

“Vulture’s Revenge”

The biting sting of blowing sand on his exposed skin penetrated dimly through to his consciousness, bringing him to a foggy state of semi-wakefulness. Using muscles which were too tired, he pushed feebly, rolling himself over and onto his back.

Squinting up at the blue sky with sand encrusted eyes, he dazedly watched as the circling vultures made their graceful aerial dance above his prone form, biding their time. “Not today,” he croaked at them, shaking a fist skyward in defiance.

Running his tongue over parched and cracked lips, he attempted to sit up. Almost he failed, as a wave of dizziness attempted to push him back into the oblivion from whence he had just roused. With limbs that felt like lead, he began to crawl slowly onward, toward the distant mountains which held the possible promise of food, water and shelter. A far better fate than the desiccation and certain death that was all the desert offered him.

He had been known as Lord Perry of Atholena, but weeks earlier. Ruling his own country, he had been loved by his people. Fair and just, his country prospered under his benevolent rule. Perry was young, barely 28 years old, and perhaps that had been a prime contributor towards his undoing. Ruling Atholena since his father died five years earlier, he had devoted his country to the pursuit of agriculture and economic prosperity. There had been no wars for more than 30 years under his father’s rule.

What need had he for armies to feed, clothe and pay? For the past five years, to the

chagrin of his father's former advisors, he had whittled down the armed forces to a bare minimum, pouring the money saved into programs that enhanced his country's wealth.

Things were very good under his rule and everyone in the kingdom prospered. The people all had food and some measure of wealth. He was much loved and often praised by his countrymen. Unfortunately, his war-like neighbors saw only the allure of a wealthy country, ripe for the picking. The dogs of war from neighboring Malthese had swooped down upon his country unexpectedly and virtually unopposed. Perry had been out hunting in the far reaches of his southernmost province when word reached him about the invaders. By then it was too late. His entire capital had been easily captured and everyone in the royal palace was put to death.

Perry recalled the horror he had felt in learning that his beautiful wife, Ellena, and his only son, the heir to the throne, had both been publicly hung. He had wanted to go back and fight, seeking revenge upon the invaders, but his faithful servant, Thomas had convinced him that this would mean certain death, and would do his murdered family no good. Urging him to flee instead, Thomas had recommended that Perry try to cross the barren dessert in an effort to reach his uncle who ruled in far away Trexton. Maybe there he could raise an army and return to exact his revenge and free his country. Seeing the wisdom in his servant's advice, he had headed south. Wrapped in his anger and grief, he had started on his long journey that had brought him to his present predicament. That had been weeks ago. He had run out of water a week back

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and his horse had died but a few days afterwards.

Starving and parched, he had drunk as much of the horse's blood and swallowed as much raw horseflesh as his body could handle. Filling his canteens with blood and hacking off as much meat from the horse's haunch as he could carry, he had continued on, the horse's death having given him renewed life. But the heat of the desert ruined his hopes of living off of the continued sustenance that the mixed blessing of his horse's death had given him. Within two days, the meat and blood had become totally rancid. It was so putrid that it could not be endured. The rotten stench attracted the vultures from whatever far away place in which they roosted.

He crawled onward for an eternity, determined not to give his pursuers the satisfaction of finding his dead body in the desert. Perry knew that his enemy, the Duke Trayborne of Malthese, would have sent his henchman after him. Duke Trayborne would never dare leave Perry alive to sow the seeds of dissent. His one week head start into the desert had probably been whittled down to mere days by his snail pace progress across this barren wasteland.

Still the vultures followed him, planning their meal as his efforts slowed and became ever more feeble. The smell of rancid blood emanating from his canteens drew them to him like sharks attracted by the fresh scent of blood. Finally he could go no farther and a body that had been pushed beyond the bounds of endurance gave up. He pitched forward, spent and unable to move. The heat of the desert pinned him down, trying to force the last vestiges of awareness from his body. Tenaciously he clung to

consciousness, knowing that the return to oblivion this time would be his last action upon earth.

Lord Perry was smart. Too smart for his own good, his father's advisors had often said. They had been right, at that. As he lay there, inches from death, his keen mind cast about, looking for a way out of this predicament. The beckoning mountains were too far away. He knew with certainty that in his weakened condition, he would never make it.

The circling vultures swooped lower, sensing the end that was coming. Looking at his imminent death, a fanciful idea came to him. With the idea came hope, and with the hope came a little tiny erg of energy. Ever so slowly he spread his empty food bag to the side of him, in the sheltered cup of his belly that his curled body made. Taking the canteen of semi-congealed blood, he weakly emptied it onto the bag. The rancid scent made him half gag and brought tears to his eyes. Working his knife from his hip scabbard up to his chest, he rested it there. The effort of his actions was almost more than his starved body could handle. All time ceased as he stopped moving completely, the heat of the sun mercifully diminishing as it made its way slowly towards the west.

One hour, two hours, who could tell how much time had passed in that frozen eternity. Slowly the vultures descended, the smell of rancid blood and his prone figure egging them on. One of the vultures dived, clawing at his hair and rising quickly. Still

he did not move. The pain from the vulture's claws opening wounds upon his scalp, and the sun's continued decline giving him more strength than he had enjoyed for days.

Enboldened by their leader's actions and the lack of response from their prey, the vultures swooped down en masse. A large vulture landed on the bag in front of him, the smell of the old blood fooling it into a false sense of security. The vulture's head dipped down, gobbling up some of the congealed blood. Perry watched through slitted eyes, hardly daring to breathe. Again it brought its head down to dine.

Summoning up every bit of energy left in his body, Perry saw his chance and with a strength born of desperation, he brought the knife down in one swift movement, impaling the vulture into the sand below it. The other vultures scattered, flying upward with an alacrity that belied their bulk. The screams of their brethren's death followed them skyward.

Now was not the time to be squeamish. Slicing open the vulture's throat, he held it to his mouth. The final beating of the vulture's heart pumped the warm liquid into his dry mouth, and he swallowed convulsively. To his liquid starved senses, the blood tasted better than the best wine his country had to offer. He drank until no more blood was forthcoming.

The cooling desert, the refreshing blood, and the hope that runs eternal, all combined to give him the strength he needed to sit up. Using his knife, he peeled back the feathers from the vulture's breast and hacked off a large hunk of meat. He ate the

food in silence, relishing the taste. His hunger was such that the bloody repast seemed

like the best viands he had ever enjoyed. He gorged until he could eat no more. Perry sat there for hours, resting and gaining back some small measure of strength.

Finally, he realized he could wait no longer. Gathering up some of the remaining vulture meat, he put it into his empty food bag. Using the small store of returning energy, he managed to gain his feet. He began staggering towards the still too distant mountains. The cold desert chill and the vulture's gift worked their magic and he slowly moved forward, all through the night. Each time he fell, he rested briefly, then forced himself up and onward. When dawn came, he had covered half of the remaining distance to the mountains. Exhausted and barely able to move, he fell down. Perry was spent and unable to rise again. Spreading out his bag, he placed the remaining vulture meat upon it, baiting his trap. Moving his knife to his chest, he made himself comfortable and waited.

The sun came up and with it came the vultures. All day long he lay in the sweltering heat, but the vultures were wary. They circled and circled but bided their time. The sun caused the remaining meat to begin turning rancid, the scent filling the air. Still Perry did not move. Movement was his enemy and he fought it. A scorpion scuttled over his leg, making its way up his chest. Terror filled him as the scorpion moved closer to his face. Biting back his fear, he remained still. Suddenly, a sand beetle emerged from its burrow and started across the sand, scant inches from his face. Seeing its natural prey, the scorpion scuttled after it, intent upon the food that would fast

disappear. Lower and lower the vultures swooped, the smell of dead carrion bringing

them ever closer. Hour by hour it went on. Finally, one landed and began feeding on the chunks of flesh in front of him. The others began landing, but Perry moved quickly, killing the foolish vulture who had wandered into his trap. His knife moved unerringly, and dinner was served. The others flew off quickly, scared by the movement they most feared.

As Perry drank the life giving fluids and ate his meal, he mused upon his desert tactics. It was the smell of death and the lack of movement that had tricked these vultures. The burrowing beetle had distracted the scorpion, probably saving his life. Perhaps he could use these lessons to overcome the other vultures that pursued him. First he needed to make it out of this damn desert. Then he would set his trap again, this time for much larger prey. From the edge of death, a plan was born.

Rising to his feet with greater ease, Perry began his trek towards the not so distant mountains. The setting sun, the sustenance and his hope gave him additional strength. It was well before sunrise when he made it to the foothills that marked the southern border of the desert. He had made it. Not only had it not killed him, but mentally, he was the stronger for it. Life had taught him the hard way. Now he would teach his enemies what he had learned. Looking up at the vultures that had followed him he gave them thanks.

“You have sustained me and taught me,” he praised them. “I shall return to you tenfold what you have given me,” he promised them. With that he wheeled about and

headed deeper into the brush, towards the mountains that beckoned him.

The water from a stream running down the mountain side met him just beyond the scrubby foothills. Sinking to his knees, he splashed the cool water over his dried face and swollen lips. He drank deeply, slaking his thirst for the first time in days. The cold water invigorated him. Splashing further into the stream, he hunkered down, letting the refreshing water wash away the sand and grit that coated his body. Dunking his head, he scrubbed gently at his inflamed scalp where the first vulture's claw had left its nasty mark. Lifting his head from the water, he laughed heartily. He was alive, and by the gods, he was going to have his revenge. With a body that was young and resilient combined with a mind both sharp and quick, it was time to show his pursuers what the desert had taught him. Give him but a few days time and he would teach them their last lesson.

The next few days were very busy ones for Perry. Using his long knife, he attached it to a length of wood, binding it with a piece of cord from his long empty food bag. An hour later he speared a fish out of the stream. Cleaning and gutting it deftly was but a short while's work. He ate it hungrily, being careful to pick out any bones. The food and water made him feel human again.

He rested only for a brief time before beginning work on his plan. Scouting along the edge of the foothills, he came upon an area that was perfect for his needs. Two merging mountains jutted out their legs, creating a small ravine. Sand and dirt had long ago filled the gap, leaving a barren patch. There was only one entrance into this area and it faced the desert.

Perry made his way into the cleft. When he determined that he was in far enough, he began his preparations. First he dug a wide hole. The sand and dirt were easily scooped out. Using his tattered food bag and shirt to haul away the sand to the sides, he flung it haphazardly out of the way. All day he labored, digging ever deeper. Once in a great while Perry rested, but he knew time was against him and so his rests were brief and far between.

He labored on into the night, digging ever deeper and wider. When morning came, his trap still wasn't big enough. Taking a brief break to drink more water and catch another fish, he returned to his labors. He was pleased to have enough liquid in his body to finally urinate. It was amazing how something as simple as the return of normal bodily functions could lift his spirits so greatly.

By late morning he determined that his pit was big enough. It was approximately 20 feet long by 20 feet wide and deeper than an average persons height. Next he brought sturdy saplings into the cleft, carefully crafting a floor over the pit. One long tree ran across the center of the pit, acting as a lynch pin. He brought numerous fronds from the streams edge, covering all gaps between the lengths of wood he had placed. Perry left one opening at the foot of the trap. He began covering the reset of his trap with the discarded sand. Covering the fronds with a couple inches of sand took another few precious hours.

Next he began the most dangerous part of his plan. Going to the edge of desert, he carefully began turning over rocks. His efforts were immediately rewarded as a

family of scorpions blinked up at him in surprise, their haven from the hot sun instantly spoiled. Using a long, leafy frond he had brought along just for this purpose, he used it to nervously brush the scorpions into his open food bag. A long wispy tree branch that he had hacked down and bent into a circle was used to hold the mouth of the bag wide open. The scorpions were extremely agitated, attempting to stab the frond repeatedly. The coolness and shade the bag provided temporarily quelled their ire as the frond whisked them into the waiting bag.

All afternoon he gathered his army, dumping them into the cool shade of his trap. Twenty, thirty, forty trips he made. After awhile he stopped counting. By the time sun began setting in the west, several hundred scorpions filled his pit. He covered the hole he had left with a strong sapling, fronds and sand, erasing the last evidence of his trap.

Making his way back to the stream he ate and drank, resting in the shade from his exertions. As night came upon him, Perry began his return trip into the desert, following the exact path that he had taken to get to his haven. He carefully brushed the sand with fronds, erasing the marks of his earlier passage. When he deemed he had backtracked far enough into the desert, he turned sharply to the left, leaving a trail plain enough that even a child could follow it. Straight to his trap he laid his trail, crawling the last few hundred yards to make it look like he had got there with his last bit of energy.

Pulling himself through the cleft, he crawled forward carefully, directly over the sand he had piled there only hours earlier. Working his way all the way to the back of the pit, he found just the right spot and laid himself down, burying his hand in the sand in front of him. Wearied from his travails through the desert and the exertions of the past few days, he fell asleep.

He slept fitfully, dreaming of his wife and child. Most of his dreams were of fun times they had in their summer palace. The dreams became more unsavory as morning approached, ending with his wife screaming for him as she and his son were being borne away by horses.

Horses. He came to with a start. The pound of horse hooves were coming. Straight to his ravine they came, stopping at the narrow cleft. Carefully opening one eye into a small slit, Perry watched as the 14 tired warriors dismounted and began slowly walking towards his prone figure at the back of the ravine. They laughed and joked as they neared him. To them he was either dead or soon to be. They could see his hand half buried in front of him, the other twisted to the side. Holding their weapons carelessly they advanced, seeing only an end to the thankless job their lord had bestowed upon them. Like the vultures in the desert, they saw only what they expected. Above their heads the vultures circled, patiently waiting.

Perry remained absolutely still, not even daring to breathe. As they got closer, he noted that they were all above the trap. It was time. Moving with incredible

swiftness, the hand that was buried in the sand grasped the lynch pin and using all of his strength, he rolled away from his pursuers, pulling the pin with him.

With a crash, the ground broke open beneath them and they fell through, into the waiting pit. The last warrior jumped backwards as he saw his brethren disappear in front of him. He lost his loosely grasped sword in his haste, barely clearing the edge of the gaping maw that had opened up beneath him. Looking down into the pit, he saw his former compatriots writhing and screaming, begging for help. He watched in horrified fascination as a giant scorpion scuttled over his former leader's face, stabbing him repeatedly with its tail. Their terror and screams of pain sent him into a whirl of panic. He was a coward to begin with, which is why he had hung at the back of the line. The added sight of his former "helpless" prey advancing along the edge of the pit with a long knife, bearing down upon him, lent wings to his feet. Whirling about, the coward ran to the tired horses and leapt upon his mount. Wheeling it about, he galloped off into the waiting desert. So intent was he upon escaping, he didn't notice that his was heading into a barren desert with only half a canteen of water. Only death waited out there for him.

Perry laughed as he watched the coward flee. He knew what the desert had to offer. Making his way to the remaining horses, Perry vaulted into the leaders saddle. Grabbing the reins of the others horses he turned and headed towards the southwest.

He was going to his uncle's. Perry had learned the ways of the real world and

now he needed a real army. He knew that he could do it. Throwing back his head he

laughed. He had food, water, horses and a kingdom to reclaim. Life beckoned him onward and in high spirits, he complied. His destiny loomed large before him.