

Diamond Line Undergraduate Literary Magazine

Volume 1 | Issue 4

Article 15

December 2021

Kalea

Brian Nicholson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/diamondlinelitmag>

Recommended Citation

Nicholson, Brian (2021) "Kalea," *Diamond Line Undergraduate Literary Magazine*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 4 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/diamondlinelitmag/vol1/iss4/15>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Diamond Line Undergraduate Literary Magazine by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu.

A wolf's howl out in the forest drew Kalea's attention from the fire she was stoking. Her bald eyebrows furrowed as her silver eyes peered out into the flickering shadows of the treeline surrounding the campsite. A snore from one of the convoy members prompted a swift kick from her, awakening the grumbling merchant who was met with Kalea's finger pressed against his mouth. She didn't bother to look at the triple-chinned mine overseer, and ignored his muffled grumbling as she shifted from a finger to a clamped hand. She knew the fat merchant chafed when Kalea gave him orders, but right now she couldn't care less about how he felt. In fact, she rarely cared about the merchant's mewling and complaining.

Her apathy towards her current boss was amplified by the current situation. She heard several growls and the quiet snap of twigs stepped on by a natural predator. Based off the noises she strained to hear over the quiet of the camp, Kalea guessed at least half a dozen wolves were prowling in the treeline she was staring into. Even at night, the sweltering humidity of the Istavinion Coast made sweat dot Kalea's forehead as she gazed out into the foreboding forest. Standing several inches over seven feet tall, Kalea was a little over three hundred pounds in lean, corded muscle. With her sleeveless, dark brown leather jerkin and pants contrasting her grey skin, her jagged tattoos and striated musculature were especially defined, which she found was a useful deterrent to most would-be combatants. She cut an intimidating figure, to say the least, and her bald, tattooed head and face belied little in the way of mercy when battle was on her mind.

Sadly, were these creatures of the night to attack, her dominating presence would do little to deter them. For that, the longsword at her hip and the shield across her back was more than enough. She had taken this job in part because her adopted mother Adelise needed her to, but also because she was desperate to put the martial skills the smithy had taught her to the test. She was still an unseasoned combatant, and though her brawn and natural athleticism could get her far, she fiercely desired the mastery of

combat in all its forms.

The sound of steel on leather cut through the crackling of the fire and the foreboding silence of the woods as she drew her simple steel longsword. For now, she left her shield leaning against the fallen log she had made her seat for her nightly watch, where she could easily access it if she needed it. Gripping the brown leather of her blade's hilt in two leather-gloved hands, she stared out into the dancing shadows of the fire-lit darkness, her face taut with determination and focus as her heart sent adrenaline coursing through her veins.

Then she heard it. A low growl, and the padding of paws on leaves and twigs. Shortly after, she saw three pairs of yellow eyes staring out of the darkness at her and the convoy, the light of the fire dancing in their low, canine eyes. She heard one of the three horses that were posted up at the opposite edge of the clearing nicker nervously.

There was silence save for the fire, the shifting of now-awakening merchants and the other two guards, and the growling of the three advancing wolves. After a few more tense moments, the wolves stalked out of the trees, stepping into the orange illumination of the campfire. She took in their matted, sleek fur, which was a spectrum of grey ranging from nearly black on their backs and the tops of their heads to nearly white on their chin and their legs, and their slavering maws, quivering with their growling, which were filled with sharp, white teeth, and two pairs of pronounced fangs on the top and bottom.

They numbered three, and approached in a loose arrow formation. They had various distinguishing marks: the one taking point had a jagged scar over its left eye so it couldn't open, the one on the left had a broken toe on his front left paw, and the one on the right was missing one of his top fangs. But it didn't matter. They would die, they would flee, or they would kill Kalea. And the only thing that would decide which of those three things would occur was Kalea's skill with her blade, and if her will to live eclipsed theirs.

They were only about twenty feet away, and

Kalea moved to keep her back to the fire. She had hunted wolves before, and she knew they liked to distract their prey before sweeping about the rear. With that in mind, she said over her shoulder, and without taking her eyes off the approaching predators, "Lukhal, take Cirdire and go make sure the rest of their pack isn't preparing to feast on our horses." Her voice was strong and steely, matching the rest of her figure well.

At her command, the two other guards moved around the convoy and to the side where the horses were tethered to their post. Lukhal was a squat, mail-clad dwarf who trusted his tankard more than himself and Cirdire was a lithe, leather-clad half elf who was woefully ill-trained with his spear, but they did what Kalea asked and that's what mattered. And right now, it was what would ensure that the convoy continued their journey.

With the other two guards protecting the convoy's rear, Kalea took a wider stance and shifted her two-handed grip on her longsword, her left - dominant - hand gripping close to the crossguard and her right holding onto the bottom of the grip and the top of the diamond-shaped pommel. With her three and a half foot long blade, she had a significant range advantage against the wolves; however, should they get in close, Kalea would have to resort to rapid hand-to-hand engagement or suffer potentially grave wounds. Additionally, the campfire at her back was both a boon and a bane: it protected her rear, but it also limited her movement. To keep it at her back, she would be unable to backpedal and would have to strafe diagonally backwards.

Taking all that into consideration, she gave the wolves her steely gaze, staring perpendicularly down the side of her diagonally-upheld blade. Several gruelingly tense seconds passed, before the wolves made their move. The broken-toed wolf on the left swung around to her side as the snaggle-toothed wolf on the right moved parallel, both snarling as they did. At the same time, the scarred wolf in the center pounced forward, snarling all the same.

Kalea gave them a roar to startle them, even as she swung her longsword about like a bat. The whirl of steel and the whistle of her blade cutting

through air surprised the wolves further, and gave them brief pause in their advance. That was all she needed.

With the wolves broken up and pausing to consider their next move, Kalea reached a gloved hand into the fire behind her, holding her longsword in her left as her right came back with a half-burning log. She hurled it at the wolf to her right as she turned to strike the one on her left. She heard the log give a satisfying thud as it collided into the wolf, followed by the wolf's whining as it was burned and forced back.

With her rear protected for the moment, and keeping her right arm free to bat away the central wolf that was now to her side, she dove forward and brought her blade down in a one-handed, overhead chop. The wolf dodged to the right even as the central wolf came barreling in on that same side, and so Kalea brought her right hand back to its position on her hilt, stopped the slice midair and swung herself around to the right, wheeling her blade around as well.

Her arms jarred in their sockets as the sailing speed of her sword was stopped dead by its braining chop into the skull of the left wolf. Grey matter and gore splattered across her blade, the ground, and both wolves in front of her as the sword carved through its killing blow, only stopping once it was halfway through the skullcap of the wolf. She felt the tug of muscle, bone, and fur on her blade as she fought to wrench it free.

The central wolf, driven to fury by the death of its companion, leapt towards her with a growl on its lips, slobber trailing out of the corners of its lips. The blade came free as the wolf came upon her, too late for her to place it between herself and her assailant. Instead, she caught the wolf in the stomach with her clenched right fist, hearing ribs crack as her unstoppable force collided with a very moveable object.

Her uppercut sent the already airborne wolf flying backwards nearly ten feet, where it bounced several times before stopping, its ragged breathing pressing on despite its wounds; however, as Kalea moved to put the wolf out of its misery, the third wolf - the one she had

thrown the log at - came snarling towards her, aiming for her legs. She didn't have time to swing her sword around, so she braced for impact and pain.

With her eyes focused on the wolf barreling towards her, she heard a metallic twang and a whistle, followed very rapidly by a blur of a crossbow bolt flying from her right peripheral and slamming into the side of the wolf. The rage in the wolf's eyes rapidly went to pain as the momentum of the bolt and its own charge sent it careening off to her left, sliding across the grassy ground before it stopped. Like its gut-punched companion, it struggled still to breath, and got to its feet atop quivering legs.

She grimaced. Though it was necessary, she took no pleasure from putting animals out of their pained miseries. With her lips pressed tightly, and her longsword in one hand, she moved to the first, barely standing wolf and killed it with a downward slice across the back of its neck. It went down with a bloody thud. Moving to the second one, which was still on its side, eyes closed, and struggling to breathe, Kalea put it down with a simple, two-handed downward thrust into its neck.

With the sickening, wet noise of a blade traveling through flesh, she withdrew her gore-splattered, blood-dripping longsword from the canine. She heard shouts across the clearing, and casting her silver eyes across the convoy she saw that Lukhal was chasing off a few much more mangy wolves that had gone for the horses and Cirdire had taken one of the crossbows tucked into one of the carts and used it to halt the wolf that had been charging Kalea. She nodded her thanks, which he returned with wild, fearful eyes. It hadn't occurred to her that this may very well have been Cirdire's first combat experience.

"Be thankful they weren't sentient. Putting down an animal is sad, but putting down another thinking, living mortal... That's what keeps you up at night." She spoke with a false confidence. She hadn't ever actually killed another sentient creature. Fought, yes, but never killed. But she knew Cirdire would need some reassurance, so she gave it to him in her own, blunt way.

Kalea grimaced as she scanned the three dead

wolves. She shouted across the clearing, all pretense of stealthiness gone, "Lukhal, how many wolves were there around back?" She heard the sound of metal sliding through flesh and bone, and a carcass settling onto the ground.

The grunts of the dwarf preceded his response, which he gave as he rounded the carts and came back into the firelight. "There were five total, but only two had the balls to actually attack. They were mangy. Runts of the litter, most likely. Sent by the alpha to get the easy pickings while the big dogs got the harder prey." She grunted, nodding to him. His voice was gruff and flat, and every sentence seemed to start low and then end high. It was strangely rhythmic while also being one of the most monotonous speech patterns she'd ever heard. She looked from the dwarf to her blade, and grimaced as she saw the blood that slicked it, the gore that hung from it in tatters, and the chunks of grey matter in between.

"Well, I suppose you all really were worth your price." Kalea looked up from her blade at Forthwind, the fat merchant that owned the caravan, his haughty voice still reverberating faintly off the silent trees. The skin around his mouth was a blotchy red. Kalea must have applied more pressure than she thought. "I was beginning to get worried I brought along muscle for no good reason," he sneered, his face still red from the raw fear he was now trying desperately to cover up.

In a purposefully flat voice that cut through whatever social maneuvering Forthwind was attempting, Kalea said, "You get what you paid for. If you had paid us more, maybe we wouldn't have waited till they were in our camp to drive them off." That was wholly untrue. Kalea, and presumably Lukhal and Cirdire, knew that pushing wolves out into the forest, where they knew the land and could surround you easily, was a death wish. But Kalea also knew that Forthwind had never even held a blade outside of portraits, much less used it to defend himself.

Her rebuke had the desired effect, as he silently looked her up and down, lingering on the still

dripping blade held out at her side. The redness came back to his face in force, though this time Kalea assumed it was embarrassment, as he said, "Hm, I suppose so." The haughtiness was gone, replaced by the quiet sorrow of a man whose fragile pride was wounded. Kalea refused to allow a smile betray the joy she felt at driving a knife in his ego, and instead went and sat back on her log, next to her unmoved shield.

She began cleaning her blade with a rag she kept in her pouch. As the cloth passed over the gore, faint squelching and wet sliding could be heard faintly over the fire. Out of the corner of her focused eyes, Kalea saw Forthwind and his merchant lackeys watching intently, with the former's pride still wounded and the latter not knowing what else to do. When she finished the gruesome job, holding the blade to the firelight to ensure it was in fact clean, Kalea tossed the gore-soaked cloth to Lukhal, who had just finished cleaning his warhammer.

He caught it, and wordlessly nodded as he filled a pot with water and set it to boil over the fire, placing both her rag and the one he had used on his own weapon inside. Kalea looked at the dwarf, and grunted as he went to grab his flask. He stopped mid-motion, and locked eyes with her.

Glad she managed to catch him before he drank, Kalea asked, "You ever seen wolves attack like that?" She put on the calm demeanor of a warrior analyzing the situation, but she was genuinely curious.

He thought for a moment, heavy brows furrowed, before shaking his head. "No. Never like that, at least. I'd say in my decades of work like this, I've dealt with some-odd a dozen wolf attacks. Usually they focus on the prey that they think'll keep them from the rest of the prey, and they never keep mangy mutts like the ones that attacked the horses. If I had to guess-

"They're struggling for food," Kalea finished his thought. He nodded, looking down at the pot, the water within just beginning to boil. "But why," she asked. "It's summer, and one of the warmest and most plentiful we've seen in a long time. Think their den got destroyed in the storm?" A storm had wracked the region about ten days - a week

- prior. A hundred-year storm, they called it. He pondered the thought, then shrugged and said, "Mayhaps. No way to know for sure. Either way, I doubt it matters. If there were any other members of their pack, they were either pups or infirm, and they're as good as dead now with their alpha and their hunters dead." She frowned. She had enjoyed the battle, but thinking about it after the fact made her sorrowful, and she couldn't stop the nagging feeling that there was something else that drove wolves to attack the way they did. Something wrong. She took her whetstone and set to sharpening her blade, and for several minutes the sounds of stone scraping steel and the combination of boiling water and crackling flame were the only noises to fill the campsite. When she finished her maintenance on her weapon, she gave her leather armor some passing glances, then undid her glove on her right hand. She nodded to herself as she inspected her hand, relieved that her uncouth stomach punch against the wolves hadn't caused her any unnecessary harm. Other than some redness on her knuckles and an aching in her joints, her hand seemed to be fine. Giving her hand one last passing glance, she slid the glove back on, and as she did so, she heard footsteps behind her and saw Cirdire step over the log and sit next to her. The scent of bile hit her nostrils, and as she looked at his paler than usual face, she knew he had just finished throwing up. Casting her eyes about the camp, she realized that the merchants had all gone off to bed. She must have been so wrapped up in her maintenance work that she didn't even notice.

She half-shouldered to herself, unperturbed by their absence, then turned back to Cirdire. "You alright," she asked, quietly and with a hint of genuine sympathy. She looked at him, but she refused to meet her gaze, staring instead at the pot as Lukhal worked to remove the boiled rags from it.

She nudged him gently on the arm, and he at last spoke, "Yeah, I'm fine. I just couldn't get the sight of you opening that wolf's brain out of my head, so my stomach forced it out." He

half-heartedly chuckled, and she punched him jokingly in the shoulder.

"Well, at least I made a spectacle of it, yeah?" She laughed quietly, but the smile died on her face as she saw his eyes remain concerned, saddened, and - though she wasn't sure - even horrified. Quieter, she asked, "This isn't what you were expecting, huh?"

He shook his head. She knew the feeling. It was only her second time doing something like this, and the first where she had faced true danger on the job. The other time had been a caravan up to Brackhill itself, the fortress of the local lord, which was only about three days from her home in Wolfward - compared to the five it took to get to their current destination, a mining town named Ramidalr - and a generally safer route, on account of the lord's forces patrolling more frequently. In fact, she had only seen a single patrol in the four days they'd been travelling thus far, and even then, it was only a half dozen lightly-armored, poorly trained dimwits.

She continued, "Well, it doesn't get easier. At least, not from what I've seen. My mom used to serve in Lord Eltumul's garrison, and she said that the way she always justified it was that she was a shield of civilization. Without people like us, spilling blood and shedding our own, all of our loved ones would be prey to all the things that go bump in the night. Besides, it's kind of fun. I've yet to find a thrill that matches that of battle."

He seemed to agree with most of what she said - save the last part - and his mood visually improved. "And it pays well."

She smiled, eager to see his youthful liveliness restored, at least partially. "And it pays well," she returned with a chuckle. Cirdire was a good person, and young - especially by half-elf standards. She was glad that she could stave off the crushing darkness of life for at least one more night, and keep his childish joy alive for that much longer. She would hate to see life tear him down like it had her brother.

She frowned, a pang of sadness striking her heart. She hadn't thought about Vaurin much since she left on her trip. She hadn't even said goodbye. In truth, she had gotten annoyed with

him. She loved him to the ends of the earth, and had been there for him night and day, through thick and thin, but this trip was proving to be a nice break. Her frown deepened. She hated when she thought about him like that. Shaking her head, trying to rid herself of her thoughts, she turned to Cirdire. He had been watching her embark on her purely mental journey, no doubt wondering what was going through her mind. As she looked at him, he glanced away and blushed.

Oh gods, he had feelings for her.

In a soured mood, and not wanting him to think anything other than what she felt, she plainly said, "I'm going to sleep. Have a good night, Cirdire, and keep me out of your thoughts." His mouth opened slightly, shock on his face as all color fled his cheeks. She locked his wide eyes for several seconds, keeping a stone cold visage, before he nodded and left wordlessly. Nodding to herself, she laid down on the log and positioned her pack like a pillow.

Sleep was hesitant to come to her, her body still holding some residual adrenaline from the battle a half-hour ago. But, with some time and some mindless insistence, the aches and fatigues of the day dragged Kalea down into the oblivion of sleep.

The rest of the trip was thankfully peaceful, and the caravan arrived at the industry-choked village of Ramidalr two mornings after the wolf attack. Kalea saw the sun rising over the mountains ahead as their caravan crested over the final hill to reach Ramidalr. The orange and red rays were choked slightly by the smoke already rising from the great furnaces of the mining town. She could hear the clang of the mines and the refineries processing the ores into ingots.

She grimaced. She adored the forge - she even hoped to one day make herself a proper blade and set of plate - but she abhorred the process of getting metals. Sometimes, entire mountain sides would be ripped apart for the precious metals hidden within. And the smell of the furnaces and the way their smoke choked the lungs and blurred the senses? Kalea was not a fan.

As she trotted alongside the horse-drawn carts, she watched as Forthwind began to pick up his stride, his chest puffing as he prepared to deal with more of his ilk. A smile stretched across his pudgy face as he stared ahead at Ramidalr. Her grimace deepened. Gods, she hated merchants. She pulled her chin up slightly, breathing deeply through her nose for a few moments. Frustration would achieve nothing. Besides, she didn't even have to do the talking. She was just there to look scary and, if the situation called for it, be scary. The piglets would mewl amongst themselves for a few hours, the real backbone of the community - laborers - would load up the ore, and then they'd be back off the way they came.

Maybe she could find some pit fighting in the meantime. She had heard rumors that Ramidalr had a robust underground fighting ring, which was apparently a trend among industrial settlements. She couldn't understand why. Sure, fighting was fun, but it could easily land you a broken hand or worse. If you had to mine or work a furnace or load crates every day in order to survive, how could you afford the injuries of brawling?

She shrugged slightly to herself as Lukhal walked up beside the towering goliath woman. He was only a few inches above half her height, yet was well more than half her weight. Dwarves were like meaty cannonballs, Kalea had decided, though she would never say that to a dwarf's face.

He grunted, droplets of whiskey on his beard, and grumbled something in Dwarvish. Kalea could understand only a few phrases in the harsh, runic language of the dwarves, and she recognized the one Lukhal used: laz-thrak. Shithole. She raised her hairless brows in surprise, a smile crossing her tattooed face.

"Really," she asked. "I thought dwarves considered mountains their flesh and metalworking their blood." Her tone was partially genuine curiosity, but mostly mocking.

"I'll not be belittled by you, Kalea, even if you are a half-giant." She was a goliath, but she didn't correct him. It was a common misconception among people, and she had grown tired of correcting every half-wit she met. "Dwarves survived the Reckoning in the Shelter Cities, like every-

one else. We're no more blood of the mountains than anyone else. We simply have a knack and tradition for metalwork and delving." She pondered his words. She had heard of the Reckoning, but the Shelter Cities were new to her. She wasn't a fan of lore and history like her brother. Reading bored her, and listening to stories was often a waste of time, in her opinion. So, instead of asking about the Shelter Cities, she merely nodded and grunted. "Apologies," she said. "Didn't mean to offend."

"Ah, none taken. Despite my love for whiskey, I still consider myself a proud dwarf and have seen many more winters than other races would be able to, and I'm not even decrepit. As such, I do my best to preserve our honor, culture, and history. When I can." He seemed proud of himself, a glint of happiness shining through his buzzed eyes.

She nodded. She understood where the dwarf was coming from. Though less bothered with it than her brother, she understood that she and him were the final members of their clan. They had a duty to the Valu-Nokane's history and the blood of their fallen families to ensure that the clan never died its final death and passed from living memory. "I respect that," she said, looking down at the dwarf. He looked up and met her gaze. They shared a moment of connection and mutual understanding and respect, before looking back out at Ramidalr.

They were passing through the farms surrounding the town now. Miners had to be fed, and rocks certainly wouldn't do the trick. Even then, the farms surrounding Ramidalr seemed sad, constricted somehow. It was as though a somber blanket was laid over the town - and in some ways, there was one.

A thin blanket of soot seemed to cover everything, and it was then Kalea understood. The very soil and the crops that came from it were choked by the fires of industry, in the same way the sunrise was. If even the sun, rising gloriously over the Gloumeda Mountains, couldn't resist the corrupting effects of smoke and ash, what hope did seedlings rising from the ground have?

They approached the wooden palisades of

Ramidalr, their brown logs stained darker by ash. As the caravan reached the gates, Forthwind began discussing his business with the guards. And so, she gazed ever intently at the guard on the left, doing her best to look invested and attentive while Forthwind secured the group entry. The left guard was, she decided, the most interesting to look at of the three men arrayed before the caravan. He seemed much like her, in all honesty. He was broad of shoulders and all-around powerfully built - for a human. He had shaggy, brown hair that fell over the shoulders of his chainmail hauberk. He rested on a spear that he held vertically in his right hand, and his blue eyes gazed out across the caravan. His face was defined and strong, with a jagged scar across his forehead.

She was running through all the ways she could lay him out in a barefist brawl when Forthwind's voice cut through the din. "Alright, pack it up. We're heading to the mines," he called, his voice no longer hinting at the wound Kalea dealt to his pride the other night. She grimaced as he made eye contact, and then found herself smiling as he visibly faltered for a moment. She enjoyed that he feared her, or at least respected her.

The caravan made their way through the soot-caked village to the northern mines, and the miners loaded up the iron ore the outsiders had come for under the shadow of the mountains. Thus, the day passed much as Kalea anticipated. Forthwind departed to "discuss business" with several gnomish merchants, and Kalea spent the day drinking and eventually brawling with countless miners of all races and genders. The caravan departed Ramidalr early the next morning, and Kalea spent the first of five days traveling back to Wolfward working off her hang-over. The trip back was uneventful, though they did have several encounters with more wolves; however, those encounters ended peacefully, and Kalea returned home with a full coin purse and Adeline's iron. With both, Kalea could relax for a few months' time and maybe even convince the blacksmith to let her forge some weaponry or armor. She would simply have to wait and see.

