

2nd place, fiction

Song of Heroes

by Michael Espinoza

For how long he had wandered, Daniel knew not. All that he knew for certain was that he walked southward, for the warmth of the setting sun was diminishing, yet still he felt its heat emanating from the west. North, behind him, lay his village, the land in which he was born, in which his family had grown, and from which he had been exiled. Stoic as his people were, he shed no tears, but only clutched tight to the curving handle of his walking staff as he probed at the ground before him, searching with the tip of the staff for crevices or obstacles that could lead him to injury.

Innangard, Daniel's village, had prospered in its day, in so much as a small isolated village could be said to prosper. Its hunters found plentiful meat, and the rivers seemed to be overflowing with fish. Thus the people of Innangard were at peace. But slowly the land turned against them, and they believed that the vaettir, the spirits of the earth, had grown hostile. For the rivers dried up, and the winters seemed unceasing in their brutal chill. Yet most devastated of all was the prospect of hunting, for the animals of the surrounding forest seemed to be in constant hiding, or altogether gone, perhaps migrating to some more habitable climate.

The priests of Innangard had visions they believed explained the mysterious disappearance of any discernable wildlife. In their meditative dreams, they each beheld an evil beast, a great, white, towering shape that ran on four legs like a wolf, but stood as high as a horse. Its fur seemed as one with the snow, and were it still it could blend seamlessly with the land but for its smoldering red eyes, and the glimmering of its dagger-like fangs. It was this creature, this maelstrom of rippling thews and crushing jaws, that had driven off the wildlife, and it was to this abomination that a sacrifice was owed.

But this sacrifice would serve a twofold purpose: to appease the ravenous being that lurked in the forest and to lessen the population of the village, so that food might be rationed more easily. While one person would not decrease the population significantly, the less mouths craving food, the more food that could be given. Thus a choice was made. Innangard needed its farmers, and its warriors, and most definitely its priests. It was then that the eye of misfortune fell upon Daniel, where he sat in his home, singing to himself songs of the ancient heroes of his people. Daniel the bard, he would be exiled, he would be sacrificed. For what good was a bard in time of famine. And more to the point... Daniel was blind. "What good could he do us," spoke a high priest, "in times of war or peace, in famine or prosperity he will still see darkness. It is a mercy to end his life."

"A mercy indeed." agreed yet another robed priest. "For even a blind man will sate the hunger of that white horror in the woods."

These priests spoke to each other and the people of the town, who had assembled in the great circular court at the heart of Innangard, save for Daniel, who remained in his home, blissful and unaware. The

people murmured a quiet, sad consent. Daniel was much beloved, but they felt their load would be lightened considerably were they not providing food for one who could not hunt for himself. This then was the consensus: Daniel would be set loose in the woods with a walking staff and fate would handle the rest. But not all were pleased with this verdict. A golden-haired girl, named Elki, raised her voice above the dull clamor. "Listen to yourselves!" she cursed them. "How many nights have we sat around the fire and heard Daniel's songs of our ancestors?! How many days has his casual wandering and early morning singing roused you all peacefully from your nightly dreams?"

"Be at peace Elki," quoth the high priest, "for Daniel's death will be swift, thus is the will of the Gods."

"Thus is the will of your greedy gullet!" she snarled. "If he is exiled, then I shall go with him."

"No," came a quiet, yet resolute voice at the rear of the crowd, "that will not do."

Hearing the clamor of voices, Daniel had roused himself from his bed. Dressing and taking his walking staff, he made his way to the crowd in time to hear the priests' decision and Elki's outburst. Sorrow filled his heart for the people of his village, for the burden he'd apparently placed upon them, and for the fact that they were all so ready to condemn him to a cruel death at the slaving fangs of an unknown demon. But ever tranquil, the blind bard reflected upon the songs of his ancestral heroes, and remembered their sacrifices, all they had given to better their families and their people. How worthy was he to keep their songs alive if he were unwilling to make the same sacrifices? This he said to Elki, who clung to him with sorrowful passion. "Many nights," spoke again the high priest, "you and Daniel have sat together and shared tales of the legendary warriors of our people. Truly if there was another way to appease this creature, to bring us peace, it would be done."

"You think only of food rationing," Elki muttered, "you would sell us all out to fill your breakfast platter with our shares of food."

"Hush Elki," Daniel said gently, "he is a man of the Gods, let his will be done."

Thus Daniel was escorted to the edge of the village, leaving behind his warm home, his familiar land, and a tearful Elki. Truthful the priest had been, for many a night Daniel had spent, holding Elki in his arms and singing quietly to her, the songs his father had taught to him. They rejoiced and laughed and wept together at the tales Daniel knew in song. Daniel had pledged to her his eternal friendship, and he felt truly distraught as he now walked, pace by pace, away from that pledge. Thoughts such as this weighed him down as he walked, slowly picking his way through the undergrowth with his staff. Still in his head rung the prayers of the villagers, that the great beast would come to him and deal him a merciful death.

The sun had long since set when Daniel first sensed eyes upon him. Knowing that water naturally took a downhill course, he was steadily making his way down a hill in hopes of finding a stream from which he might drink. But, as one might feel the presence of an onlooker who goes unseen, Daniel's skin prickled as the eerie sense of being carefully observed washed over him. Stopping short, his keen ears detected a tiny footstep on the snow. Subtle, quiet, and ominous beyond compare.

Bringing his staff about in a wide arc across the ground, Daniel deduced that he was in a small clearing. Springing forward, he placed his back to a tree and faced the way from whence he'd come, clutching his staff in both hands as one might wield a bludgeon or a double-handed sword. The footsteps continued now, padding closer, accompanied by the quiet breaths of a predator carefully monitoring its own respiration, so as not to alert its prey. Searching the clearing with his sense of sound, Daniel could find no means of escape, only a cold wind blowing through the densely grouped trees and the quiet pattering of still-falling snow. Yet still onward came that awful padding gait of the unseen horror.

Daniel would not die a coward, but he knew he stood no chance in pitched battle. Laying down his staff, he strode forward, ready to meet his fate, knowing that soon, he would be with his ancestors. But it was not the scoring scrape of fangs that met him, but a cold muzzle that was thrust against him, accompanied by a curious barking, and a licking tongue. Extending his hands, Daniel observed that some great dog, perhaps even a wolf, stood before him now, licking at his face. But what wolf could be so tame as this?

The creature nuzzled Daniel affectionately, its tale wagging from side to side at a pleasant speed. Daniel scratched the wolf behind its ears and down its great back, marveling at the height of the creature. The wolf barked happily, circling its new friend and in doing so, herding Daniel away from the clearing and in a desired direction. By standing behind the blind bard, the creature would prod the man with its muzzle to coax him in a certain direction.

Having reclaimed his staff, Daniel made quick work of the forest terrain, and soon felt the sensation of a natural roof above his head. A cave, and for the moment, a home.

The wolf disappeared then for a moment, out of the mouth of the cave. Daniel sat against a wall, content for the moment to have found a place to rest wherein he would not be drenched in snow. Still, it disheartened him that his canine benefactor had disappeared so readily. Just as this thought crossed his mind, Daniel heard a loud splash far in the distance, followed by a victorious animal grunt. Mere moments later, the wolf trotted back into the cave and deposited something bloody and wet into the blind man's lap. Crying out, Daniel leapt up and clutched at the item the wolf had just bestowed upon him. A freshly-killed fish.

"Thank you," Daniel said, "my friend."

The wolf barked appreciatively and promptly ripped his fair share of the fish away from the scaly body, darting off to a corner of the cave to enjoy his meal. Grimacing, Daniel set about to gutting the fish and scraping out its meat with his bare hands, which by the end of this ordeal stank of blood and scales. Throwing caution aside in favor of survival and a full stomach, Daniel tore into the fish meat and found himself quite content with it despite its raw bite and the iron taste left by its spilled blood.

Sleep came easy that night, and Daniel woke the next morning with the furry body of his newfound ally close at hand. The wolf led Daniel to the river that morning and the bard drank deep, likewise taking the opportunity to bathe himself and clean his garments. As Daniel did so, the wolf set about to fishing, and

soon had a whole pile of fish ready to be consumed at their leisure. Daniel cried to the heavens with praise for his good fortune, surely the spirits of the land were pleased with him.

On their way back to the cave, the wolf nuzzled Daniel irritably, displeased with the pace they were keeping on their trek. Daniel sighed and tried his best to tell the wolf that he could walk no faster without losing his bearings, but his companion seemed to have other ideas. Crouching low, behind the bard, the wolf darting beneath him before raising itself up to its full, horse-like height, with Daniel astride its back. Taking off at full speed, the trip back to the cave was made in little time at all, and Daniel was quick to dismount and set about to cleaning their kills with a sharpened rock he'd procured by the river's edge. Thus his new means of transport was secured Riding upon the wolf's massive back like a horseman on his steed, Daniel's passage through the forest was made easy. By day they journeyed afar, fishing or hunting greater prey, which Daniel would skin as best he could. It was easy for him to see, with the ravenous appetite of the wolf, how hunting could have been made scarce for his people. By night, they returned to the cave to eat and sleep contentedly, until the sun rose again.

But the wilds of the northern lands, with their small villages such as Innangard, did not long go unnoticed by the world at large. While Daniel and the wolf slept content in their cave, a caravan journeyed up from the south, not to make trade or bring gifts, but to conquer and enslave. Beating a path through the forest, the slavers made short work of many smaller settlements before turning their attentions, and their weapons, upon Innangard. Stricken by famine, the warriors of Innangard could do little to fight, but battled valiantly until they were cut down by the great and wicked blades of the raiders from the south. The men were butchered like dogs in the streets, the women and children locked away to be sold in markets and foreign ports. But none of this great devastation reached Daniel's knowledge until the slavers, in a last act of cruelty, set Innangard ablaze.

"Smoke," Daniel said suddenly, rising from his sleep in the dead of night, "a fire!"

The wolf whined unhappily.

"Innangard, my home." Daniel swore, leaping to his feet. "The smoke drifts to us on the northern wind."

He had been cursed by his people, exiled from his homeland, and now he knew, somehow, that it was in peril. Could he leave the land he'd grown in to burn?

They had forsaken him so readily. But Elki had not, nor would any of the heroes in his songs forsake even the most evil of their brethren. Striding to the mouth of the cave and taking up his staff, Daniel issued a charge to the Gods.

"Until now," he spoke, "you have blessed me with the gift of song and given me what I felt to be a curse of blindness. But now, in the cover of this starless night, let me ride like a shadow and bring swift death to those who would harm my kinsmen! Let me move as one with the darkness and give to me the courage of the heroes whose songs I've sung. My village forsook me, but I trust you who dwell on high shall not be so ready to deal death!"

By his side, the great wolf howled to the heavens in a mighty, echoing display of power and dominion over the raw forces of passion and strength. Leaping astride his mount, Daniel spurred the wolf onward in the direction of the smoke, lifting high the war-cry of his people. But silent went he as the wolf crested a hilltop and he felt the blaze of flame warm his skin that had grown so accustomed to the cold over these many long nights. "Go my steed," Daniel said, "warn me of attackers and protect me as you have in the past. Not long have I known you, but surely it was divinity that led me into your company. Now let us go and carve out a song for ourselves in the glorious blaze of battle."

Into the village they charged, through streets clogged with bodies, between buildings that crumbled and burned. Homes, merchant stalls, and the temple, all cast the eerie glow of flame upon the moon-bathed snow. Like a blur of death came Daniel and his fiery eyed steed, charging into the midst of slavers who stood triumphantly watching their work unfold. With its crushing jaws the wolf tore asunder hapless enemies left and right, as Daniel's staff sang a killing song, striking at the heads of his foes from where he sat upon his steed. Quick work the team made of these men, and others were likewise soon to fall.

Making their way to the cages wherein the survivors of the raid were held, Daniel and his beast made short work of the guards, who fell with torn throats and crushed skulls to paint a crimson portrait of destruction upon the snow's blank canvas. Guided by the voices of his fellow villagers, Daniel found the keys to the cages and released the people of Innangard. Children cried, women rejoiced, and the last few fighting men took up arms and charged into the inferno that once had been their home. It was then that, above the roar of the people and the startled cries of the remaining slavers, that Daniel heard the scream of a familiar voice.

Turning his mount, Daniel coaxed it on through the smoke and flame that obscured all vision. More to his advantage. The scene that unfolded beyond his sight, however, was grim. Elki stood, at last discovered after having hidden for quite some time, a stolen bow and arrow in her hand, a dead slaver at her feet. A semi-circle of the raiders had formed around her and their fallen comrade. She had an arrow notched, but they wielded blades. She would fall but one of them before they were upon her. "Drop the bow, girl!" barked one of the raiders in a raspy tone. "You're done."

"I'll die like my brothers!" snarled Elki. "And you dogs shall join your fallen as well!"

When the twang of the bowstring resounded in Daniel's ears, he leapt into the midst of the attackers as they pressed in on Elki. Surprised, they spun to face him, giving Elki time to notch another arrow and loose it into the crowd. Together with Elki and his wolf, Daniel battered down the last of the slave-traders, only stopping when Elki's hand caught his arm.

"Innangard is ruined." he said quietly.

"Yet you returned?"

"I would not forsake my village."

"You are noble," Elki sighed, "like the warriors of your songs. How came you by your steed."

"The prayers of the people were answered." Daniel replied. "I was met by the great beast that haunted your woods, but I was not quick to greet him with malice and death. Thus we are friends."

Taking Elki's hand, Daniel dismounted the wolf, who trotted in circles about them as they made their way to the central court, wherein the surviving citizens were gathered. Already it had been decided that efforts would be made to rebuild the town. When the people saw Daniel, a silence washed over them as an ocean wave washes over the shore. For beside him, was the great beast that had filled them with such dread, seated upon the ground and thumping its tail happily. The high priest, who had surrendered his every weapon abruptly and thus been spared the raiders wrath, was the first to speak, rushing forward and clasping Daniel's shoulders.

"The Gods sent you back to your home," he cried, "to bring salvation! Hail to you Daniel, welcome back! You have truly earned your place in our midst."

"Save your pompous words, holy man," Daniel barked, pushing back the priest, who stumbled to the ground with the force of the blow, "I'd earned my place in your midst when I was born into this land! It was your selfishness, your swiftness to pass judgment that cast me out! I'll not return to the likes of you and call myself content!"

"Daniel," cried Elki, hugging him tightly, "what madness is this; where will you go?"

"I was exiled," Daniel replied, "no kindness, earned in any way, can make good that evil act. I will go into the forest as I was bidden, but I shall not live as an exile. I shall live by the songs of my people, not by the words of some selfish priest, and I shall start a clan of my own."

"But," Elki protested, "to start a clan of your own, you shall need another, a... a woman."

"This is true."

Silent, the people of Innangard stood and watched as Daniel climbed upon his steed, Elki leaping up behind him. The wolf, the great beast whose very being had inspired fear in the people here assembled, let out a great, sky-rending howl, before turning to the night and vanishing with its riders on its back.

The villagers milled about in confusion, discontent and guilt-ridden for their willingness to cast out one of their own and then beg for his return. This blind bard had seen through the selfish intentions of the priest, and the dangerous acquiescence of the people so willing to heed the words of an authority.

But they still would rebuild their village as best they could.

Meanwhile, Daniel and Elki traveled deep into the woods, to the cave in which Daniel had lived. Long would they live in this land, great would the songs of their lives be. Splendid adventures and dangerous pursuits would leave the two humans and their steed hardened and battle-ready. Yet always they would find delight in gathering by the fire and remembering, after a long day's work, the songs of heroes who, like Daniel and Elki, stood by their virtues, unfaltering, and struck out to roam the world and leave legendary greatness in their every stride.