the table sat a long loaf of fresh-baked bread from Ortigueira.

The four men were very much alone in the old mill which had ground no flour since before the Spanish Revolution. The mill itself was perched atop steep cliffs ranging west along the Galician coast. The land was long grown over with scrub and brambles bearing huge thorns. Two-hundred feet below crashed a violent, eroding surf. The mill's crumbling water wheel lay rotting in a dry gulch nearby, its heavy brooding millstones worn and silent.

"This is the land of Don Quixote de la Mancha, Bill!" Marker leaned back in his chair, and

swept his arm toward the door where the senator stood. "This evening we make new legends!"

The fourth man in the group sat morosely, gazing out at the swiftly moving cloud-banks scudding across the gray winter sky. One thought kept stealing into his troubled mind: *Betrayal!* But he did not speak it aloud.

The senator stepped back from the doorway, turned and stood by his chair at the table. He took up his goblet and held it in the air. The oil lamp hissed. A lone seagull heading out to sea cried forlornly.

"Gentlemen," said the senator. "To life!"

Dr. Hackett the historian hastily took his goblet and stood up, scraping his chair loudly along the rough stone floor. He thought of his only son, who worked in a small furniture factory, who made an honest living and lived a good life by many a standard. He thought of his daughter-in-law and he thought of their two children. He could picture their house just outside Grass Valley in the foothills of the California Sierras. He would sit at their table for large Sunday dinners.

"Grammpa," the children would say, staring at him. "Grammpa, why did the unicorns come back?" And he would answer, "We don't know yet, my little birds. We are continuing to study this...this new, wonderful mystery. But you can bet your britches that you will be the first to find out, just as soon as we come up with something." Driving the long road back to Berkeley, he'd hear their question over and over again. Just before saying goodbye, he'd told his son, "None of us really know anything. We never really figure things out." Those were the last words he'd spoken to his son since he'd found out about his illness and before he'd left for Washington to visit Senator Richard Carp. He cursed his lack of courage.

Lieutenant Marker arose, grasped the heavy goblet in front of him. Lifting his drink, he turned to the fourth man still seated, and said, "To our *Sanctuary Keeper*, our brave unicorn hunter

and his glorious horned Beast!"

The senator and the medievalist also turned to the fourth man. They held their goblets high. The liquid sloshed thickly in their cups.

Dr. Hackett had mixed the legendary liquid, himself, blended it carefully according to the ancient Sephardic-Kabbalabic formula copied from a thirteenth century manuscript he'd discovered tucked away in a private library in Toledo. The arcane mixture was a paste constituted of equal parts of horn marrow, horn shavings and unicorn blood. This preparation was heated over a flame and stirred into a decanter of red wine at a ratio of one part paste to seven parts wine. Dr. Hackett held his goblet in both hands to keep from spilling.

With great deliberation, the fourth man stirred from his chair. He bent forward, clutched a tattered coat about his throat. Standing up slowly, he could feel the large bulge of *euro* notes in his back pocket. They were worth close to twenty-five thousand dollars, U.S. Under heavy brows his eyes peered less outward than inward. He stretched forth his left hand, reached for his own golden goblet. Holding the cup away from himself, he looked vaguely at the other three men. He mumbled something in *Gallego*, that smooth dialect still heard in old Galician fishing villages.

The Sanctuary Keeper watched the other three drink down the contents of their cups. The senator and the soldier imbibed with great abandon, slammed down their goblets onto the table, self-assured, glaring wryly at one another. The historian squinted, put the goblet to his lips and gulped down his share of liquid mythos.

The fourth man stood silently, watching the other three stare back at him.

Lieutenant Marker grinned.

The Sanctuary Keeper started to cross himself but choked back the familiar movement of his hand. It was too late for such things now, he realized. He had forsaken his faith even as he had

betrayed—*for money!*—the ancient oath of the Brotherhood of Sanctuary Keepers. Hand trembling, the Spaniard raised the golden cup to his lips—"*This is my body which is broken for you,*" he muttered in his soft, archaic dialect. "*This is my blood which is shed for you, drink ye all of it in remembrance of Me.*" He poured the contents of the goblet down his throat, nearly retching at the horrible knowledge and bitter taste of his deed. Beneath his shirt he felt the ancient Sanctuary Keeper's amulet hanging on its chain, cold against his chest, upon one side the image of a unicorn, upon the other an ancient castle.

When, not many hours before, he had raised this amulet up to the living, breathing horned Beast, the huge creature had lowered its graceful head in greeting, tipping its magnificent horn nearly to the ground. The unicorn had looked into the Sanctuary Keeper's eyes; and in the creature's gaze the man was sure he discerned a strange amalgamation of understanding and mocking indifference. And it was, at that silent instant, that the two razor-tipped hunting arrows pierced the unicorn, one through its throat, the other into its heart. The Beast reared up with a blood-choked roar then fell to the ground dead. Lieutenant Marker and the senator came out of their places of hiding into the open, each holding a heavy, compound hunting bow.

All four men had looked down on the Beast. As if materially unstable, its flanks glistened, its flesh shimmered eerily in the gray morning light streaming down from the cloudy Galician sky. Yet, no thunder came out of heaven, neither earthquake nor angelic reprisal. The four men buried the creature's bloodless hornless carcass in a shallow pit behind the old mill.

"I feel strong!" Marker exclaimed. "The power—" He picked up the empty goblet, crushed it in his hand as if it was made of paper. His eyes flamed like red dawn. "The power!" he bellowed.

Dr. Hackett threw his arms up into the air and laughed aloud in a burst of released tension, "It works! God, it works!" he cried, trembling more and more violently. "Eternal—" but he fell back into his chair. Eyes clouding over, sinking into oblivion.

Dead.

Lieutenant Marker dropped the crushed goblet and stared open-mouthed at the lifeless historian. He glanced at the Sanctuary Keeper, reached for his revolver, but uncertainty and fear replaced the dying fire in his eyes, and the old soldier fell backwards with a heavy thud onto the cold stone floor.

The Sanctuary Keeper looked at the senator.

"You bastard!" yelled Senator Carp, as he too crumpled to the ground in a heap. Bubbles of poisonous blood sputtered from between his plague-dead lips.

The old Galician looked about the room, from one body to the other. He crossed himself, slowly this time, deliberately—he cried, "God have mercy! Christ have mercy." Then, smiling weakly, he slumped down into his chair.

After awhile, raising up off the four bodies in thick malignant tendrils, a pestilential miasma filled the room. Soon it wafted out of the mill and into the cool evening air.