

# *UN-KING* BY MARCO BAIER

“I want you to kill my father.”

Words like these bear weight, especially when spoken by a king. They echoed through the vastness of the nocturnal throne room, lingering in the alcoves along the walls for just a bit longer before fading into the shadows of Castle Morgenheim.

Craven was alone with King Michaelus the Third, a splotch of ink amidst the white and gold of the palace. His thumbs hooked into his belt, he stood at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the Sun Throne — a monstrosity of gold, mirrors and diamonds that would bathe the room in blinding brightness once the morrow came.

Craven was a tall man. Narrow of hip and broad of shoulder, he was clad in black leather armor that spoke of both wealth and experience. So did his weapons: two pistols, a fat-bladed hunting knife strapped to his thigh, and a long sword amongst other, less obvious tools of killing. Letting him keep his weapons in presence of the king was an honor, although a dubious one considering that they had branded him with a geas: a spell marring the flesh of his palm that would prevent him from harming the monarch. Even thinking of doing so would cause him agonizing pain.

Craven gave the king a smile that was as narrow and cold as the edge of his knife, the expression a remnant of days where he still knew joy.

“Kill your father?” Craven asked, putting just a little bit of surprise in his voice. “I thought the great Raphael of Morgenheim, Knight of the Sun and Paladin of Ahn had fallen 60 years ago during the last Crusade.”

“My father,” said the old king, “died in that... mistake. Something else had come back in his stead, wearing his flesh like a glove. He was... hollow. Raphael the Hollow is his name now.”

“I heard tales of the Hollow One,” Craven replied. “An outlaw, a marauding knight, selling his services to the highest bidder or just plainly killing for pleasure. Some say he drinks the blood of his enemies, that he is a vampire... Which could be possible I guess, seeing that most of the stories around

him date back half a century. And you are sure it is your father?"

The frail king cackled, nodding, "I am. He paid me a visit five years ago, during the dark hours of the night, and he was looking no older than the day he had left us half a century ago. I woke to see him sit at my bed, holding my crown in his hands, smiling as if it was but yesterday we last saw each other. Do you know what he said?"

"I have no idea, my Liege," Craven said, hiding his disdain for the rhetorical question and humoring the monarch.

"He thanked me for keeping his throne warm. That he was tired of wandering and soon would return for good to become king of Morgenheim once more. Said I should not worry, he would allow me to reign until my son came of age." The king's eyes grew cold, "a son he ordered me to sire, so that he could replace him once the boy came of age. Refusal would mean the death of me—and every soul of our noble line."

"I see..." Craven said, adding. "Isn't the prince turning four soon?"

The king nodded, a tormented smile showing on his face. "Aye, he is, though he is not my son by blood. A hunting accident in my youth made sure I would never be able to sire a child of my own... He is of low birth, the bastard child of a whore that did not want him. I chose him for his fair hair and blue eyes, eyes and hair like mine, like my fathers'."

The king shook his head, "The boy was meant to be a sacrificial lamb, but I... I never thought I would come to love him as I do." His voice trailed off, his silence saying more than words.

After some moments, the king harrumphed, staring at Craven with tired eyes. "I am old, hunter. A puppet king the day my cursed father put the crown on my head. I do not fear death, not anymore, but I fear for the life of my boy and my kin. For their sake, my father must die!"

Craven took a step closer to the throne, placing his boot on the first step and wondering if the geas would cause him enough pain to deter any attempt to kill the monarch. *If I wanted to kill him, I could,* Craven thought, *geas or not.*

The mere idea made the branding in his palm sting, an unusual feeling for a man who had not felt

pain in over a decade.

*Interesting*, Craven thought.

Addressing the king, he said, "May I ask why you chose me? There are plenty of Death Hunters about, all eager to do thy lord's bidding. You could get a whole army to hunt him down."

"A whole army..." echoed the king. "Yes, I suppose I could, but what if Raphael learns of it before they corner him, what then? No, only one man, one hunter," he pointed a thin finger at Craven, "You."

"But why me?"

The ruler of Morgenheim leant back in his throne, saying, "To kill a monster, you must become one... My father once said this, and I do believe it to be true. Therefore, I ordered my men to find the most ruthless, coldhearted and capable killer they could." A sardonic smile flashed over his features, "This is why you are here."

Craven shrugged, "I always thought of myself merely as being practical". He took another step up the stairs, his outline becoming visible in the corona of mirrors fanning out from the throne. He envisioned crossing the remaining distance to the monarch and driving his knife into his frail chest.

Pain shot from the gears up his arm.

*Intriguing*, he thought, suppressing a wince.

"When I do this deed for you," Craven asked, forming a fist and quenching some of the pain, "what will be my reward?"

The king smiled. "I know of your addiction..."

Craven gave a court bow, "That's common knowledge for anyone with eyes in his head."

"Lich Tears are hard to come by, are they not?" asked the king. "My alchemist told me they are distilled from the brain-matter of the undead, are they not?"

This time Craven did not bother to answer the rhetorical questions. Instead, he mustered the king with cold, impassionate eyes, taking another step, feeling another sting at the casual thought of

throttling him.

The king continued, “He also told me that the pearls bestow the powers of the Undead, eliminating both emotional and physical pain—and to some extent, even magically induced suffering. Is that not true?”

“Your alchemist is quite right,” replied Craven, being very aware of the unpleasant sensations in his arm. “Your highness should try it. It will take away all worry and pain. All fear. For a small price that is...”

The king’s face turned sour, unable and unwilling to hide his disgust. “You mean life-long addiction, the dulling of smell and taste and those... disfigurements? I think not. However, if you bring me the head of my father, a powerful undead if there ever was one, you will have the purest of ingredients: his brain. I will also give you the means to produce your poison wherever you go. You shall have your own mobile laboratory, along with a true master of the craft as your servant: Mortin Echser. He is an alchemist currently residing in my prison, who has chosen a life of servitude over the chopping block. Here, try his work.”

The king pulled a small silver flask from one of the many folds of his golden robe and with a flick of his wrist sent it flying towards Craven. The Death Hunters left shot out, grasping the flask out of the air with a movement so quick the flask seemed to disappear. In the same fashion, a massive blunderbuss pistol, a dragoon, appeared in his other hand, its cave-like muzzle aiming at the monarch. The action had been unconscious, born by experience, training and a strange twitch he noticed in the king’s eyes as he threw. The hand holding the gun felt afire. It was the strongest pain Craven had felt in years.

The king froze, grinned ruefully and put aside the little gun that had jumped into his palm from the hidden contraption strapped around his arm. “I apologize. I had to test if the rest of your reputation was well-earned... I am pleased with what I see.”

Craven lowered his gun, then looked at the box in his hand. Made of silver, worn, and with a jester face on the front, it seemed to be a very expensive children’s candy box. Appreciating the irony, he shook it. Its walls were padded, yet still he could hear the faint rocking of what sounded like small pebbles.

Craven tugged away his dragoon, opened a small latch on the jester-box and shook some of the

content in his hand. Five round orbs fell out, each about as big as a pearl and as black as a murderer's heart. They reflected barely any light, seemed to absorb it in fact... just like the eyes that beheld them.

Lich Tears.

The king smiled. "Do we have a deal?"



*Two months, two weeks and three days later...*

Craven stood hidden by foliage on a tree-topped hill overlooking a small valley, waiting patiently, standing as still as a statue. He had so for the better part of the day, moving for the first time in hours to shake the jester-box in a way that by now had become a comforting habit. It had held 100 Lich Tears when he had accepted the contract to bring down the Un-King of Morgenheim. Now, almost three months later, it held a mere ten. They were potent having lasted that long... but time was running short.

It was good that he finally found him...

It had not been too hard to track down the Un-King of Morgenheim once Craven had identified his pattern. For the past years, the fallen paladin had grown tired of slaughter on a grand scale. Nowadays he preferred to raid isolated farms. He would come, conquer, and destroy, leaving only the dead behind. He had followed that trail of death, closing in on his target by means of elimination, visiting several of the rural farmsteads in the area in hopes of finding his target.

And now he had him...

A trail lead from the hill where he stood, one end disappeared into the woods to the east from where he had come, the other lead down to a small valley with a long farmhouse and a barn at its center. The animals of the farm roamed freely in the valley, had been for quite some time it seemed. Some sheep and cows had fallen prey to the hunger of predators, as several corpses along the rim of the wood

suggested. Their brethren grazed not far from them, oblivious to the dangers of the approaching night.

*Cattle, through and through, Craven thought.*

He waded that the family who used to tend for the animals was dead, killed in a fashion not unlike their livestock. He was proved wrong as he saw a young woman stepped from the house, hurrying towards the well with buckets in her hands. Even from afar, Craven could see that she was both blond and good-looking. The girl showed not fear or disdain of the sun, something that even the strongest of the nightkin would, considering the brightness of the day.

*No vampire that one, Craven thought. Maybe a slave bound by blood?*

He was still pondering the question as a tall, broad-shouldered man with long blonde hair stepped from the house. Once outside, he turned his face towards the sun, enjoying its touch.

It was Raphael.

The Un-King wandered around, idly surveying the valley and the surrounding woods while enjoying the fresh air. Eventually his eyes wandered up the road to where Craven was hidden, and for a brief moment, the Death Hunter thought himself spotted. The feeling faded as the monarch's gaze continued to wander along the outline of the woods, eventually settling on the girl filling the buckets from the well.

"Hurry, my love," the Un-King shouted, his voice somehow harsh and gentle at the same time. "Your sister is getting lonely. And I am getting bored."

"I'm coming," the woman screamed, running back in such a hurry that the buckets lost half their content. They both disappeared inside.

Craven quietly contemplated what he had seen, his shark-like eyes unblinking as the gears and cogs of his mind worked in unison to assess the new situation.

"Change of plans," he eventually muttered and shook a Lich Tear from his box.



The farmhouse, like most of the rural dwellings in the area, was a flat, crude construct built from long logs and topped by a straw roof. Built with practical reasons in mind, not beauty, it had only one entrance and windows that were little more than vertical slits, turning the structure into both an easy to defend fortress and a death trap.

Craven played with the thought of barring the door and setting fire to the structure, but quickly dismissed the idea. After all, a head burned to ashes was of little use to him. That such an approach would also kill the two girls and everybody else in the house never listed as a problem with him.

He checked his weapons one more time. The dragoon was loaded with “Holy Shrapnel”, his own special mix that would bring down werewolves, vampires, wendigos, revenants and even a rabbit bull. A one shot solution to pretty much everything that roamed the earth. His Wheelock pistol was loaded with a gold and silver bullet in each barrel and his long sword and hunting knife were sharp enough to shave with.

Seeing no benefit in waiting for the day anymore, Craven sneaked over the barren fields toward the farm once night fell. Light burned inside, seeping from the window slits like spilled milk. He hurried from shadow to shadow, planning to scale the rough wall of the farmhouse, and then cutting a hole in the straw to gain entry over the roof.

His plan was thwarted as the heavy door of the house opened and a good-natured laughter bellowed from within. Inside, illuminated by the light, stood Raphael. Tall, athletic and narrow of hip, his long golden hair cascaded down his shoulders. He looked nothing like a man close to 100 years, twenty years seemed more fitting and he seemed bursting with vitality and was blessed with devilish good looks.

“Come out, come out, wherever—and whoever—you are. I know you are here. No need for hiding,” shouted Raphael followed by laughter. “Come on in! I was about to sing a song for the women of the house. I have quite a voice they say, you shouldn’t miss it!”

He chuckled, turned and went inside, leaving the door wide open. It was both an invitation and a challenge and Craven weighted his options, his mind calmly addressing the new situation. He made his decision just before the Un-King began singing a sailor's song.

“Dear gods,” whispered Craven, holstering his Wheelock pistol, “that is one filthy song...”



Craven never much cared for music and art, though he had to admit that the Un-King had a fine voice, and certain... talent. His words echoed through the hallway as Craven stepped past the heavy oaken door, closing it behind him.

The corpse of a blond girl with pigtails lay in the short corridor leading to the main room of the building. It was hard to tell her age, for something had sucked every bit of life from her, leaving her skin brown, shriveled, and clinging to her bones like crumpled parchment.

Ever careful and pragmatic, Craven stepped toward her and with one swipe of his sword, severed the corpse-neck, a precaution should the Un-King know the art of Necromancy. The song stopped, interrupted by Raphael's throaty chuckle. As he continued, there was even more amusement in his voice.

A long wooden table dominated the main room. Seated by a total of eleven, eight of them were dead and turned into shriveled husks, like the girl he left behind. Their faces looked horribly stretched, like the victims of a stroke, their mouths open so wide the jaws had dislocated. Among the dead and to the left and right of the Un-King sat two beautiful girls, one blond-haired, and the other with raven-black hair. Sisters by the look of it, though their beauty was of a different quality.

The blonde girl was a rural beauty with a round face, wide hips and an ample bosom. The dark haired one was slimmer, paler, and with her symmetrical face and high cheekbones the epitome of classical beauty. None of them could be older than 20 summers, and they both looked scared to death.

The dark-haired girl at Raphael's left, as pale as a porcelain statue, stared blankly ahead. Her sister was smiling and silently weeping at the same time, her blue eyes briefly faltering toward Craven as he entered. The center of her attention, however, was Raphael. Like a foppish bard, he stood on a large chair at the table's stern, a chimney with a big fire roaring behind him. He was just finishing his song...

"...and then he plowed her *good* — with his drunken sailor's *wood!*"

There was a moment of silence, then a frown from the fallen paladin caused both girls to applaud him. A weak clap-clap came from the dark-haired girl and frantic applause from her blonde sister. Satisfied, the former paladin jumped from the chair and sat down in one fluid motion. He took the blonde-haired woman's hand in his and gave it a kiss. Fresh tears streamed from her eyes.

"Did you like it?" Raphael asked.

"Oh, yes, yes my lord," she replied. "It—"

"Made you horny?" Raphael finished her sentence. Somehow, the girl still had the decency to blush, which made the Un-King laugh. "I'm just kidding Elsa, my darling, how about a ballad now? For you and Ilsa?"

"How about a duet?" asked Craven, positioning himself behind the free chair at the tables end. His gaze wandered over the corpse faces of the former family, their plates still stood in front of them, the food on it, rotting and crawling with maggots. The odor of decay emanating from it, sweet and sticky, was even apparent to Craven's dulled sense of smell.

The knight grinned, leaning back.

"Then again," said Craven. "I have a terrible singing voice... I just can't seem to capture the emotions of a song."

The Un-King smiled. "Ohh, but emotions are so important. Life has to offer so much... You just have to take it. Squeeze it. Enjoy it."

"I see you are quite good the last part."

The Un-King's smile widened.

A moment of silence ensued in which Craven locked eyes with the monster across the table. It was not a staring contest in the traditional sense. After all, Craven's eyes were entirely black, and as such, it was impossible to tell when or if he broke eye contact. However, there was still the matter of blinking, and the Un-King did so first.

It was all that Craven needed. He pulled, aimed and fired his Wheelock pistol before Raphael could open his eyes again. The gold bullet hit the smiling monarch right between the eyes, tearing through his skull and exiting in a shower of black, red, and grey that splattered the tall backrest of his chair. His body bolted back violently and Elsa screamed as blood hit her face.

For a moment, Raphael sat perfectly upright, still smiling his devilish smile, then he fell forward, his head and upper body landing flat on the table, splattering bright red blood over the remnants of his meal.

Craven, ever careful, was already on the move to finish the job and decapitate the monarch. Yet before he could do so, Elsa pulled a large kitchen knife from a loaf on the table and with a scream that held all her torment, brought the blade down on Raphael's neck. Three savage slashes later, the head rolled free, yet that did not stop her. In frenzy, she drove the blade through the head, nailing it on the table.

Had Craven not grabbed her arm, she probably would have reduced it to mincemeat.

"There—there," he said, struggling to hold her, calming her eventually and adding, "It is over."

The raven-haired girl turned and looked at him, her blue eyes wet with tears. Collapsing to her knees, she started crying. Her sister followed her example, hand in front of her face, sobbing as she regarded the growing pool of blood on the table.

"Well," Craven said, looking around. "That was easier than expected."

He managed to give the girls a fake smile from which he hoped it looked comforting. If it had any effect, it was destroyed as the headless body of the Un-King jumped from his chair, pulling his sabre in

the process, and driving the blade into Elsa's neck and downward into her heart.

"You don't say," said Raphael's head.



Craven could not be shocked in the traditional sense, the Lich Tears made sure of that, but he could still be surprised and awed, especially in cases so horrid that they would sent a normal men fleeing in terror. This was one of those rare occurrences.

The blood seeping from the neck of the former paladin had turned to long gooey strands that looked like bloody tentacles as they stretched from the head toward the severed neck. Meanwhile Raphael's body shivered in ecstasy as he drained the young girl of life, reducing her to a mummy in but a few heartbeats.

It was then that Craven realized what the Un-King really was. Something he knew well.

He was an addict.

The sabre of the Un-King was no ordinary blade. Its hand guard resembled the claw of a skeleton and the blade itself appeared to be sharpened bone. Tiny holes perforated the length of it, absorbing the life-blood like a sponge and in a speed that should not be possible.

It was a cursed weapon: a vampire blade.

"Fascinating," Craven whispered and pulled his dragoon.

It was not quite the reply or reaction Raphael had expected and his eyes widened as Craven aimed and fired the heavy lead-shot pistol. The grin on the Un-King's face turned to a visage of terror as the buckshot turned hand, and most of the lower arm, that held the sabre into a red cloud. Hit by the shrapnel, the blade tore from the carcass of the girl, skittering over the floor.

A roar of anger and frustration tore from Raphael's head.

Craven exploded into action, jumping over the table feet-first and kicking the headless torso in the chest, sending him to the ground. Looking around Craven's black gaze locked on the cursed weapon.

"No!" wailed Raphael. "You can't have it!"

A blood-tendrill from the fallen paladin's head wrapped itself around Craven's wrist. The gooey strand was sticky and surprisingly sturdy. It stopped him in his track as he went for the blade, jerking him back.

He turned around, seeing more strands of blood reach from the impaled skull toward him, and made a split second decision. He put his foot on the table for additional advantage and pulled with all his strength. The blood-tendrill did not tear, yet the knife nailing Raphael's head to the table tore through flesh and bone, coming loose under Raphael's anguished screams.

Using the momentum, Craven swung the head in a high arc, slamming it against the low beams of the ceiling with bone crushing force. The impact created a corona of blood against the wood, and a shower of blood and teeth rained down on him. Almost flattened by the impact, the deformed head released its grasp on Craven, slowly sliding from the beam like a squished insect.

Craven nodded satisfied, then was hit in the side and brought down.

His whole world went dark.

The next thing he saw was a fist pummeling down on him with enough force to send his head rocking back against the stone floor and all did turn dark again. He did not feel pain, but the sudden way in which his lungs had been bereft of air left him gasping. The fist hit his face repeatedly, each blow knocking the back of his skull against the stone floor.

After the third strike, Craven's vision came back. The body of Raphael sat atop his chest, his knees pinning down Craven's arms, blood gushing from his severed neck like lava from a slowly settling volcano. The Death Hunter noticed with some surprise that his left arm, and what was left of Raphael's right arm, were deadlocking each other in a most bizarre way.

Craven's dismembering shot had left the bones of Raphael's lower arm exposed, the splintered remains looming from the raw flesh like jagged daggers—and the ruthless Un-King had promptly used them as such and driven them into Craven's lower arm.

Another strike hammered Craven's head against the floor and from somewhere at his side, he could hear Raphael utter in slurred, distorted speech, "You sh break my face, I break your sh."

He was right about that. Craven felt chipped teeth in his mouth and had a hard time not swallowing those already knocked out. The next blow of the Un-King shattered his cheekbone and his left eye went blind.

During all this time, Craven did not even feel a hint of worry. Such feelings were long beyond him, as was the sensation of pain. Instead, he was analyzing the situation as if it was nothing more than a game of chess, the reality of death not bothering him, and he took the punishment in order to ponder his next moves. Being pinned to the ground was bad to begin with; on top of that, the Un-King was a lot stronger than he was — probably an additional power the blade bestowed upon him. Craven knew using raw force would avail to nothing...

*Time to play dead man*, Craven thought and let himself go limp, allowing the former knight to bring home two more strikes that completely shattered his nose. Each time, Raphael had leaned back a little bit farther to reach out and give additional force to his blows. From the looks of it, the third strike aimed to be the final one.

Through half closed lids, Craven saw the Un-King lean back until he sat straight, raising his fist above his shoulder, intending to bring it down on the Death Hunter's head like a hammer.

Once the fist was at his highest, Craven leant forward with all the strength he had left, rocking the headless body back. Then, as quickly as he had pushed, Craven let himself fall back, bringing both his legs up and wrapped them around the torso, pushing. The bones skewering his arm dislodged with an explosion of blood, and with a wet smack, the body of Raphael found itself flat on his own back.

Letting go of his enemy, Craven rolled onto his feet, wiping the blood blurring his vision from his still working right eye. His left arm hung useless at his side, blood gushing from the wounds in his lower arm in a steady flow. He looked for the cursed blade of Raphael, hoping to get to it before the Un-King was

on his feet again, but the fallen paladin surprised him with his agility as he somersaulted onto his feet, bringing his blood-soaked bulk between Craven and the cursed blade.

Craven took a step back, pondering his options while contemptuously spitting broken teeth into the general direction of the Un-King's head. It still hung from the beam against which Craven had flailed it, dangling from a thick strand of blood-goo, like a giant spider. Blood-tendrils had borne themselves from multiple fractures in the skull, flopping and twitching like the tentacles of some hideous sea creature and forming an obscene corona.

The remaining bloodshot eye of the Un-King locked with Craven's still open shark eye, and they measured each other.

"Yoush cannot win," the Un-King croaked, bloody saliva dripping from a mouth of broken teeth. "I 'ave taken too many lives to ever be desstroyed."

"You don't say," Craven said.

"Let's end disch," said the fallen king, its headless torso lifting his arms in a boxer pose.

Craven raised his good hand as the headless torso advanced. "Wait," he said. "Before we finish this, I have one question."

The Un-King hesitated, then sneered and said, "Assk away then. It shall be the lasst knowledge youh ever gain."

Craven pulled a loose canine that bothered him from his gums and threw it away. Then he asked, "How the hell can you speak? Your lungs are still in your body, you should not be able to make a sound..."

The Un-King's mouth opened, then closed again as he was pondering the question, being baffled at the absurdity of it asked in such a situation.

It was all the time Craven needed.

"Why the fuck would-" the Un-King started to speak, but was silenced as the tip of his cursed sabre burst from his chest, driven deep between his shoulder blades with all the strength the farmer girl Ilsa

could muster.

Raphael could not even scream, nor could his body move as the hunger of the blade began taking away what it had so often bestowed. With a wail of terror, Ilsa let go of the blade as the unclean life flowed into her, yet the weapon continued to drain Raphael's body, crimson lightning dancing up and down its length. The blade devoured him, as slowly as a spider would a moth. The Un-King's head shrieked in nameless terror at the sight.

Craven relaxed a fraction, seeing how his plan had worked, then, under the terrified eye of the hanging head, he made its way toward the paralyzed body, walking past and behind it. Ignoring the cowering girl, he took his time to pull the leather glove from his right hand, spat out a mouthful of blood, and then said, "Let's see how this works."

His hand clutched around the hilt.



Invigoration and exhilaration filled Craven, rushed through his veins like fire. For a man who had given away the very ability to feel, both physically and emotionally, the euphoria was almost too much. He shivered uncontrolled as life-energy pumped from Raphael into Craven, slowly turning the former king into a withering husk. A part of Craven's mind noticed that the draining took far longer than it had with the young girl. Then again, the Un-King had surely devoured more life over the years than a normal body could normally hold.

Craven's broken cheekbone healed itself and popped back into place, the swelling around his eyes fading. The loose or shattered teeth within his mouth mended, and the ones that had been knocked out grew back. A grin, a true grin, stretched Craven's features, turning his face into a gore-drenched mask that made Ilsa withdraw in newfound horror.

The girl stumbled back until she was with her back to the wall, then she almost collapsed, sitting down crouching, hiding her face behind her pointy knees after gazing at him one more time with wide

eyes. This sight pulled Craven back in the here and now. With tremendous effort, he wrested both blade and soul from the shriveling carcass of the Un-King, stumbling back.

What remained of the Un-King's body was little more than bones and skin, flopping to the ground like a discarded sack, twitching feebly, but the Hollow One was far from being finished.

"Mine," groaned Raphael's head. "Mine!" While Craven was finishing of the Un-Kings body, his head had dropped onto the table and now pulled itself towards Craven by reaching out with its slimy blood-tentacles. "Mine!" Raphael groaned again and pulled himself over the edge, landing on the ground with a wet thud.

More emotions, long forgotten and intrusive, took hold of Craven: foremost of them disgust and distress for the hideous thing making its agonizingly slow way towards him. He took a faltering step back to get some room to think, yet his usual cold and analytic process of thought had lost much of its edge. He felt more alive than he had in years, more alive than he ever had, but also much more vulnerable, much more human.

"Mine... Mine..." the Un-King moaned, a tentacle worming towards Craven's boot.

Craven gripped the sabre harder, feeling the longing of the alien blade, its hunger, promising Craven even higher states of ecstasy. The temptation was strong. He knew draining what was left of the Un-King would sustain the feeling of joy for days. Part of Craven loved that feeling, wanted to hold on to it, but there was another part of him. A darker part, the part of his soul that still remembered how much pain life could hold.

Then, the first memories came, agonizing even in the midst of his exhilaration.

"No," he whispered, almost sad, then, firmer "No! You cannot have it." Craven said it as much to the head of Raphael as to himself.

With that, he kicked the head into the fireplace, where it landed right on top of the burning logs. There Raphael the Hollow, the Un-King of Morgenheim, screamed as he was consumed by flames as hungry as the ones that had devoured his soul over the past century.

Craven slumped into a chair that stood against the wall, placing the sabre on the ground. The

moment his hand let go of the grip, he could feel a cold anger, like the hatred of a woman scorned. The thought made him smile as he absently took the box with the Lich Tears from his pocket.

Ilsa stared at him curiously, her arms slung around her legs, eyes peering over her bony knees.

He poured two tears into his palm before he even knew what he was doing, yet found himself stopped by the sobbing of the girl.

“No worry,” he said, giving her one of the most genuine smiles he had managed in years. It was a sad smile. “All will be fine.”

Then he swallowed both tears, crashing them between his teeth. The bitter, black liquid spilled, and a wave of frost rolled against the fire in his gut.

Euphoria fought with entropy.

It was an even battle...

A third tear ended it.



Craven and Ilsa stood in front of the brightly burning farmhouse: pyre to mad king and loved family alike. A chest, just large enough to hold a human head stood beside Craven, fine tendrils of smoke still trailing from its closed lids.

“What are you doing with ... it?” asked Ilsa after a while of staring blankly into the flames.

“Turn him in for his bounty,” Craven replied truthfully.

Ilsa slowly nodded. After some minutes, she asked, “Can I... Can I come with you?”

“Why not...” Craven replied, shrugging and turned to go.

The girl stared at his back for several seconds, and then followed quietly.



Craven was pleased.

After delivering the head to the king, both coin and Lich Tears would be his, as well as the means to produce a steady supply of both. On top of that, he also acquired a magical weapon, a priceless, although dangerous artifact. He would have to learn more about it as soon as possible and before he used it again, but after tonight, he was sure he could withstand anything the vampiric weapon threw at him.

And last, but not least, there was the girl and what he had in mind for her...

For when hunting monsters, it was always good to have bait.