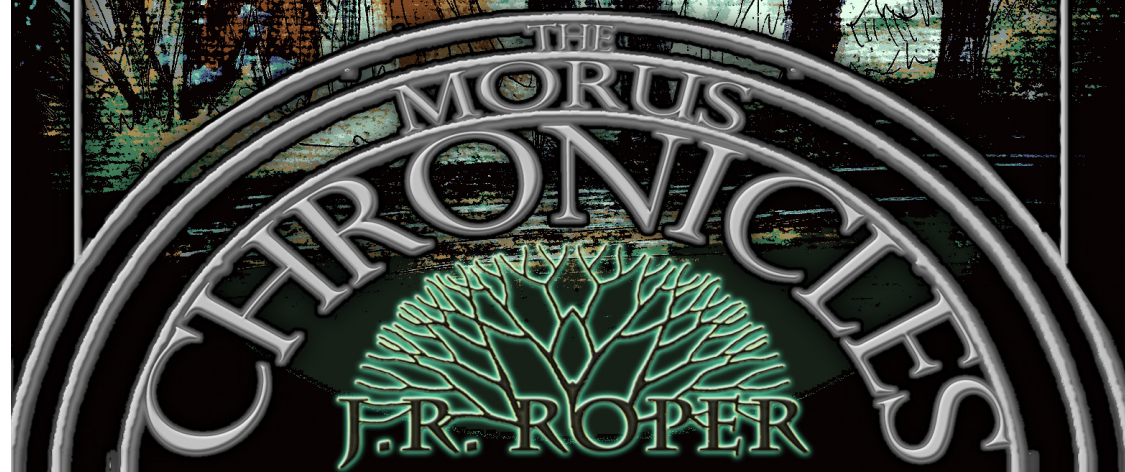


MEL

& THE BLACK RIDER

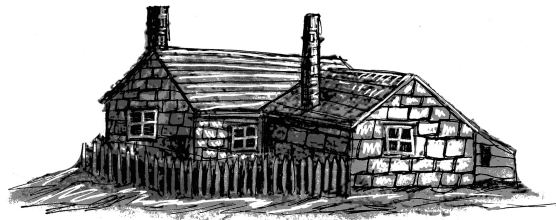
SHORT STORIES FROM



Mel & the Black Rider

Short Stories from the Morus Chronicles

By J.R. Roper



HIDDEN COTTAGE
PRESS

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Book Cover by Luke Spooner of Carrion House.

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FOREWORD

One of my greatest disappointments while editing *The Spirit of Steel: Book Two of the Morus Chronicles* was having to cut early scenes that didn't fit chronologically. With fan feedback and the anticipation of the next full-length novel, I took the best scenes and turned them into this collection. It is with pleasure that I invite you to experience these four short stories and return to *The Morus Chronicles*.

The lead story, *Mel & the Black Rider*, picks up where Mel left off in *The Hunter Awakens: Book One of the Morus Chronicles*. She is in trouble, and she knows it.

The remaining three stories provide a glimpse at Lord Dehdric and the rising darkness, how Eldorian is doing convincing The Council to train Ethan, and the last story takes the reader back to the beginning and offers some background on Ethan's Uncle Nero.

I sincerely hope you enjoy these stories. Should this be your first experience with the *Morus Chronicles*, I hope you return.

MEL & THE BLACK RIDER

A deep cooling of the night air halted Mel in her tracks. She drew her daggers and inhaled slowly, hoping a scent might give away the force nearby. She was exhausted and needed to rest. Helping the boy had nearly killed her, and for letting him live, she would surely face punishment from her master. A raspy breath rattled from a nearby tree and she caught a familiar scent. The Oracle was nearby.

Looking to her left, Mel spotted her, hunched on the ground between two great trees.

“Come closer, girl,” the Oracle hissed.

Mel held tight to her daggers and kept a reasonable distance. From ten paces away, she saw torn clothing and large dark spots on the Oracle’s back. Her white hair appeared matted with dried blood and her face had a nasty gash. “What happened to you?”

“Caught off guard. Lured by my own greatness. Thinking no one would attack me, an Oracle.” She chuckled to herself.

“We need to get you some help.”

“No, child. My wounds are fatal. You’ve heard the curse for those who kill an Oracle, but to heal one would bring even greater pain.”

“Is there anything I can do to lessen your suffering?” Mel asked.

“No. This is where I meet my end.” The Oracle looked to the sky. “It comes soon.”

“I disobeyed my master and saved the boy as you instructed.”

The Oracle's black eyes bored into Mel's. "If you survive what awaits at your master's home, you will become an unstoppable force. All will fear you."

"The same Changeling who wounded you also defeated me. I was lucky to escape. How can I be unstoppable if I cannot defeat a creature of the Dark?" A smile spread across the Oracle's face, the look prickling Mel's scalp. "What?"

"You are unharmed, are you not? The Changeling fatally wounded me, but he failed to spill your blood. Don't you see? You are the Hellish One."

Mel's heart thumped in her chest, and she took a calming breath. "I don't believe you."

The old woman's gaze looked to the sky once again. "The boy will give you freedom. Protect him at all cost. Whichever of you survives will become master over the Dark."

"Will we both survive?"

"No."

Mel knew what she had to do. The boy was already under fire from the Dark and soon would be sought by anyone who desired power. He would be hers as long as she needed him, and then she would take her place above all. It wasn't right, but nothing in her world was. Alone, but powerful, that was her destiny.

"I leave you now, girl." The Oracle closed her eyes and disappeared, melting into the earth.

The house on Walker Street had been boarded up, as if being protected from a hurricane. Mel found a note pushed through a nail beneath the porch. It read *HL*, which stood for Hickory Lane. A place the clan hadn't returned to for years. Mel remembered Lehl, her mother, speaking of the cursed place. Lehl had said a creature lived on the land, even before Master Himes made it his

home. An ancient evil, one which had never been dealt with by the Light or Dark.

Her journey to the new meeting place wasn't far. Hickory Lane was just beyond the outskirts of town. After a quick rest in the forest, and five hours of walking across fields and down rarely traveled paths, she began down the dirt road.

Unlike Walker Street, Hickory Lane was well-guarded by her master. The moment she started up the tree-lined driveway, scents flooded her and prodded her memory. Mel's father was somewhere nearby, along with two clan assassins she didn't know well. Stopping in the middle of the driveway, she noticed someone watching from behind a nearby tree.

"Reporting to Master Himes," she asserted quietly.

One of the assassins appeared. Trevor, a tall, thin man who'd never been unkind to Mel, gestured her forward. He moved through the trees a few paces ahead, presumably to alert the others and prevent an assault on her for trespassing. Or maybe an attack was their purpose? Mel *had* disobeyed a direct order and protected the boy instead of killing him. She'd feared punishment, but until now, hadn't really considered what it might be.

Striding ahead, Mel readied herself to pull throwers and end the life of anyone who dared attack her. She couldn't take on the clan, but she would not go down alone and certain death for the first attacker would be on all of their minds.

The breeze picked up and cooled. Rarely did she feel cold, being a follower of the Dark herself, but something was nearby. Something beyond Master Himes, beyond the clan. Mel shook it off for now and continued ahead. The two-story house with a wrap-around porch and graying cedar siding was fully lit—something unusual for her master.

Although they remained in shadows, the porch was lined with people, and all seemed fixated on her approach. Trevor moved in quickly from her left and stopped directly in front of her.

“Quite the welcoming committee,” Mel acknowledged.

He nodded. “Please, give me your daggers, girl. If you refuse, there are archers on the roof and in the trees who have been instructed to kill you. I don’t want to see one of the finest clan members shot down in front of me.” He held out his hands.

Mel looked around and spotted five archers, but there were probably more. She was fast, but not fast enough to escape. “What does he intend to do to me?”

“I think you know.”

“Is there a possibility I can survive?”

Trevor hesitated. “Yes. But not much.”

Mel handed over her daggers and two throwers. She left the pin tucked neatly next to her scalp. Sometimes she wore it just as a decoration, but not today. Today, it had a greater purpose.

Trevor led her up the creaky porch steps. The clan members lining the porch watched her enter with solemn expressions. Those who didn’t look on merely stared at the ground like mourners following a casket. As she walked through the entry, many footsteps followed.

Inside, the house smelled of fire and cooked meat. More clan members awaited her here. They lined her path through the foyer, down the basement stairs, and to the right. A fireplace came into view and cast an eerie glow over the large underground room. Himes sat in a high-back chair, his staff next to him. His fat head glistened with sweat that trailed down to his droopy chin. Lehl, her mother, stood hunched at his side, while her father, tall and brooding, with

long dark hair, watched on from near the fireplace. Fewer clan members had been allowed down here, but more than a dozen sat scattered around the room.

“Ah . . . my favorite clan spy. How are you doing, my dear?” Himes asked. His lumpy neck and twisted eyes made it hard for Mel not to vomit.

“Ready for another task, sir.” Her own words were enough to make her gag.

Himes straightened in his chair and leaned forward, his body shifting sloppily with his movement. “Are you, now? *Excellent*. We have a special job for you, Hellish Mel.”

Laughter filled the basement. Lehl smirked and leaned against the back of Himes’ chair. Only Father remained serious.

“Can’t do much without my weapons, however.”

“Oh, we’ll give them back. Not to worry,” he assured.

“So, what is it?” She stared into Himes’ darkening eyes.

“This home has been plagued since I made it my primary residence many years ago. And after your impressive accomplishments this summer, I feel you are the perfect clan member to rid us of this nuisance once and for all.”

A cold crept over her skin, chilling her to the bone. Whatever lived on this land was not human and nothing anyone, even Himes himself, knew how to kill. “Will I have help?”

Himes looked as if he were holding in a laugh. He shook his head slowly. “Only you can do this, Mel. No one else is worthy. I could’ve had Tab help you, but she has been missing since mid June. Any idea where she might be?”

Mel glared at him. She would not back down from this challenge. She had killed Tab in self-defense, and she felt no remorse for the witch. “I wouldn’t want her help anyway,” she finally said, allowing herself a half smile.

Himes gripped his staff and the yellow orb on the end glowed, then dulled again. “Of course, this task could claim your life. Your parents are here to see you off, should it be for the last time. When the sun sets, your task begins.”

“What exactly am I fighting?”

His smile grew, until the points of his teeth shone in the firelight. “The Black Rider.”

Lehl took her by the arm and led her upstairs. The murmur of low voices silenced as they stepped onto the main floor. The onlookers parted, allowing them access to the next staircase. They strode up and Mel felt a hand press gently against her back. *Father.*

Once upstairs, they entered a room to the left. Father pulled down the window shades and gestured to the table and chairs in the corner of the room.

Mel sat and her parents joined her. She figured this was a common occurrence for most kids, to sit with one’s parents. But for her, it was rare. Her parents despised each other. Lehl was a witch and as bad as they come. Father, however, was a fallen ranger and more interested in wealth than anything else—which was the reason she’d become a spy. Himes paid them for her service.

“Do I have any hope?” Mel asked.

“None,” Lehl spat.

Father glared at Lehl. “There is little hope, daughter, even for a well-trained killer.”

“What is the Black Rider?”

“An ancient evil. One who survived the cleanse long ago.”

“The cleanse?”

“Yes. It was when the Light had more power than ever before. A host of wizards gathered to cleanse the land of evil. Well . . . *most* evil. No one knows how, but the Black Rider survived the cleanse and has been in hiding ever since. Himes was drawn to this place, not knowing the power he felt was something he couldn’t control.”

“Won’t admit it,” Lehl interrupted, “but he’s scared to face the Black Rider himself.”

Mel's mind stirred. If she could win, defeat the Black Rider somehow, Himes would fear her. "Is anything known about the Black Rider?"

"He lives only miles away. Some say he is like a man riding a black horse. Others say he *is* the horse."

"How does he kill his victims?" Mel straightened in her chair.

"There is a gully filled with thick, thorny trees. A shallow stream flows through it. The bodies of his victims have been discovered in both places, amongst the thorns, and squelched into the stream bed."

"Can he be killed?"

Father nodded to Lehl who stood by the window and was peering through a parting in the shades.

"Is it worth telling, girl? Even you, my daughter, have little chance of winning."

Mel rarely had to fight back tears, but they stung the corners of her eyes. She closed them and searched the darkness for a reason to fight. The boy was all she saw. Innocence. He'd fought off Lord Dehdric, a great feat. But he stood no chance alone against what was coming.

The world of Light and Dark would be on to him and would want to make him their own. He needed her—needed Hellish Mel by his side. She opened her eyes. "I will fight," she said. "And win."

Lehl shook her head. "The Black Rider has been challenged before and always prevails. Little was written about these events and most is from the memory of the clan. The closest anyone has come was a fallen ranger. A beast of a man from the Viking era. He wielded an axe and was feared for his courage and brute strength."

"I should add that the Legion have made more than one attempt on him and none have succeeded," Father said.

"Why should the Legion care?" Mel asked.

“Remember, they serve neither Light nor Dark. The Legion might be the world’s best hope at a peaceful future, as they are willing to destroy the Dark, while the Light show too much mercy.”

“Tell me then,” Mel addressed both of them, “has anyone injured the Black Rider?”

Father placed a hand on her shoulder. “Hand to hand combat has led only to death. If you can land a thrower, it might be your best chance.”

“I’d rather take a thrower to the heart than side with your father on anything, but I agree,” Lehl said. “As I have always told you. Attack superior warriors from a distance.”

“Could I have bow?” Mel did not carry a bow. Too bulky. But she had been well trained with one and it might be the difference between life and death.

“Unfortunately, no. Himes wants you dead for killing a clan member and failing to kill the boy. You are lucky he is giving you your daggers.” Father pushed his long, dark hair behind his ears. “And stay away from the stream.”

A knock on the door stole their attention.

“It’s time we go.” Lehl nodded to Mel. “Prepare yourself. I fear our next meeting will be in the afterlife.” Her mother then left the room with not so much as a second glance in her direction.

Father rose and pulled her to a standing position. He hugged her tightly, but only for a moment. Not even long enough for her to breathe in his warmth.

“Remember, the better half of you is ranger. Hold on to that and don’t fear anything of the Dark. They want you dead because they fear you. When you defeat the Black Rider, you will truly be an assassin.” Father squeezed her shoulder. “I wish I’d done better for you.” He dropped his gaze and made for the door, pausing in the threshold without turning around. “Be unpredictable. This demon has never fought anyone like you.”

Mel visualized herself waiting for the Black Rider as his horse galloped toward her. Waiting until he was too far to strike her, but close enough that she could easily land a thrower. But where would she aim? All she saw in her mind was solid black, with two glowing eyes. Should she aim for an eye? Or the neck? A gut shot would land for sure, but it wouldn't be enough to do serious damage, and he might have protective armor. If he wore an entire suit of armor, what would she do, go for his horse?

The door opened, breaking her vision. Trevor stepped in. "Come, girl."

Mel rose. "Any advice?"

He glanced back into the hallway and then leaned into the room, motioning her closer.

She stepped up right next to him and he cupped his hand around her ear.

"Just win. No style points. Run if you must. Fight dirty," he whispered. Then he placed his hand on top of her head and tousled her black curls. "Death is not an option," he said as he led her out of the room.

There were more mourners now than before, and most of them held a candle close to their heart—the sign for a lost clan member. They lined the upstairs hallway, the staircase, and filled the room below. Himes had positioned himself by the door. Standing for a change, his pot belly slumped over his belt. The room was silent. Mel tried to calm her heart, but it thudded against her ribcage.

The assassin stopped in front of Master Himes. Father and Lehl flanked him on either side.

Master Himes leaned against his staff. "No girl of thirteen would dare fight a demon of the ancient world, except you. Good luck, and we all thank you for volunteering for this necessary deed." His smile looked like that of a lumpy lizard.

“It’s my duty to the clan.” Mel held her chin high and fixed her eyes on Himes. “This will surely make me an assassin, should I survive.”

“Of course.” His eyes bored down on her. “Should you survive.”

She held out her hand. “My daggers.”

Himes nodded and Trevor removed the two throwers and two combat daggers from his pockets and handed them to Mel. She fitted the throwers in her forearm sheaths and the daggers in the sheaths that hung against her sides.

Lehl handed her a pouch. “Rowan powder. Use it well.”

Mel tucked it into her pants pocket.

Himes looked irritated, but was trying not to show it. They all parted and showed her the door. She stopped in the threshold and turned back.

“Another light goes out,” Master Himes said.

In an instant, every candle in the house blew out and plunged them into darkness. No one made a sound.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” Mel slammed the door and stared at the weathered cedar. No one believed she would survive. No one. And when she returned, they would fear her.

She strode down the stairs, around the house, and began across the fallow field. The gully was a good two miles behind the house. She pulled back her black curls and tied them up. Then she started across the fields. When she was about halfway to the gully, a loud grunt, like an angry bull, broke the evening quiet.

Mel froze and waited. Another hideous grunt echoed across the field. She pulled a combat dagger in her left hand and a thrower in her right. When would this creature attack? Before she even reached the gully? If he was like most, he’d make her come well within his lair, so escape was not possible. Not that it mattered. He’d want to escape once the battle began.

Moonlight turned the field into a sea of silver, shining on the blades of weeds and grass. The wind picked up and blew into Mel's face. A good omen, as it brought scents of her enemy. Faint hints of matted hair and rank sweat. She wondered if the smell was of the horse or the man. Either way, while fighting, she would need a steel stomach.

Mel moved forward, gripping her weapons. Ready for an attack. She was within one hundred paces of the gully now. Trees and large bushes had migrated over the slope, blocking her view of the gully and stream. It was then she saw movement—a slight parting of branches. She nearly released a thrower, but thought better of it. Twenty paces was an accurate distance. She'd need to get closer.

Striding onward, she moved straight for the location of the movement. Then she heard it again. The hideous grunt. What was it that had moved? An animal braving the gully, unaware of the demon that lived there?

She held her thrower above her shoulder, ready to release. Ten paces from the gully and she saw it. Someone hanging by their feet from a thorn tree. Someone still moving. Mel couldn't make out the face, but the body was clearly mangled and the person near death.

"Can you hear me?" she whispered.

No response. They were unconscious. She wanted to cut the person down and revive them, or give a proper burial. But there was no time for it now. The Black Rider had to be dealt with swiftly.

Mel looked for a parting in the bushes and descended the gully slope. It was wide. Much wider than she'd anticipated. And the forest was thick. She'd expected to see the stream, but it remained hidden from view.

The smell was stronger now, like she was bathing in it. Dried blood and pungent sweat.

She made it to the gully floor and the moment she heard the trickle of a stream, a dark shadow sloshed through the water toward her. Not quick or attacking, but slowly, as if it already had her in its grip. Mel halted and stared. She felt her heart beating in her temples and the sloshing sound of water silenced. This was the freezing moment when normal humans accepted death. Not Mel. She knew better. She'd been trained to fight through the freeze. Trained to win.

The shadow continued toward her. At first, it looked like an outline of a man on a horse. But as it approached, it became clear. This demon rider held no resemblance to a human. The man and the horse were one and the black cloak she expected to see moving in the creature's wake was a thick coat of black hair. A hundred years of sweat and rank blood threatened to overwhelm her, but she squeezed the thrower in her right hand and the dagger in her left, ignoring the freeze and the smell.

The time was now. Mel ran toward it and aimed her thrower for the right eye. She released with all her force. The thrower felt right as it released, and the path was true. The Black Rider rose up at the last moment and the thrower glanced off its cheek. But it drew blood, which spotted the air as the demon shook its head and roared in pain. Two swords rose at its sides. The arms were muscular and if the beast caught her, she'd be crushed instantly.

Be unpredictable. Be deliberate. The demon flexed and roared but remained in the stream. She couldn't meet it there. It would be the end of her, squelched into the mud. But what if it refused to leave?

Mel drew her other thrower and held it in her right hand. She took in a long breath through her mouth and crept to about twenty paces away. "You belong to the Dark," she spoke as she concentrated on the bottom of its neck. Looking into its eyes could be dangerous, and a direct hit to the airway would stun the

demon and allow her to attack with her daggers. “It’s time you joined your master and left this place.”

The Black Rider rattled a growl and showed its teeth; long and sharp, not fitting for its bull shaped head.

“You will die this night,” Mel said.

Its eyes glowed yellow. “Another corpse for my stream,” the Black Rider said with a deep voice.

Mel was about to heave her thrower, when the Black Rider rose and charged. It was faster than she’d expected—otherworldly. She followed through, as if throwing, but held tight to the thrower and sprinted to her right. She dove into underbrush and fought through the low growing thorn bushes. Fallen thorns pierced her knuckles and knees, but she continued forward, holding tight to her dagger and thrower. Hitting another opening, she sprinted across, hoping to find a tall tree to gain higher ground. To attack on *her* terms. But all the trees were low growing and too thick to climb. Thumping footsteps neared from her left.

Be unpredictable.

As the demon neared, Mel estimated the angle. She envisioned the hairy black throat. *Throw*. She rounded off her path to bring the Black Rider in view, leapt as high as she could, located the throat, and released.

A scream bellowed into the night and the demon reared onto its back legs, thrashing violently before dropping the sword in its left hand. This was it. Her chance.

Mel pulled her other combat dagger and charged the beast. She’d been taught to attack the arm with a weapon. Disable the enemy completely and drive a blade home. As she approached, the Black Rider pulled out the thrower and stared her down. She fainted toward his empty hand and drove at his armed one.

Against a normal opponent, she could block with one dagger and slice with the other, but the Black Rider's sword came crushing down on her left dagger and her blade shattered. With her right she pushed the sword wide. It skidded over her shoulder and she felt it graze her skin. The demon's empty hand caught her by the throat, squeezing. The pressure turned the world hazy and dark. This was the end.

Mel had always known she would die someday at the hand of a worthy opponent, but she'd expected that day to come in the waning years of her long life as an assassin. Not now. Not here, where Himes had set her up to die. Mel envisioned Ethan. Alone. Without a protector or ally. Had the Oracle been wrong? Would the boy suffer on his own? No. She had to fight. Had to help him defeat the Dark. She couldn't die here. Mel squeezed the dagger still in her right hand.

Yellow eyes glowed inches from her own and rancid breath warmed her face. "Like all the rest." The Black Rider snorted. "Unworthy." It opened its mouth and fire rose from its throat, jaws widening, as if to eat her.

Mel focused on the throat. *Unworthy* reverberated through her mind and her blood heated as if fire coursed through her veins. Sight returned and she stared into its yellow eyes. Everything sharpened. The mouth closed and the grip loosened. Mel felt something behind her, holding her up. The Black Rider tried to pull away, but Mel gripped its wrist with her left hand and held the demon in place. Whatever was behind her cast a glow on the demon. Mel wanted to turn and see what it was, but she couldn't move.

The sound of rushing wind approached from behind and she heard a whisper. "Finish the cleansing."

Mel pulled herself toward the Black Rider and drove her right dagger into its neck. As it hit the demon, the blade glowed, and an explosion of light threw

her backward. She hung in the air as a cloud of dark glitter whirled away, then she landed on her back.

The warmth left and pain from the fight caused her shoulder to throb and her neck to nearly swell her throat shut. Mel calmed her breathing and closed her eyes. She saw him again—her boy. But this time, he wouldn't be alone.

Mel awoke to the murmur of many voices and a room glowing with candlelight. She was in the entry room of Himes' home. Father stared down at her and smiled.

"Ready to sit?" Father asked.

Her neck felt bruised, yet she could breathe freely. Her shoulder still throbbed but had obviously been tended to by a healer. Her hands were empty. She knew her throwers and left dagger were lost, but her right had finished off a demon and would be a greater weapon than before as a result. Where was it?

"My weapons?" she asked.

Father shook his head and looked behind her.

Mel rose to a seated position and found Lehl standing behind her.

"Well, well," Himes said from the other direction.

Mel turned quickly and regretted it as her neck stiffened.

"Not bad, girl. We are all so proud. So proud." Himes licked his lips. "It's unfortunate the events of the summer are still all too fresh in my mind. You simply failed to get rid of the boy."

Mel's forehead coated with sweat and her pounding heart threatened to explode. "Give me my weapon."

“Lehl will keep it for you, until you have proven yourself worthy again,” Himes said. “The boy still lives, and Lord Dehdric is plotting another use for him. You will have another chance, and this time you’d better not fail.”

Her dagger wouldn’t remain in Lehl’s possession for long. No. Soon, it would be hers again. And when it returned to her hand, she would remind Himes that she feared no one. For she was Hellish Mel.

Start *The Spirit of Steel* and see what happens next:

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THE GROWING DARKNESS

Tina Spencer loved everything about the forest after a soft rain covered the leaves and underbrush with a fresh sprinkling. The glistening foliage and earthy smells made the forest come to life. The forest path was her place to think, to breathe. But there was one area, cut between two steep hills, that always made the hairs on her neck stand like needles in a pincushion.

The slight slope upward, and the change from mud to rough gravel, reminded Tina that she was near the nerve-wracking narrowed path. The thick summer canopy thinned, and the hill pass loomed in front of her. She turned down the music blaring through her ear buds and quickened her pace.

The exposed rock walls shimmered in the fading sunlight, only dulled by the occasional patch of thick moss. She jogged on and on, past the historic marker, the midway point. As she entered a long straightaway, the home stretch, a small rock fell from the hillside, about thirty paces ahead. Tina slowed to a walk.

Rocks are bound to fall sometimes. She removed her ear buds and listened for the usual sounds of nature, the reminder that everything was okay. Nothing stirred but a whip of wind that blew between the hills. Tina's spine tingled and she looked above, scanning the ridge carefully.

The place where the rock walls ended and the hill slopes began angled steeply; nothing could sit and wait without falling. Tina sighed through dried lips and drew a long breath. Gravel crunched from far behind. Tina spun, still not in view of the pursuer. She bolted for a small gap in the rock wall and sucked in a breath, tucking herself out of eyeshot.

Footsteps plodded from her left, fast approaching, now within ten paces. Tina held her breath and watched as a short, hefty man in a gray jogging suit trudged along, huffing quite loudly.

The footsteps became distant again. She shimmied out of her hiding place and tightened her ponytail. Such a wimp. With her ear buds repositioned Tina walked slowly, not wanting to catch the other jogger. As she started to laugh at herself, a falling rock from her left sent a prickle down the backs of her arms.

She jolted, plastering her back to the opposite wall. A cold slippery hand grabbed her right arm. The hand was pale and bony, more skeleton than human. She shoved away from the rock wall and yanked free.

The pale hand protruded from the rock and curves that looked like nature's creation transformed into human like features. Another hand shot out. Bright red eyes stared into hers, surrounded by wild black hair that resembled tree roots.

She wanted to scream, to run. But everything froze.

Cracked, bloody lips curled into a smile.

"Don't worry," said a man's voice. He stepped out of the rock as if it were liquid. Rank breath surrounded Tina as his smile opened, revealing blackened teeth. "You won't feel a thing. Not yet."

The world closed around her, squeezing the air out of her lungs. The red eyes grew into large swirling circles of light and she fell into a deep sleep.

Tina's head smacked into something and her back burned, raw. The bag over her head smelled like a dead animal and her ankles ached from hands wrapped tightly around them, dragging her. She tried to scream, but choked on a horri-

ble tasting cloth that had been shoved down her throat. They stopped and her feet fell to the ground.

A loud creaking noise, like an opening door, broke the silence and Tina was placed on her feet. She was shoved through a narrow door and sat down. Her captor pulled the bag off her head. His eyes, red before, now resembled shiny black beads. He took a long sniff of the cloth sack, now soaked in blood from the throbbing split on the back of her head.

“Sure hope I get to have you when the master’s finished.” His eyes shone red for a moment. He removed the cord that had been cutting into her ankles and pushed her ahead of him. Tina saw a fire about twenty paces ahead, with four people seated around it. The captor threw her behind a cloaked man who was seated to the right.

He turned on the spot and grabbed her by the jaw.

Her teeth cut into her cheek and she tasted blood. His empty eyes were surrounded by a full beard and moustache.

“So, what do you think, Lord?”

“She’ll do nicely.” He turned her head from side to side. “So young—and full of life. Whatever you do child, don’t die on me. For then your soul will face more torment than you could ever imagine. You wouldn’t want that now...would you?”

Tears stung her eyes. What had she done to deserve this? How could she escape? After a tighter squeeze, teeth cutting further into her cheeks, she flew backwards, landing hard on the rock floor.

“What’s our next move,” asked a deep voiced man from across the fire.

Through tears, Tina made out the figure of a large man, who looked like a body builder from the world’s strongest man competition. He was flanked by a woman with long greasy hair and someone shrouded by a cloak.

“Shouldn’t talk about such things with her around.” The woman pointed a sharpened white stick at Tina. From its shine, it had to be a bone.

“I’ll worry about that,” growled the one they called Lord.

With his words she cowered away from the fire.

The Lord returned his gaze to the fire, and with a movement of his hand, the woman shrieked and flew into the cave wall. The man squeezed his hand into a tight fist and the woman fell into a crumpled heap, motionless.

All eyes stared into the flames.

Tina started shaking. She couldn’t escape with this man around.

“As I was about to say before I was so rudely interrupted—our next move is to be patient.” He bit off meat from a stick. Meat that smelled rotten. “The boy got lucky last time...we need someone who’ll handle him properly.” He took another bite. “Bringing her to full power will require something greater than the amulet. Something for a warrior.” He motioned toward Tina. “This girl is the first piece.”

Oh God, piece for what?

“My Lord,” said the burly man. “Are we sure this is a good idea?”

“Boze, old friend, she’s our best chance.”

“And if the boy—”

The man glared at Boze. “I know the boy’s weakness.”

ELDORIAN AT THE COUNCIL

“His training has been delayed long enough.” Eldorian’s hard stare swept across the faces of the seven council members.

“As I’ve already told you, the boy will be trained when we have the intelligence needed,” Grub said, his neck lumping over his collar and bald head glowing red.

“We approved the training more than two months ago. The boy grows more vulnerable by the day. He cannot remain idle.” Eldorian threw up his hands and made for the exit.

“We’re not done,” Grub shot.

Eldorian turned back. “Not done what? Talking? The boy needs more protection than you have provided and I am going to him now.” Eldorian nodded to the gate guard before leaving the circle of stone pillars. He descended the long flight of white stairs, passed the Wizard Gardens, and waited by the Greater Pond.

The water looked like liquid silver as the surround of torches reflected off the surface. Minutes passed before footsteps followed down the stairs. He could make out Grub and the bearded wizard first. They broke off to the left toward their homes. Next came the Ranger representative and Soar, a young female wizard he still needed to convince. Finally, allies approached—his kinsmen, the king and queen of the Alvar, and Andonicus, the only supporting wizard.

Eldorian bowed. “My Lady and Lord.” He straightened again. “Any chance of support for the boy?”

Lady Aillte pulled on her hood. "Soon if Soar joins us. If not, it will take a month of deliberating." She glanced back toward the white steps. "They want a full report on past treasure hunters and possible objects to be hunted."

Eldorian slammed his staff onto the limestone walkway. "Ethan needs our protection."

"We cannot argue with the Council's extra care," said Lord Rardell.

"Of course we can," Andonicus interrupted. "We're capable of protecting him. And we have legitimate trainers."

"Any word on who?" Eldorian asked.

Andonicus scratched his clean-shaven cheek. "You won't like who Grub proposed."

Eldorian gritted his teeth and squeezed his staff. "Is he the best qualified?"

"I daresay he is. He is one of a few wizards with night sight," Andonicus said.

"And his combat skills?"

Andonicus nodded. "Are lacking."

Eldorian shook his head. "Ethan needs to learn to fight." He pulled on his own hood. "I make for Roseville. Send word when a decision is made." He bowed again and made for the surface.

NERO'S SEARCH: BEFORE BOOK ONE

As Nero peered from behind the fence at the lawn's edge, his mind raced with terrible memories. The house looked cozy, white with black shutters, and a large front porch surrounded by windows. Someday, when it became his, he'd paint it red. He squeezed his temples. Focus.

He stalked across the front lawn. A rustle of the underbrush near the tree line forced Nero to halt. Who'd be watching tonight? He remained still as he scanned the area.

Nothing stirred, and he continued forward, looking toward the woods every few steps. Once to the front porch, he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and removed a pen light from his overcoat, switching it on. He crouched next to the porch steps and took the key from just underneath the edge. Nero ascended the stairs and with a light click, opened the door.

Moonlight through the windows showed an unchanged room. Ugly flower-covered lamp shades, dusty fake flowers, and a useless bookshelf against the far wall.

Nero maneuvered around the creaky floorboards and entered the living room. A large picture window covered the wall to the right and the moon's faint glow revealed the same old mismatched furniture. A staircase rose to the left.

The old man would never hide anything on the main floor. Maybe the spare rooms or the attic. He stepped masterfully on the outer edges of the stairs to avoid the creaking he knew so well.

A landing with a night light waited at the top of the steps, a thief's enemy. He unscrewed the tiny bulb until it went dark.

He peaked in the first room, shined his penlight over the junk closet, and moved on.

As he approached the next door a bed frame creaked. Nero paused. The whistle of noisy breathing was rhythmic. He'd only dare a glance at the sleepers. As he peered in, he pictured himself storming in and making the kill.

He closed his eyes and balled his fists. Save it for later. Nero entered the next room, took out his cell phone, and dialed the number to his master's house.

"And," answered a deep man's voice. Not who he wanted to talk to.

"Can I—" Nero started.

"No. He's not here. You answer to me."

"Do we really need them?" Nero's cheek twitched.

"You need to control yourself. The book is needed to convince the boy."

He clenched his teeth. "I can find it myself."

"No, you can't. Now do your job." The phone beeped.

With his back against the wall, he sank to a seated position. This had been his room for eighteen years. The old man would sooner gut it than hide anything here.

His job? He'd signed up to unearth the treasure, nothing more.

Nero reentered the hallway. As he gripped the door handle of the next room, his heart seared. It felt as if its metal knob would burn into his hand. He squeezed it tight and turned. He'd looked over this room many times in the dead of night.

The small light illuminated soft blue walls circled around the top by an athletic border. Sports posters, first place awards, and science projects covered the walls and ceiling. He rummaged through a drawer of medals and ribbons and lifted the bed mattress to find a *National Geographic* magazine.

Not what he'd hide under a mattress. A thorough search proved useless. The innocence of the room remained.

He rubbed his hands together as he looked to the end of the hall. Would the attic hold the family secret?

As each box, book, and piece of furniture came up empty, Nero's search became more frantic. He tossed the hood off his greasy black hair. His probing hands, so used to shuffling through other peoples' things, began to tremble.

Would the master think he hadn't found it on purpose? His right hand shook.

Light trickled in through the attic window at the peak of the ceiling. Time was up. He slunk down the attic stairs and past the bedrooms. After crossing the lit landing, he maneuvered down the staircase. Halfway down he halted. The bulb had been screwed back in. He gripped the stair rail and listened carefully. Someone walked across the kitchen.

Silence again. Someone stood between the kitchen and dining room, staring up at him.

Nero pulled a blade from his pants pocket.

"Vern, is that you?" questioned the frail voice of an elderly woman.

"No," he replied.

"Nero?"

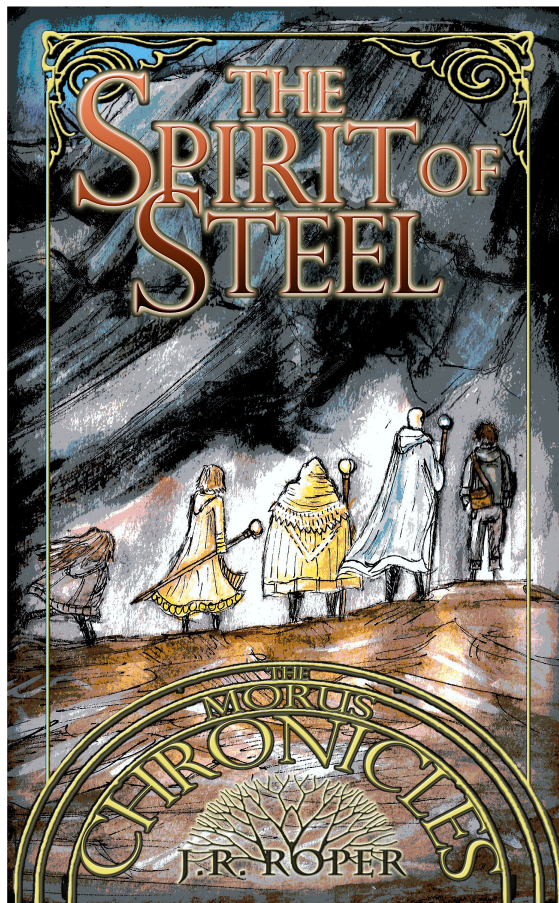
"I didn't want to wake you, so I let myself in."

"Good heavens, you're back," her voice quivered.

He smiled, hatred carefully hidden beneath a menacing smirk he had perfected. "Yes, I've come home, Mom." He placed the blade back in his pocket.

THE SPIRIT OF STEEL

More adventure awaits for Ethan, Mel, and Destry. See what happens next in the Spirit of Steel, a finalist for a Forewords Review IndieFab Award in Juvenile Fiction.



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