



PROTECTORS
IN
EBULON

A short story

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Protectors in Ebulon

Kae and fifty other Protectors waited by the doors of the Priests' Palace. The tops of the three triangular towers of the palace disappeared in the thick storm clouds. Kae had the hood of his black Protector cloak pulled low over his eyes against the rain. This was no day to ride, but the five corps of Protectors gathered were assembled and ready for battle. If the pleas echoing in Kae's mind were anything to go by, they were to assist the Kingdom of Ebulon.

Fasten the scarf over your mouth, Kae! First Captain Entan ordered on the air. Kae obeyed immediately. He hadn't spoken to Entan since the First Captain told him to obey the priests in all things. Kae had refused. The way he had argued with the captain shamed Kae now. Yet what was done was done. Entan should not have asked him to be a coward.

The Kingdom of Ebulon needs your help, heroes of the lands! Please come swiftly!

The strange voice drifted through Kae's mind again, as it had countless times that morning, the desperation in the plea hard to ignore. Yet this was fifty Protectors answering the call, assembled to offer aid. Ebulon only needed to wait a little longer and all would be well.

Kae'd only been made a Protector three days ago, and this was already the second mission they sent him on. If the First Captain led them, it had to be important.

Ryon, another recently pledged Protector, nudged Kae and whispered. "If we are to leave for Ebulon, why must we enter the palace first?"

Kae shared his friend's reluctance to enter the palace. He had begun to doubt Ebulon was a real place, feared it was just another test performed by the priests.

"Who understands all the dealings of priests?" Kae said, loudly enough for all the

gathered Protectors to hear. Some grumbled their agreement, spitting on the ground to better make their point. Entan looked at him sharply.

A grizzled Protector with a scar running down his left cheek laughed. "What does a pledge know of the dealings of priests?"

"I know enough!" Kae replied, keeping his voice steady and firm, mimicking a commanding tone Entan might have used. He was a Protector now, and would not stand for anyone's mockery. "I know they like their secrets and demand absolute obedience."

The priests wanted to take away Kae's ability to use the Life Force, because they deemed him too powerful. Wanted him to obey and never question, desired to control him completely. Even the First Captain urged Kae to submit to the priests' control. But Kae could use his Life Force in ways others could not. He had more to lose if he obeyed that command.

Enough of this talk, Kae! Entan ordered on the air. Kae cast the captain a glance, but Entan was looking straight ahead and not meeting his gaze.

The doors of the palace creaked as they slid open. A jittery priest beckoned them all inside.

Only a handful of the torches lining the cavernous entrance hall of the palace were lit, giving off more smoke than light. An ancient priest stood by the hanging staircase leading to the underground room, where Kae was finally made a Protector a few days ago.

From the corner of his eye, Kae noticed a hooded and masked Protector join them from behind the vast marble staircase leading to the upper floors of the palace.

Why would a Protector wait for us inside the palace?

The old priest clapped his hands to get their attention. "I will open the passage into the kingdom of Ebulon for you. Follow me down these stairs."

The descent took a good while. The priest led the way, limping down the stairs and

stopping often to catch his breath. Kae spent the wait counting and recounting all the Protectors. Ten men to a corps, five corps sent, fifty men. The cloaked figure made fifty-one. He was not a member of any of the corps sent.

In the underground hall, the priest laid his hands against a wooden plaque hanging on the eastern wall. He muttered words Kae could not hear, and then started humming. The wall vanished. The underground hall of the Priest's palace opened onto a vast courtyard, filled with ranks upon ranks of mail-clad warrior. A clanking of steel echoed across the courtyard as many of the soldiers drew their swords, startled from the sudden appearance of Protectors.

The priest stood aside and pointed. "Ebulon. Your skills are needed there. May you all return safely."

"But how?" Ryon asked in a high-pitched voice. The other Protectors laughed. Yet fear filled the air around them. Ryon was not the only one afraid.

"Worry not, the First Captain will see you safely returned," the priest replied.

The Protectors filed past him and into Ebulon. Black smoke rose into the sky in the east, shading the bright morning sun.

Filling the air was a stench of excrement, old blood, rotting meat, garbage left in the heat too long, all mixed together into something so vile Kae had no word for it.

Ryon nudged him. "What died here and wasn't buried?"

"Separate and be vigilant!" Entan ordered and walked towards the ranks of soldiers.

Kae willed his Life Force, his essence, to take shape inside his chest and called his separated self to his side. A translucent, but wholly recognizable copy of his proper body stood beside him. All around, the separated selves of the other Protectors sprung up at Entan's order, doubling their number.

As always, the separated self gave Kae a heightened awareness of all around him. Kae's heart and mind filled with fear, excitement, expectation of death, lethargy, and terror of the men and women inside the walls. He could hardly distinguish his own emotions from those of the people around him.

An older warrior, a band of gold encircling his head, approached. Entan stepped forward to clasp hands with him. "Thank you for coming, my friends! I am King Yadi. We had begun to fear none of our ancient allies would answer the call."

Entan released the king's hand and swept it to show all the Protectors. "I've brought fifty men, more than enough. What is the nature of the threat you face?"

"Orcs. Vile creatures you have no knowledge of in your lands. They have no mercy and less love for men. And this time, I fear they mean to destroy us!"

Orcs?

Resolution and purpose emanated from the Protectors, yet fear mingled there as well.

"The less time we lose on talk, the better then. We will form up there." Entan pointed to the wall over the gate. Sunlight reflected blindingly off the armor of the soldiers lining it. "I take it you will not insist of a central command?"

Yadi shook his head. "No. I am grateful beyond words that you have come. My only plea is that you help me save my people from annihilation."

Entan ordered the Protectors to climb the wide stone stairs to the top of the wall. Men and women in heavy steel armor watched them pass.

"How do they hope to survive? They wear no armor, and those staves and thin swords will simply break against the tough hide of the orcs." The woman who spoke laughed a bitter laugh.

How wrong she is!

The sword of every Protector could cut through armor, and the two staffs each carried on their backs were known to split rock if wielded correctly, let alone skulls.

Yet Kae could not blame this woman for her ignorance. They still wore armor here and used heavy, broad swords. No wonder they needed help.

The fifty-first Protector didn't join any of the corps, but walked a few steps behind them now. Kae crouched on the ground, pretending to fasten the leather ribbons that held his boot tight against his calf.

As the man passed him, Kae looked up and saw his eyes beneath the black hood.

His heart stopped in his chest. *It cannot be. He can't be this dumb!*

Kae leapt up and grabbed the man's arm to halt him and pull him closer. "Baynard, you fool! What are you doing here? You are a priest, not a Protector!"

The fear rising in Kae's chest was all his own this time.

Baynard yanked his arm from Kae's grasp and removed his scarf. "The people of Ebulon need help. I heard their call too, but when I asked the Head Priest to send a party of priests to aid in the fighting, he refused. He told me he doesn't even expect any of you to return and would not risk priests to the same losing cause."

"And still you came? Why?" Kae had known Baynard since they were boys. Baynard became a priest, Kae a Protector. Different roles, different training. Kae gave Baynard secret lessons from time to time, but it was one thing to practice sword fighting on fine afternoons, another to fight orcs. "You can't hope to win any real battles, Baynard?"

Color rose in Baynard's cheeks. "I came because the Head Priest is wrong. Priests are needed here, if for nothing else than to assist you all."

Kae, come! Entan called on the air.

"Nothing for it, what's done is done. Stay near me. I'll keep you from harm. Let's hope

we survive this and return home!" Kae ran up the stone steps to join the Protectors.

His separated self was no longer just a replica of his proper body. It shone from inside with red light now, yet did not burn. Still, Kae feared it would start to, just as it did when last he used it for too long.

"Can you use your separated self, Baynard?" Kae asked as they reached the top of the wall.

Baynard's separated self appeared beside him, a near solid copy of the young priest. Kae's waved to it, but it didn't see. The priest could not see another's separated self either. None but Kae could do such a thing.

"I can do things with my separated self you have never even heard of," Baynard replied. "Do not fear for me. I can well take care of myself."

Boastful, but likely Baynard had simply spoken the simple truth. Kae only found out about the separated self a few days ago, and so far no one explained much beyond that. Still, his separated self could travel farther than anyone else's, could see others' where none could see his. Now it burned with red shimmering flames. Nothing Kae did would douse the flames, not imagining the river that always brought calm, not the visions of rain shielding it, not concentrating on Entan's orders as he revealed the battle plan.

The vile stench in the air grew worse up on the wall. Like rotting fish and rotting meat mixed together in a pot of old blood, with a heavy helping of a decaying animal corpse, seasoned with rotten flowers. Then boiled.

Kae let the river flowing through his mind wash away the stench.

"Perhaps these orcs fight by smell alone," Baynard whispered, but straightened as Entan's gaze locked on him.

Pay attention! Entan's voice came on the wind.

The Captain turned to Kae. "Send your separated self out to scan the area surrounding the castle. Tell me how many orcs there are, how far from the walls their camp lies, what they look like."

Kae nodded. His separated self already stood on the ridge near the horizon line. Baynard's separated self appeared beside his. The valley below was filled with creatures of all shapes and sizes, some looked like giant rocks, bits of sheer wall broken off.

Is that where we are, near the Mountains of Giants?

Kae was born in a village at the foot of those grand mountains, lived in their shadow until the bandits burned down his home and killed his parents. Kae only survived because Entan and the Protectors came just in time to drive the bandits away.

No, it cannot be!

Giants no longer existed. Besides, the creatures swarming in the valley below him were no giants! Some were taller than men, others much shorter.

The nauseating stench in the air came from them, and mixed here with dung they burned to stay warm. Yet filtered through his separated self, the smell was easier to bear.

The orcs were preparing to attack. The steady, monotonous beating of drums grew louder and louder. Torturous, like listening to water drip from a pipe at the castle, while watching Issa eat and not able to join her.

Issa would just be waking now. *Would she wait for me this morning, as she waited yesterday?*

Such thoughts were useless, pointless and painful. Kae was no longer Issa's Guardian. The priests had never allowed Protectors to love. Issa and Kae had no future. Kae's future was with the Protectors.

Kae had no future if all these vile creatures attacked the walls of Ebulon. Thousands

upon thousands mingled and jostled in the valley.

The skin of his separated self glowed a shimmering red now, began to burn. But not as it had after Kae had used it for too long. This was a slow, quiet, seething burning, like a predator ready to pounce.

As the orcs began to form up for battle, ten catapults were revealed. They meant to take down the walls of Ebulon and make short work of it, judging by the size of the boulders stacked on leather sheets ready to be carried.

Kae had seen enough.

His separated self was back by his side on the wall. Kae reported all he saw to Entan.

Do you think we could attack them in their camp before they advance?

Kae shook his head. *There are thousands of them, all readying to attack the walls.*

Entan turned to the rest of the Protectors and ordered on the air. *Separate and prepare your bows.*

The drums in the distance stopped.

With the sound of thunder, the horizon line darkened with orcs.

They move as wind.

Calls to arms echoed all around them. Archers drew their arrows. Fires beneath cauldrons of boiling oil and water sprung to life.

Fear, anxiety, exhilaration, remorse, caution, cowardice, apprehension, hatred and sadness filled Kae's chest through his separated self. He could not differentiate his own emotions from those of the soldiers around him. To seal it all off, he imagined damp fog surrounding his separated self. It lessened the burning glow of its skin, kept the torrent of emotions at bay.

Everyone except Baynard readied their bows and arrows.

Entan looked at the priest. "Prepare for battle!"

Baynard pulled back his hood. "As a priest, I can use the Life Force to confuse and drive away the orcs. But I cannot shoot arrows."

Entan's mouth dropped open. "I was not told any of the priests were to accompany us. Are you the only one?"

Baynard blushed. "Yes, and I have come of my own free will. Long ago, when greater need still existed, priests and Protectors fought side by side. A battle such as this calls for a collaboration once again, do you not agree?"

Baynard's voice, the utter truth of his words, seeped deep into Kae's awareness. The calm tone Baynard used convinced him of the wisdom.

The effect was gone as soon as Baynard finished speaking.

Entan cleared his throat. "Yes, Father, I agree. Far be it for me to question the decisions of priests."

Kae rounded on Baynard as soon as Entan turned away. "How did you do that? Convince him so easily?"

Kae was sure Baynard had used the Life Force to do so, yet how, he did not know.

"I told you I can use the Life Force in ways you never heard of. Now pay attention, Kae, the enemy is almost upon us."

The rumbling thunder grew closer, drowning out all other noise. On the horizon the terrible catapults were growing larger.

Only the steel purpose of bringing death emanated from the Protectors around Kae.

Each man's separated self stood beside them. Kae knew that every arrow loosed would fly true because of the clarity with which their separated selves saw. His own separated self, a being of pure red flame now, stood among the advancing orcs, choosing a

target for Kae's first arrow.

If only I could unleash its fire, burn them all before they reach the walls.

Baynard's separated self suddenly appeared in the sky above the advancing orcs. It was no longer a copy of the priest, but more like a sheet of his essence. Kae knew it was Baynard, yet not by looking at it.

Can I do such a thing?

Tendrils broke off Baynard's separated self, shooting down at the orcs, as sunlight shoots down through new spring storm clouds.

Kae's own separated self felt Baynard's attack. The tendrils of Baynard's Life Force were fear and confusion, madness and hatred for their fellows. Some orcs were worse affected by it than others. These took axe and sword to their neighbors. One of the catapults was cut down, followed by another.

Baynard leaned forward and grasped Kae's arm. "Your separated self has no bounds, spread thin enough it could cover the world, yet still remain whole."

Baynard's separated self was prying into Kae's thoughts, but the shield of fog Kae raised to hide his inner mind prevented the priest from gaining entrance. "Cover the world? How?"

Baynard furrowed his forehead then grinned. "Like...like melted butter covers bread, to use words you might better understand. Help me rise now. I am recovered enough to fight again."

Kae wasn't sure Baynard was right, but helped him up regardless.

"And the fear and hatred you made them feel, how do you do that?"

Baynard released his arm, apology in his eyes. "You block me too hard and I don't have the strength to put knowledge directly into your mind. Once orcs breach the walls, you

will be able to use your skills with weapons. Likely that will do more good against these creatures."

The catapults had ground to a halt. The whistling of a large object rent the air, followed by a terrible crash as the first of the stones hit the walls.

More creaking followed as the orcs adjusted the catapults now that range was ascertained.

Arrows flew from the ground up. Some reached the top of the wall.

To Kae's right, a large boulder crashed into a group of the wall's defenders, Protectors among them.

Kae's heart raced in his chest. Protector arrows were no match for the stones.

Baynard's separated self was again a sheet over the orcs. But the fear and hatred it rained down this time was weak, as high summer showers are weak.

An arrow whistled by Kae, lodged itself in Baynard's side.

The sheet of his friend's Life Force vanished from the sky. Baynard's blood bubbled from behind his fingers as he clutched the wound. His eyes were wide as he looked up at Kae.

Take him from the wall. Find a healer. A priest must not die here. Entan ordered on the air.

Kae needed no urging.

"I'm fine, really, I don't think I'm grievously wounded. I can yet fight," Baynard protested.

They left a trail of blood as Kae carried Baynard down to the courtyard. Three Protectors lay dead at the foot of the stairs, mowed down by the orcs' rocks. Ryon lay dead among them, half of his head gone.

Kae's separated self burned, flames rising higher, fed by rage over these useless deaths. Protectors were trained to fight with sword and staffs, not die from stones flung by vile creatures in strange lands.

Kae clutched Baynard's arm. "Tell me how to use my Life Force against the orcs. I can end this!"

His separated self already stood among the orcs. Only a thin linen sheet enclosed its raging flames. Flames hot enough to melt flesh. Kae could release the fire, let flame cover the orcs. Torch them all until only ashes remained. If only Baynard taught him how.

Baynard's blood fell to the ground in fat drops, pooled there. If he was not healed soon, he might never be. His eyes were already rolling into the back of his head.

Tell me! Kae yelled directly into the priest's mind, demanding he agree.

"Just let it cover the skies, then unleash it. You dictate its shape. It must always do your bidding. If you tell it to plant all the fear in the world into the hearts of those it can reach, that is what it will do. Because it must do what you want it to do..."

I can make it cover the world with flames!

Kae looked at Ryon again to fuel his own anger, make the flames rise higher, burn hotter.

He gave all of his attention to his separated self.

Like melted butter over bread...

But his separated self would not expand, would not leave its human shape.

Kae tried harder, pushed and pulled.

Imagined his separated self turning into a river, a sea.

Nothing.

It wouldn't even fly.

But he had to end this battle. Had to find a healer for Baynard. Had to bring him home.

Had to return home and be near Issa.

All the sadness at the thought of Issa, his forbidden love, turned to red-hot ire.

If it won't stretch, it might explode!

Kae fed the flames burning inside his separated self with all the rage he could muster. He let the memories come. Bandits killing his mother and father. Dead Ann with blue flowers in her hair, beaten to death by her husband for laying with a Protector. Issa laughing on the cliffs holding Kae's hand, as they leaned into the strong gusts of wind. Entan telling him he must never see Issa again. The priests don't allow love; Protectors must do as priests command.

Kae's separated self exploded in a red sunset. A sunset of fire and death.

Orcs shrieked and screamed as flames engulfed them. Those nearest turned to ash in seconds. Flames danced on the ones farther out. The catapults broke as their arms were swallowed by the fire.

Kae's separated self was the fire, burning all in its path as it covered the land to the south, east, west and north. It had no beginning, no end. Yet still remained a part of him. His essence made fire.

The Protectors and steel-clad warriors atop the wall beat their arms against invisible flames.

Yet Kae could not control the burning.

"Leave the wall!" His proper body yelled to the men and women atop the battlements.

"Leave or be burned alive!"

They obeyed, scrambled into the courtyard.

All the orcs, all the thousands upon thousands of them were shrieking, dying or dead.

Kae's separated self was unyielding flame consuming the world.

He did not know how to call it back.

He imagined it taking the shape of his copy.

It wouldn't.

He called it back into his chest.

It didn't come.

The river, cold, deep and green flowed through his mind when he called it. Flowed over the flames of his raging separated self. Evaporated in clouds of steam as it doused its flames.

The sandy bottom showed before Kae's separated self was contained again. A man again. His copy.

All the orcs lay smoldering beneath the walls. Their bodies covered the ground all the way back to the ridge, and as far as sight could reach on all sides.

Shouts of joy at a battle won broke the silence. First one or two, then enough to fill the courtyard.

Kae's separated self wavered and waned, turned translucent, its strength spent. Kae no longer saw through its eyes, no longer saw the thousand dead orcs.

Baynard was sitting up next to Kae, a bandage covering his wound. Beside him, a man in brown robes was repacking bandages and ointments into a leather bag.

Baynard looked into Kae's eyes. "I saw what you did! Truly, you have more skill than me."

Ryon lay in a puddle of congealing blood to Kae's left.

The healer followed Kae's gaze and whispered. "Him, I can do nothing about."

The scarred Protector grasped Kae's arms. "It was you who caused the burning? You killed all those creatures? Amazing!"

Other Protectors slapped Kae on the back, congratulated him on the victory.

Captain Entan pulled Kae away from them. "Was it you? Did you cause the burning?"

Kae nodded, didn't have the strength left to speak.

"The Head Priest must never know of this, Kae. You must deny it. He will never let you live, if he knows you possess such strength!"

Entan's separated self was cowering beside the man. Kae looked away from it, didn't want to see the Captain's weakness. Entan was holding the shirt of his uniform, his hands shaking. "Promise me, Kae! You must deny this."

Kae pried Entan's arms away. "I am as I am, Captain. A Protector."

Return now! All Protectors are needed back at the Palace. The Head Priest's voice filled Kae's mind.

The walls of Ebulon opened into the underground hall of the Priest's Palace.

Entan cleared his throat, turned away from Kae and ordered them to leave.

Kae tried to lift Ryon's lifeless body to carry him home for burial. He didn't have the strength. The fire took it all. Another Protector pushed him aside and picked Ryon up.

"You will need rest to recover after what you did with your Life Force," Baynard explained as they walked through the opening.

A row of priests waited inside the underground hall of the palace. One of them grasped Kae's arm, and suddenly the man was in his mind. Seeing the battle, the orcs and the flames, plucking it all from Kae's mind as though weeding a garden. Kae tried to fight the man's touch, prevent him from taking his memories. Yet he barely had the strength to stand.

Ebulon, the orcs, Ryon's head a bloody mess, rotting cooked meat, his separated self

exploding in burning death...all disappeared from Kae's mind, as smoke escapes through an open window.

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