

“The gaze of the Eye can turn a brave man into a hero. From a hero it will create a god of war and conquest. Facing a monstrous soul-eating being, a plague of monsters and a nomad horde, Kerinstye needs such a hero to save it. But with only Talsin and Dalden to work with, salvation is a pretty tall order even for the Eye of Glory.”



Martin J.

Dougherty

The Eye of Glory



The Eye of Glory

A Post-Modern Fantasy Romp of the Worst Kind

By Martin J Dougherty

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The Eye of Glory

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Author's Preface

The Eye of Glory was first written in the summer of 2000, not long after I went professional as a writer. It was published by Hekaforge as a promotional item for the Lejendary Earth (sic, and also a registered trademark) game line.

Some years later, about a year after I founded Avenger Enterprises, I had the half-baked idea of releasing some of my fiction as Avenger titles. Chris Clark at Inner City Games was kind enough not only to release the manuscript back to me but also to find a copy I could work from. Thanks, Chris. And Gary (Gygax) too, for letting me do the project in the first place.

Thanks are also due to Michael Taylor for layout and maybe to people who told me they liked the book; most especially Mark McManus. And especially to Helen and Ann-Marie, for never quite leaving the idea of a sequel alone... and to Martin Laurie, who I strongly suspect would BE Onslaught if he had the opportunity.

And from the original dedication I'll finally add:

The Eye of Glory owes a lot to many people, and so it is dedicated to them.

To the fencers past and present at the University of Sunderland, upon whom I practiced Talsin's unusual swordsmanship.

To my wife Helen for putting up with my obsessive writing. To Steve Bond for Dalden, and to Gary Thompson for spotting a clanger just before I dropped it.

And once again, I am in debt to Martin Laurie. This time it's for the Fighting Chance Inn and for Onslaught.

And all the rest.

Right, enough with the self-indulgence. Let's get down to business.

MJD, March 2007.

“The gaze of the Eye can turn a brave man into a hero. From a hero it will create a god of war and conquest. Facing a monstrous soul-eating being, a plague of monsters and a nomad horde, Kerinstye needs such a hero to save it. But with only Talsin and Dalden to work with, salvation is a pretty tall order even for the Eye of Glory.”

Chapter One

Bone crunched as Dalden's left fist slammed into the blond farmboy's cheek. He followed the punch with a straight right, sending the cocky young man staggering. The bigger man was game, though. He recovered himself, breathing heavily through bubbles of blood from his smashed nose. He shifted his guard to cover the injured side of his face and came forward again. His expression was demonic in the dim torchlight that more or less failed to illuminate the fighting pit.

This time the farmboy's advance was not the overconfident rush of a tall and powerful man facing what he thought was a much weaker opponent. Now the young farmer had learned respect the hard way, and he was going to make Dalden pay for the lesson in smashed teeth and broken bones.

The farmboy was big, with solid rippling muscles honestly gained in healthy outdoor labor. Until today his good looks had never been marred by a sound beating, unlike Dalden's battered features. He was big and strong and good-looking and Dalden hated him for it.

Mostly for the good-looking part.

Dalden gave ground, hearing the excited murmurs from outside the fighting pit. He could have pressed the advantage, could have ended it then and there, but he wanted to drag the fight out, make it a spectacle. He needed a decent cut from the side bets. It was up to Talsin to push the betting up, and he'd better do a decent job. This hulking great plow-pusher was going to be a struggle to take down now that he was wary and roused. It had damn well better be worth it.

The farmer closed, throwing a series of tight jabs to keep Dalden moving back. He'd picked up some training, then. How much, and what difference it would make, Dalden was about to find out. He stopped backing up, let the next jab come in. Dalden swayed aside, then ducked the cross that followed. He lashed a quick left into the farmboy's iron-hard gut muscles, bobbed out of the way of a straight right, and struck again.

The farmboy didn't seem to notice the blows, but the crowd did. They thought that Dalden, a regular of the Fighting Chance Inn's combat pit, was failing to hurt his opponent. The murmurs got louder, the betting increased in tempo, and members of the crowd began shouting out offers of bodyguard or boudoir duty to the farmboy. Most, but not all, of the offers came from women.

Dalden sneered through the week-old stubble that was thicker than the hair on his head. Short, of immensely powerful build but as impressively ugly, Dalden didn't get bedroom offers. None that he cared to take up, anyway. He did sometimes get mistaken for a dwarf, though. That wasn't much consolation really, and few made the mistake twice.

The farmboy came in again, using the same jab-cross-uppercut combination for the third time. Dalden grinned and changed leads. Most right-handers were trained to fight left hand forward, but Dalden was more or less ambidextrous when it came to hurting people. Now he knew exactly how much training the farmboy had, and how he would react. It was time to finish this and collect the spoils.

Dalden snapped two fast jabs out with his right, then twitched his left shoulder as if about to throw a cross. The farm boy instinctively moved to cover his cracked right cheekbone against the left cross he expected was coming. Dalden instead jabbed him in the face again. The short, vicious punch had all Dalden's weight moving forward behind it. The blond head snapped back. Now Dalden launched the cross, drawing his right back for an immense haymaker than all but lifted the bigger man from his feet.

The farmboy stumbled against the back wall of the pit and slid down, spitting teeth and blood. He made no attempt to rise but instead clutched at his ruined face and whimpered. Dalden grinned as a grubby towel came flying out of the dimness above. He wiped his sweaty torso down with it, then tossed it on the battered youth's head with a derisive laugh.

Dalden vaulted out of the pit and flexed his impressive muscles, breathing deep of the smoky, sweat-reeking air. On three sides around the fighting pit were crammed the tables occupied by ordinary patrons of the Fighting Chance. Most were off-duty mercenaries, enforcers or guards; common swordslingers, retribution men and rogues. The rest were tradesmen and laborers sitting in little huddled groups, all wary or – depending on how much sense they had

– slightly afraid of the others. Humans and members of the Cousin Races were mixed among the tables without prejudice; which merely meant that nobody cared if it was Dwarf, Elf, Ogre or Human who got stabbed or clubbed. Servers moved among the tables; not attractive serving wenches but hard-eyed fighters. Not a few of them were veterans of the pit and every one of them was armed.

On the fourth side of the fighting pit were the shrouded private booths. Their owners kept their identities secret for the sake of presumed respectability, but Dalden knew they were vicarious thrill-seekers like everyone else who came to watch the fights. They just had more money, that was all. They were scum, all of them. Decent people didn't come to the Fighting Chance.

Not that there were all that many decent people in Kerinstye anyway.

There were a few cheers from around the pit, and some good-natured jeering from those who knew Dalden well enough – or had sufficient weaponry to hand – to think they could get away with it. He grinned again at the recognition and made an obscene gesture at the whimpering blond man being helped out of the pit. Nobody made him any bedroom offers, of course, but the farmboy wasn't getting any either. Dalden chuckled and swaggered towards his favorite corner table.

At the table, almost lost in smoky shadows, Talsin sat with his soft boots up on the table and his arm around a child-like, dark-haired young woman's shoulders. A wine flagon and three cups stood atop Dalden's crumpled and dirty gray shirt. Dalden picked up the flagon and drained it without bothering with a cup, dribbling wine down his front as he took great gulps.

"What we get?" he demanded of Talsin.

Talsin shrugged. "Not a great deal," he said with a boyish grin. Talsin was clean-shaven, with soft brown eyes slightly darker than the long hair he somehow managed to keep clean. Tall and slender and possessed of a silver tongue that went some way towards making up for a lack of any real talent in his ostensible profession - a mage-scholar specializing in ancient lore – Talsin was for some reason immensely attractive to women. Dalden found this last trait inexplicable, but only occasionally hated his friend for it. He didn't like the way the girl was snuggling up, though. And something about her wasn't quite right. It wasn't just that she was very young... a child really. No, something more.

"How much, Talsin?" demanded Dalden again. He glared at the girl in the dim and smoky light. Ah, that was it. She was an Elf. Not that it mattered to Dalden who Talsin slept with. Just that if she'd been as young as he thought, well, children usually have angry fathers. The Elf smiled back at Dalden, somewhat nervously.

"Dalden, this is my... friend... Halfassi. Half..."

“Talsin!” Dalden barked, slipping his arms into his shirt and feeling the comforting weight of the knife sheathes in each sleeve. The dagger sewn into the back-of-neck holder scraped his spine as it settled reassuringly in place.

“Thirty-eight Kerine,” Talsin said with a shrug. “Plus an offer of a private display bout.”

Dalden glared at his old friend.

Talsin shrugged again. “Okay, it was forty-five,” he said with a grin. “And the offer.”

“Who?” Dalden buckled on his weapon belt, with its shortsword on one side and yet another dagger on the other. With the two knives he’d not removed from his boots, the punch-dagger and the brass knuckles hooked to his belt, he was now fully dressed. At need, he could grab up his buckler and crossbow from the bench beside Talsin. You could easily spot the regulars in the Fighting Chance. They were the ones who came in armed to the teeth. People who didn’t were unlikely to survive long enough to become regulars.

Dalden seated himself, gesturing rudely at one of the servers, a burly young man named Arduin. “What about this offer?”

“You’ll not like it. Down at the other end of the river. The Prince-Admiral is holding an open fighting tournament at the Port Fortress. One of the merchants wants to put a stable together to enter. He’s paying a ridiculously small sum to anyone willing to turn up and show off.”

“Forget it,” grunted Dalden.

“Might have to take it. We’re broke.”

“We have forty-five, plus whatever you haven’t wasted from last night’s bout,” Dalden replied with a grin.

Talsin chuckled. The previous night’s so-called bout had been one of what Dalden liked to call his ‘unscheduled matches’. The lone man Dalden had waylaid in a particularly dark and lonely alley had certainly not been expecting a boxing match. They’d gained a few coins and a strange piece of ruby and gold jewellery that was just too ornate to go through their usual fences. The man’s sword had brought a reasonable price which was quickly eaten up in a flurry of debt-settlement with the local sharks. They’d left him his knife, though. Leaving a man unarmed on the streets of Kerinstye was much the same as cutting his throat; perhaps crueller. Neither Talsin nor Dalden was into murder. Not most days, anyway.

“Food, shorty!” snapped Arduin, dumping a battered pewter plate piled high with bread, topped by badly cooked meat and a few vegetables of unhealthy aspect, in front of Dalden. A vessel – it was too vast to be a mere tankard – of strong black beer thumped down beside it and slopped froth on the filthy table-top.

“Money, jackass!” barked Dalden, flicking a coin at Arduin. The servers in the Fighting Chance – male and female alike – were pretty fair combatants themselves. Most of them visited the pit once or twice a month for extra cash, but few would dare to talk to Dalden like that. In this case, though, there was respect between Arduin and Dalden. They had bashed one another almost to oblivion in the pit on two occasions, and had fought side by side against the Prince-Mercantile’s enforcers when the city’s only female Prince had foolishly decided to make the Fighting Chance part of her holdings.

“You enjoyed pounding that hopeful, didn’t you?” asked Arduin.

“Nah. Only made forty-five on the bets,” Dalden grunted, stuffing his mouth with bread. He flicked the vegetables onto the table top with a disdainful expression. “What’s these anyway? You know I don’t eat green stuff.”

Arduin chuckled. “Ask your friend how much he really got. And those are called vegetables. They’re good for you.”

“Cheaper than meat, you mean,” Talsin put in with a grin.

“Didn’t see you in the pit tonight, Backstreet Wizard.” Arduin retorted, his tone rich with contempt.

Talsin swallowed his annoyance and wisely bit back a reply. There were two kinds of people in the Fighting Chance. The ones who had set foot in the pit, and the hangers-on who watched, drank and incidentally kept the place open with their bets and patronage. Some of those hangers-on, the ones in the shrouded side booths with their own special entrances, were rumored to be among the richest and most powerful people in the ancient city of Kerinstye. Wilder tales had all seven of the city’s Princes, plus a number of powerful priests, mages, sorcerers, artificers and maybe a minor deity or two behind the curtains. Nobody seemed to know for sure. Nobody sane or reliable, anyway.

Arduin turned to hurl abuse at another of the servers, then moved away among the close-packed tables, shoving customers roughly aside. Dalden watched his macho antics with fond amusement. “Forty-five Kerine, Talsin?” he said suddenly.

“All right. Sixty.”

“How about I pick you up and shake you?” Dalden offered. The Elf shifted position nervously beside Talsin.

“Sixty. Really, Dalden.”

“All right. What are we going to do about that ruby thing?”

Talsin shrugged. “Looks too valuable to take to Ulrfeich. He’s only good for cheap necklaces and such. Besides, I’m sure it’s magic. Feels like, anyway. You know, Dalden, I’m sure I’ve heard of this thing, or something like it.”

“Right,” said Dalden around a mouthful of bloody half-cooked meat.

“No, really. Ruby thing shaped like an eye... Ruby Eye... I vaguely remember a reference from somewhere.”

“Right,” said Dalden again, then suddenly looked up. “You think it’s really valuable?”

“Maybe. Why the sudden interest?”

“I was just looking around at our world. Look how small it is. A favorite table in the corner, a few coins for beating up on some poor dope who thinks he’s got what it takes. I mean, Talsin, look at us.”

Talsin was listening to the Elf whispering in his ear. He nodded absently at Dalden.

“Two aging swordslingers....”

“Aging!” snapped Talsin suddenly, making the Elf jump. “Dalden, you just turned thirty. I’m much younger.”

“Okay, two third-rate swordslingers, just scraping by. Before you came along I ran with the Hatchet Brothers. They just vanished one night. Before that I was with Yrlich. He got a knife in the belly. Then there was Tavir. He left me for dead after he figured I was worth more as a victim than as a partner. That’s my life, Talsin. Fifteen years since I went over the side of my uncle’s fishing skiff to find my fortune. Fifteen years. For what? A few new bruises, a table in the Fighting Chance, sixty in cash and a ruby thing we daren’t sell because we’re not tough enough to survive the experience.”

“Eighty-seven, Dalden.” Talsin said softly. “Eighty-seven tonight. I’m sorry.”

Dalden shrugged, slightly surprised to find that Talsin really did look apologetic... guilty even. “Doesn’t matter. If it was five hundred it’d still not matter. This is our world. We’ll just scrape along until one of us gets killed. Then the other finds a new sidekick and does it all over again.”

“And keeps on scraping along?” Talsin replied. “Hoping for that big score that doesn’t come?”

“Yeah.” Dalden noisily downed half his ale. Some of it went down his front, adding to the stains on his shirt. He didn’t care much, other than for the wasted beer. Dalden didn’t have an appearance you worried about spoiling.

“This is Kerinstye. Two steps from hell,” Talsin said. “It’s the same for everyone. You’re either rich and great and powerful or you’re poor and downtrodden. Everyone is just trying to get through one more day. The farmers and the rivermen and those poor dumb fools who try to make a living by trading among the hinterland villages. The Princes and the great mages and the merchants? I bet they’re struggling along just like us though, I concede, in rather more comfort and style.” Talsin smiled up at the Elf as she slipped away among the tables. She managed to thread her way among the crowd all the way to the stairs without being more than slightly molested on the way.

Talsin went on, "And in between there's us. Swordslingers and backstreet mages. Just keeping going day by day because the alternative is trying to scratch a living as a fisherman or a farmer. Or laying down to die."

"Same thing," Dalden grunted. "I tried both. Fishing and laying down. Didn't much care for either."

"Maybe. But what else is there? I mean, I know what they say; the city is decaying, the nomads raid into the valley more with each passing year... we'll be overrun some day. But maybe it won't happen today. Maybe not tomorrow, either. And that means there's a little hope."

"You really believe that?"

Talsin's eyebrows rose. "That the city is falling? Or about hope?"

"Either."

"Yes, I suppose. The city will be overrun, or collapse in an orgy of political in-fighting or something. I don't think there's any hope for us in the long term. But in the near term.... There's still a chance for you and I to live out our lives in luxury and splendor. Maybe this," he patted the hidden pocket where he'd stashed the ruby eye, "will change our luck."

"Or get us killed."

"Or that. Look, Dalden, of you're going to be so gloomy then I'm off to bed."

"With your little friend?"

Talsin grinned, "How well you know me. Enjoy your meal."

"Unlikely," Dalden snorted, then glanced up as the noise level increased.

Ardurn was climbing into the pit and stripping off his shirt, calling out for a challenger to take him on. For a second, Dalden considered it. Then he thought better of the idea. After all, Ardurn had brought his food, and you couldn't be too careful in Kerinstye. Come to think of it, if caution was necessary in Kerinstye, insane paranoia was a survival trait in the Fighting Chance.

Talsin fastened his sword belt over his shirt of crimson linen. He settled his long, slim thrusting sword and its companion parrying dagger a little more comfortably. He glanced around at the tables, looking for potential trouble on his route to the stairs.

There were nights when you would be safer to ride out across the steppes to the nearest of the city-states of the Jurlan Plains, which meant crossing a hundred and more miles of hostile nomad-infested wilderness, than to cross the floor of the Fighting Chance Inn. But tonight looked only as hazardous as, say, navigating one of the Death Rivers, tributaries of the Waryne River upon whose bank Kerinstye festered.

Talsin reckoned he could make it without calling on his special talents. Which was just as well, since he possessed all the magical aptitude of a well-trained lapdog. He smiled at his own analogy, and in acknowledgement of

Dalden's bravado in laying claim to the table farthest from both door and stairs, as he set off on his slightly perilous journey. He had not gone three steps when trouble came in through the front door.

And like everyone else who came through that door, trouble came in heavily armed and in the company of several friends.

Epilogue

“Death,” said Talsin, “is a lot more complicated than I thought.”

“You see now its fascination?” Onslaught said. “Why we study it so closely and worship its name?”

“Yes. And no, I’m not joining your cult,” Talsin said. “What now?”

“Good question,” said Dalden.

“We should try to find out if the river-galley survived,” Talsin offered. “The state we’re in, we’re not going to make it overland back to Kerinstye.”

“Perhaps some of my order escaped destruction. They may be able to help us,” Andara suggested.

“I wonder what happened to Russial?” Talsin said suddenly.

“Huh?” Dalden replied.

“He entered the cloud with us, but he didn’t come out.”

“Ardurn got lost for a while. Maybe Russial ended up somewhere else,” Dalden suggested.

“Wherever it is, it’s probably better than this,” Talsin groused.

“What’s so bad about this?” demanded Onslaught, who had retrieved the blade of Bloodsong from Ikai’s body.

“The fittest of us could charitably be described as walking wounded,” Talsin said. “We’re stuck in a ruined city with no provisions, facing a walk home of many leagues through hostile monster-infested countryside. And worst of all home, assuming that there is anything left of it and we can get to it through the besieging nomad army, is Kerinstye.”

“Yeah,” Onslaught said. “Sounds like the making of fine adventure!”

Talsin rolled his eyes to the sky. Dalden patted him on the shoulder. “It could be worse,” Dalden said.

“HOW?”

“Well,” Dalden said, gazing around at the wreckage of the city and the many corpses that lay all about. “At least you’re a hero.”

Talsin shuddered at the thought.

Martin J Dougherty

About the Author

Hailing from northeast England, Martin J Dougherty has been a gamer since 1983 and a published author since 1986. Currently a professional writer, he has been at times a games designer, an engineer, a self-protection instructor, a teacher and a defence analyst.

Martin has published a range of books covering topics as diverse as self-protection, medieval warfare and space flight, and has addressed international conferences on anti-shipping missiles and homeland security issues.

Having avidly played every incarnation of the game, Martin became a Traveller author in the early 1990s. He has published materials for Traveller: The New Era, Marc Miller's Traveller, GURPS Traveller, GRIP Traveller and (at the recommendation of the game's creator, Marc Miller) Traveller20.

Martin's interests include martial arts and fencing. He coaches the University of Sunderland fencing team and has competed to national level. As a martial artist he holds black belts in Tai-Jitsu and Self-Defence, teaching at the university and in the local community.