



One Last Job

By Blaise Jones

The pub was dark and smoky, the air thick with the stench of alcohol and sweat. Few men were talking, and those that were talked in hushed voices. No one wanted to be heard, and no one wanted to listen. Doing either of those in New Emerald could get your throat cut. Years ago, after the plague had hit the Dead Port, the few survivors had set up a refugee camp several miles up river from the city, right on the edge of the wastelands, calling their settlement New Emerald. It soon evolved from a sea of tents into a small town surrounded by a sea of tents. The survivors had hoped that they could continue their old way of life, trading on the river instead of the port, but no merchant ship would dare pass through the port in order to reach them. Soon New Emerald was all but abandoned by any honest folk, leaving it in the hands of the desperate and the depraved.

One ruthless and ambitious man came to power in New Emerald. His name, Ahriman Kerberos. Kerberos, skilled in both the use of Necromancy and Spirit Mastery, soon gained control of New Emerald through brute force and backhanded political maneuvers. At first there were many other men who challenged him, but they either gave in or simply disappeared. Now he resided as a noble of sorts in a small castle he had built in the center of New Emerald. His past was a mystery, and rumors ranged from him being an exiled heir to the throne of Kinbornu, to being a spawn of Hell itself. Despite his iron grip on New Emerald, crime still thrived, mostly due to Kerberos spending his time working on his own secret agendas. Therefore, his city had become a haven for both those trying to hide, and those who come searching for the hidden.

The door to the pub flew open, and in walked a tall and ugly man. He had an unkempt black beard, and his bald head reflected what little light there was in the pub. His beady eyes scanned the barroom, daring anyone to say something to him, but no one was that stupid. Everyone knew who he was. Ramgore, wanted for murder, rape, and larceny. Everyone knew that to cross him was death. Ramgore walked through the pub up to the bar, causing everyone to quickly avert their eyes as he passed. Everyone except one man sitting with his back against a wall, his faced hidden by a dark green, hooded cloak.

*One Last Job*

As Ramgore sat down at the bar and ordered his drink, the man got up and walked over to the bar, sitting down next to him. There was an audible intake of breath throughout the pub. Obviously someone had a death wish. Ramgore looked down upon the hooded man, astounded that someone would have the audacity to dare sit next to him. The man seemed oblivious to Ramgore's incredulous expression, and quietly ordered a drink. Eventually Ramgore turned his attention back to his own drink. There was a noticeable relaxation of each man in the bar.

Before Ramgore could take a sip, the man next to him said, "You wouldn't happen to be Ramgore, would you?"

This time the entire pub fell silent, and the men nearest to the pair at the bar backed away, anticipating impending violence.

Ramgore had had enough of this tiny hooded man. He reached to his side for his mace and swung at where the man was sitting, but he was no longer there. Ramgore looked around for a second, before feeling a tap on his shoulder. He turned just in time for the hooded man's fist to slam into his face. The blow staggered Ramgore, and before his could recover the hooded man was upon him. Blows rained down upon Ramgore from all sides, and he was powerless to stop them. Finally, broken, beaten, and bloody, Ramgore fell to the ground in a heap.

The pub was dumbfounded. After making sure that Ramgore wasn't getting up, the hooded man let out a tired sigh and removed his hood. The man underneath was quite handsome, with short blond hair and deep blue eyes. He walked over to the unconscious Ramgore, gave him a little kick to the side to make sure he was out, and quickly bound his arms and legs. He looked down at the mountain of a man for a moment, and then turned to the still silent bar patrons and said, "So, who wants to help me carry this heap to the nearest guard station?"



Roland left the dungeon, after making sure that Ramgore was securely chained to the wall, and walked up to the Captain of the guard of New Emerald, a fat and unhealthy looking man, to accept his reward. "Thank you sir, for helping rid this town of a horrid and violent criminal. Because of you we can all rest a little easier tonight". The Captain didn't sound interested in the slightest as he spoke. It was obvious that none of the New Emerald guards really cared about



*One Last Job*

the city or its inhabitants. To them it was just a payday. Roland held his tongue and accepted the gold, ready to be rid the Captain's loathsome company.

Before Roland could leave, the Captain called after him, "Sir, you wouldn't happen to be Roland Suluma, the famous guard turned bounty hunter, would you?"

Roland paused at the door, debating whether to ignore the man and leave. After a few seconds, Roland said, "If I were?"

The Captain eyed him for a moment before saying, "Well, it's just that we recently received orders from Lord Kerberos to investigate a disturbance at the Dead Port blockade he set up all those years ago. We'd be honored to have you accompany us."

Without the slightest pause Roland said, "Not interested," and began to leave.

The Captain practically flew out of his chair in protest. He approached Roland, saying, "Please sir, I implore that you reconsider. I could make it worth your while."

That got Roland's attention. He hadn't gotten as much as he had hoped from Ramgore's bounty, and Roland needed the money. He turned to face the Captain. "How much we talking?"

The Captain suddenly looked a little uneasy and stammered, "Half of what you received for Ramgore."

Roland gave the Captain an amused smirk and said, "No less than double this. Take it or leave it."

The Captain has livid, the waddles of fat on his neck shaking in his anger. "How dare you try and steal such an exorbitant amount! Do you have any idea who you're talking to? I'm..."

Roland interrupted him. "You're an out of shape, over-weight, slug of a Captain who's in charge of a group of men who have zero to little respect for you and could care less about this assignment. A Captain who has been given an assignment that is obviously over his head. You need me because you wisely deduced that you and your men would not be able to handle this assignment, and you wish to have someone with you who can actually handle themselves in a fight."

The Captain was speechless. His face was beet-red with anger, and he seemed about to say something in retort, but instead gave a weary sigh. "Fine, you'll get the gold once we return. Now be sure to meet us at the docks in an hour. We have a ferry ready to take us down to the blockade."

Roland left the Captain and walked outside. Looking up to the sky, he whispered to



One Last Job

himself, “Is that man really the best Kerberos has to offer the kingdom? And people wonder why I left the guards.” He half considered not showing up at the docks, but then he remembered why he was doing this, and gave an irritated grunt. Life was so much more complicated when you had responsibilities.



The Smoke was visible for miles, stretching into the sky like a black serpent. The blockade of Dead Port was burning.

Roland gazed at the burning barricade from the ferry. He thought back to when it was first built. The blockade had been set up only a few years ago, soon after Kerberos had come to power in New Emerald. He said it was there to keep poor souls from stumbling in and succumbing to the infection. That sounded like a load of horse crap to Roland. No one, not from any part of the former Empire, was stupid enough to go near the place. Which was what had Roland confused. Why would anyone want to go into the Dead Port? Who would attack the blockade?

The Captain ordered his men to take the horses off the ferry and investigate. He was already on his horse. Roland couldn't help but feel sorry for the poor thing: the Captain must have weighted a ton.

As they rode into the ruined camp, the true horror of what had happened hit Roland. There were bodies everywhere, many of which were in multiple pieces. The stench of burning flesh was in the air, causing the hairs on Roland's neck to stand on end. However, it wasn't just the dead bodies and the copious amounts of blood everywhere that were bothering Roland. What unnerved him was the fact that, judging by the stages of decomposition in the bodies, this had happened days ago, yet no scavengers had disturbed any of the bodies. Roland had never seen anything like it. Then, he noticed something near the body of a horse. It was a vulture, bloated from its feast, but Roland took no notice of that. The vulture was dead, and there were no visible signs of violence on the bird.

Suddenly it dawned on Roland. “Don't touch anything!” he shouted, “The bodies have been infected by the plague!”

As soon as he said it, the New Emerald guards flew into a panic. It was every man for

*One Last Job*

himself, soldiers shoving and pushing each other in order to get away from the infected corpse.

Only Roland didn't panic. He was sure the infection could only be transferred by direct contact with the infected. He calmly, but quickly, made his way to the soldiers and their Captain, who was farther away than anyone else. He looked back at the barricade and saw that the gate had been smashed from inside.

"Well that explains how the infection spread," he said to the Captain, pointing out the gate, "whatever did this came from inside the Port. But what's got me confused is how something with the plague could move, let alone kill an entire garrison of soldiers."

The Captain was terrified, and Roland couldn't really blame him. When the plague first appeared it sent the entire region into a panic.

The Captain stammered, "We have to get out of here. We'll take the ferry back to New Emerald and send a message to Lord Kerberos; he'll know what to do."

Roland looked at the Captain in disbelief, "Don't you think we should hunt down whatever did this can make sure it doesn't spread the infection?"

The Captain looked at Roland. "Are you insane? We'll be infected! No, we have to leave at once, take the ferry... Where'd the ferry go?" he shouted.

Roland looked back and saw that the ferry man had already left. Apparently he had heard Roland's shout about the plague and hightailed it out of there. Smart guy.

Roland looked at the Captain and said with a sort of grim smugness, "So, looks like we're hoofing it back. Maybe we'll see whatever did this along the way."

As the Captain gathered the soldiers together to tell them about "his plan" for hunting down the culprit of the massacre, Roland noticed something in the grass. He bent down for a closer look, and was shocked at what he saw. Footprints had been scorched into the ground, killing all the grass around them. Roland followed them to their origin with his eyes. They started from inside the blockade. They led toward the north, following the river.

Roland walked over to the Captain just as he was telling his soldiers to split into pairs and go off in all directions looking for whatever had done this.

Roland interrupted, pointing off to the north. "Or, you could not split up, getting lost in the Wastelands, and just follow the footprints that lead from inside the Dead Port and off in that direction."

The Captain gave Roland a look of pure hatred. "Or we could do what the bounty hunter



*One Last Job*

suggested.”

The Captain mounted up and led his men after the footprints. Roland followed them from a short distance.

They followed the trail till the sun sank into the horizon, leaving them in the empty blackness of night. They set up camp and soon had several fires going. Roland had his own fire, and none of the soldiers approached him. He preferred it that way. The less he had to talk to these people, the better. Judging by the looks of them, the Captain had just emptied the dungeon when he had been looking for guards.

Roland casually listened to their small talk, which ranged from their mundane lifestyles in New Emerald to ridiculous theories as to what exactly they were hunting. Roland again thought about why he was even in this situation. He needed the money, that’s for sure, but did he really need it so much that he was willing to tangle with some sort of plague-carrying killing machine? He let out a sigh; yes, yes he was. When a man has a responsibility, he’s willing to do some pretty crazy stuff. He’d do anything to make sure she would be comfortable.

Suddenly, there was shouting from one of the fires. There was an orange glow from off to the north. Something was on fire.

They arrived at what remained of the small fishing village in time to see a repeat of the scene from earlier. All the huts were on fire and dead bodies littered the streets. Even the women and children hadn’t been spared. For the first time since he was a boy, Roland felt a twinge of fear. Not the usual kind of fear, like whenever he entered a fight. No, this fear was primal, the same primordial sensation every child feels when they gaze out into the woods at night, where every shadow is a monster and every noise a sneaking behemoth. This was fear driven by some instinct, some genetic memory that lay dormant in every man, but is never truly forgotten.

Roland did his best to shake off the feeling. He tried to distract himself by looking for the footprints. Sure enough, they passed right through the center of the village and into the nearest hut. They told a tale of cold-blooded murder as they went from house to house, leaving only scorch marks and bloodstains. It was one thing to kill soldiers in the heat of battle, but coldly going into someone’s home and murdering them was beyond barbaric; it was inhuman.

Roland looked at the Captain and now saw not fear on his face, but a look of grim determination. It appeared that he finally understood what needed to be done. Silently he led



*One Last Job*

his men from the massacred village and followed the footprints into the night. There would be no more stopping tonight. No one could fall asleep after seeing what they had.

They reached their quarry at dawn. As soon as the sun had risen above the horizon, one of the soldiers gave a shout. Out in the distance ahead there was a lone figure heading north.

They reached the figure in minutes, thundering up behind it. The figure turned just as they pulled to a stop a spear throw away from him. Roland got a good look at the man, if he could be called that, and broke out in a cold sweat.

The man had long, oily black hair that flowed in the wind like a river. He stood at least two heads taller than Roland, and was more muscular and finely built than any other man Roland had seen in his life. He wore no shirt. His body was covered in strange runes that Roland couldn't identify. Around each of his wrists were rusted shackles, one of which still had a chain attached. The chain coiled up his arm and around his body like a serpent of steel, and ended with a serrated black blade that looked like it had been forged in the very fires of Hell itself. However, the most shocking thing about this man was his face. He had no nose. In its place was a gapping hole that quivered and made a sickening noise every time the man breathed in. His teeth were ragged and yellow, as if he had chewed through the chains that had been attached to his shackles. His eyes were bloodshot and haggard, and they seemed to glow with all the hatred in the world. The scorched footprints lead right up to where the man was standing, and there were none continuing beyond him.

There was no mistake, this was what had massacred the soldiers at the Dead Port blockade and the villagers from the night before. They stood there, motionless, glaring back at each other. Roland felt the fear from last night, this time amplified to the point where he was near hysterics. Nothing, no amount of gold, was worth confronting this monster.

Finally, one of the guards couldn't take it anymore. He charged the man, spear pointed at its chest, a terrified war cry escaping his lips like a rat leaving a sinking ship. The other soldiers followed his lead, even the Captain, and charged the man. Even Roland followed suit. Maybe, just maybe, if they all attacked at once they'd be able to take down this monster.

The first of the soldiers only made it half way when suddenly the man whipped the chain at them so fast it was only a blur. It made an evil hiss as it flew through the air and cut through their horses' legs like a hot knife through butter. The horse fell to the ground, taking their riders with them. This happened over and over again; whenever a rider got close enough, his



*One Last Job*

horse would be cut out from beneath him.

Roland was prepared. As soon as he saw the monster begin to release the chain again, he leapt from the back of his horse.

Roland flew through the air towards the monster, drawing his twin swords as he grew near. He kicked the man square in the chest with all the force he could muster, but it barely staggered the monster. Roland prepared to run him through, but a shimmer of movement to the right caught his eye and he dodged just in time as the man's black blade came slicing through the air.

Roland rolled out of way back to where the other soldiers were getting up, catching his breath. The man hadn't even broken a sweat. He stared at Roland with the same intensity as before, as if trying to kill Roland simply by looking at him.

The other soldiers dismounted and drew their swords and shields. They charged the man with reckless abandon. They hadn't the slightest chance, even they knew it, but they couldn't stop themselves. This man, this monster, was an abomination, and the world must be cleansed of it at any cost.

As the soldiers approached him, the monster started to swing his blade in front of him like a meat grinder, quickly killing the first couple of soldiers. His sword cut through their armor and shields as if they were made of paper, rending flesh with ease. The men fell to the ground in pieces, littering the dirt with intestines and offal.

The monster quickly spun around, causing his chain to scythe through the air at head level. Several of the soldiers were decapitated, sending fountains of crimson into the air.

The monster threw his blade into the body of another soldier with such force that it went straight through him. It pulled the blade back, ripping the hole in the soldier's chest open all the more wider.

The Captain, running amazingly fast for a man of his girth, charged onwards even after seeing the fate of his men in front of him. The monster whipped his blade in an ascending arc, cleaving the Captain in half, groin to head. The corpse fell in two pieces, one to either side, with a sickening plop.

Only Roland remained. He felt sick after witnessing this killing machine in action, but it was necessary. If he was going to stand any chance against this monster, he needed to study its movements during combat. He thought momentarily about fleeing, but knew it was pointless.



*One Last Job*

All of the horses were dead, and Roland didn't have enough water to make it back to any city. He was going to die, one way or another. He, too, could not resist the aura this creature had around it. If he was going to die than he was going to die ridding the world of this monstrosity.

Roland charged the monster, his hooded cloak billowing in the wind behind him, his swords in hand. The monster's range was about fifteen feet in all directions, and he could swing his chain so fast Roland almost couldn't trace it. Almost.

As soon as he got within the monster's range, Roland dove to the ground and felt the blade slice through the air above him. He pulled out into a roll and quickly got back on his feet. He was now only ten feet from the monster.

The monster drew back his chain and twirled it in front of himself, making a veritable wall of serrated steel.

Roland quickly removed his cloak and threw it into the chain, weighing it down just enough to interrupt the twirl. "Damn," he muttered, "that was my favorite cloak." Roland leapt past it and continued toward the monster. Now there were only five feet between them.

Roland readied his swords to cleave this monster's head from its shoulders, almost upon it. "I can do this," he thought to himself, "I can actually make it out of this alive."

Roland drew back his swords, and leapt into the air so they were level to the monster's neck. He gazed into the monster's hideous face. Hate-filled eyes glared back into his. And Roland swung.

Instead of feeling the blades go through the monster's neck, Roland felt them clang against something hard and metal. The monster had managed to move his shackles into the path of the swords, preventing them from decapitating him.

As Roland fell back to the ground, the monster drew back its arm and slammed its fist into Roland's face with the force of a battering ram. Roland flew backwards, his nose broken, and lost his grip on his swords.

Roland hit the ground hard and rolled to a stop several yards away from the monster. He gripped his face in pain, and slowly, agonizingly, got back to his feet. If he was going to die, he wasn't going to lie on the ground like a sick dog, he was going to go out like a man. Barely able to keep his balance, Roland started to run towards the monster, every nerve in his body screaming in pain, his vision blurred, knowing that he was going to die, and not caring.

Roland was almost within blades reach when suddenly he felt a horrible pain erupt from



One Last Job

deep within his chest. He fell to the ground and squeezed his arms against his body, writhing in agony. What was happening to him? He got onto his hands and knees, and started violently coughing up blood.

Roland gazed down into the droplets of blood on the ground below his face, feeling weak and confused. His vision grew even more blurry. He finally realized what was going on. He had been infected by the plague. The monster was a source of the plague, infecting everything he touched.

Roland rolled onto his back, and gazed up into the morning sky. He could hear the monster approaching him, but he no longer cared. His mind wandered, thinking back to why he was here in the first place. “Re-responsibility,” he breathed out. “When a man has...a responsibility...he...he does crazy things.”

Roland's view of the sky was suddenly obscured by a looming shadow. For a moment he thought the sun had been blocked by clouds. His vision cleared for a brief moment and saw the monster standing over him, his blade pointed at his chest. Roland gazed into his eyes, those hateful, murderous eyes, one last time, and whispered one word as the monster drove its blade down into his chest. “Maria.”



The monster, the man, pulled his blade from the Roland's chest, pausing for a moment to look at his handy work. He then swung the chain around himself. Despite being razor sharp, it didn't cut into his chest. He walked over to Roland's ruined cloak and draped it over his shoulders. The moment the tattered cloak touched his skin, it turned the same oily black color as the man's hair.

He continued north, ignoring the sun bearing down onto his head and the wind blowing dust into his face. Nothing mattered but his revenge. Long ago, so, so long ago, he had been a normal man, like the ones he had just killed. He even once had his own Maria. But all that had changed an eternity ago. Now all this monster, this man, had was his desire for vengeance.

The man soon began to approach another village. He paused for a brief second and contemplated going around it.

The voice in the back of his head whispered in its dark, hoarse tone, “You want to be

*One Last Job*

strong enough to kill him, don't you? Mercy makes you soft, makes you weak. In order to gain the strength to kill Kerberos, you're going to be like steel: cold and unfeeling. Show no mercy, not to anyone."

The man, the monster, nodded in consent to the dark voice in the back of his head. He continued onwards towards the village, leaving behind a trail of scorched, dead grass. He spoke to the voice in his head, that dark sinister voice, with his own corroded voice; "Everything that has felt his influence shall wither and die, along with anything that stands in my way. Kerberos' suffering shall be legendary. This I swear."

The voice inside his head chuckled as the monster entered the village and the voices outside his head began to scream.



This Work set in Runes of Gallidon – runesofgallidon.com.

Available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) license.

First Published December, 2009.

