

“Rise of the Rudis”

By George Starks

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My memories were a fog when I woke up lying on my gut. I could feel the light of the noon sun beaming through the window. I grabbed the back of my head and felt something wet. I winced at the pain and then chuckled. Checking my throbbing right hand, I saw the blood on my palm and knuckles. I figured I'd laugh some more. Truth be told, living could be a good thing at times, more or less. But right now I felt real good – breathing can do that for you.

I looked at my other hand, where my Rudis had been. In Roman times, a Rudis was a wooden sword presented to gladiators who had proven themselves worthy of freedom. My Rudis, made from the wood of a petrified tree, was a family heirloom passed down from the great Flammo himself. It had saved my life many times, whenever I found myself in one of those aw-hell moments.

As my eyes cleared, they followed a line of vision that led up and through the shattered remains of my front window. I don't know if it was due to its sharpened point or sheer heft, but my Rudis had done its job. Hell, my Rudis is my third love. I had always been a gladiator at heart. I'm pissed about the window, though. I'd just cleaned the damned thing. Now glass was all over the place, the shards gleaming in the black dust shrouding the room.

The sunlight coming through the window hit my face like a crowbar. It made me grimace in such a way that the tip of my tongue found an unfamiliar vacant spot where my right molar should've been. I staggered to my feet and brushed the black Styx dust from my face, my shredded shirt and faded denims. Foul tasting stuff, I spat it out in a gush of blood. I badly wanted to curse the spittle as it splattered over the floor of my home, my castle. But I didn't.

I took a deep breath, hacked up another gob and spat out a red and black cocktail. This time, though, it tasted of a deeper vintage than the blood coming from the hole where my tooth had been, maybe a little internal hemorrhaging. Then it hit me. My heart sank. Riding on a breeze was the stink of the crap my dog Jabal had left on the lawn just before he ran away during the night. That odor mingled in the air with that sickening sweet stench of death.

If it had been a month earlier, I'd have knocked back a fifth of Wild Turkey and cussed out the night. I'd have used all those choice words, those dirty words. You know, the words that chase away nuns. But I don't do that anymore. It was Kat, my first love, who'd made me give it up. She made me the no-boozing no-cussing man I am now.

I caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye that shot pain all the way through me. The corpse of my Kat lay sprawled out on the kitchen floor of my double-wide trailer. Since I'd never been the passionate kind of guy, I didn't run over to her, grab her up in my arms, or howl out in agony like they do in them movies. Naw, nothing like that, because it's not my way. I just stared at her naked body covered in that red and black cocktail. She looked to be resting peacefully just out of reach of the light shining through the stained glass sunroof that depicted the Lord's angels offering salvation to men like me.

I'm not the religious type. The people I bought my double-wide from were Christians, at least on Sunday. It was those Christians that put that sunroof up, and when I bought my castle I found the sunroof good for business. When I retired and met Kat, she loved that heavenly picture in the ceiling. So we kept it.

Kat was a devout woman with enough fire to clean up a man like me. Trust me, what she did for me was akin to convincing the devil to throw away his pitchfork.

The sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach began digging deeper. My memories were slowly returning, and I hated what they had to say.

I loved Kat, no doubts there, but now she had that sickening sweet smell about her. She was so still, so... Did she move?

I limped over to my raggedy couch, knelt down and retrieved the second great love of my life, my Judge. The Judge is my gun. Before Kat, the Judge and I spent a lot of time together doing a little cleaning of our own. That was the business I was born into. I was a cleaner, and the best there was. I looked good doing it too. My stiff chin, blue eyes and dimples made me the best-looking cleaner there'd ever been. My woman loved running her hands across my bald scalp, no shyness there. I looked good, and Kat loved me for it. However, every so often I had to clean up a different type of filth, the kind of filth that made me powerful enemies.

I'd retired, or so I thought. I had to give up the life I knew to protect her. Apparently my enemies didn't know that. My poor Kat... Did she move?

I cleared my head and checked my Judge, emptying the spent casings and reloading with point-four-ten gauge silver buckshot. I loaded the chamber quick and steady, in keeping with Dad's training. *One for you and one for him, one for you and one for him, one for you... Judge ready.*

* * *

I sat on my torn up couch in the light of my front window, placed my Judge on my lap and did something I'd never done before. I cried a tear for my Kat. I know it's not my way, but I did it. To be honest, I cried more than a few tears. When she'd reformed me, as I say, we would talk. She would call me Rudy after my Rudis, and say things like, "If you got to cuss 'em, call 'em bags, like these."

Then she'd point to her large breasts and press them against my face. I'd say, "But I like those." 'Cause I did. I liked her breasts a lot.

She would say, "Exactly, if you like 'em then why cuss 'em?"

I couldn't argue with that logic. Then she'd massage my ego a bit, saying I looked like a gladiator. I'd like to think there was some truth to that. I may be bald and a bit north of forty, but I was in shape. I had to be, because I'd made lots of enemies before I retired.

Then Kat would go into her marriage talk and I would look at my bourbon, "Thanksgiving in a bottle" as I called it. It always sat there on the kitchen counter, always full. It was a reminder of the good she'd brought into my life. So, when she talked about marriage, I'd always grin and nod at whatever she'd say. I was her's.

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A sound caught my attention, some kind of deep guttural snarl. I thought of Jabal and remembered he'd skedaddled last night during an aw-hell moment. I gripped the Judge's hand and readied myself for a session. I turned my eyes toward Kat.

I cried about that marriage thing. Sorry, Kat, but this shit hurts. “I need you,” I whispered and shook my head. This was a bad time to show my feminine side.

My lady began to move. The dust fell from her as she rose to her feet. Her bags still called to me, but they weren’t the same without her. She took one step, two steps, stopped and smiled beneath matted blond hair, now turned all black and crimson.

“I... I love you,” she said. Her teeth had changed. They were now razor-sharp, and the air was permeated by the sickening sweet smell of her breath.

I cocked the Judge with a *CLICK*.

“Yeah, me too,” I said and I meant it.

“Till death do us part?” she asked in a dry rasping voice.

Death, I imagined, had done a number on her lungs.

She stepped closer, but stopped, careful not to pierce the daylight surrounding me. I could see her black eyes recoil from the light. She hated it. This wasn’t the Kat I knew.

I looked up and spotted the shattered remnants of my “Thanksgiving in a bottle” resting on the kitchen counter behind her. For a moment I enjoyed those memories.

“Yup,” I said finally.

“Come,” she said.

She wet her lips and brushed seductively at the black dust enveloping the flesh of her thin waist and thick hips. Really, she was starting to look a lot better to me. I had to remind myself that this wasn't Kat.

I came to my feet and pointed with my free hand, the one free of blood, to the stained glass sunroof in the ceiling behind her. For the first time since I could remember, my hand shook in the face of this sort of thing. Fear of death was never a problem, but losing a loved one was a drag.

"Remember how you loved it?" I asked pleadingly.

I watched her slowly turn and then I raised the Judge, *BLAM*. A round of silver buckshot struck the small of Kat's back, sending her sprawling onto the floor with a clamor beneath the stained glass sunroof. *BLAM*, the Judge spoke again, sending a round through the stained glass above her.

The sunroof shattered, giving way to the light of day as sparkles of colored glass came shimmering down like angels bringing salvation. I shed a river of tears as I watched Kat's body burst into blue flames.

The flames silenced her screeching cries as her body was reduced to the black powder of the Styx.

My memories returned as I stared at her ashes floating on the air, joining that of the six who had come in the night. The six Styx who'd come calling... the six effin vampires... the six bags who came and took her away to get to me. They had crossed the line last night. I was retired. I just wanted to be left alone with Kat. Thirty years of killing will do that. Hell, if they thought the hunter in me was

a terror then, just wait. The Rudis lives. I'm going to kill'em all. Anybody gets in my way, I bag 'em!

The End