

The Silver Staff

By Brandon Oliger

“This can’t be it.”

Liv looked down at her GPS. She had arrived at the north pole.

It hadn’t been easy. She’d bribed a shady icebreaker captain to get close, and then it had taken a week, alone, trudging through snow and ice.

Luckily, she wore a thermal exosuit and carried enough life-support tablets to last several months. She was sick of eating the little, green candies, but they were keeping her alive. In the old days, most polar adventurers died of hypothermia or hunger.

She wanted to give up and head home, but she had to keep looking. Her people’s survival depended on it. She mapped out a spiral search pattern on the GPS, starting where she stood and working its way out. About 100 steps in, she tripped on something. This was surprising in the hard-packed snow that surrounded her. She knelt and felt around for whatever the object was. Brushing away some snow, she uncovered the top of what seemed to be a gray, steel rod. She stopped for a moment and took in her surroundings again. Why is this here?

She dug down a little further but couldn’t get far in the hard-pack. She braced and pulled it upwards. At first, it didn’t move, but then something shifted. The whole thing came out at once, causing Liv to fall backward with the five-foot, steel pole laying next to her.

The world changed.

The receding sunset morphed into an eerie, green moonscape, and the snow changed to gray dust.

People!

People encircled her! All clad in black. And they were armed! Most of them had bulky rifles strapped to their chests, and a few of them stood upon what looked like a tank. But, the tank didn’t have treads or wheels. It floated just above the ground and had bright lights where wheels should have been. The soldiers didn’t point their guns at her, though she felt it wouldn’t take much to make that happen.

“State your business.” A voice boomed from the tank. The lights distorted things so that Liv couldn’t see who had spoken.

Collecting herself, she stood and faced the tank. “Where am I?”

“State your business.”

Well, here goes nothing. She didn’t have anything to lose by telling them.

“My name is Liv Erner, and I am seeking refuge for my people. We have survived in the Canadian north for several years, but resources have run out, and the enemy threatens our borders. We have heard rumors that people lived here, away from the war and its tumults. We are kind people who simply want to live in peace. We can contribute - we have workers of all sorts.”

“You have workers, and we have rules. Pick up the staff.”

Liv cautiously reached down and lifted up the pole. It was lighter than it looked.

The voice boomed again. “How many of you are there?”

“About a thousand.”

The voice was silent for a few seconds, as if observing her, and then spoke again. “You may earn refuge for your people, Liv Erner...through single combat.”

Liv heard boots hit the ground as someone jumped from the tank.

A man emerged. He was middle-aged and dressed in the same uniform as the rest. What set him apart was his stark white hair and matching, close-trimmed beard. He carried himself like a general and seemed in excellent physical shape. In his right hand was a pole like hers, but his was crimson red.

“I have no desire to fight,” she said.

“Fight, or die. Those are your options.”

Liv struck a fighting pose. She had fought one-on-one plenty of times, but rarely with melee weapons. The staff would be a problem. The sheer absurdity of her current situation began to weigh on her, but she pushed those thoughts down to address when she wasn't in mortal danger.

She decided to let him have the first move. That way she could assess his strategy. They circled, facing each other. After about thirty seconds of this, he lept at her, the butt end of his staff aimed at her torso. She expertly dodged and broke away into a defensive posture.

They started circling again, when she had a fleeting thought - and acted on it. She broke her defensive pose and knelt in the sand, planting the staff so that it pointed straight into the air.

“This may be your way, but it's not mine. My people are peacemakers.” At this, she bowed her head and laid down her staff in the dust. The man looked at her and pondered.

“Why do you surrender in this way?”

“I would rather die than kill another for my own, selfish desires. It is our way.”

“Then you choose death?”

“I suppose I do.”

He carefully approached, and she braced for his attack. Despite her bravery, tears formed at the edge of her eyes, one of them escaping and marking the dust below.

He took her by the arm and lifted her to face him.

“I’m Klaus. To value others above self is one of our core values. Your people may find refuge here.”

Liv froze. She was overjoyed, but the questions about how she got there and who these people were flooded her brain.

“Come with me.”

Klaus led her past the tank and through the ranks of soldiers who had now broken formation.

She realized that the sky she saw before was an illusion. She was actually in a large, black room with projections set up to mimic an otherworldly setting.

Klaus led her to a door built seamlessly into the wall.

It was a lounge of sorts. Comfortable-looking chairs sat in front of a large window. Daylight was shining through!

“You are a guest of the Santeranian Treaty Alliance. Have a look.” He gestured towards the window. Liv stepped forward and gasped.

Cities! Great, domed cities on the hard-pack.

She stared with wide eyes.

Klaus smiled.

“Liv, welcome to Project SanTA.”

THE END