

Cail, you're not dead.

"Cail! Caaaaiiiiii!!! Caaaaiiiiii!!!!!" it wailed across the grey wasteland. In the midst a man was standing. He had his hands to his ears. "Stop. Stop. Stop," he yelled. The wailing didn't stop. "Cail! Caaaaiiiiii!!! Caaaaiiiiii!!!!!" He started running, his hands on his ears. He wanted to get away from the eerie sound, but there was no escaping.

He kept on running until he tripped. He fell full frontal to the ground. He still had his hand to his ears and no way to prevent himself from hitting the ground. He heard his nose snap and bit his tongue hard. His lip split and he also felt his front teeth crack.

"Outhchf!"

Cail had bruises on his arms and legs, and his face was a mess. He tried to scramble to his feet, but something got hold of an arm and a leg.

"Whaft fthe...?" Cail said with some effort. He looked at his arm and gave a high-pitched scream. There was someone half buried in the rock. He or she, it was not clear which, had one arm protruding from the hard prison, where the rest was stuck in. That one arm was clamping onto the arm of Cail.

"Vlet go!"

Cail struggled. He pulled at the fingers with the hand of the other arm. With great effort he managed to pull free. As he now scrambled to his feet, he felt something pulling his leg. He looked at it. There was also a body buried half in the rock. Its head was also half buried. Only the eyes were visible and the bold top of the head. The eyes were vacant. Yet they had something maniacal. Both arms were free of the rock and moving like a swimmer, but this swimmer wasn't going anywhere. Still it had Cail by the leg.

Cail kicked the hand wildly. He was desperate and angry and hurt. This monstrosity had to let go.

"Flet go!" Cail screamed, and he kicked once more. He kicked himself free. With great effort and aching all over he got to his feet.

Drawing a painful breath he looked around. He was still on the grey wastes, but this part was covered with bodies half buried in the rocks. Cail could only move across it with great care in order not to be tripped. Cail didn't want to find out what would happen if he was caught by the throat.

And so Cail very slowly manoeuvred across the body field to... well, he didn't know... to somewhere else. Cail walked for a very long time. Slowly and zigzagging, but surely he left this part. It was impossible to say how long it had taken him. He never got tired or hungry. So that didn't help, but his body did heal and that made him guess he walked for weeks. Then he encountered a slope. The ground quite abruptly fell down into that slope. Cail could see the end of it. There the ground was totally flat again, but there was something odd about it. The ground seemed to be more like water, but not quite.

Cail was very intrigued by it. What could possibly make the ground look like that? He neglected to think of dangers, hungry animals or the likes. He was drawn by the sight like a moth to a lamp. He just stepped down onto the slope thinking it was made of rock too, but it wasn't. The slope was made of crusted ash with loose sand underneath. The second Cail stepped on the surface the top layer cracked. His foot sank into the first foot of sand and Cail fell forward. The surface cracked further as he fell on top of it. If he hadn't spread his arms he would have sunken into the sand. His luck was short lived, though. The cracks he made and the sand he stirred came into motion. Cracks opened and sand spilled out. A sand

avalanche started to sweep down the hill and in its wake Cail sailed on top of a shelf of crusted ash. He quickly looked down to the flat ground he was now speeding to. The seemingly liquid ground flowed away from the onrushing sand before it got too close. There appeared to be vast numbers of sentient beings down there.

Cail actually didn't want to find out anymore what was there. He couldn't do anything to stop himself from doing so. He was now speeding towards the answer. As he now and again looked up from his sled, he could more and more distinguish, that it were bipedal creatures, perhaps humans. The bipedal creatures started to look more and more like human. They in fact were humans or rather had been humans.

The avalanche rushed on. The humans tried to stay out of its way, but some failed. Cail managed to ride the whole way on top of the sand and debris wave. His ride stopped some ten yards from the surviving crowd. Cail looked up to them embarrassed for having caused this disaster.

"Sorry," he said with a small voice.

The humans were bold, grey and dressed in rags. The rags were grey too, but had very vague tones of the former clothes. It occurred to Cail that he could see the colours of his regiment in some of the grey.

The grey men did not react. They just stood there. Behind Cail men were digging themselves out of the sand. The avalanche hadn't harmed them at all. It had just buried them. Cail looked at them with utter bafflement. And then a man not that grey, not that bold and with not so greyed clothes emerged.

"Captain! Captain Porter! You're alive."

The man stopped. He at first stared at Cail. It took awhile before the words spoken to him were processed.

"Cail?"

"yes, sir. It's Cail."

The man again needed time to give meaning to the words.

"Are you dead too?"

Now Cail needed time.

"Dead? No, sir, I don't think so."

"Cail, you're not dead? What are you doing here then?"

The little conversation clearly helped captain Porter in his dealing with the words. He now seemed to understand what he was doing, what he was saying and hearing.

"I don't know where here is."

"The grey area."

"The what?"

"The grey area. The first place you end up after you've died."

"Then I must have died too."

"No Cail. You're not dead. You're hurt. You can't get hurt if you're dead."

Cail thought it over.

"Okay, but how did I get here then."

"I don't know Cail. But it's not good. They don't like alive people here. You'd better hide."

Cail looked around. He only saw grey men and no one that seemed to fit the description of an entity, that could dislike things. He also saw no place to hide.

"Come stand between us. Perhaps they'll overlook you."

Cail did what the captain suggested. He hid.

“What are you doing here, sir?”

Captain had more difficulty again with processing what was said. His colours had had faded and his hair had retracted.

“Ehm, We’re waiting here for judgement day. It can happen any moment now. The apocalypse, you know, is upon us.”

“What? Who said so?”

“Didn’t you hear it?”

“When? Where?”

“Before we went to battle.”

“What? No! Did you believe that nonsense?”

“It’s the truth.”

“No, captain, it isn’t. They lied!”

The captain needed time to think it over, but the colours evaporated and his hair went. He didn’t finish his line of thought. He turned grey.

Cail cursed. “Aw man!” He looked around. Thousands upon thousands of men went into battle thinking the truth was on their side. Thinking they would return for judgment day if they laid their lives. But nothing happened. They just lost. His regiment had been the last line of defense. A dead captain Porter meant they had lost, lost completely.

Cail was considering the magnitude of what had happened back... back home. With the last line of defence gone the enemy, the heathens, could just march on to Kartagan, his home. Where his wife and daughters lived.

He was preoccupied that he didn’t feel the ground tremble. Only when the grey men he hid between started to move did he notice something was up. New avalanches came down the slope, small ones. Cail moved with the crowd, but tried to look at the top of the slope. The trembling became rocking and more sand and debris came sliding down. The crowd stopped where it wouldn’t come. This gave Cail the opportunity to watch closely at the thing arriving. He first of course saw the head emerging over the top of the slope. It was vague as if it was still very far away. It was. The rocking increased as more of the entity became visible. More and more it got its real size. Cail stared at it in awe. This entity was enormous.

As it came to the top of the slope, its full body became visible. Cail could hardly estimate how tall it was. ten, twenty stories high. It was much larger than any building he’d ever seen. And it was extremely frightening to behold. More terrifying than any demon drawing he’d ever seen. The demon had two huge horns and large fangs. His eyes were two enormous blood-red pools of evil. Its blistering skin oozed pus and pulsated as maggots the size horses wriggled underneath the surface. Now and again their sickly white heads appeared in the craters of the festering wounds. Large parts of the body were covered in battle gear and its head was fitted in a helmet that left only the eyes and the gaping mouth free. Greenish slime ran out of it. The thing had a falchion the size of a siege tower.

“Grey men!!” the demon bellowed. The sound made Cail physically ill. The grey men looked up unmoved. They sort of got in ranks. Cail tried to move in line as best as he could without throwing up. “Ready for battle!” The whole group got into a ready position. The demon stepped down from the top of the slope in two steps. His feet were cloven hoofs and the overly muscular legs were covered with dirty, greasy hairs. It just walked where it wanted and sometimes stepped on grey men. They were pressed into the ground, but roze unharmed. The stench of the demon made Cail nauseous nearly made him vomit, but he held his own.

“Follow,” the demon bellowed as he walked on. The crowd in union started to run. After an unknown amount of time they arrived at a piece of land scattered with weapons of all sorts and sizes. The grey men all picked up a weapon quickly and followed the demon further. As it rounded a corner of a hill their destination was revealed. In the distance a war was waging. Demons of all sizes and shapes were fighting.

“Aaattaaackkk!!” their demon barked.

The grey men started to run. They passed a number of demons and then attacked another. It towered sky high above the men, but they did not hesitate. They just started to hack and slash at the feet and then started to climb. The hairs on the legs were used for that. The demon hadn't felt the attacks much, but lots of climbing men did make him look. It bent over to wipe them away. With a swipe the men were knocked away and fell to the ground many yards from the demon. It lifted its head to look for the big enemy and found it very soon. The leader of the grey men let its sword come down on the head of the undefended demon. The sword split its skull.

All the grey men stood up from everything they endured. The ones that were knocked away. The ones that were halfway up the demon should have been crushed by the corpse that fell upon them, but they were not. They just stood up, collected their weapons and ran to another enemy. Cail stared at it all in a dumbstruck awe. He saw men being struck with a full force hew of a sword the size of a bridge. Being eaten alive and then emerging from a wound unharmed.

After a while the enemy was pushed back. The grey men seemed to be winning, but the enemy had still a trick up its sleeve. From far the humming of a thousand wings slowly started to fill the air. The sky filled with hornet-like beings, who looked to have arms and spider-like legs. Cail's heart shrunk by the fear the sound and sight caused. He did not move, even when the hornet-like demons started to crash to the ground on top of the grey men. Up close they looked even more horrible than from afar. They were horse size and had a stinger the size of a grown man's leg. But it was all useless against the grey men. The stinger did not pierce them and after a struggle most hornet demons just took off with their victims.

And then it was Cail's turn. He was knocked over. The hornet just missed him, but one of its wings hit him. Before Cail could get up it was upon him. The stinger was pushed right into his belly. Cail screamed from the overwhelming pain. In horror he looked at the stinger. It was pulsing as the venom was pumped out of it into Cail.

The venom immediately started to do its destructing work. Inch by inch the flesh it encountered died and blackened. Within a couple of seconds Cail started to die. He gasped, shocked, and all went black.

“Cail! Caaaaiiiiii!!! Caaaaiiiiii!!!!!!”

“Cail! Caaaaiiiiii!!! Caaaaiiiiii!!!!!!”

“Wake up! Wake up!”

Cail opened his eyes and looked at the blue sky. He was not dead. He was alive. He got up and his belly hurt a lot. He looked around. The field hospital was erected on top of the slope which he had defended. They did lose, but the one calling him was his wife. They did lose, but only the war and the rest was spared.