

- Declan's Story -

BY TOWER NOW DEFEATED

A prequel to The Dreamer's Tears

For three nights every month, Declan and the boys would be herded down into Corva's dingy cellar with no lights and no pillows. The cellar was not a good place for sleeping, consisting mainly of unfriendly stone and wood. But that was good, for light and dreaming would only bring the Knightmares and the possibility of being burned to a crisp.

Even though he was only nine, it was Declan's job to keep the little ones awake by whatever means possible. The first night was always easiest because everyone was scared. First nights were for distracting stories, and the boys would happily listen so they could hide their fear. But the two nights following were more difficult. Everyone was so tired by then and the dark did not help - a bright light in their eyes might have kept them awake but the deep dark of the cellar was enough to put anyone to sleep. Often, Declan had to resort to pinching them awake. The older boys did not like that at all.

It was never difficult for Declan to stay awake. Perhaps that's why he was given the job. These nights always reminded him of his mother and father and how they died. If he closed his eyes and listened too closely he could remember everything about that night - the snorting, the fire. So he kept his eyes open and waited, the smell of burning thick in the air and nothing but the sound of clapping hooves to signal the beasts' arrival.

Something crashed overhead and ash drifted in through the cellar ceiling. He sighed. He and the boys were going to have plenty to clean when the three nights were over. Corva provided an essential service to the people of Crabford – in Traumm, everyone needed someone to clean up the ash the Knightmares left behind. It's a good thing there were so many orphans around.

That was how Declan landed up scrubbing Nancy Mason's porch in late November. The foam from his scrubbing was black already and he silently cursed the Knightmares for making his job so difficult. Then he heard the sound of clip-clopping hooves and looked up in horror, wondering if his own thoughts had brought the Knightmares out of their hiding places.

He was relieved to find it wasn't a Knightmare at all, it was only the Myster leading his mule into town, dragging behind it a dilapidated wagon with an assortment of tradable and saleable goods. The Myster was very brave to have a mule. Most people were too superstitious to have an animal that was such a close cousin to the Knightmares. The Myster didn't seem very bothered with their opinions – he lovingly stroked his mule's muzzle and whispered sweetly to it. The mule seemed nice enough but those clip-clopping hooves gave Declan the shudders.

Though Declan was eager to see the Myster up close he didn't dare leave his cleaning post. Corva was roaming the street and Declan didn't want to get caught away from his station. Still, from the porch he watched as grownups from all over the village flocked to the wagon to see what interesting things the Myster had brought this time. Corva appeared there too, undoubtedly spending all the money Declan and the other boys had earned him. Declan glanced over the street to where Elizar was washing some windows. Elizar winked at him. They probably had the best spot out of all the boys – they could watch without getting their ears slapped by Corva.

The villagers cloistered around the Myster's wagon until they'd traded their fill and when it was all over the Myster climbed up onto the back of his wagon. This was the part Declan had been waiting for. Most of the people in Crabford were overly fond of the Myster's stories. He told tales of the land beyond their small village: tales of Knightmares and magical towers and wagons that needed no mules. By this time Declan could see that while Corva was properly occupied with the stories, the other boys were leaning over porch railings and hanging out of windows to listen. He hoped none of them would get into trouble. The penalty for not finishing a job in time was no dinner and none of the boys could really afford to go without their daily meal.

Declan waited for the story he longed for all the months the Myster was away - the story about a town called Newton and its magical tower. The Myster left it for last, taking in a deep breath and churning out the words with the drama of a true performer.

"And do you know that Newton has not seen a Knightmare for hundreds of years? It's true! There they are protected by their magical tower and the Master of Transformations who keeps it running. I swear it! I've seen it for myself. When the moon wanes, their town is covered in light, like a giant dome that Knightmares cannot penetrate. If they try, the beasts are burned to cinders in an instant. I swear it! The tower stretches its light into the night and throws it all over Newton. And while the Knightmares come to devour the outer villages, the folk of Newton sleep and dream unafraid. I swear it! There is even a rhyme the children sing:

*Tonight all children will be safe and sound,
They shall dream and sleep contented,
For what was once our greatest fear
By Tower now is defeated."*

Declan knew the words by heart. He would whisper them to himself sometimes and his heart would swell with the words. But hope was a bitter pill in a village like his, where there was no tower and no way out. He had stopped scrubbing while the Myster spoke, lost in a foggy-eyed daydream. He hadn't even noticed Corva making his way over to him.

"Why aren't you working, boy?" asked Corva, grabbing Declan by his threadbare collar. He lowered his voice to a whisper so no one else would hear him. "Must I teach you the value of good hard work, then? There's no time for loafing about - you've got another two porches to do today. You know what happens when you work overtime don't you?"

Declan lowered his eyes, as he had been taught, and returned to his scrubbing. His knees were rubbed raw, his fingers burning from the strange powder Corva put in his water to help with the ash. With each scrub he imagined himself at the tower, standing in its full light, protected from everything that might hurt him - even the likes of Corva.

Listening to the Myster talk had earned Declan a few extra hours and it was already dark when he finished up for the day. The moon was fat and full that night, casting its blue-white light over the village and throwing shadows everywhere. Corva's house was quiet when Declan got there, Corva sleeping in his chair, watching over the boys who lay on whatever piece of floor

they could find. A bottle of ale rested on his large belly and drool collected in the corner of his mouth. Of course, there was no dinner; Corva would not have kept him any. Declan had no qualms about stealing from a man who used children to earn his money, so he snuck into the kitchen to see if he could find anything to eat. He could hardly be blamed for being a misfit; he was only imitating his master after all.

Declan tore a large hunk of bread from under a cloth on the kitchen table. Nothing had ever tasted so delicious. He reached for another handful knowing he should rather go to bed. In mid swallow, a strong hand clamped hard on Declan's shoulder.

"I thought I told you - boys who do not make it in time for dinner, do not eat. Cough it up, boy. I'll feed it to the chickens. They're more worthy of it." Corva's eyes were bleary from the ale but his face was ferocious.

Declan stared at Corva with wide eyes. Cough it up? He swallowed instead. If he was going to get a beating, it may as well be on a full stomach. Corva's face turned red and blotchy. Declan had seen this look before; he braced himself.

Later, as he lay down on the ground beside Elizar, he tried not to cry. He knew his bruises would not stop Corva from sending him to work again tomorrow. No one would talk – they didn't seem to care how the boys were treated so long as they did the work. Declan's stomach growled again and the sound made him want to cry even more. Beside him Elizar turned over and patted him on the back. He was a small, wiry boy who always looked out for everyone - even boys twice his size.

"Sorry, Declan," he whispered, his voice barely audible above the snoring of the other boys.

Declan sniffed and nodded. "My fault," he said.

"Horse dung!" said Elizar fiercely and then the fierceness seemed to be sucked from him and he sighed. "If I had wings I would fly out of here quick as a flash."

"Where would you go?" asked Declan.

"Newton."

"It's not real," said Declan.

"Who's to say? The Myster says it is. An' he travels more than any of these villagers who say he's lying." Elizar turned onto his back, staring out the window. "What if it does though? What if there is a place that's protected from them?"

Declan's heart swelled again. Hope was a lovely, horrible thing.

"We could run away," Declan said.

"Maybe one day," said Elizar.

"What about tonight? We could wait in the forest and follow the Myster all the way to Newton. He could give us a lift."

"Think he would?" asked Elizar, doubtful.

"Even if he didn't, we could still follow him."

The idea had already sunk its roots down deep in Declan's mind and now there was no going back. Whatever dangers lay out there in the forests beyond Crabford they were better than the hands of Corva. Whether Elizar came or not, Declan was leaving the village tonight.

It was quiet but for a night owls when Declan and Elizar finally made their way past the last house in the village. They paused at the edge of the forest to catch their breath, listening for sounds of anyone who might have found them out.

"We made it," said Declan. He was grinning hard at their little victory. "All the way to the forest."

Elizar was grinning too. "Now all we have to do is wait. Somewhere close to the road." He seemed bolder than usual, as if the idea of freedom was urging him on.

Declan nodded but he looked warily at the forest. He could have sworn he saw something move in there.

"What's wrong?" asked Elizar.

"You think the beasts really do live in there?" asked Declan. He wrapped his arms around his chest like he was trying to hold himself together.

"Who? The Knightmares?"

Declan nodded. An involuntary shudder traveled down his neck.

Elizar opened his mouth to say something when a branch snapped deep in the forest.

"Maybe this was a bad idea..." whispered Declan.

But Elizar gritted his teeth. "I'd rather face those beasts than Corva. Want another beating? Think you'd live through two in one night?" he asked. He squared his jaw at the forest and took a step forward. "I'm not going back."

“No?” came a growl of a voice from behind them. Corva emerged on the path, his eyes filled with a blinding fury. "You think you can just run away after everything I have done for you? You ungrateful nothings. I should have fed you to the Knightmares myself..."

Elizar pushed Declan aside. "Run! Get out of here! Go!"

Declan hesitated as Corva advanced on them. For a moment he was filled with so much hatred for this blundering, nasty man. He wanted nothing more than to beat him the way he had beaten so many of the boys. But for all the strength in Declan's small arms, Corva was far more experienced at throwing punches.

"Get out of here, Declan!" shouted Elizar and threw himself at Corva's legs, toppling the man over. Such large bravery for such a small boy.

Fear burned out the anger and suddenly Declan's legs were taking him into the forest. His heart was trying to beat its way out of his chest. He ran far and fast, not thinking where he was going, until his lungs burned too badly for him to go on. By now the sky was lightening and by the light Declan realised he was horribly lost. He had no idea where the road was. He chose a sturdy looking tree and climbed it to better get his bearings. Traumm stretched out in every direction; forests, hills and rivers. There, to the south, was the snaking road. If he walked in that direction he might still make it before the Myster went on his way. He thought of Elizar, wondering what punishment Corva would think up for him. Declan felt ashamed that he had left his friend at the man's mercy but he did not dare go back or Elizar's stunt would be for nothing.

Though his empty belly complained mightily, Declan walked on and on and on until he finally found the road. He went west - the way the Myster always left their village. He would keep his feet moving so that his stomach would not have any time to think.

Declan walked for three days and still the Myster was nowhere to be seen. He stole some eggs from a farm and ate them raw because he did not know how to make a fire; Corva had never taught them anything other than cleaning. He slept under branches during the day – just in case - and kept to the main road at night but he had not seen a single person the entire time. He was so tired and hungry that at one point he hoped Corva had only knocked him out and he was merely dreaming. He began to see strange things in the forest – unreal things, crazy things. Which is why, when he saw the flickering fire in the forest, he was convinced Knightmares had found him at last.

He glanced up at the moon, relieved to see that it was still quite fat. It wasn't yet time for Knightmares to roam the skies. He followed the firelight until he heard laughing and talking. He paused to listen, to find out if they were the kind of people who might share some food and a spot at the fire. He went as near as he dared, trying to get a better look.

There were three men around the fire. They looked as though they had been on the road for weeks. They carried shabby packs and all wore similar tunics over their clothes with the symbol of a heart broken in half.

"And then I said to her, if she didn't bring the goat into the cellar, we would be eating it for dinner the next night," said one man, cackling loudly. He had the grubbiest clothes of the lot and an untidy head of hair.

"Did she take it with?" asked another man, across the fire from him. He was the shortest and had a small, narrow face.

"Are you mad? And ruin her beautiful linen? Not likely. That dried meat we've been feasting on was once my dear goat," said the first.

Two of the men burst out laughing which sent the smallest man into a coughing fit.

"Some sister she was," said the third man. He chewed on a good chunk from the dried strip of goat's meat.

"I know it. Should have left her out there for the Knightmares to find," laughed the first.

"So many Knightmares lately," said the small man, shaking his head. "They used to keep to themselves for the most part, didn't they?"

"Not the way I remember it. Though, I've heard it tell they are trying to get back into the towns with towers. Newton especially," said the third man.

"They need remuneration," said the small man.

"Remuner-what?" asked the grubby man, scowling at the smaller one.

"Payment," said the small man. "A sacrifice. I mean, that was the point of them wasn't it? To avenge Wreagan's broken heart? They're probably never going to settle until they've got that sorted."

The grubby man rolled his eyes. "That simple, is it? And where are we going to find a sacrifice? In case you hadn't noticed the forests near the towerless towns have barely any animals in them at all."

"I say the folk of Newton need to learn their lesson. They should never have harbored Mage Reve in the first place. If they'd just let the mage's get on with their business, they would have sorted it out and left us ordinary folk out of it," said the third man.

Declan held back a gasp. Newton was real? And there were other towns with towers like theirs? He stumbled forward, into the light of the fire and the three men jumped up, brandishing various weapons.

"Ah, he's just a lad," said the grubbiest man, sheathing his short blade. "Nothing to worry about."

"You're nothing to worry about, are you?" asked the third man.

Declan shook his head, eying the dried meat with desperation. He no longer cared if these men killed him, so long as they fed him first.

"Well then, come and sit down with the vagabonds and have yourself a bite," said the grubbiest man.

Declan did not wait for a second invitation and wolfed down the dried goats meat in minutes.

"What's a boy like you doing in the forest? There's no towns for miles away," said the smallest.

"I ran away," said Declan between mouthfuls.

"From the folk who gave you those bruises, I suppose?" asked the third.

Declan nodded, stuffing more meat into his mouth. The bruises would be yellowing by now and his face would be all blotchy. And having slept on the forest floor for days he must look a sight.

"And where, exactly, are you off to?" asked the grubbiest.

"Newton," said Declan. Newton was a *real* place and he was going to live there. He would make a new life for himself under that bright light.

"Ah," said the third tellingly, glancing between his companions.

"And you?" asked Declan. "Where are you going? Are you also on your way to Newton?"

"In a way," said the grubbiest man. He was picking some meat from his teeth with a thin stick.

"Are you also going to live there?" asked Declan.

"Nope," said the third man. "We're going to sabotage their tower and watch their city burn. And you're exactly what we need."

The three men had bound Declan when he tried to get away. The grubbiest, Morgan, had told Declan he was a blessing. They belonged to a group of zealots, called *Brothers of the Broken Heart*, who believed the Knightmares were after sacrifices. They were supporters of Mage Wreagan. And so, they were out to find some willing volunteers. Declan was forcibly volunteered.

He had no idea what they meant to do with him. He stopped trying to think about it. He stopped thinking altogether. It seemed everything he said or did took him somewhere worse than before. He did not speak to the men, even when they asked him questions. He did not try to escape because, shamefully, he would rather be their prisoner and be fed, than wander the forest alone again.

So when they arrived at the base of a giant tower some weeks later, Declan did not think much of it. By that time he was just felt numb to everything and his imminent death did nothing to produce the proper awe he should have for the place.

"When we kill the Master of Transformations there will be no one to transform this tower," said Morgan. "The Knightmares will come here first - they're clever beasts, they know this tower has to go."

"And they'll find you, of course," said the smallest, Needle.

"And when they kill you, they will stop destroying the villages. They will be satisfied," said the third, Hubert.

That made no sense. The Knightmares had been killing people for over two centuries and it never seemed to be enough, one 'sacrifice' would hardly make a difference. Declan looked up at the tower. He had waited for years to see this magical tower for himself but up close it was something of a disappointment. He could not imagine how something so bland could save an entire town.

Morgan set about chaining Declan to the stairs that led up and around the tower. The manacles bit into his skin and he tried very hard not to cry.

"He's all skin and bones, this one," said Needle, tutting irritably. "We should have found a fatter one."

"He'll do. He's a symbol, not a meal," said Hubert.

Needle nodded sagely as Hubert drew their symbol of the broken heart on the ground. Declan was struck by their absolute calm. Had they no hearts at all? His hope petered out entirely and he let himself cry; he didn't care who saw him.

"Your tears won't save you now, boy," said Morgan. "Come on, lads. It's off to kill the Master of Transformations now."

"And you're sure this will stop them?" asked Needle as they walked away.

"Should do. If not, at least Newton will burn," said Morgan.

"True. At least there's that," said Needle.

"Wait!" cried Declan. "You can't really leave me here. They'll kill me."

"Ah, he speaks!" laughed Hubert. "Give them a bit of a fight, hey lad?"

"Please! You can't just leave me here," Declan cried.

"No one can hear you, boy," said Morgan. "There isn't a house for miles - the light is too bright, you see. Not now though. Not this time."

The brothers left Declan at the foot of the stairs and disappeared into the forest. Declan looked up at the tower.

"Please work. Please work tonight. Please," he whispered to the stones.

As night fell, Declan realized he still had another day left. The moon was not entirely gone yet. Still, every beat of wings and rustle of leaves set terror racing in him again. He sat wide eyed and cold against the tower. It occurred to him, deep into the night, that Elizar had been the lucky one after all. Of course, the thought of his friend only produced more tears.

When dawn broke he was exhausted but instead of sleeping, he began pulling at the manacles. He pulled until the skin on his wrists was raw but he barely loosened the chains at all. He did not stop though - he might not have had any hope but he wasn't ready to die either.

He pulled at the chains until the baking sun, hunger and exhaustion got the best of him and he passed out. As he faded, he wondered if he would ever open his eyes again.

There was the strange sensation of floating. Declan tried to open his eyes but eyelids felt so heavy. Someone was carrying him, gently. He was carefully placed onto a cushioned chair and a growling beast carried him away. Was he dreaming? Had the Knightmares come for him after all? He did not feel any burning. His mind went in and out of focus and he saw strange things

like hovering material and gleaming wagons. His ears were filled with ticking and the gentle crackle of a fire and when he woke he found himself in a chair in the strangest room he had ever seen. The ceiling was open to the rafters and at one end of the room was a rickety looking staircase that led to a floating landing with three doors. Everything about the house seemed to lean just a little. Across from him, sat an old man who had fallen asleep with a cup of tea on his lap. The ticking came from the numerous clocks and contraptions scattered about the room and Declan was being warmed, not by a Knightmare's terrifying flame but a well contained hearth fire.

Outside the sky was bright but the windows were shuttered closed.

"Where am I?" asked Declan, his voice croaky.

The man's eyes flew open and his face broke into a smile. Even though it was clear that he was not young, he had a shock of thick black hair, only lightly threaded with grey and a pair of bright blue eyes.

"You're in the Master's cottage," said the man. "The Master of Transformation. You were passed out. Chained to the tower..."

Declan looked down at his wrists which were carefully bandaged now. "Yes," said Declan.

"Who did this to you?" There was such concern in the man's voice. "Who would do this?"

"You're the Master of Transformation?" asked Declan, changing the subject. He would not think about Brothers of the Broken Heart, nor Corva ever again.

"Yes. My name is Borinvere," said the man.

"Then they didn't kill you," said Declan with relief. "And the tower? Is it shining?"

"Obviously I'm still alive. I have clever means of achieving such things – especially when it comes to killers who are cowards. And that light outside is from the tower itself."

"It's night?" asked Declan in surprise.

Borinvere nodded. "For a few more hours."

"Can I see?" asked Declan.

"See what?"

"The tower."

"Have you never seen it?" asked Borinvere curiously, arching one of his eyebrows.

Declan shook his head and tried to stand. His head spun so hard he had to sit back down.

"Take it easy. Your body needs some time to recover. Let me help," said Borinvere.

Declan could not help but flinch as Borinvere drew near - in his experience, the hands of men were seldom kind. But Borinvere gently lifted him and helped him walk to the door. As Borinvere opened the door light flooded the room and Declan had to close his eyes for a moment. Then he saw the transformed tower - no longer was it a dull black thing, and neither did it merely shine a single light from its top, instead the entire tower, from its base to its pinnacle was shining, pouring light for miles. Declan saw that the Master's house sat on a hill and below, in the valley, stretched the town of Newton. He could see the curling roads and neat houses. There didn't seem to be any signs of fire damage anywhere.

Declan stood for a moment in the light. It didn't have a temperature like the sun but it seemed to transform him. For all his mistakes and misadventures, he had finally made it to the very place he needed to be.

"Is it magic?" asked Declan.

"Very much so," said Borinvere with a smile.

"Is it safe?"

"Oh yes, you'll be safe here, son," said Borinvere.

Standing there in the light, Declan thought he might actually believe it.

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