

The Armor in the Crypt

Ari Levitch

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The day was unusually hot. Not that the summers were mild here, but the oppressive heat had an uncharacteristically early start today. The heat visibly radiated off the black stones of the castle walls, and the sentries clung to patches of shade cast by the crenellations. On most mornings, Borico Gavish, son of the castle's lord, could be seen up on the battlements coordinating the castle's defenses against various imagined attackers. In this, he was an unquestioned master, for under his command, no such force had yet to breach the walls.

On a day such as this, under such conditions, no army would dare attack the castle, and so Borico sought solace from the heat in the castle's crypt, a chamber beneath the castle, hidden away from the insistent sun. Down here it was cool. Down here it was dark, and the adolescent mind of a one-day knight was able to go to work. Borico held a lantern in which a wobbly little flame cast shadows that undulated eerily, each one a vile monster to be slain with the finely crafted wooden sword he gripped in his other hand. He was a lone paladin, banishing darkness before him, and every corner of the crypt was made safe by the boy's heroic feats.



Art by Wesley Burt

“Borico the Brave,” he tested. “Borico the Bold.” He would work on that later. At last, his quest brought him to the alcove that had no tomb, only an empty suit of armor that appeared to be standing guard. Armor by itself was nothing new for Borico, but this single suit standing in the crypt always struck him as odd.

The armor loomed over Borico, but not in a menacing way. Standing there in front of it, Borico was struck with awe. Here, in forged steel, was his aspiration incarnated. The suit was impeccably crafted, a network of interlocking plates. It was topped by an imposing helm with a wide crest that he imagined could be seen from anywhere on the battlefield. He looked up into the emptiness behind the visor, a thick pool of darkness that seemed somehow to be looking back. Slowly, his hand lifted the lantern, the shifting light playing off of the armor to create spider-like shapes across its plates.

The darkness behind the visor was stubborn.

“You’re a brave one, Master Borico,” came a voice that echoed off the walls.

Borico whirled around, nearly dropping the lantern. His sword shook in his hand and his eyes were wide with what he would later describe as resolute courage. “Who’s there?”

A figure emerged from the shadows. In the lantern light, Borico saw a man whose shape revealed his identity. Rounded shoulders. Stooped posture. He would have been considered tall if he stood up straight, Borico had once overheard his father say. This was Gwaro, a favorite troubadour of his father’s. If there was any doubt, the musician’s short, flared-out beard confirmed it. To Borico, it looked odd now to see him without an instrument in his hands.

“Forgive me, young master,” Gwaro continued. “Like you, I have come down here for a moment’s respite from the merciless sun. My apologies if I have startled you.”

In a wave of relief and sharp awareness of his own frightened appearance, Borico gathered himself. “Hello, Gwaro.”

Gwaro nodded and stepped forward to stand beside Borico. Together, they admired the suit of armor. “As I said, you are a brave one,” said Gwaro.

Although Borico braced himself for mockery and condescension, neither were in the words. “I am not afraid of the dark or the crypt.”

“That’s not what I meant.” The bent troubadour stood staring at the armor, considering it as he combed his fingers through his frazzled beard. He turned to the boy. “Have you heard the story?”

“Of course. My brother told me that this was the armor of Leore the Dragonslayer. He could walk through dragon fire.”

“That is definitely a story, but begging your brother’s pardon, not the story.”

Excitement over the prospect of mysteries revealed, of truths sorted out, was clearly displayed upon Borico’s face, and it was enough encouragement for Gwaro. He began in a well-practiced storytelling voice, “In days long since passed, when the warrior kings and queens of old forged their kingdom in this land—”

“That’s the Age of Strife.”

“Yes, exactly, and you’ll know that during this time, the land was beset by all manner of evil. And that the kings and queens built strings of castles to keep the evil at bay. This was one such castle, built to defend against a powerful necromancer who raised the dead to march on the living. Your ancestors fought countless battles against the dark wizard, and although they were often triumphant on the field, the wizard always eluded capture. So it went. Knights content to earn glory on the battlefield. Common folk happy to be protected.”

Gwaro took the lantern from Borico and wrapped his nimble fingers around it to obscure its light. “But of course, contentment and happiness are not in a necromancer’s nature. His ambitions grew crueler, and his mystic arts grew darker.



Art by Maciej Kuciara

“One day—a hot day much like today—a scout reported that she saw an army of the dead like none that had been seen before. It was enough to swarm over the castle walls and lay waste to the rest of the kingdom, replenishing its numbers easily as it marched. But the lord and lady of the castle dismissed the scout’s warning. ‘We will meet them in battle and crush them under the hooves of our horses, and impale them upon the points of our lances!’ they declared to their gathered knights.”

Borico gripped the hilt of his wooden sword as though he were included among the knights.



Art by Tyler Jacobson

Gwaro continued, “The following day, with banners flying and armor gleaming, the knights of the castle rode out to battle the hordes of the undead. What they met was as the scout reported.

“At the castle, the lord’s daughter and son were left in charge of its defenses.”

“Wait! What about the battle?” protested Borico.

Without stopping, Gwaro help up a hand to silence the boy. “Unmoving, the siblings stood atop the battlements, waiting for any sign of victory, of their father’s and mother’s return. And the sign came, although not one they hoped for. A horse bearing a rider ran at full gallop toward the gate.

“What happened? Was it the scout?”

“It was, and the words she called from her horse made their way up to sister and brother on the wall like a stone from a catapult. ‘They are all dead.’ The scout caught her breath. ‘The necromancer’s army will be here in hours.’

“Faces grim as the dead that approached, the siblings left the wall. Guards scurried about them, making ready the defenses. If any words were meant for the siblings, they gave no notice, but went silently to the armory. Sister and brother, the new lords of the castle, climbed into their suits of armor, and mounted their horses. At their command, the gate was raised, and the two knights strode forth.”

Borico’s eyes were wide. “They went to fight the undead army by themselves?”

“In their own way, yes. Years before, the siblings made a pact to seek vengeance for their father and mother should they fall in battle. Together, they made their way through the wilderness, all the while knowing that in their absence, the castle was surely being overrun, its inhabitants being transformed into undead soldiers. But finally, after two day’s ride, they came upon what they sought. Before them

rose the ruins of a once-great monastery, repurposed for wicked work.” As Gwaro spoke, he retreated into the darkness of the crypt until he was a vague shadow of black against black.

“The necromancer’s lair!”

“Indeed, Master Borico. From inside the desecrated monastery, the necromancer commanded his undead, and it would be inside the monastery that the siblings would find their vengeance.

“They approached the giant rotted wood doors, upon which were bolted numerous severed heads of who knows who, for they too were rotted, their eyes long ago plucked out by carrion birds. The brother placed a gauntleted hand upon the door and pushed. At the first creek of the ancient hinges, the heads sprang to life.” The storyteller’s voice grew louder. “They hissed in unison!” He drew out the word “hissing” in such a way that Borico thought something crawled up his spine. “The son froze where he stood. Though eyeless, the heads seemed to see him, their gazes turning his blood to ice.

“The sister saw the crippling fear in her brother and, sword in hand, she pressed on. Vengeance stoked a flame in her heart that could not be quenched. Their pact drove her forward, while the brother remained at the entry. In an instant,” Gwaro snapped his fingers, “the sister was gone from sight.”

Predictably, came Borico’s disapproval. “He’s a coward! He’s simply a coward!”

“Ah, but it is never simple with the dark arts, Brave Borico. Its very essence is to contaminate.” The troubadour began to curl his fingers into odd angular shapes. “It siphons life from the living to twist the things we love.

“You see, the brother waited. Hours passed. And then he heard steel on stone—armored footfalls. For a moment, the ice in his veins thawed as he saw his sister stumble toward him. He ran to her. When light caught her armor, he saw the blood. A sword—her sword—was run through her belly from back to front. The blade protruded from a clean puncture in her breastplate, extending almost her arm’s length from her body. The blade was red, a cruel tongue that drooled onto the floor.



Art by Seb McKinnon

“He put her arm around his shoulder and bore her weight as he led her from the monastery. This time, however, the sister refused to move. She stood and looked into her brother’s eyes, but when he looked back, he saw her eyes were a milky white, and the color had drained from her face. She was wounded, he knew, but there was more. The sister reached behind her, where her hand found the hilt.” Gwaro took the wooden sword from Borico and acted out the scene. “She pulled at it, and the blade began to slide backward. Her other hand gripped the blade to help in its extraction. There was a low screech of metal on metal as she worked the blade from her armored body.

“At last the blade was free, and the sister stood with her bloodied sword in her bloodied hand, an undead horror in the guise of his sister.

“Without a word, the sister lashed out with her sword.” Gwaro faked a lunge at Borico who leapt backward. “The brother was not quite as fortunate as you, for the point of the blade bit into his throat just beneath his helm. All went black. But before all went silent, he heard a voice that was both his sister’s and something else entirely. ‘The pact.’

“When the brother came to, he scanned the landscape through the narrow visor of his helm, half in a daze. There was no sign of what was once his sister, but what he did see was the corpse of a man crumpled in a heap just behind him. Warily, the brother rolled the corpse to see who it was, and he found himself staring down at his own face. Blood had seeped into the woolen undershirt from the neck wound, and spread out to create a sort of crimson beard.

“The brother did not panic at sight of his own lifeless body. Rather, a sense of calm washed over him, and fear no longer held him. He looked over his armor, and noticed that in the joints, where would

see evidence of a body beneath, there was nothing. And yet when he flexed his fingers, the gauntlet responded to his commands. He was in the suit, but somehow his body was not. It was left behind."

"But how... why did his spirit get stuck in his armor? Why didn't he become like his sister? It doesn't make sense," said Borico.

"Perhaps." Gwaro smiled. "I only tell the stories, Master Borico. I leave it to braver souls to provide the subject matter.

"However, it turns out that this is the most debated part of the story. Some claim that it was the brother's cowardice that got his sister killed. They say when she returned to kill him, she was under the necromancer's power. However, when the killing blow was struck, the sister used the sliver of remaining will she had to place some kind of protective magic on the brother to prevent him from becoming a like her."

"But that's not what you believe."

"No, I believe it was the pact that preserved his spirit. A pact has powerful magic of its own, driven by pure purpose. For you see, the brother, no longer gripped by fear, entered the monastery. He hacked his way through scores of the undead, and cut down fouler beasts that stood in his path. The necromancer's magic held no sway over the brother's spirit, and in a single stroke, the brother struck the necromancer's head from his shoulders."

"The pact was fulfilled!"

"The pact was fulfilled. The brother returned to the castle where the undead army had collapsed. Silently, he went down to the crypt, this very crypt, to lay to rest.

Yet when the need is dire, the brother wakes again to defend the family."



Art by Izzy

Borico stared up at the suit of plate mail, awe in his eyes. Then he turned to Gwaro, “Whatever happened to the sister?”

“Nobody knows for certain, but the empty space beside this one is for her, should she ever return home.” With the wooden sword, the storyteller indicated a vacant alcove.

Footsteps on stone echoed through the crypt.

“Hello?” called the boy, half expecting to see the sister shambling toward them in the darkness.

“Is that you, Master Borico?” came a gruff voice that seemed almost a growl in the cavernous crypt. Borico recognized it immediately as belonging to Kray, the master-at-arms.

“It is,” said Borico.

“Come on then. You’re late for your lesson. It’s time to learn to swing a sword proper.”

Borico took one last look at the suit of armor and went to his instructor. The two of them walked toward the steps that led to the surface, leaving Gwaro in the cool of the crypt. “Sorry, master Kray. Gwaro was telling me the story of the armor.”

“Oh yeah? He told you how it was forged by demons and blessed by angels? It’s a classic one.”

