



A Letter Home

A SHORT STORY FROM THE WORLD OF NAN'KADUR

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A LETTER HOME

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Written by Don Elliott.

To my sweet Shandi,

If ever I loved you, I love you now. Your absence since my exile has been a curse. It is a ghost that haunts me even through this war. This awful war. For ten years we have fought, and the toll has grown heavy. I persist for the memory of you. I wake every morning with the vision of you by my side.

You asked me to move on, I know. And yes, I am a low-horn, but I believe I have found a way to earn the right to return home. It is a dangerous thing, and I may not survive. But if I do, I will be the first low-horn to be a commander in the Kad'an army. With that esteem, after the war ends, your uncle and the senate surely won't deny my return.

And if I fall, death is better than life without you, my dearest love.

Should you not receive another letter from me, then I have failed. Know then that I have loved you with all of me. You have consumed my very essence, and I am made better for it. I will die knowing our love will return us to the stars.

*With hope,
Djeodi*



Zana



A spy discovered Hashak the Savage is behind enemy lines, vulnerable for the first time since the war began. We need to move fast and I'm the closest captain, so it's on me to take the giant out. The general lets me choose my own soldiers, for if my plan is to work, I need specific skills.

"Captain Djeodi," says Zana, my first choice. She is young, vicious, and small. I've seen her squeeze through places where my thigh couldn't fit—and I'm in the best shape of my life.

"How quiet y'all need me for this?" she asks. "Chain mail, alright?"

"No. You're going to be my shadow-walker on this opp. If all goes well, you won't even need your knives."

“You got a different view on things, Djeodi. ‘Goin’ ‘well’ ain’t not using my knives! After what those beetle fuckers did, I’mma kill all of ‘em.” She laughs with a wicked grin. She’s rough as any man but too young to see the toll being taken from her. The war lust we all feel after so long in the fight is a useful thing—until the battle is over, and then all the holes where loved ones once stood consume you. I know this.

“Zana is a good choice. Now, who else?” asks the General. Though he is shorter than me, the two curved horns from his temples rise above my head, and yet he’s never treated me like a low-horn, so I respect him.

“I will take Bolly,” I say, knowing it will surprise them both.

“I thought you said stealth, boss. That dillo-head’s loud as a petra in heat!” Zana declares.

“He’s quiet enough for what I need.”

“Who else?” the General asks.

“Thone, assuming he doesn’t mind working with a human.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I want the Kid as well.”

Zana groans. “A human?” she asks.

“The Kid can hold his own in a fight. You know this.” That’s not the point. If all goes well, he won’t even have to lift a sword.

“Thone and the Kid,” the General says, disappointment creeping below the surface like a sunta worm. “That will form your squad? Don’t you want more? For a mission this important, I can spare three times as many without concern.”

“For this plan to work, I can’t have too many assholes bumbling around. You see? Give me these four, and Hashak the Savage will fall.”

“I like your confidence, captain. You remember what is at stake here—for you personally.”

That’s not a question. He’ll promote me to commander if the opp succeeds. All I need is to kill the giant Hashak, and I will become the highest-ranking low-horn in the history of Or’ontar. That will give me the legal right to return to Dro’an Tor, my true home. My wife’s uncle won’t be able to stop my return this time.

“Yes sir, I remember perfectly. Now, may I be excused to rally my team?”

“Good man, Djeodi. I have faith in ‘ol Red Horns!”

Zana raises her fist in the air. “To Red Horns and a bloody day!”

I’ve always hated that name.



The Kid



O r'ontar is a pyram-nation of Cyndyr—meaning there are thousands of people packed into two enormous, three-mile long pyramids running in parallel to each other like fallen columns. There are eight pyram-nations in all, surrounding a single, massive geyser like spokes on a wheel. While most are predominantly human, this nation is almost entirely gadak. But it isn't like my homeland. The gadaks here are a bit, I don't know, intense. They're obsessed with productivity and time like an addiction, feverish, as if they can't get enough. They surround themselves with mechanical things—math machines, printing presses that can deliver an entire book in a day, pressurized oil lamp systems—I could go

on. All of it only so they can eat up more and more time with more and more busyness.

I've got the feeling that the Kid loves every bit of it.

"Watch this, Jodah," he says, mispronouncing my name. He reveals a strange titanium device, clicks a gear into place, grins at me like a child with an unbearable secret, and hurls it into the air.

Wings like a bird snap open, and it soars across the training ground with a buzz. Fifty yards out, it drops a metal ball that bounces in the hard dirt below.

"What the dust—" I stop short when the bird curves around in a perfect half circle and flies back toward us. "Ok, I'll admit that's impressive. But what's the use of it?"

"Did you see it?" the Kid asks, snatching the bird from the air.

"What?"

"It dropped a ferris bomb! It was empty, of course, but you get it now, Jodah?"

I wonder if he even tries to say my name right. Doesn't matter. The bird thing is impressive, obviously, and now you see why I brought him.

I smile. "Show me what else you got."



Bolly



We wait until night before crossing the sandy divide between our two long pyramids. Neither moon has risen and there's mounds of rubble from a previous battle, so we're well hidden as we approach the lone enemy guard, one-hundred feet above on the first level of the pyramid. He doesn't see us and Thone kills him with a perfect shot from his crossbow.

We scale a collapsed building until we're within thirty feet of the first level rails, then Bolly hurls a padded grappling hook like a catapult. It catches with a muffled thump and then we're up.

The first level of the pyramid was decimated months ago in one of the bloodiest battles of the war this year—I know, I was there. The rebels abandoned it and it's now a

wasteland of collapsed buildings and dark streets. Not a single light shines from the ceiling thirty feet above, and I hear no sound save Thone's heavy breathing.

I lead us deep into the city until it's too dark to see, then head north along the shadow line. The spy's coordinates were precise, and I want to get as close as possible without using lights.

There's a strange sound up ahead—falling water—a lot of it. My heart picks up a beat. No one lets water go to waste, not even in a war. It could be nothing. It could be a trap. Worst of all, Hashak abandoned it because they called him back to the front lines, and my plan is in vain.

I motion Zana near. The battle hand language is hard for me. My fingers aren't nimble, and we didn't use it at Dro'an Tor, so I've only been on it for a decade or two. I know, that should be enough. Anyway, I tell her I'm concerned about the water falling and it might be a trap. I command her to scout the perimeter and report back.

She salutes and disappears into the darkness. She's not a real shadow-walker, but she's damn close in my estimation.

We wait in silence until she returns, materializing from the darkness like a specter. She signals there are nine soldiers—five near the water and four keeping watch. They haven't heard us. Yet.

I explain my plan to the others. It's as simple as it needs to be—these are the best fighters you can find, well, aside from the Kid.

I give my signal, and Bolly is the first to move. Like a boulder, he lumbers from our hiding into the open and straight for the sound of the water. He once lived in this pyram and fought for the rebel king in the early years of the war. But as time went by, the king became erratic and the leadership around him cruel. They shaved his horns for cowardice when his squad was routed, and there's not much worse you can do to a gadak. Bolly will live with the shame of being hornless for the rest of his life.

He deserted the king's army that very night and returned to the Confederation.

I peer around the corner and see his right side flickers faintly in the orange light of a fire. By this time, Zana should be in place and Thone ready with his double-crossbow—an impressive invention.

The Kid is crouched next to me. I don't want him involved. My plan needs him alive—at least a little longer.

“Lo!” Bolly calls out. “Do I hear enemies or fellow brothers?”

“Stop right there!” shouts a man I can't see. “I don't recognize you. Who's your commanding officer?”

Bolly raises his hands innocently. “Name's Bolly, I's with, uh, Garza's squad, but got separated.”

“Garza's dead.” The man steps into view and I see his high-horns are long and sharply curved.

Bolly hesitates. “That's horrible news, when'd it happen?”

“I'm surprised you don't know, seeing as you 'reported' to him.”

“Well, I's sent on a mission a few days back, and I haven't been gettin' news.”

The man whistles and three other high-horns come from behind. “Boys. Our friend Bolly here wants to know when ol’ Garza died.”

The men laugh, and suddenly weapons are in their hands. “He died three years ago, you stupid pagoran’s ass,” growls one of them.

Damnit. This wasn’t the plan. I grip my ax and brace to rush out.

“He’s a fucking hornless!” says a man.

“What’s your business, big’un?” the first asks.

Bolly stutters and fumbles over some unbelievable answer.

The men laugh.

“Hornless, this just isn’t your day. Boys! Tie him up.”

I shout a command and rush out of hiding. As I sprint, I see a bolt appear in a straight horn’s neck.

Zana emerges from the darkness and slits another man’s throat.

Before the first can overcome his surprise, Bolly stabs him through the chest with his sword.

The last man is mine. He tries to run, but I end him with a throwing ax. I'm good at that.

We search for others but find none, so I let them take a moment to rest and drink.



Thone



“**W**hat’s the story with Hashak?” the Kid asks. “What makes him such a big deal? It can’t only be because he’s tall.”

“Tall?” laughs Thone. “Do you know what a gorshak is?”

“Sure. Once in a while, a gadak is born who’s... tall.”

Bolly chuckles. “I am tall. Gorshaks are two of me standing on my own head!” He laughs more, and I hush him.

“They aren’t born ‘once in a while’ either,” Thone says. “Gorshaks were originally bred from gadaks, though the secret of how they did it has been lost. They stay now within their own kind because they look down on us shorter people.”

Zana laughs. “Literally.”

“Regardless,” the Kid says. “Even a ten-foot-tall bastard wouldn’t be reason enough to put together a group like this. What makes him so important?”

Everyone looks at me. Truth is, I don’t care why Hashak is important to our cause, all I want is his head in a bag and the promotion to follow. I haven’t stopped thinking about Shandi since I got this command.

“Hashak is the commander of a small militia,” I begin. “He made a name for himself in the early years. He led a team that invaded our pyram and, from what they say, in a single battle, he killed more than a hundred soldiers. But it’s not just his size, it’s his cleverness.”

“That’s a truth right there,” Thone says. “I was in those front lines back then. He outsmarted and outmaneuvered us constantly. It wasn’t until our current general took charge that we managed to force those tanga shits out.”

“What about now?” the Kid asks.

“We’re told the Giant has a smaller squad. A team of specialists,” I answer.

“What’s in this for you?” Thone asks. “I’ve known you for years and never seen you initiate something so... aggressive.”

“He’s getting a promotion!” Zana says.

“Ha! I knew it was something.”

If I’m going to trust these people to risk their lives for me, I can at least be honest. “A promotion to commander means I can return home to Dro’an Tor.”

“I thought they exiled you?” Thone asks. I’m not sure how he knows that.

“I was. But a rank like that makes me equal to a high-horn.”

Thone and Bolly both laugh. “Low-horns are always low,” Bolly says. “Unless you have none...” His eyes turn somber, and he touches the rough stump where a horn once was. I feel bad for him.

“Laugh as much as you want,” I continue. “All that matters is I get back to Dro’an Tor.”

“What’s so important?” asks the Kid.

“He’s got a wife and kid back home,” Thone answers for me.

“How in the dust do you know so much?” I ask him, a little unnerved.

“You told me, you fat bastard!” I have no memory of this. “Three years back, you were drunk past your horns! You probably don’t remember. That was before you quit drinking the stuff. You spilled your water about everything.”

Shit. Of all people, why would I have said anything to Thone? Whatever goes in his ear comes out his mouth.

“They exiled him,” Thone explains. “Had an illegal kid and refused to kill it. When that happens, the law out there is that one family member has to leave the city. Meaning the father, the mother, or the child. Keep the population steady. Now, being the low-horn of the family—yes, he says he married a high-horn—he was the one kicked out. Begged your wife to come with you too, didn’t you?”

I feel blood rush to my temples. I stand. “We’ve wasted enough time. Everyone up. You know the plan. From here on out, nothing but silence.”

I leave without looking back.



Hashak, the Savage



Finding Hashak the Savage is surprisingly easy. We can hear his drunken squad a hundred yards out. I'm across the street from a wide set of stairs that lead up between two ruined gods into the cavity of a half-collapsed sanctuary. At the far end, surrounded by blocks and broken pillars, the Giant sits against a golden altar.

Seeing Hashak for the first time makes me acutely aware of my hubris. He stands ten feet tall with a scarred face and a braided black beard. A single horn extends from his forehead and curls back over his skull. Like all giants, his ears are long, pointed, and capped with tufts of wispy hair. My head is a plum in his massive hands, and I remember the rumors of the cannibal giants.

He calls for one of his men, his voice as enormous as you would expect and thick with the Northside accent. "Take two dem and go ta find da mens. I don't like dey late."

"Aye, commander," says the other. Three soldiers leave the sanctuary.

It's time.

The Savage rests against the battered altar, arms hanging over his knees, a large ax dangling from his fingers like a child's toy. Even sitting down, he's taller than me. I haven't seen many giants up close, and images of what he could do to me flood my mind. I curse myself as a coward with words cruel enough to make my father proud, then focus on the memory of my wife, the memory of my exile, the arrogance and prejudice of the high-horns...

"You're mine, Hashak the Savage," I growl under my breath. Sometimes you have to find your courage, sometimes you have to make it.

I hurl a pebble down the alley. It clatters in the darkness ahead, but Hashak and his men remain lost in

drunken conversations. I gave the signal. Now it's time for the Kid to put his pack of inventions to use.

A moment later, something like a tall candelabra with crystal spheres instead of lights rolls across the street and smacks against the temple stairs with a clattering bang. Maybe the damn thing is broken—not all the Kid's inventions work the way he intends.

Snapping to attention, Hashak sends three men to investigate—about as many as I hoped for. They circle it, weapons out like animals, unsure if it's prey or a threat.

One man gets brave and approaches it with his hand extended.

“Don'ya touch it!” says another.

“I ain' 'fraid.” He peers down the dark street. “Bah!” He reaches out and, as his finger touches the surface of a sphere, it explodes with a brilliant flash of white light and a cloud of fine red powder. The men cry out, clutching their blinded eyes, two dropping weapons.

The Giant opens his mouth, but a shower of sparks explodes from the center of the device. Embers land on

the red powder and their bodies erupt into flames. They flail about, but it is too late.

Hashak the Savage stands to his feet, enraged.

On cue, Zana strides from behind a broken statue, whistling. “Hey, big man. I’s a little hot for your brothers. How ‘bout you? Is it true what they say about giants?” She blows him a kiss. I never realized how round her hips are. My wife’s hips are round...

Hashak doesn’t take the bait. He chuckles and points a lazy finger. From behind an alcove appears a warrior we didn’t see, his longbow drawn.

I shout, but only her name leaves my lips before the arrow slams into Zana’s chest.

“No!” cries Thone. The old man breaks from our plan and rushes into the open. He shoots the bowman in the neck with his crossbow, flips it over, shoots again at the closest man to him.

I curse and race across the street. At the top of the stairs I see Thone engaged, sword-to-hammer with a jagged-horn brute. A second man is moving to engage.

Hashak is watching me.

The Kid rushes by. He hurls a fist-sized ferris bomb at the second gadak and it explodes on impact, breaking him open like a soft-boiled egg.

Thone hacks the arm off his enemy, then cleaves his head in two.

Hashak roars.

The giant steps forward but Bolly... Gonn'damnit Bolly! Our own giant is standing before the Savage like a child before an angry god.

Bolly swings his mighty sword, Hashak leaps back. He's more nimble than should be possible for one so large. But on comes Bolly, slashing again. He has no grace; he has only rage.

I sprint forward. The Kid throws another ferris bomb, but Hashak's bracer takes the explosion like a hammer to a shield.

The Giant cries out in anger, kicks Bolly in the chest. The big man sails backward and crashes into Thone.

The Kid reaches Hashak before me. He flings a chain net through the air, but the Giant snags it like a rag and

tosses it aside. Then, bloody eyes and one easy swing of his ax, he cleaves the Kid in two.

“No!” I cry out. Hashak throws a piece of the broken pillar at me, and I dive to the side.

When I rise, I see the Savage stomp down on Thone, and the old man’s chest collapses like a bug.

My plan is failing.

Bolly is on his feet and our eyes lock just long enough to know we’ll die to kill this dusting beetle fucker. What else do I have without this victory? There is nothing to go home to.

Bolly and I have seen more combat than I can remember. We fight well together, we always have. But we’ve never faced a giant.

We spread out, circling him from a distance.

The giant laughs. “You thought you could take me? I am Hashak the Savage! I’ve killed—”

“We know. It’s been said,” Bolly interrupts.

He scowls. “Then give up! Or I’ll devour your tasty flesh.” I want to say he is overconfident, but I doubt it. “And I’ll have you first, little man!”

Hashak lunges as Bolly thrusts his great sword forward, piercing the Giant's side halfway to the hilt—but it does not slow the Savage. Ignoring the blade, his two great hands snatch Bolly's arms and raise him in the air.

I throw my largest dagger, burying it to the hilt in his back. He only roars.

Bolly roars back, but he's helpless.

The Giant's muscles flex like massive cables and, with a gruesome rip, he tears off an arm.

My friend of thirty years cries out in horror.

I swing my ax low with both hands, striking the Giant behind the ankle. I feel a tendon snap loose and Hashak crashes to the ground with a howl of pain.

I leap and bring my ax down on his back. I hack at him, blood splattering my horns. He shoves upward and sends me crashing to the floor.

I roll to my feet. Wild anger twists his face as he stumbles to one knee.

“I will crush you and eat your bones!”

I laugh, though, unlike him, my confidence comes from desperation. The more angry he is, the more likely

he will make a mistake. I consider throwing my ax at his head—from this distance I have a good shot—but if I miss... No. Bad idea.

He hurls a handful of gravel and I'm forced to cover my eyes. Then I'm hit like a coal train and I smash into a wall, crumpling like a tin sheet.

A massive hand wraps around my head, like that plumb I imagined, and raises me in the air. The weight of my body pulls on my neck and I reach up to grasp his thick fingers. I cry out, feeling pressure like a vice as the Savage squeezes.

He smashes my head against the stone, and I hear a loud crack. I'm losing my senses... He slams me again, my horn taking the brunt, straining against my skull. I try to claw at him, but my arms are sluggish, flopping like flags in the wind as he laughs.

Again, he slams my head against the wall. Unbearable pain twists my skull and my horn snaps in half.

"I will eat you raw!" Spittle flies in my face.

An idea comes to mind, desperate, and I shout, "You lie! You aren't a man-eater, and everyone knows it."

The pressure on my skull builds, and I have a vision of my head caving in.

“I am a man-eater, and I will prove it with your body first!”

“Prove it to who? We killed all your men!” I laugh as wickedly as I can, but my words are drunk.

“Enough!” The Giant opens his mouth wide as my face, long rotten teeth and rancid breath, then jerks me close.

I release his finger with one hand, grab a dagger sheathed on my back, and stab it through his eye.

He reels back and topples to the ground—crying out in pain, screaming for his ruptured eye.

I do not hesitate. I retrieve my ax and bury it in his skull. Twice. Hashak the Savage goes limp, twitches, and dies.

I collapse to the ground, panting. Zana moans—she is still alive. Bolly is dead in a pool of black blood. Thone, the Kid, they are all dead. Victims of the Savage.

Victims of my hubris.

But I have won.

I tell myself this as I lift my broken horn from the dust.



Djeodi



I return with the giant's head on my back and Zana on my arm. The general is well pleased, though the loss of the others saddens him. He attributes it to war, not a poorly executed and failed plan. I am cloaked with honor and applauded by high-horns and low-horns alike. I am promoted to commander, the first low-horn in Or'ontar history, now entitled to all the trappings and freedom that come with the title.

After the ceremony I feel no joy. I try to think of Shandi, my daughter, my homeland, but I am sick in my bones. Thone. The Kid. Bolly. Blood that I cannot wash clean. Their deaths bear on me heavier than armor, heavier than stone. It is the weight of guilt. It is an old companion.

Yet, despite it all, I will return. I promised I would.

I am told a letter is waiting for me... I send her my thoughts.

My love, I am coming home.

To Djeodi,

I write this letter with trepidation, hoping that it reach you before you risk everything to no end. I have loved you, but what you want is not possible. We knew this risk when we had our child. Yet even if my uncle were to concede, it would still not be enough.

My first love, I am sorry. I waited thirty years, but now I have married again, and I love him dearly. I did not wish to share this with you, but you would not heed my letters, and so I am left with no other choice.

Move on. Give up on us, because I have already done the same.

Djeodi, do not come home.

In memory,

Shandi



About the Author

Don lives in the Pacific Northwest with his wife and dachshund Milton. Like everyone else up here, he loves backpacking, hiking, skiing, cooking, and eating.

Don is also the CEO of a digital marketing agency called Gravitare, in Vancouver, Washington. His staff is flippin' awesome.

The Story of Rain is the first series in an sweeping tale of war and love.

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