

The Cenataur (Part 1)

by Peter Wood

Some say it was a single-minded act of creative will; others say an older civilisation's hive-mind built it piece by piece. Either way, every world has the need for bad and good, for furry dice and cactus quills if you like. A child's mind needs to believe there are monsters beneath the bed as well as a mother's hug in the dead of night.

Love needs loathing like cold weather needs warm clothing. And all truths, untruths and part truths need a place to live when a mind gets too sardine-packed with information and cynicism.

Some say this act of creation was so strong it broke shards from a world being born leaving only rotten pond-water that slicked and stretched itself into lakes and oceans. The separated shard of an ex-world simply floated from sight and nearly out of mind.

Worlds repair and heal themselves so we need to pay no mind to that presently...

The shard though, separated from the maternal hug and central nervous system will eventually crumble. In time. Even parasites need a host.

A few say there was a time on this shard when the light was brighter, the earth thicker and thieves, reprobates, good guys and those somewhere in between co-existed, uncomfortably in a constant state of flux and fight.

What can be said was this: Good existed.

Pure, unequivocal good. One of those became the Cenataur.

Myths get tangled. Stories, life and histories become convoluted and long-winded. So to the basics... Because that's all we need right now...

Let me set the scene:

Two warring battalions of soldiers on top of two directly opposite hills; much battle-based name calling and taunts bellowed from one hill to the other, emissaries scuttle down the brow of one undulating hill and up the other passing final demands, caveats then further demands. Neither army were quite ready to properly raise their

Available online at *«<http://fictionaut.com/stories/peter-wood/the-cenataur-part-1>»*

Copyright © 2013 Peter Wood. All rights reserved.

weapons for the inevitable bloodshed. Three days and nights of repeated challenges, demands and counter-demands, until on the fourth when the moon was a silver sickle in the sky...

The final message.

War finally erupts.

"Soldier!" the General barks at a subordinate, sweating heavily in heavy silver suited armour, "Go tell 'im that..."

"Sir?" the sweating subordinate asks, knowing the chore was beyond his remit, but also just smart-enough to know not to argue, ask questions or churn the wrath of his superior into fury, because that was never a good thing. He'd heard, they'd all heard stories about the General's moods, and they were enough, "Tell 'em what, Sir?"

"It is..." then the General pauses, a skinny smile stretching across his bearded face, "Quill!"

The coterie of soldiers flew into a panic—paper and quills on a battlefield were hardly standard issue, less use than a fish laid on a flesh wound.

"Come on! Come on... I'm waiting."

"Y-yessir."

Paper and quill finally found, the General turns away dabs the end of the quill in ink then scrawls a message, folds the paper twice then turning back to his troops he hands it to the sweating subordinate with a smirk, "Now go. No-one but the chief's to red it, Gettit!"

The subordinate nods.

"Now get go, soldier!"

"Yessir!" the subordinate salutes turns on his feet, prepares for the long march down the hill and up the other side into enemy territory.

Both armies watch the tiny speck of silver armour tumble, march, trip and pick himself up again. The silver silhouette becoming muddier and browner and dirtier as he progresses.

From both hills the subordinate is aware of equal amounts of laughter and jeering. The subordinate's progress is slow, to some even comical, but the subordinate knows one thing; every single pair

of eyes watching him was deep down, relieved the duty hadn't fallen to them.

On the eve of a new sun skinning the horizon, the sweating panting subordinate, muddy and looking far from soldier-like, hands the note to the Enemy's General. The subordinate - flanked by several burly, glaring and battle-starved soldiers - tried not to quake in his armour. One false move and the subordinate's guts would be the indefinite article.

Everyone watched as the General took the note from the trembling hand of the subordinate. Everyone watched as he unfolded the piece of paper. Everything turned slow-motion.

The General scanned the letter's contents, great grizzled frown-lines creasing a bulldog face. Silence, then, "You wrote this?"

The subordinate shook his head, looking at the ground.

"No notion of what's writ?"

Slowly, the subordinate raised his head, "Sir I could no doubt make a head of a snake or a tail of a swine from it..." realising that this was perhaps the wrong answer, judging from the bulging, swelling veins on the General's face, he coughed, "Asides, what is of state should remain so..."

A raised eyebrow, then, "Laddy, you go' no clue?"

The subordinate shook his head.

The general did the unthinkable...

He passed the note to the subordinate, "Here. Read!"

The world stood still the subordinate stretched his hand out to take the note.

Then.

When he looked at the piece of paper's contents, it whistled and crashed somewhere into infinity.

The general eyeballed the subordinate, eyes raised in hoping for at least some clarification. The subordinate's guppying soundless mouth said it all.

The subordinate looked at one side of the page, turned it over, then turned it back again. The note was, well, there was no note, the page, both sides were... blank.

The subordinate's heart sank. He had no idea what this meant. But whatever happened next was unlikely to be pretty... for him.

Suddenly...

From the other hill...

War-cries.

Armour clattered, unsheathed swords grated and hurled spears whistled through the early morning sky, glinting like pearly drops of water before reaching the height of their arcs then transforming into savage armour-penetrating spears again.

The General and the sweating subordinate stood alone on the brow of the hill. War raged below, many tiny dots moved almost randomly, to orders unheard from the top of the hill.

"You are either very brave or very stupid, soldier." The General's voice almost had a tinge of boredom to it, "What's your name, laddy?"

"In the rules of battle, I can only tell you this..."

"Name, sonny!"

"Aveson, sir."

"Aveson, tell me, did you volunteer or?"

"I was picked to take this to you..."

"Did you volunteer for this..." the General's vast arm made a sweeping gesture across the battlefield.

"I was happy in my trade, and if I am blessed, then I will return too."

"Which is?"

"A little of everything, but carpenter mostly... Doors, ornamental suchlike."

The General snorted. A long long pause, like he was trying to reach the solution to a particularly thorny quandary.

"And you are brave and loyal?"

"I'm not one to answer such, but I've never wished for another's wife, if that's what loyal means."

"And to you?"

"It's a start, sir."

"Hmmm." Another pause, "And if I were to join the fray, would you just up an' scarper or fight me."

"I would obey my orders and trust that I see another day and my wife again."

"Hmm. I may've answered similar." With that the General removed a whistle from his pocket and blew three times, chirp, pause, whistle chirp, pause, whistle chirp.

"Aveson."

"Sir?"

"You must do as you have to, I must do as I am commanded."

Although Aveson was looking directly at the General, he wasn't blind or stupid. He knew that sometime very soon there would be some kind of reaction from the three whistles.

Sure enough, in his peripheral vision he noticed a change in the fight formation below. Two tiny specks separated themselves like reproducing amoeba from the fray. These two specks disappeared momentarily and then reappeared in larger, sharper focus marching double-time up the hill towards the General and Aveson.

"Yes, sir." Aveson answered. In his belly he knew if ever intended to act the hero, now was probably the moment. Yet his heart wasn't there. If it were, he'd've lunged at the general's sword or picked up a stone or something to stun the General.

Nothing. He simply stood there thinking, 'he's done nought to me and what is a battle but strangers hacking and hurting other strangers when other times they'd've been drinking buddies.'

The sound of clattering armour and panting horses grew louder. Louder til the horses bodies and their riders shimmied up the hill.

"Well, Aveson. Last chance."

"For what sir?"

Seeing that the subordinate wasn't about to make any quick, impetuous moves towards him, the General shrugged and started walking down the hill and into battle. He passed the newly arrived horses and riders, called out, "You know what to do."

A raise of the hand, but no backward glance. The General launched himself onto one of the horses, gave a kick at the beast's belly then was gone from view, into battle.

The two soldiers briefly watched the General disappear from view. Then slowly, ominously approached Aveson. Aveson told himself to stand straight, not to cower or shrink from them. Definitely not to fear them.

After the first punch, everything went blank. No more hill, no more soldiers or battle. Everything vanished into tin-ear echoes, rushing wind and darkness.

The battle continued to rage. Time trundled on.

A sound of running water — perhaps a fountain. A coldness embraced Aveson's body. A damp wet fog flannelled him. Slow dawning. Aveson wakes. He is no longer on the hill of the battlefield or in the open-air. He is in a cell, slick unblemished granite blocks for walls that stretch and stretch and stretch high upwards like a chimney-stack.

Minute shafts of light crawl from an opening way above him. Aveson stretches out his arms, they touch both sides. To his left, built in the wall is a wooden bench, hardly long enough for him to stretch out fully on.

A voice inside tells him that escape and action is the only option.

Palms feel for handholds, scars in the brickwork, something that might give some grip. Nothing. Aveson feels the ground. It is hard, stone but gritty. He rubs both palms across the floor so they are dirty and scarred with grime and grit.

He leans his back on one side of the wall and angles himself so his hands are palm flat against the other. He lifts one leg so it is on the wall, braces himself to rest his weight.

Pain shoots through Aveson's shoulders. He vaguely recalls the fists and feet that tramped him when he was in semi-consciousness. An inner voice accuses him of being a coward and not attempting to either run or fight when he had the chance.

Aveson grits his teeth, places his other leg onto the wall. He waits for his body to give and for his weight to tumble back onto the floor. He waits a second or two more. Gravity doesn't come, quite yet.

He raises his left palm slightly off the wall, feels his body sliding a touch, then replaces his hand pixie-step shifting his weight and balance upwards a little more. A gradual crab-like shimmy up the wall.

Progress is slow. He daren't look down. Not for fear of heights but for fear of seeing how little progress he is making and therefore letting inevitable futility swamp his brain.

Aveson imagines with each foot and hand movement that he is making major headway up the granite walls. When he finally looks down, he sees he has hardly lifted himself a foot from the ground.

Frustration cracks his concentration. He falls hard onto the unforgiving cell floor.

Again and again Aveson attempts to crab-crawl up the slick-sheared wall. The walls never seem to get any easier to grip on to or lose their slickness. Each time though Aveson falls and the further up he reaches, the harder and more painful the landing gets.

The ghosts of bruises stir beneath his skin. In time they will swell into their own blue-black patina but for now they remain as if slowly stirring from sleep.

Fatigue seethes too. Every strand, every inch of muscle fibre aches, begs for rest. If he closed his eyes, slept, just for a few minutes, he'd have energy to try again.

Random thoughts: a block of wood, spinning turning, rough, untouched on a lathe; blink, his wife standing at the door awaiting his return beneath a full and golden summer moon; blink, a leaf falling in an autumn forest; blink, the spinning turning of wood on the lathe, now a vague apparition of a face appearing from within; blink, a shape, a head wallowing in a foggy strangled mist.

A voice. More a chuckle of a thought, "Heee heee haw... One steps up, two to the floor..."

Aveson listens, silence, "hello?" he whispers, unsure if the voice was from within him or whether he is not alone.

Silence.

A scuttling rasping sound from the corner of the cell. Aveson blinks.

"Who, what's there?"

A voice, the same one that could be a thought cackles, "heee... Haaww... Heee Free as insects.. Freer than bees..."

"I don't understand?" Aveson slowly, quietly speaks, eyes alert again, darting from corner to corner of the cell.

A tic tac clicking sound, like pointy stilettos on metal. Aveson feels the hairs on his neck prick, then a sickly, musty smell.

Someone, something approaches from the shadows. Barely enough time to compute a thought. Vast insectile bug-eyes appear, sharing Aveson's breath. Aveson stares unblinking into the ever-assessing predatory compound eyes. Neither blink. Aveson realises he's been holding his breath and is about to explode if he doesn't let it out.

Time stretches and weaves around them.

The creature opens its mouth; Serated gums designed for mashing and chopping, the stench of part digested meals makes Aveson retch and gag. He remembers to breathe again.

"Three for betray..." the insectile voice squirms, "four for war.."

Aveson blinks uncomprehendingly. He feels something, an arm maybe, slide up the side of his back. He feels an involuntary shiver. "Five... heee haw... ssss-tayyy a-llivve..."

"I want to..." Aveson stammers.

"Alllll beastsss want that..." the voice retorts, luxuriating in the sounds of the words, the gums masticate the words glue-ily, yet the voice to Aveson, still feels like it is coming from inside his own head, "Nooooo diiiiffffrrrent are you?"

How can Aveson answer, maybe this thing is right, self-preservation is the one true thing that every animal and human has in common, but, then what about love, he immediately thinks of his wife and how her tears will be unstoppable when she's told he's been captured and maybe worse. What about all the jobs he'd been tasked to do for the villagers before this war broke out. How could

he let people down. Even if the reasons were somewhat beyond his control.

The insect-like beast blinks for the first time, gums mash together, then it nods, "Follll-ooooow!"

Aveson is about to ask, 'Follow where' but already the insect-like beast has scuttled into the shadows and out of Aveson's view. Aveson listens to the scurrying sound, follows the noise to the furthest corner of the cell.

Something wraps tight round Aveson's wrist, tight as thorns as sharp as rose-bush branches. It pulls, it tugs. Aveson winces in pain, decides to let this thing drag him wherever it needs him to go. No point refusing and increasing the pain. Aveson's body follows...

Follows through and down a seeming gaping hole or cavity in the floor that was definitely not there before, but now for some reason, was...

Aveson follows...

No-one truly knew what happened next and Aveson never told.

Villagers made guesses and assumptions, but like Rumpelstiltskin, he never uttered the truth. Unlike Rumpelstiltskin, Aveson's temper was far more even, so if anyone had properly guessed, no-body, not even his wife knew.

Folk from the town did notice changes though... A far-away distant expression that occasionally glimmered then evaporated like morning dew on a plant's leaf. Also a new composure and confidence in his manner that some felt verged on recklessness had the experimental forays not been successful. The other change, noticeable to all but still subtle were the carvings Aveson embellished his work with. Where once there'd been bland but skilled curlicues and bevelled edges now were fine insect body carapaces with a tactile quality that impelled most to stroke and caress.

The other change, that only his wife knew, was his sleeping habit of lying on his back dreamlessly serene. Where once the sleeping world had held fidgety uncoordinated wriggles and moans, Aveson now remained rigid as a fencepost and silent as the underworld... Or

that's what she recalled, but she'd never known herself fall asleep so quickly. A kiss on the cheek, the briefest of letting the mind settle then she'd be in the land of nod. A question she sometimes wondered about...

But, when the farthings and pennies rolled in, a few quirks and deviations from the norm could be tolerated.

Only once did Aveson's temper alter. And that Aveson's wife did not want to contemplate beyond him being overly tired and emotional and in need of a sweet food intake.

Inside Aveson knew something had changed or turned inside of him, but being mostly of a mild-mannered disposition, all he wanted to do was get free from the cell, kiss his wife and thank his lucky stars for being returned to safety... Which he did til the day he died. Daily.

