

# The Last Guardian

A fantasy Short Story



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## The Last Guardian

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Cold wind whipped down from the mountain with the slanted peak. Under its brow nestled a great fortress, long white banners streaming from its many spires. In the largest courtyard, the final Ritual of Selection was drawing to a close. Out of a score of acceptable candidates only two had passed the tests and were engaged in battle.

A fist slammed into Cornac's face yet again, and Aginol slipped easily back from the wild hook thrown by his opponent. There was a slight smirk on Aginol's face as his arm pumped out straight punches one after the other, slowly turning Cornac's face into a collection of lumps and bruises while Cornac flailed away fruitlessly.

The smirk was understandable. Everybody had known that he would best Cornac in the use of magic. Everybody had known as well, that the heavysset Cornac would pummel the wiry, effeminate – looking Aginol into submission in the physical portion of the contest. Yet, here the unexpected was happening. Aginol had just tossed his opponent aside as the heavier man had tried to tackle him and bring him to the ground. Aginol's fists were flickering lightning as Cornac tried to regain his balance, beating a tattoo on his face. It seemed as though the final elimination, the verdict of the judges, would not be necessary after all.

Cornac fell onto the platform, and Aginol leapt back lest the blood spatter over his feet. Disdainfully he turned his back on the fallen man, and raised his arms as the Voice of Yanos, the current Guardian, stood to end the contest. His handsome face was a sneer of triumph. The warrior – priests surrounding the arena began clapping *clap-clap-clap ... clap-clap-clap* in unison to show their approval. He strode over to where their leader stood.

The old man before him was still firm of back and eye, but Time was catching up with him fast. The Voice of Yanos held up his hand. The arena fell silent. He walked over to meet Aginol.

“*Anlos*,” said Aginol, bowing his head, “all I await is your final approval.”

“I am indeed still the *Anlos*. Let's not forget that,” said the old man, in a low voice.

“You imply disapproval of the outcome?” said Aginol, equally softly.

“I thought that it would have gone to Arbitration. Cornac would have won that.”

“Yet it did not. I dropped him like a rotten fruit. What makes you think I would not have won an Arbitration?”

“Your arrogance, for one. Even though Cornac is not your match in battle, his heart is purer and simpler. That counts for a lot as far as I am concerned.”

“You could overturn the result. Are you going to do that?”

“No. The last thing that we need is more division in our ranks. Already the Light Orders war with each other, while the servants of Chaos slink around waiting only for the right moment. I accept your victory as the Finger of Yanos, our God, pointing to you.”

“He accepts the result! I will be the new *Anlos!*” shouted Aginol, pre-empting the old man. The *clap-clap-clap ... clap-clap-clap* began again, and Aginol’s heart soared in joy.

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Forty years had passed.

Aginol – *Anlos*, the Guardian, to his subordinates – strode past the kneeling recruits, and spat in the dust. “Faugh!” he said in disgust, “whatever happened to the days of old, when the volunteers streamed to our gates and we could glean only the best for the glory of our God?”

“We have to accept what we get,” said the heavyset man at his right, “the plagues have ruined the population and the other Orders leach our influence. You know this.” Aginol glanced at him. “Cornac, my old friend, we have come a long way. Yet this is the most pathetic rabble I have yet set eyes on. It looks like a collection of convalescents from the infirmary. I weep for the future of our great Order.”

Indeed, the rickety teenagers that made the latest intake, would have made a hungry mountain wolf look elsewhere for something a little meatier to devour. Aginol stretched his back, and there were a few cracks that sounded. Age was catching up with him fast. It would be only a few years until it became necessary to choose a new *Anlos*, and Yanos alone knew which pathetic loser would emerge to initiate the slide of their Order straight into the cesspool. Cornac seemed to read his thoughts.

“We will be the last of the greats, *Anlos*,” he said.

“Self-sacrifice. That is what is needed. The other so-called Orders of Light offer a life of ease and comfort. The people of today seem to think that they will stand against the Dark through the application of a sternly worded letter instead of a fist to the face,” said Aginol.

“Or outright debauchery. The Brothers of Life seem to think that they can hump their way to victory the next time the chaotics rise again.”

Aginol screwed up his face. Little disgusted him more than those self-absorbed libertines. At least true Servants of Chaos had some backbone to them. The last one he had impaled had grinned at him through the pain as he slid down the pole, and said that he would send his arch-demon Aginol’s regards. Aginol could not help but feel a twinge of respect at that.

“Have we not given enough?” muttered Aginol, as they made their way back to the interior of the fortress. The question was rhetorical. Aginol had half an ear missing and great scars running across his face now, a legacy of the wars he had been in. Cornac was likewise scarred.

“How is morality to survive without strength to protect it? Ah! How I wish I could have my old youth back. I hate looking like a half-eaten slab of beef. Not ... not that I value beauty for vanity’s sake. But it is befitting that purity of heart should be contained within purity of form.”

“Well, what can we do, Aginol? Nothing. Perhaps the cycle of Guardians is for the best. Yanos will find us a new champion, as he found you for us. Imagine only one Anlos, forever. Would he not become overcome by the task before him?”  
“It would be hard, yes. But such a sacrifice would be worth it to preserve the power of Good in this world. We guard many great treasures.”  
Cornac could only shrug in agreement.

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It was a few weeks after that conversation that a messenger found Aginol and Cornac in the sparring hall, as they pushed their old, creaking bodies through drills.

“My *Anlos*,” said the messenger, “Word is brought to you of yet another problem facing the world from the realms of the demons.”

“Well, what of it?” snarled Aginol, “Why don’t you tell the Calgonites to deal with it?” The messenger waited with his head bowed. They all knew that the word would have gone out to everybody and that the only people with enough backbone to deal with the problem would be them.

“What is the news?” asked Cornac, gently.

“A creature of darkness stalks the high places to the north. Many people have gone missing in the night and their corpses are found in the morning drained of all blood. Human prints are found nearby, but they disappear at the feet of cliffs that would be hard to scale even in daylight. The villages there are all but abandoning their land out of fear.”

“Fools! They mustn’t move. The creature will only follow them. It has been a long while, but this can only mean that another vampire has emerged from whatever hole it has been hiding in. We had better deal with it before it seeks to create more of its kind.”

“It will be difficult. We are not as strong as we were, and these creatures have had many lifetimes to learn all manner of devious tricks,” Cornac added.

“We have the eyes of Yanos upon us. Righteousness – and preparation – will prevail.”

It was many weeks of travelling before they arrived at the afflicted region. The Duskpeak mountains were difficult terrain to traverse. All manner of foul beings had made their homes in this desolate region, hiding in the roots of the mountains. Over the years the Order of Yanos had winkled these bad apples out, and the news of a vampire on the loose was the biggest event in a decade.

The miserable villages that they now reached were stone-built and slate roofed, and every window and door was hung with a profusion of plants reputed to keep vampires at bay. The odor of mashed garlic, spread over doors and sills, made Aginol raise his brows when still several thousand paces out. His score of followers, clad in mail, helms and padded surcoats, likewise gagged. Their mounts neighed and pawed in complaint. Wrapping a scented cloth over his mouth, he questioned the villagers at length. They directed him to a deep gorge, reputed to contain a system of caverns.

“That’s a good guess,” said Cornac, sitting on his horse, a silver-flanged mace at his side.

“No doubt. The old texts make it clear that these creatures like darkness,” muttered Aginol, looking about himself at the motley collection of reeking villagers clustered about him, “you know, some of these people look a good deal sturdier than the

walking cadavers that volunteered to join us back home. After we have disposed of this vampire, we should round some of them up and take them back to join the ranks.” “What if they don’t want to come, Anlos?” asked a knight to his left. “Nonsense. What greater honour than to serve Yanos, and to fight the Good Fight?” Anlos replied dismissively, and they moved on.

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The caves were extensive and pitch black. The villager’s guess had been spot on. There were spatters of blood on the muddy floor, and ominous stains on the streaked limestone walls. Aginol stationed four knights with hooked nets at what the villagers assured him was the only exit, and the rest he took with him. Their torches cast lurid shadows on the walls, and despite the blessings of Yanos, fear knotted their stomachs. These creatures were reputed to be tremendously dangerous opponents, and there was a good chance that some of them would not return home alive.

The passages were narrow and twisting, with few open spaces. “That’s better,” said Aginol, as he moved ahead, “then the creature cannot slip by us.” The caverns writhed their way into the guts of the mountain, and they followed. Much time passed.

They entered a large chamber, with a pool of water in the floor. Their torches were orange stars reflected off the surface of the water. The knights spread out in the chamber, many feet trampling the mud. Hollow echoes sounded off the walls. Aginol held up his hand and whispered “*Nath Alleion.*” His palm glowed like a tiny sun, and he shone it about the chamber, revealing it to be empty. Then he played it over the water.

“There!” gasped one of the knights, pointing. The pool was full of ice-white corpses. The vampire had brought its victims here, and for some reason unknown, had decided to store their remains within this cold pool.

A knight bent down close to the pool, staring. A beautiful high-cheeked maiden lay dead next to the edge, her long hair spread like strands of gold under the surface of the water. “‘Ware,” snapped Aginol at him. But it was too late.

The corpse’s eyes snapped open and a slender arm burst out of the surface, clamping impossibly strong fingers over the knight’s neck. The man’s eyes bulged, and there were gristly snapping sounds as the creature’s fingers crushed his neck. The woman’s face was distorted in a fanged snarl as she emerged from the pool to feed. Most of the knights recoiled in horror, but one had the presence of mind to thrust his blazing torch into her face. The scream was ear-shattering, and it grew worse when Aginol hurled the contents of a crystal bottle over the creature and into the pool.

Consecrated water, containing the essence of a thousand prayers to Yanos.

The vampire’s flesh bubbled up and it thrashed about in agony as the holy water devoured it. The corpses in the water likewise started to bubble, and it was clear that they too had been infected with the vampire’s foul essence. It took about several minutes for the waters to stop seething and become still again.

“Clearly the beast has decided to begin creating progeny,” said Cornac.

“Right you are. These creatures need not breathe, and care not for the cold. Clever of it to hide its spawn in the pool,” said Aginol.

“Was . . . was that not the beast, Anlos?” asked a knight.

“I doubt it. That woman was wearing the garb of a villager,” replied Aginol, casting his radiant palm this way and that, illuminating every nook and cranny, “yet this is a dead end. Where did the creature get to?”

“There!” The cry went up.

From the blackness of the cavern roof two pinpricks of orange light could be seen reflecting their torches. Then the pinpricks blinked.

Things happened extremely fast after that. Aginol’s light revealed a figure in ornate black and gold hose and cloak clinging limpet-like to a stalactite. No sooner had he lit it up than it swung off and plummeted into the midst of the knights. Immediately they tried to use their torches to drive it back, but the master vampire was far too strong for that. With its bare hands it ripped and clawed into them. Several knights were sent sprawling, trailing crimson; another toppled into the pool with his face ripped off. Sparks flew as a knight slammed his torch into the creature’s back. Knights flew as it slammed its arms into them like clubs. A knight stabbed it in the back with a silver dagger; the vampire whirled around, a ghastly grin on its face. Pulling the dagger from its back the creature bit down on it, and spat a crescent of silver out in disdain. Then it stabbed the dagger into the knight’s face with a blur of motion.

The knights stepped back, aghast. The vampire was far stronger than they had imagined such creatures to be. The total silence in which it fought was even more unnerving. It grinned a grave-grin at them.

Aginol and Cornac pushed their way to the fore. Cornac gripped his silver flanged mace tightly, and Aginol held his glowing palm before him like a lamp. His other hand was behind his back. The vampire glanced over the two warrior-priests with disdain. “More silver? That won’t work,” it said, cocking its head like a mad jester. The voice it had was cultured and strangely accented.

Aginol put forth his will, and his palm flared up as bright as the sun. Indeed, it *was* the sun, being the magically stored sunlight of a week’s worth of rituals he had undergone in order to prepare for this moment. The creature shrieked and threw its hands before its face, the skin smoking in the light. Cornac slammed his mace into it, and the sharp flanges drove into its heavy flesh. Smoke erupted from the wounds, because that mace was hollow and filled with a frangible container of consecrated water that would break under impact. Aginol drew his hand out from behind his back, and expertly cast a weighted, hooked net over the vampire. The other knights began pummeling it with their torches. It screamed like a burning cat.

“Hold!” shouted Aginol, and he drew forth a heavy chain of cold-beaten iron. He and another knight soon had it trussed up at its feet and arms. An ox could not have broken those links.

“*Anlos*, are you sure that this is the right thing to do? We came to kill it,” Cornac said. “We will. But the villagers must see it die, for the glory of Yanos,” Aginol replied, putting a hood over the creature’s face.

The knights carried their dead and wounded out of the caverns, and made camp in the gorge. Aginol ordered a great pile of wood to be heaped up, and the creature chained atop the pile. "If at any time it threatens to break loose, the nearest knight must light the pyre immediately," he said.

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It was past midnight when Aginol rose up and stealthily made his way to the heaped pyre. Nobody else was awake save the sentries hidden a way out in the undergrowth, and they were looking outwards – not in. He pulled the hood off the creature's face, and immediately its eyes locked on his own. It felt as though there was a great pressure pushing against him, trying to break into his mind. He glared back, and after many long minutes the vampire gasped, looked away. Aginol sneered. "I knew that your kind is able to command the weak-willed through thought and gaze alone. The old texts say so. But I ... *I* am the chosen of Yanos. *I* have spent my whole life conditioning my mind and body to endure anything."

"What do you want?" asked the vampire, still looking away. Aginol just smiled. "Why do you not just kill me? Spare me the embarrassment of being slaughtered like a pig before those useless peasants." Its voice was deep, with rounded vowels. "Oh, I will," said Aginol, "but first you can tell me who you are." "What does it matter! Why do you even care?" "It matters. Your name will live on in our records if nothing more. Tell me." "Oh, very well. My name is Breath-of-Night. That is the only name that matters." "And your sire?" "Death's Shadow. But he is gone. I ripped his heart out myself." Aginol smiled. "Good. Very good. That name I know. Death's Shadow. A master-vampire in alliance with the chaos-cultists of Kerak, about a hundred years ago." "I sense the lie within you," the vampire said, "what is your true intention?"

Aginol chuckled quietly. "I have told you no lies. Why do you so accuse me?" "I can feel the untruth within you. There is something that you are masking." Aginol smiled a secret smile. "Your senses are correct. There is indeed a reason why you have been spared up until now. I want what you have."

Breath-of-Night hissed a long, shuddering laugh at this, and Aginol glanced quickly about himself. "Quiet, fool! If you draw any attention, I will light this pyre on the instant." It took a while for the vampire to stop sniggering, and it looked at him with contempt.

"You're the fool, then. Do you know how it is to live ten lifetimes in darkness, alone, the servant of another seeking only to destroy him to gain freedom. Then, one day, when that freedom comes, and your master lies dead through a tiny miscalculation, to face eternity alone? The only company to have is through making more of your kind, and then living in fear and through fear as they in turn hate and despise you, seeking only to destroy you in turn? Fool!" said Breath-of-Night, an intense look of earnestness on its aristocratic face.

Aginol shook his head. "I told you, I am the complete master of my body. I will control the curse, and use its effect of life everlasting to be the last Anlos for my faith.

Yanos will understand. There is need for an invincible leader to ensure that you chaos-vermin never threaten mankind again. I am prepared to undergo the curse of the vampire in order to be that leader, for Goodness. That's why I wanted to make sure of your bloodline. I need a strong line for this."

Breath-of-Night snorted in incredulous mirth. Yet, the vampire also nodded. "If you let me go, I will do it. I give you my pledge that I will go far from here, and you will never hear from me again."

"You have my word," said Aginol.

The vampire bit down on its on lip, and thick black blood spurted forth. It grinned, and again Aginol felt the intense pressure of its will.

"Give me a kiss, then," Breath-of-Night said, smiling a blood-smile.

Aginol recoiled slightly. "I don't kiss men," he said.

"I'm not a man."

Aginol bent over and kissed.

Immediately the vampire bit him, as he knew it would. Its fangs drove into his lower lip, and its blood mixed with his. It felt as though tiny gold sparks flavoured with some intense spice were seeping into his flesh. The vampire put forth its will again, and this time it was a terrible surge. It was as though he were trying to hold back the flow of a river through will alone.

Aginol pulled back, and already his motions were uncoordinated, as though invisible strings were pulling his limbs this way and that. Yanos above! The creature's will was multiplied times over, now that its blood was in him.

"You're mine, now," hissed Breath-of-Night.

"Not yet. *Nath Alleion!*" cried Aginol, drawing on his last reserves of will.

His palm erupted with light, and he shone it with such power at the vampire that its skin ignited instantly, a great puff of smoke blooming up. The wood underneath combusted under the blinding heat, and it began shrieking in agony.

"You promised! You said I could go!"

"I lied," said Aginol, panting with effort, "you said yourself I held a lie within me. But Yanos will forgive me my trespass. I do this for Him and for Good."

As the creature writhed in its death agonies, the immense pile of burning wood sent a lick of flame into the sky visible for many thousandpace. Shouts went up as the knights began to awake. Aginol drew forth a flask of consecrated water and splashed it over the creature, stilling its cries.

Then he sank to his knees.

It was as though his heartbeat was amplified at thousand times over. It thundered in his ears. With each beat his head felt like bursting with pain. His face was burning up. His lip prickled and itched with a thousand ant bites. Aginol held his head in his hands, drawing on his training, on his vast will, to conquer the vampire-taint running through his veins. He tried to find his centre of thought. He tried to extend his awareness through his body. He tried ...



... when Aginol awoke, it was in darkness.

He awoke with a start. He had been having the most awful nightmares. He'd dreamed that he had been running around, ripping the living hearts from the bodies of his men, and eating them. Sucking the hot blood from their veins. And *enjoying* it.

Disoriented he ran his hand over his face, and something crusty and flaky crumbled off of it. It smelled of old iron and butter and salt. Looking at his hand, he could see it was a dark powder. Then he realised that he was in the caves. Then he realised that he could *see*, in pitch blackness. The world was a blur of greys ... but he could *see*.

Aginol remembered, now. Remembered kissing the creature, and burning it. His dreams ... were not dreams. Aghast he looked again at his hand, and rubbed more of the substance off his face. *Dried blood*.

"Hellfire and darkness, what did I do?" Aginol muttered shakily to himself. He had lost control. Completely. His training had been as much good as a torch in a thunderstorm when the killing lust had swept over him. He was overcome by the sensation of having made the biggest mistake of his life. The sensation a rat must have, if it walked into a warm hole and found that it was the home of a nest of hungry cobras.

"But it is not too late," Aginol whispered to himself, "I must find those that I have bitten. Capture them, and bring them back. There must be a cure for this affliction. This is for the good of the Order. Yanos give me strength. Yanos give me strength!"

He made his way stealthily out of the caves, which were littered with the corpses of knights. At the very exit, he could see starlight glimmering.

A bulky figure stepped in the space of the exit, wielding a silver mace.

Cornac.

His old friend's face was a mask of fear and anguish. "Anlos ... Aginol! Fight it! Fight the curse. I know that you are still in there. We will find a way to save you."

"It ... it's alright. I have regained my senses. I am in command of myself."

"Yanos be praised! I thought that we had lost you forever."

"No ... I'm good. It's just that ..."

"That what?"

That a whiff of Cornac's scent had curled past Aginol. That it smelled like hot iron, and butter and salt and *life*. His belly knotted with hunger and desire. Drool ran down his lip, but Cornac could not see that, because it was too dark. Just a little taste. What harm ... what harm could it do?

Aginol backhanded the mace out of Cornac's hand. The weapon bent in half against his inhumanly hard flesh. He bore down on Cornac, and hurled him to the ground, pinning him. Cornac could not push him off because Aginol was beyond human

strength, now. He became aware that Cornac was saying something. It sounded like “No.”

“You cannot deny me,” said Aginol, drool splattering Cornac’s face, “I am the Anlos. The *last* Anlos. And I just want a little taste. *Little taste.*”

The liquid that he sucked from the monk was like drinking the juice of living rubies.

Aginol looked up.

“I won’t ... kill you, old friend. I am the Anlos. I have done this sacrifice for you. For our order. For Yanos ... and *Goodness.*”

He smiled the smile of a pederast.

The vampire drank again, and the scream carried far into the mountains, but there was nobody to hear.

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This story is a prologue to *The Man from the Tower*, a much longer work available from major e-book retailers. It is the first in what will be a three book epic fantasy series called “*Tergin’s Tale*”. Very likely the next books will also have short stories like this one given away as I develop the characters and their backgrounds.

If you enjoyed reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it, you may want to head over to my blog at <http://brunoccestella.blogspot.com/> where additional short stories are available for download, free of charge.

If you have criticism, praise or something to say about what you have read, write me an email at [brunostellareadermail@gmail.com](mailto:brunostellareadermail@gmail.com). I’d love to hear from you.