

The Seventh Ideal

By: William Taylor

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Chapter One

When the sun touches the mountains, and the oppressive black birds voice their final songs, the hills begin to sing in a soft, seemingly all encompassing, and immensely deep song. The very grass shakes and drops of dew roll down the stems like tear drops bidding the ruler of the day goodbye.

All eyes turn to watch, and all ears listen to the foreboding silence as the shadows begin to stretch their long black fingers across the landscape greedily claiming the earth and its inhabitants as their own. Every creature seeks a place of refuge from the deep cloud of thick mist that rolls in behind the shadows. The very hair on Haldan's neck stood on end as he witnessed the daily phenomenon. He turned his eyes to the valley that seemed to ooze a thick billowing cloud of darkness.

He held his breath as he watched a brave deer bolt across the meadow towards her fawn, who Haldan could barely make out, calling for her to save him from the night. Before she could cross the meadow, the mist consumed her; and the calling of her fawn was drowned out by the darkness. Halden took a couple steps back from the village gate. He watched in amazement as the rocks around the perimeter began to glow a soft golden.

The wave of darkness neared, but dared not touch the boundary, for if it did then it would be destroyed. Halden had seen it happen once before when he was twelve. The darkness that was greedy enough to try to touch the stone exploded in a flash of light, and for a moment the sun was visible, but only for a couple of seconds at most. No man was allowed out at night; those

who ventured too far from the village never returned; it was rumored that they were taken by the power and turned into monsters.

Halden had never seen an actual monster, but some nights if he stared long enough into the swirling darkness, he could make out large inhuman shapes. Once a year, large numbers of men, women, and children would visit his village. Most were merchants but some were storytellers. If he saved up and worked hard through the year, he could earn enough coppers to purchase a ticket to one of the performances.

Halden loved to listen to the foreign stories of distant lands, thrilling adventures of brave men who would fight crazed beasts or terrifying armies with little more than a dagger and win. His favorite stories, however, were of the great warriors of his own people. Thal the Vast was his all time favorite to learn about. It was said that he could enter the darkness and it would move around him. He would go retrieve lost children, but it was rumored that he went in search of the Night Bringer, Cala'n the Bloodthirsty.

Someday Halden would go and find Thal the Vast and assist him in bringing an end to the darkness. He had been dreaming of it ever since he was a little boy. He was nearly a man now, and the elders would decide what occupation he would have. Thelmen and Breena kept telling him that he was going to be a farmer just like his father.

They had no idea what they were talking about. They all had bets placed on what their new occupations would be. Halden had been volunteering for night watch, and helping out with the guard posts for years now. He had a good relationship with Captain Durham, as good as one could have with the large man anyway. Becoming a soldier was the first step in bringing an end to the darkness.

“See anything tonight Halden? Like another ghost hu?”

“Na na, don’t ya remember it twas just a little tabby, knocked over a water barrel it did.” The two older boys snickered at him. Jepoth and Arioan, they had both been assigned to be soldiers two years earlier and now thought they ran the place. If there were two people in the village that Halden disliked it was these two, they were bullies. Halden couldn’t stand seeing bullies. It drove him mad! They were both bigger than he was so all he had managed to do was run away. Tonight they seemed in a mischievous mood. They were supposed to be at their post watching the western gate.

“The only thing I’ve seen tonight is your two ugly faces - could have mistaken them for a pair of monsters.” Halden was famous for his tongue; it was constantly getting him into more trouble than it was worth. “Did you hear that Jepoth? The little worm asked us for a beating he did,”

“Yeah I did hear him asking so politely. We shouldn’t make him wait.”

“I think you’re right.” They both chuckled and Jepoth cracked his knuckles.

“Do you guys literally have nothing better to do than show me your ugly fists up close?” Halden asked, taking a step back towards the baker’s shop.

“Let me think about that for a moment... Nope nothing comes to my mind, what about you Arioan?”

“Can’t think of anything Jep.”

“Good.” Jepoth stepped forward. “Don’t squirm and I promise your lesson will be over quickly.” Halden turned from his post and darted forward; he cursed the two bullies as he skirted down a side street heading towards his house. His father would be upset at him. He would do anything to tell Halden just how bad it is to be a soldier. Bringing two soldiers back to his home angry would not be a good way to convince his father it was.

“Your little tricks aren’t going to work this time little mouse, can’t pull a fast one on us twice.”

Halden careened his neck around to see Arioan barreling down towards him. Even dressed in the thick leather armor and carrying a spear the older boy was gaining on him.

“I bet you three coppers you're wrong. It's not hard to outsmart the village idiots,” Halden yelled back. The insult only seemed to give Arioan added speed as his face turned a brilliant shade of red. “Why you little...” He was cut off as his feet were ensnared by a discarded fishing net that Halden had shoved off a nearby crate. Arioan hit the ground hard and he cried out in pain, a slew of curse words followed that only brought a smile to Halden's face.

He turned south and headed towards the large oak tree that sat just outside his house. If you were small and light enough, scaling the tree wasn’t too hard especially if you had experience climbing. Halden had loads of climbing experience, being the smallest kid around, he was often sent scurrying up trees to search for herds of deer, elk, and other animals.

Halden rounded the bend and the oak tree came into view, his hair whipped back as the wind tugged on the strands. He was going to make it. This was too easy. It was what followed that he dreaded. Jepoth and Arioan would roughly knock on their door and awaken everyone in the household. They would explain to Halden's father that they went to check on him and he wasn’t at his post. They would insist that Halden not bother volunteering if he couldn’t do what he was asked to.

It was dreadful to sit in his room with his arms wrapped around his legs just listening to the lies they would feed to his mother and father. What could he do though? Confront them and explain to his father they were the negligent ones who constantly were shirking off their duties. Not only would his father not believe him, he would most likely end up in the cellar for the

winter. Halden hated being in the cellar; it was so cold, and the mice chewed through most of his socks before the season was through.

He shot out of the alleyway and slammed to the ground as he was tripped by the butt of Jepoth's spear. Halden cried out. His knee felt like it was soaked in oil that was set on fire. He scrambled to the side but was met with a kick to the ribs that sent him rolling onto his back, his lungs protesting - the lack of air made him gasp and clutch his side.

“Thought we didn’t know your plan worm? Well we've been watchin you. I know about your precious tree and your favorite alleyways. Now, I heard something about you giving me three coppers as a protection fee.” Halden just laid and stared up at the stars that glittered the heavens not being able to breathe let alone talk. His eyes watered but finally he sputtered and gasped sucking in air. He tried to sit up but a spear tip pressed against his chest. A small stream of blood began to leak down his chest as the spear tip drove slightly into his flesh.

The cold steel felt like hot iron digging into his chest. He blinked away tears as Arioan finally arrived, one side of his head was swollen and he had a gash on one cheek.

“What he do to you Arioan? Did the little worm hurt you?” Arioan didn’t say anything but his eyes conveyed the message all too clear. They seemed to say, *you're a dead man*. Halden swallowed hard. Arioan advanced and kicked Halden in the head, his vision blurred and he felt something warm running down his chest all the way to his hip. He realized that when his body rolled from the kick Jepoth's spear cut a jagged line from one side of him to the other.

Halden didn’t move as a flurry of kicks landed in quick succession on his arms, legs, side and head. Halden tried to cover his head with his hands but they did little to protect him from steel toed boots. His mind was a blur and he was vaguely aware of voices shouting and lights being shone in his eyes. His body felt numb, the pain was no longer there, nothing but a dull

sensation. Halden's thoughts were turned back to the black swirling mist and stories of Tahl the Vast. He imagined himself fighting alongside the large hero.

Then his thoughts seemed to end, like a pathway drifting into an eternal lake of inky blackness.

When Halden did finally regain his consciousness, he had never been so unhappy in his entire life. What little skin he could see was a deep shade of purple or yellow. He seemed to have more bruises than flesh. His head rang and he could barely see out of one eye. Keeping himself conscious proved to be a task indeed. Halden wished that the attack had been just a dream. He scanned the small cottage for his mother or father, neither was present but the pleasant smell of sweet barley cakes filled his nostrils and nearly sent him into a pleasant dream.

Thoughts of sweet delectable cake filled his mind as he let his imagination wander. He pushed away the unpleasant thoughts of Jepoth and Arioan as he tried to forget his pain. The old wooden front door of the cottage creaked open and Halden thought he could make out the dirty face of Thelmen. He was a spindly boy with a long neck and a round face. His hair resembled the nest of a chipmunk and his eyes were a deep muddy brown. He wore a grin on his face as he noticed Halden staring at him. Thelmen was perhaps Halden's oldest and dearest friend - that was of course if Breena wasn't around. If she were, then it only made sense that she be his best friend. It wasn't only Halden who felt this way, everyone who knew Breena thought it. If they didn't then they didn't have a good judge of character.

Breena was the kindest person Halden had ever met. She was like an angel descended from heaven to bless the people with her presence. However, she did not like to get dirty and that could be problematic in a village that saw snow for the better part of the year. Avoiding deep treacherous pools of mud that would fill your shoes if you happened to step in the wrong place

was difficult. Halden had seen the girl crying more than once near the side of one of these thick gooey, dreadful, pools.

“So how do ya feel?” Thelmen asked, stepping into the room and placing a new log on the hearth that had burned down to nearly nothing. “How do you think I feel?” Thelmen took another look at Halden and realized the absurdity of the question. Yes, Thelmen was Halden’s oldest and most dear friend but he wasn’t the brightest.

“Sorry, I just mean, I didn’t know what else to say. What even happened? Halden? There are rumors that you were caught stealing. The elders have been investigating. It’s not looking too good for ya.” Of course, that was the outcome! He had been branded a thief to justify the actions of Jepoth and Arioan. They were as spineless as a couple of eels!

“I did nothing of the sort. Those two slimy cockroaches are a bunch of liars.” Halden said, his anger rising in him like the sun coming up over the horizon. It burned hot inside his chest and if it weren’t for the agonizing pain he would have leapt from his bed to claim his vengeance.

“I know that. It’s just that the whole village is talking about it. My mum didn’t even want me comin around until things were resolved.”

“There is nothing to resolve. Jepoth and Arioan tried to murder me in broad nightlight.”

“I’m not sure nightlight is a real thing.”

“Sure it is, think about it. People are always saying broad daylight. If there is such a thing as that then why can’t there be a broad nightlight? It only makes sense.” Halden said, while gazing longingly towards the steaming loaves of barley cakes.

“I never thought about it like that. I guess that’s why you’re the smart one and I’m nothin but a wool head hu?” He replied with his eyes following Halden’s to the fresh baked goodies.

“Thelmen you're not a wool head. Your brain just hasn't had time to catch up with the rest of you, and I'm not smart. My body hasn't caught up with my growing brain yet. You'll see soon enough they'll be calling you the genius. Cause we all know you're going to grow up a whole lot bigger than me.”

“I guess you're right. I hope my brain catches up soon.” Themlen said longingly, “I wish my body would catch up, that way I can start fighting my own battles and put Jepoth and Arioan in their places.”

“So you're still wanting to be a soldier? Even after what they did to you?”

“Of course I am. I don't think that will ever change even if they place me in the fields. One can't choose what his heart yearns for, he can only bridle his passions and live within his means.” Halden quoted, it was one of his least favorite and perhaps most painful of poems to hear. His mother often read the passage in her thick Synomian accent. He had heard it so many times he could quote it from memory.

“Where did you hear that?”

“From one of my mothers books. It's one of her favorites,” Halden said, dismayed.

“I can see why, it is quite true,” Thelmen said, sitting himself down at the old wooden table. He was practically drooling over the barley cakes. Before Thelmen had the opportunity to take a bite, his hand still hovering over one of the cakes, the door opened and Breena stepped in.

“Halden you're awake! I thought that for sure you would still be resting. I brought a little something as a get well present,” Breena said, her bronze colored coils bouncing from atop her head. She wore a bright green dress with a white bow fixed over one ear. She practically glowed as she gracefully glided through the room and placed a large reed basket on the table. Tendrils of white steam swirled in the air creating a dizzying pattern that dispersed through the small

cottage. Breena stood taller than Halden. She had the most beautiful face he had ever seen. It wasn't the kind of beauty that men talked about when a woman walked by. It was something more sacred. She didn't have any striking features that set her apart from any other girl. It was her radiant attitude and demeanor - it was how she treated others that made her beautiful. She had long, curly auburn colored hair and pale blue and reflective golden eyes that held a world of innocence and love for all creatures inside them.

"Thank you Breena. Thelmen has been filling me in on the details of the situation."

Halden replied, gesturing to his friend whose interest had left the barley cakes and moved towards the hidden gems held within the confines of the basket.

"Oh he has? Then you know about it then," She replied with a twinkle in her eye. Halden didn't just know about it, he had lived it. Unless she was talking about something else entirely. Halden apparently took too long to voice a response as she giggled and stepped up to his bedside.

"I'm talking about the monster sighting last night. Did you get a good look at it? I heard it had a mouthful of glass and jagged teeth." She gave her best attempt at a ferocious face then fell over backwards and laughed at her own failed attempt.

"You're serious? Someone saw a real monster?" Thelmen visibly paled and in between mouthfuls of what looked like bran muffins covered in a thick honey glaze, told him what he had heard. "I heard that it was the biggest wolf anyone had ever seen and that its eyes were red like a demon's."

"Oh and I suppose that you know what a demon's eyes look like? Have you actually met one?" Thelmen scowled but his interest in the muffins kept him from lashing back at her. Halden couldn't believe it. A real monster sighting and he was too busy getting himself beat.

Fate was cruel. No matter how hard he tried, he was always absent when something interesting actually took place.

“What happened then? Did it attack? How did it get in?” He kept his last question to himself, *was it my fault?*

“Well, Captain Durham and a couple of his guards were the first to spot it as it entered the northern gate. They said it bared its teeth and growled, but it left as soon as the archers loosed arrows in its direction. It was swallowed up by the darkness and hasn’t been seen since,” Breena said quietly, as if telling a wonderful tale to young children. Halden was nearly fifteen; the story only piqued his interest and made him yearn to go scour the site where the beast had last been seen.

“I can see the wheels turning in your head Halden, if you think that you're getting out of bed for even a moment longer, I will call your mother and have her restrain you to the bed.” She warned. “How did you know what I was thinkin’ about?”

“It’s a gift Halden, maybe if you thought before you acted once in a while you wouldn’t end up in such bad shape. But don’t worry, I searched the area this morning. I had to bribe two guards with loaves of bread to let me in. I drew what I found here.” She reached down to a crimson colored satchel and pulled out a small leather bound diary. He recognized it as the one she used to draw the large oak tree outside of his home.

Breena handed him the book and with a little aid from her, he found the drawing of the northern gate and the large distinct footprint left by the midnight visitor. Halden sat up in his bed and ignored the pain. The drawing was far too important to be bothered by a little discomfort. Below, scrawled in neat letters were her findings.