

An excerpt from

Brute the Brewmaster

By Michael Paul Johnson

Prologue

WALKING AWAY

It happened while staring at a fire. The flames clashed together before him, blazoned reds and yellows, twisting and twirling up into the night. Each flame danced with the others as they devoured the lumber feast. And Brute just stared. The fire destroyed. It consumed. It made sense. Because it was natural. What he was doing used to feel natural, as natural as breathing. Not anymore. Something had changed inside him. So he stood up and walked away from the war-camp bonfire, never to return.

He didn't leave. Not right away. No. First, he visited the king. It was the right thing to do, and Brute

knew it. He always tried to do the right thing. But the line between right and wrong had become increasingly blurred the more he fought. Eventually, he could no longer tell right from wrong. There was a lot of blood on his hands. Enough to give any man battle fatigue. But it wasn't just the blood for Brute. It was the amount of blood and how it had gotten them almost nowhere. Why sacrifice all those people and cause all that bloodshed if not for a noble cause?

Brute's first and only stop before abandoning his post was to talk to King Colhart, the last remaining sovereign of The Rift.

He walked into the king's war council without worry. Shortly after, he walked out with the king's permission to discharge and a fat sack of gold coins for all the years of service. Colhart understood. He had lost a great deal in the war, and that humbles a king. Most kings who had territory in the Rift either seceded to UnderRealm or lost their thrones altogether. King Colhart of Rivinia was the final holdout. All the other kings of humanity gave Colhart their unyielding support to hold the front. Even if they had disputes among themselves, they never let it get in the way of keeping Rivinia afloat.

It felt like UnderRealm settlements on the Rift were growing larger by the day. Some were even merging into already existing human towns. King Colhart knew it was only a matter of time before his

forces were overrun, but still he fought on. All this time, he had Brute. Before that, he had Brute's squad, a vicious and effective tool against any foe. With his strongest warrior giving up the fight, the king waved goodbye to any chance of victory he might have had. And yet, he didn't stop him. He didn't even resent Brute for it. That man had given him the best years of his life. By the end of his career as a warrior, Brute had racked up enough kills to make his benefit-to-cost ratio astronomical. He had done his time and served his king with full honors. Hence the sack of gold.

Brute walked out of the Rivinian camp not in shame or fear, not even in hope or relief. He felt nothing. It was a symptomatic neutrality that clouded how he saw the world. He had crushed enough skulls and severed enough spines with his legendary broadsword, Soulripper, to see the ugly truth of it all. And now, he had done the math and wanted out before the fight cost him his sanity.

Soulripper was a broadsword that no mortal man could wield. Except Brutus Tornatore, the recipient of so much arcane magic that his body held onto certain attributes permanently, like his hulking mass and size, enabling him to swing a sword that looked more like a stone pillar. After using something like that in countless battles, Brute's arms and legs started resembling pillars themselves. Even if people were upset with his leaving,

they would never say it to his face. The man looked like he could punch a boulder clean through.

In all his years of service to the king, he had come to know how righteous and compassionate Colhart was, both as a man and a ruler. They might have been friends under different circumstances. But a king can't have friends like other men can. And Brute was too busy keeping company with the shadows of his fallen enemies. He needed to put as much distance between himself and the camp as possible. Lugging Soulripper around on his back didn't exactly help, but it was the only place to sheath a sword of such magnitude.

Brute expected King Colhart to let him go. Just like he expected someone else to have a problem letting go of him. His older sister, the legendary Jintara Tornatore, was the deadliest woman in OverWorld and Brute's only rival as the greatest warrior in Rivinia. Brute had always surpassed Jintara, and it only got worse as the magic imbued him with more strength, more height, and more mass. Jintara was a quicker form of deadly, a cunning, cutthroat warrior. She had pushed him to fight for Rivinia in the first place, before either of them was known. All their lives, she pushed him. Only recently had he realized her true intentions. If he had to face her in order to leave, let's just say things wouldn't end as harmoniously as they had with the king.

Thankfully, his sister was nowhere to be found at the camp.

Brute took his broadsword and his sack of gold and walked the trail back to the Posting Road, the main road that ran all along the Rift and connected OverWorld. There wasn't a horse big enough to carry him. He couldn't ride in a wagon without weighing it down and straining the wheels. When you're the size of a small hut, you get used to walking everywhere. From the Posting Road, Brute could decide where he wanted to spend the rest of his life. He already knew what he wanted to do with it.

His best friend Carmody had given him the idea. In fact, the arcanist would never shut up about it. He had come up with just the right plan to run a profit through a brick-and-mortar business that would last them the rest of their lives. It was a dream he used to talk about after the war. But the war was never truly over, not even when the treaties were drawn. Not for an arcanist and a warrior.

Still, Carmody had the right idea. He was one of the humblest arcanists Brute had ever met. The plan was simple: find magical hops and open up a brewery. That was it.

With nothing more than his broadsword, the clothes on his back, and that fat sack of coin, Brutus Tornatore set out to find a town where he could open a brewery, even though he didn't know the first thing about brewing beer.

Chapter 1

THE AUCTION

In a small town like Cutler, you always know when something out of the ordinary happens. Now, I wasn't there, but what I heard later on was that a great oak tree of a man was walking down Main Posting with a broadsword on his back. And it looked like the two were here to conquer. Sure, Cutler was on the Posting Road and there were travelers every day, but this terrifying man was not just passing through. The humble folks of Cutler could tell by his restrained pace. He was looking for something. And just like that, he turned off Main Posting, up Civawak Street, toward the farms.

By the time Brute made it to Cutler, he was not the same polished soldier he had been when he left the war camp. His hair and beard had grown in. He wore a dark cloak that mostly concealed him, except for Soulripper and a big bag tied to his back. So for anyone watching, all they could really see of this hulking man was the hair and beard sticking out from under the hood. It was safe to say no one got close. No one needed to. He appeared to know where he was going. He headed up

the road to Hargrove Farm. Today, the town was auctioning it off. The news had spread all along the Posting Road, from Deket to Forbu.

Okay, so those are the closest towns east and west of Cutler on the Posting, but that's still three towns. For Brute, it felt like the right place at the right time. He walked up the path to the main house and had to duck through the doorway as he let himself in. The auctioneer at the podium at the head of the living room stopped mid-sentence at the sight of Brute.

"Great God of the Sun, that is the biggest man I've ever seen," he said. He had an accented twang to his voice, like he was born and raised in Cutler. "Is that even a man?" he continued at Brute's expense. "Or is he some monster sent to us from UnderRealm?"

Some people laughed in the few rows of seats. Not many, just one or two, and they looked like they worked for the auctioneer. Brute found a bench along the wall before the stairs and sat down, allowing the man at the podium to continue.

"As I was saying. My name is Pil Ankledorf. Many of you know me as the guy who knows how to get things in town." He pointed to a woman with dark features and even darker hair, and she glowered back at him. Pil continued without flinching. He even smiled and winked at her. "The town asked me to help out today because I can talk faster than any of them." That actually got a couple of laughs. "I'm here to sell this sad

sack of a farm to the highest bidder. Before we get started, does anyone have any questions about the property?”

“Can you grow barley here?” asked Brute.

“My god, it can talk,” Ankledorf replied, bewildered.

“It’s a wheat farm,” said an old man in the first row.

“Can it grow barley and hops?” Brute persisted.

Now he gained a collective glance from the room, including the raven-haired girl and the two other women she was with. They looked like sisters, Brute noticed. Briefly. He also noticed how beautiful the raven-haired girl was, once he got a good look at her, and once she stopped scowling at the creep on the podium. She had almond-shaped eyes and small dark pupils that glowed blue around their edges, like the darkest depths of the ocean. Her eyelashes were naturally flawless, accenting her feminine charm. Her face was thin, but her cheeks were round. She had luscious pink lips and a strong chin. Her body was slender but curvaceous. Brute tried not to stare.

“It can grow anything, as long as you have the seed and the equipment,” the girl next to the old man said. “Rich crop soil has never been an issue here.” After another glance, she seemed much closer to an adult woman than a girl. She was just short. Her back was turned to him, but once she spoke, he could tell she was older than she looked.

“Any other questions?” Ankledorf said with a smile that didn’t touch his eyes. “Alright, let’s begin then. Initial bid starts at ten thousand gold coin. Do I hear ten thousand?”

“Ten thousand!” bid the old man in the first row.

“Ten thousand,” confirmed Ankledorf. “Do I hear eleven thousand?”

“Eleven thousand!” said another member of the crowd.

“Twelve thousand!” said someone else with a raised hand.

And they were off. Ankledorf sometimes couldn’t get a word in before the next bid, and there was always another bid before he finished speaking. The pace didn’t slow until they reached forty thousand gold coins. The sisters were still in the bid. Most had dropped out. Brute waited until the bidding hit forty-three thousand gold coins. Or more accurately, he waited until there were only two bidders left before placing his first bid.

“Fifty thousand gold coins,” he said. And the room went quiet.

“That’s fifty thousand. Do I hear fifty-one thousand? Okay, that’s fifty thousand going once. Fifty thousand going twice.”

“Fifty-five thousand!” yelled the raven-haired girl, as one of her sisters slapped her on the arm.

“That’s fifty-five thousand! Do I hear fifty-six thousand?” Ankledorf rattled off.

“Fifty-six thousand,” Brute said.

“That’s fifty-six thousand. Going once. Going twice. Sold to the unfortunately large man in the back of the room. Thank you for coming, ladies and gentlemen. I honestly didn’t think it was going to be that exciting. Have a good night!”

A couple of people clapped for Ankledorf. The old man in the first row looked completely deflated. The raven-haired girl on the other side of the room looked proud. Should he take that personally or use it as an excuse to introduce himself? Before he could approach either the curious old man or the raven-haired girl, Ankledorf walked right up to him.

“Alright, boss.” Ankledorf corralled Brute toward the dining room. “Here are the keys and the deed to the castle. With your brand-new homestead comes a whopping fifty acres of farmland. I hope you can handle it.”

Brute glared at him as he leaned over the table where the townie had rolled out the deed. Ankledorf continued, “Yeah, I think you can handle it, big stuff.” He slapped Brute’s enormous bicep with the back of his hand as he walked back to the living room toward the only two people still sitting in the rows of seats. The old man and the girl. Ankledorf turned around as he backed toward them while they consoled each other. He spoke to Brute from across the room.

“If you have any questions about this place, you can ask these two. And of course,” Ankledorf added, “if you need anything, come see me in town. Or maybe I’ll make a house call in a couple of days. How does that sound?”

“Whatever makes you stop talking,” said Brute.

“Oh, you’re funny,” said Ankledorf. “I wasn’t expecting that.” He patted the two sitting and weeping, put his hat on, and walked out of the house like a fart in the wind. That was the Pil Ankledorf way. He would return. Someone like that, you could never get rid of.

Brute walked over and examined the old man and the girl carefully as he sat back down on the bench. Even though she resembled the old man with the same round, welcoming eyes, her skin was lighter than his. She also had braided black hair. He had a wild gray bush on his head that trailed down into a full beard. She wasn’t crying. She was trying to stop him from sobbing in front of everyone with her arms around him.

Now that Brute was really thinking about it, they had only bid once, at the start, for ten thousand gold coins. That was clearly all they had. Why even bother showing up? Did they think it would’ve been that much of a bargain? That seemed like a stretch to Brute. It most certainly had to be. They were here because they had to be. Because...

And then it hit him. The defeated look in the aftermath of the auction, the humble bid, the knowledge of the farm beforehand.

“You’re the previous owners, aren’t you?” asked Brute.

That got the old man to compose himself. It took a few minutes, but he was able to look Brute in the eye and nod. Then the girl spoke for them.

“My name is Nori Hargrove, and this is my father, Thatcher. My great-grandfather built this farm with his bare hands. Things were going well until Mother died and Jed went off to fight in the war. Then Dad blew out his knee, and Tomas died, and that was it.”

“Tomas?” Brute asked.

“The horse,” she explained. “Without a horse to pull the plow, we weren’t able to make harvest. Dad had to take loans from the town to reseed every season, until it got so bad they were finally able to claim the house legally. We only had one chance to buy it back today, and you just outbid us by forty-six thousand coin.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What the hell do you want with a grain farm?” asked Nori.

“To brew beer.”

“Do you even know how to make beer?” she pressed.

“I need barley, water, yeast, and hops.”

“So that’s why you wanted to know about barley,” said Nori.

“Do you think it can be done?”

“What do you care about what we think?” asked Thatcher.

“I want to hire you.”

“What?” asked Nori.

“You can keep your house, as long as you let me stay here, work with me to farm the barley, and brew the beer...” He drifted off as he searched his mind for anything else while the moment struck. “And cook for me at least one square meal a day. I will pay you both on top of returning the house. Do we have a deal?”

“Are you sure?” Nori asked. “You’re basically wasting fifty-six thousand coin. Even more, actually.”

“Will you stop me from turning that barn into a brewery?” He pointed out the window to the empty barn adjacent to the main house.

“That used to be for cows, back when we were a dairy and wheat farm. The cows all died from sopox when I was a girl, and Pa never replaced them. You can do whatever you want with that barn. It can hold a brewery and then some, but it’s going to take some renovating.”

“As long as you don’t get in my way about any cosmetic changes to the barn or the switch from wheat to barley, you can have your farm back. I need the help.”

“Look, mister...” Thatcher trailed off. “Say, what’s your name anyway?”

“My name is Brutus Tornatore.”

“Like the legendary warrior of King Colhart’s court?”

“The very same,” he said.

“Well then, that explains the sword,” said Nori.

“I don’t care how big your damn sword is,” Thatcher burst out. “We don’t have a horse to pull the plow. We can’t farm without a horse. That’s it.”

“We don’t need a horse,” said Brute.

“Don’t be ridiculous...” Thatcher trailed off as Brute stood up before him. “You can’t be serious.”

Chapter 2

THE HELLHOUND OF HULDOON

Brute was dead serious.

Thatcher and Nori Hargrove watched in astonishment from the double swinging doors that opened from the kitchen onto the backyard as Brute, now shirtless, pulled the plow through the soil, the horse's harness wrapped around his shoulders and arms. He was moving faster than Tomas, and something told them this wasn't just a burst out of the gate. Brute was muscle on top of muscle on top of stone with a molten core. Still, they watched him plow the entire field. He started sweating on the second acre; his pace didn't slow until the fortieth. By then Azalea, watching from the tree line, still hadn't lost interest.

Remember the raven-haired girl from the auction? She was, in fact, the sister of those two other women. Her name was Azalea, and her sisters' names were Phoebe and Iris. Together they ran a potion shop in town. That would have been the normal way to introduce herself to Brute. Instead, they only traded glances at the auction before she made him pay an extra six thousand coin for no reason at all. That part still made her chuckle. Something about the giant oaf intrigued her, so she decided to visit the farm

unannounced and unnoticed the next morning. To her utter shock and delight, there he was, standing in the unfiltered morning sun with no shirt on, dragging that dreadful plow through the earth.

One thing perplexed her: he had a head full of hair, yet not a single follicle on the rest of his body. His skin was tough like leather but completely hairless. It was quite the conundrum - the curious case of the missing body hair. Azalea had superb vision; being from UnderRealm, she could practically see in the dark. So, in the brilliance of broad daylight she clocked him with perfect clarity and then some.

Even from her place among the trees she could see the sweat bead on his bare shoulders, then drop and trace paths down the intensely carved muscles (and a few nasty scars). We're talking muscles upon muscles, especially in his arms, legs, shoulders, and abdomen. Whether the droplets were ambitious enough to ford each muscle or chose instead to run rivers between them, Azalea spent a good part of the morning watching each one find its own path down the big brute's body. To her, it was a morning well wasted.

She waited long enough to be sure she wasn't seen and to judge whether he might repeat this performance tomorrow. From what she could gather, all signs pointed to this not being a one-time deal. Before she left Hargrove Farm she had already decided to return the next morning.

Brute walked into the kitchen for lunch. Nori had set the dining-room table for three, Brute's bench along the side closest to the doorway. She served bacon-garden sandwiches with sinch fritters – an old recipe from her mother that hid the less desirable parts of pigs and chickens in deep-fried balls of batter. Nori's pride, though, lay in the bread: homemade sourdough, her fluffiest loaf yet. Brute examined it carefully.

"What is it?" she asked.

Hunched over like that, so delicate and precise, the huge, burly man looked almost fragile.

He replied, "You made this yourself, from scratch?"

"Yes, I did."

"And you used yeast?"

"Yes, I did." Nori now saw where he was going.

"I want you to teach me how to make the yeast."

"I can do that. We can make a list of ingredients and head to town one day."

"I already have a list and a recipe."

"Can I see it?" Nori asked.

"No."

"Oh, okay."

"It's in my head."

"I see."

She was about to ask him to write it down but decided against it. If he didn't know how to read or write, that would explain why the recipe was in his head,

and she didn't want to embarrass him. "All right, then. We'll go to town, and they'll have everything we need."

"Some of the things will be hard to get."

"Oh, trust me, there's a shop for everything in Cutler."

"Even magical things?" he asked.

"There's a potion shop on Nestune and Cortair. Remember those sisters from the auction? They run it."

"They're from UnderRealm?"

"Genuine witches. A lot of folks in Cutler are. The war ended here a long time ago."

Brute nodded, brow furrowed in what looked like deep contemplation. At last he agreed to go into town with her and gather everything they needed for brewing. Then he gathered all three plates, each one still piled with a sandwich and fritters, sat on his bench, and polished off every bite. Nori was dumbfounded; it all happened so fast. Yet what had she expected? The man looked like five of her stitched together, so of course he needed giant-sized portions.

"That was very good, Nori," he said approvingly. "I'm glad you enjoyed my lunch," she replied, a quick snipe the big lug never even noticed.

"Is there a place to wash off?"

"There's nothing in the house that can hold you, Brute, but if you follow me outside I rigged a nozzle to the well line."

Nori led him to a pipe that ran back to the neighborhood water mill. “A couple of years ago the town clerics installed this system. We only used the pipeline to bring water closer to the crops, but when you moved in I figured out how to prop it up so it arches overhead. I set the nozzle at the center of the archway, so when I turn this valve it should...” She twisted the valve and water sprinkled from the nozzle. “It actually worked!”

Brute was already hurrying under the spray. Shirtless, and with travel pants sorely in need of a rinse, he shouted, “The water’s cold, but it’s clean.” The chill barely seemed to bother him. “It’s so refreshing!” he declared as water splashed into his mouth.

“When you finish up, I’ll give you a haircut.”

“You cut hair too?”

“I do it all, big guy.” She smiled and went inside to make another round of sandwiches for herself and her dad.

A little later she had Brute seated on the bench in the middle of the room, snipping away with her specialized scissors. She trimmed his hair so it could still dangle over his eyes when not properly parted, and she left the beard, getting as close as she could with the clippers. It wasn’t that she lacked a straight razor, but she had only one left after breaking the first two on his hide-like skin, so he got an in-depth trim instead.

They never did get around to visiting the shops. There was no rush; the barley needed weeks to grow before harvest. During that time Brute settled into a routine with the Hargroves. They shared three meals a day and slowly learned each other's quirks—when to stay clear of the big guy, how to repair furniture he accidentally broke with sheer force.

After about a month they found a groove. Thatcher joked privately to Nori that living with Brute felt like boarding Tomas the horse, though he would never say so to Brute's face. Every day the Hargroves still thanked their guest for reclaiming their home. Even when they got on one another's nerves, it wasn't a bad setup, and life finally felt almost normal, until one fateful night.

They were enjoying a late supper of roast chicken and taters when Nori spotted something through the window. "Fire! The ridge is on fire!" she yelled. By the time Brute rose from his bench, Thatcher and Nori were already at the glass.

"It's a dog," she said.

"It's on fire!" Thatcher shouted.

"Damn it!" Brute slammed his fist on the table, sending plates and glasses flying. "Damn it to hell! It found me again!" He seized the bench he had been sitting on and hurled it against the wall.

"Whoa!" the Hargroves cried.

"The damned thing follows me wherever I go!" Brute paced, struggling to contain himself.

“What?” Nori asked, exasperated.

“It’s a direswamp hellhound. It’s been stalking me since the Battle of Huldoon!”

Thatcher and Nori stared at each other to confirm they were both hearing the same thing, but Brute was already out the door, sprinting toward the burning hound on the ridge. Soulripper lay ignored by the threshold; Nori found it oddly sweet that he preferred fists over steel for this fight.

The night turned surreal. They watched an enormous man wrestle a flaming dog for hours and wondered why neither burned. At last Thatcher and Nori gave up and went to bed. Outside, Brute wrestled the hellhound till dawn. When they tired, Brute would shout at the beast and it would howl back.

“Get lost, you stupid thing!”

“Awooooo!”

“Arghh!”