

A N A N T H O L O G Y O F

A PRAYER FOR
DEAD KINGS
— AND —
OTHER TALES

SCOTT
FITZGERALD
GRAY

AUTHOR OF CLEARWATER DAWN

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Clearwater Dawn

(Chapter One — Complete)

A PRAYER FOR DEAD KINGS AND OTHER TALES

An Anthology of the Endlands
by
Scott Fitzgerald Gray

When he finally seized the sword, Morghan felt the power again, spiking in a sensation like the emptiness of unspoken words. A bloodless rage twisted through him just as the voice had twisted through him before, and in that instant, in a heartbeat, in the rawness of memory where it clawed at him from the dark dreams that the day tried to push away, he knew that anything was possible.

Too many things still to be done.

So many debts to repay.

“Avenge them...”

- In a lost tomb, a warrior haunted by the deaths of those who once followed him hears an offer of redemption in the voice of an ancient blade...
- A sword of kings lingers in a forgotten forest, where dwells a timeless spirit of the wood — a creature able to sense the apocalyptic future that unfolds if the weapon is ever reclaimed...
- A prince and princess share a bond of blood and a dark secret, both of which threaten to destroy them when their father is killed...
- A warrior living under a monstrous curse has his wish for death transformed by a desperate young girl with blood on her

hands...

- A reclusive storyteller finds himself in possession of an enchanted axe that promises he will rule the world — whether he wants to or not...
- The pain of the past haunts a mage sought out by the woman he once loved, who needs his knowledge and power to save the life of the man she loves now...
- A young exile returns home carrying the weight of betrayal and the stolen sword that is the symbol of his people — a blade with which he will destroy the legacy of the father he tried and failed to kill years before...
- A king long thought dead walks his war-torn homeland as a ragged pilgrim, consumed by the sins of his past. But even as he does, the daughter of his greatest knight hunts him, desperate to convince him to take up the crown once more...

The first Endlands anthology from Scott Fitzgerald Gray, *A Prayer for Dead Kings and Other Tales* follows a disparate group of heroes and villains caught up with the dark history — and darker destiny — of nine weapons of ancient magic, lost to time and mind.

In the aftermath of the fall of Empire, magic is the ultimate force for tyranny and freedom in the lands of the Elder Kingdoms. Magic defines the line between right and wrong, life and death that compels countless characters to take up a mantle of heroism they never expected to wear.

However, in the world of the Endlands, even the tales of heroes seldom end as expected...

This epic-fantasy/sword-and-sword sorcery anthology includes six all-new short stories, the novella *Ghostsong*, and the short novel *A Prayer for Dead Kings*.

A PRAYER FOR DEAD KINGS AND OTHER TALES

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Scott Fitzgerald Gray

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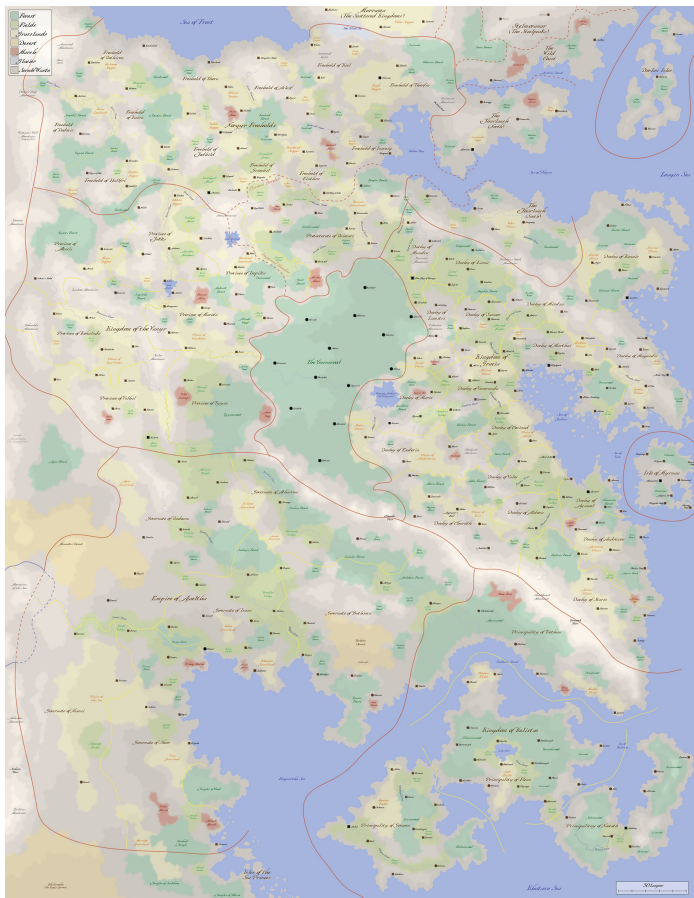
Smashwords Edition

To Colleen, Shvaugn, and Caitlin
For Infinite Patience

*Wainamoinen, the magician,
Comes to view the blade of conquest,
Lifts admiringly the fire-sword,
Then these words the hero utters:*

*“Does the weapon match the soldier,
Does the handle suit the bearer?”*

— The Kalevala,
Rune XXXIX



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RAZEEN WAS STILL WARM when they found him, the rigor just beginning to set. Dead since dusk, no longer. From across the table, Scúrhand prodded the wizened figure with a scroll tube, the lifeless body rocking like a sapling in the wind.

The dark-haired mage spat. “Of course,” he said, only to himself.

Across the tower chamber, Morghan circled warily, his gaze flitting across the destruction that had carried through the room. The subtle weight of the longsword shifted gently in his hands.

All is lost...

The voice was the whisper of a silk-lined sheath as it slipped within the tall warrior’s mind. He spun fast like there might have been someone behind him, saw nothing but the walls of ransacked shelves and the dead sage they had come to see. Scúrhand inspected the bruising at the pale throat where Razeen had been strangled.

Where it gripped his sword, Morghan’s hand was shaking. He squeezed his fingers shut, forced the tremor from them. Across from him, Scúrhand didn’t see.

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They had been three days on horse from the Highport before they reached the citadel, a narrow track breaking from the eastbound trade road to follow a rising line of scrub and sand along the ocean headland. The eastern sky was already dark when they arrived, the sun gone to a molten line beneath a black haze of storm cloud along the opposite horizon. The pounding of the surf was constant past tall columns of stone, the ruins of ancient battlements staggering their way across the rough beach and into black water beyond.

In the end, the shroud of darkness and sound had given Scúrhand and Morghan a chance to see the dozen or so figures hidden in ambush position along the road, long before they themselves could be sighted. The sentries wore dark leather and helms of blackened steel, scattered behind scrub trees as they watched for any sign of approach. This meant they left themselves open where Scúrhand and Morghan swung wide to the north and around, tethering the horses in a stand of salt pine and approaching unseen, away from the cliffs.

They moved to within sight of the sentry farthest from the gatehouse, the others unseen but close enough to shout to. Atop a rise, behind a screen of wind-whipped sea grass, they watched for a long while.

“When I was last here, the sage was far more welcoming,” Scúrhand whispered at last. “Perhaps he heard you were coming this time.” The mage noted that Morghan didn’t smile. “We should endeavor to find out who they are and why they’re here.”

“Agreed,” Morghan said. “Take this one.”

“An excellent suggestion,” Scúrhand whispered, “and one whose planning is worth long discussion, ideally back in the city.”

“Take him.”

“Or perhaps another city entirely.”

“You take him or I will, and I’ll be a lot less quiet about it.” Morghan shifted as if preparing to move, making an obvious attempt to reveal his position where he stood a full head taller

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than the mage and twice as broad. His mail was plate set within two layers of chain in an arrangement he had designed himself, apparently for the amount of noise it could make when he wanted it to.

Scúrhand sighed. He felt for the power that threaded through him, summoned it with a whisper that knocked the sentry into the air and two strides back. He fell with a muffled thud, Morghan already moving.

Even as Scúrhand followed, however, the warrior stopped to kneel beside the motionless form. Morghan had seen the mage drop enough sentries in the same way, and so should have known this one wasn't getting up anytime soon. But as Scúrhand slowed, he saw that Morghan wasn't checking the pulse of blood at the figure's neck as he assumed, but was fingering the insignia on the cloak. A boar's head sigil was embossed there, black on red, barely visible in the shadows.

"Who are they?" Scúrhand asked. The warrior only shook his head.

The citadel consisted of adjoining ramshackle towers leaning at dangerous angles into the ever-present wind. It was a military ruin, built and rebuilt by the succession of petty lords who had claimed this headland in the endless wars that were Gracia's greatest legacy. The space within it held two hundred warriors and their arms when it was new built. Before the long peace of Empire and the erosion of the sandy bluff turned its garrisons to fading memories and left it to be claimed by a lone Gnome who valued his privacy. Peace and the passage of time made for much irony in property values, Scúrhand had noted more than once.

One window lit in the cliffside wall made a gleaming gold beacon against the night. It was there that they had climbed, out of sight of the sentries below. To be accurate, Morghan climbed, clawing his way up along handholds found and carefully tested in the weathered stone. Scúrhand had an easier time of it, rising effortlessly through the air alongside him. The black cloak he

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wore over loose leggings and a high-collared jacket was of aristocratic cut, but in a style no self-respecting noble had worn in a dozen generations. Scúrhand knew the garment and the dweomer of flight woven into its threads to be older than that by far.

Though the mage was fairly certain he could have carried the warrior aloft as well as himself, he'd been reluctant to test the supposition with slightly more certain death promised on the rocks below if he failed. Morghan hadn't seemed to mind, not even breathing hard when they finally pulled themselves through the open shutters of some sort of study. It was there that Razeen had been found.

The body was draped across a high table, propped in a chair so ridiculously tall that the diminutive figure must have scaled it like a ladder. He had a selection of scrolls before him that Scúrhand took in at a glance, mundane alchemical texts.

Morghan was still pacing the room, listening carefully at each of three exits, stairs leading up and down. Velvet drapes in the same indescribable purple the sage wore were hung from tall pillars of yellowing marble. The air was heavy with the scent of old parchment and dust.

From below, loud enough for them both to hear, came the sound of smashing wood.

"We leave now?" Scúrhand said with little real hope. Again, Morghan didn't smile.

Vindicator...

Morghan took the stairs first. He didn't have to look back to know that Scúrhand was following.

Curving columns of black oak rose between levels of shadow above and below as they descended. A pool of light preceded them, cast from the pulse of lightning that traced the dagger Scúrhand had claimed from the ruins of Myrnan. The Sorcerers' Isle, legendary across Gracia and all five Elder Kingdoms and countless lands beyond. During a particularly violent squall that dogged them along the six-day voyage from

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Myrnan to the Gracian mainland, the mage christened the blade Storm's Light. Morghan had spent most of the remainder of the trip offering his opinion of those who named their weapons.

"A blade's a tool like any other. You don't name the plow any more than the oxen that pull it."

"I've never had an ox save my life," Scúrhand said. They were sailing through rain past sunset of the last day, the lights of the Highport visible ahead. "This might do that someday." The mage was doing handwork with the new blade at the rail. In the twilight, the pulse of its storm light shone.

Now, Scúrhand willed that light to darkness as Morghan waved him back. Where the stairs met an open balcony, they saw a faint light from ahead. Directly beneath them, the undying glow of magical evenlamps was filtered by some kind of latticed ceiling. Narrow beams crisscrossed below an empty space where the stairs turned and descended once more. There was room enough for Morghan to squeeze through, shifting slowly to spread his weight across the narrow beams. Scúrhand was close behind, perched at the balcony's edge.

Through narrow slats, the mage and the warrior watched the movement in the library below. A dozen figures in the same dark leather as the sentries outside worked with a silent efficiency as they tore through the shelves. Already, scrolls and bound volumes were strewn so thickly that they hid the floor. Scúrhand could only stare.

"That's a duke's ransom in lore they're stepping through," the mage hissed. "What in fate's name are they looking for that would make them discard that?"

Barrend's Bane...

Clear in Morghan's head again, an echoing voice, his own and not his somehow.

"What is Barrend's Bane?" Scúrhand whispered, and Morghan had to glance over to the mage's questioning look to realize that he'd murmured the name aloud.

A year before, in the midst of a long string of days spent trying to forget, Morghan had seen the boar's head along the

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Myrnan docks. A sigil on a cloak, black on red. It was an image he knew, locked into place in his mind. Scribed from the searing memory of a lash wielded by an arm that wore the same insignia. The memory of the pain was knife-sharp across his back, his chest.

The stone-faced warriors who wore the black boar on Myrnan had been led by a woman with hair the color of deep sunset. She and all the others were strangers to Morghan. But over the week that followed, he spent a modest percentage of the coin he brought out from the ruins to discover their names and mission. The secrecy that carried them to the Sorcerers' Isle was impressive even against the routine secrecy of most of those who sought Myrnan's hidden riches. In the end, though, all information had a price.

It was at a weaponsmith's stall along the muddy tracks of Claygate Keep's old Porttown where Morghan found what he sought. The pale hair and sky-blue eyes marked the smith as Norgyr stock, his accent betraying him as not that long gone from the northlands. The flame-haired woman and her guard had visited him twice while Morghan tailed them. But when it came his own turn to step inside the stall, the smith met his inquiries with a sullen silence. Morghan noted the boar's head marked in ink at the smith's bare shoulder, a faded clan insignia beneath it.

In the dusky glow of the forge, the warrior pulled his sleeve down to reveal his own shoulder. Then he told a story. When he was done, the dark rage in the smith's eyes was one he recognized. He gave Morghan a name.

"What is Barrend's Bane?" Scúrhand asked again, but Morghan was moving. Shifting silently along the lattice of narrow beams, he strained to hear the voices filtering up from below.

"...the vault," a woman was saying. She was the leader of the searchers to judge by the manner in which she spoke. Her hair was flame-red in the pale light, as bright as it had been when Morghan first saw it in the dawn glow of the Myrnan docks. "Start again, top to bottom. Check every door, every

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passageway. Search for diaries, journals. What you can't read, bring to me."

The smith in his dockside shed had first seen the hidden mark on the shield at Morghan's back as he and the warrior drank at the hearth.

"You came out of Eltolitinus?" the smith asked gruffly when Morghan's story was done. "With this?" He touched the shield almost reverently. "I lost count of them that died trying to be you, lad."

The ruins beneath Myrnan were named for Eltolitinus, the greatest of the many mages who had tried to claim the Sorcerers' Isle as their own. A demigod of magic to the Aigorani who were the forebears of Gracia, his legend was built on the transformation of the entirety of Myrnan to a vast island-castle three thousand years before. It was the aftermath of the dungeons of Eltolitinus that had pushed Morghan to wander alone. Hoping to bury the memories of the dark month he and Scúrhand and all the others had spent beneath the earth.

In the end, the Norgyr smith told Morghan a story of his own. The legend of Barrend, who was weaponsmith to the magical court of the Sathnari, masters of the Sorcerers' Isle a thousand years before the island-castle was raised.

Avenge them...

As he watched the soldiers in black tear through the library, the voice in Morghan's mind was the voice of the smith suddenly. *Barrend's mark is what they seek. Weapons of the old age, secrets of craft long lost. Magics that can't be made by mortal hand no more.*

"Seek the signs of Barrend's Bane," the woman called from below.

Those who know it will kill for this mark.

"The lore we seek will be found or we do not return, by Arsanc's orders."

As the woman's voice echoed, Scúrhand saw a sudden darkness twist through Morghan where he watched.

Those who claim it lay claim to the power of kings.

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Then the mage saw the warrior fall.

With a groaning crunch, the lattice of the ceiling gave way beneath Morghan's weight, the first arrows from below nocked and fired wild past him before he even hit the ground. Without a thought, Scúrhand launched himself into the air, cloak clutched tight and spread behind him as he soared silently to the apex of the arched ceiling. There was room in plenty to fly, the library huge, four passageways wending out of it where the great stairs ended their twisting path down.

The figures below didn't notice him, understandably distracted as Morghan landed with sword in hand and proceeded to carve his way through them. Scúrhand saw three down already, the rest pressing, but the warrior moved with a speed and grace that belied his size.

Then all at once, a pulse of white light wrapped Morghan like a shroud. The warrior's battle-scarred voice was choked off with a sudden finality. Rigid, he stood locked in a stillness that captured all the fury of his suddenly silenced attack. His eyes were dark between the line of his steel helm and the carefully trimmed beard. His blade was gripped tight, well-muscled arms locked in the midst of a backhand blow, held unwavering where he was frozen fast.

Scúrhand alighted on a section of shelf he hoped was sturdy enough to hold him. He saw the red-haired woman step up, hands still twisted in the complex gesture of the incantation that had taken Morghan out, another spell already on her lips that Scúrhand didn't want to wait to see the effect of.

"Stand down or die consumed by arcane fire!" he called with what he hoped was suitable bravado. He saw reflexive movement below, bows drawn and arrows nocked with a common bead on his heart, but he was already airborne again. He extended one fist, the plain copper ring there spouting flame to wrap his hand. He saw uncertainty in the eyes of those closest to him, fire flowing up his arm to the shoulder now. Where it billowed around him, the black cape gave him the imposing tone he hoped for, enough to hopefully hide the fact that the ring

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presented less threat to the foes scattering below him than if he'd simply fallen on them.

It was a relic claimed when he and Morghan first met, happenstance travelers who found themselves fighting at each other's backs when a cache of unguarded gold they had pursued independently on the frontier turned out to be less unguarded than was publicized. The ring's power was defensive, its dweomer swallowing the heat of mundane flame and eldritch fire alike, but its presentation proved almost as effective at keeping him out of the thick of combat as any blade might prove within it. Since that day he and Morghan met, the thick of combat was a place Scúrhand preferred to leave for the warrior whenever humanly possible.

On the floor below, the red-haired woman took a step toward him, and in her bright gaze, Scúrhand saw suddenly the youth she was trying hard to hide.

"If you wish to parlay, say your piece," she said in the Imperial tongue. A tone of authority in the words but no strength in her voice to back it up, barely an apprentice's age by her look. Her accent marked her as Norgyr even if her ruddy features suggested Vanyr or the Kelist Isles. The guards with her all bore the pale hair and blue eyes of the north where they watched him coldly.

Scúrhand responded in the Norgyr tongue as a hopeful token of concord.

"My partner and I mean no trouble nor harm. On the contrary, depending on your business here, we may find ourselves in a position of mutual benefit."

"Your partner has a unique way of introducing himself." Scúrhand caught the dark looks of the three wounded men behind the girl, but the fact that they were merely limping was more than fortune. More times than the mage could count, Morghan had demonstrated a ruthless taste for the blood of those who deserved to shed it. However, Scúrhand had just as often witnessed the warrior's almost preternatural ability to leave less threatening foes standing, if a little shakily.

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“My partner was set upon by your overzealous associates before being given any chance to explain his untimely entrance. Having watched him make it, I assure you that gravity was at sole fault. No one here intends murder. Least of all you.”

The comment wasn't subtle, but the sudden darkness of the face beneath the rough-cut red hair told Scúrhand it worked. Not much of a gamble, given that of all the magic she could have cast, this one had chosen to simply freeze Morghan in his tracks rather than attempt to kill him outright. But before she could respond, from behind them both, a third voice barked out suddenly.

“Presume to know another man's intent often enough, and it'll eventually be the last mistake you make.”

The tone was imperious, edged with a dark smile that Scúrhand could feel even before he saw it. He caught no sign of surprise from the soldiers, but the girl flinched. Scúrhand glanced back, careful not to move too suddenly.

A figure in silver mail strode up through the shadows at the back of the library, a squad of six archers arrayed to either side, shortbows drawn on the mage where he hovered. Scúrhand fought the urge to lift for the ceiling once more, dropping with a flourish instead, the cloak swirling in a calculated display. He managed not to stumble as he touched down.

“I am Naethdraca, called by some the Stormhand.” It was the common translation of Scúrhand's patronymic that he never used himself, but which he had long practiced speaking with just a hint of menace. “That is Morghan. Our business here is research, nothing more.”

He felt his dark features appraised as he let his long hair hang to cover them. The girl and the newcomer ignored the theatrics, but a look of sudden unease among the troops behind them told Scúrhand they had done the trick. He saw more than one figure glance to the dragon stitched in gold at the edge of his jacket collar, the mark of his given name. Naethdraca, the War Dragon who had been a grandfather he never met. They were old names, both promising power that the mage had yet to fully

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live up to.

“Ectauth,” the mailed figure offered by way of a name, blue eyes ice-bright beneath a shock of pale hair. “My overly talkative servant is Thiri.” Scúrhand nodded to the girl, her green eyes the color of wet leaves in the glow of the evenlamps. “Our business here is none of yours.”

“Nor would I seek to know it,” Scúrhand said evenly. “But if it please you, accept my services. I could not help but overhear that you search for some key within the lore here. Lore in which I am well versed. If my skills and knowledge can in some way smooth over the potential for conflict, they are yours.”

Ectauth made to speak, but the girl Thiri cut him off. “Take the mage up on his offer, my lord. The sage’s death has cost us time.” She appraised him carefully, Scúrhand patient, ignoring the silver warrior’s dark look. There was an odd dynamic here, one he wasn’t quite certain of. The girl’s skill with the spellcraft that held Morghan fast was good enough, but her demeanor marked her as a scholar, not a warrior.

Ectauth was another matter, though. The careful set of the armor, no weapon at his waist. Mail sleeves cut back of the wrist so that the movement of his hands would be unobstructed. He was a combat mage. A battle-caster of the Norgyr, his magical craft was focused and honed as a weapon. Whatever information might be hidden here, whatever this group had come in search of, it would be beyond Ectauth, leader though he was. He was thus obliged to depend on the girl’s scholarly arts, Scúrhand decided. An obligation bound to rankle a combat mage.

“I expect you intended only to threaten the sage,” Scúrhand said carefully. Another speculation, but a correct one from the reaction in the pale blue eyes. “Let us take the arrival of my companion and I as fortune, then. Or at the very least, let us get on with our research and leave you to yours.”

Where he stood, Morghan watched and heard it all, motionless within the grip of Thiri’s spell. His intact senses focused past the paralysis that the warrior suspected felt far too

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much like death would someday, and which was fading with each slow step Ectauth took around him. For all Scúrhand's postured tact, Morghan knew that the mage's words were also designed to fill up as much time as possible, allowing him to fight the effect of the spell that bound him.

From the start, the warrior had still been able to feel the sword against his fingers, the faint warmth of life pushing through his arms even as he forced himself to keep the blade steady in its interrupted stroke. As Ectauth considered Scúrhand's words, Morghan could feel sensation return to his legs as well, fought to stay steady. Thiri was watching him, though, where she paced around him. Cautious of any first sign that her binding was close to the breaking point.

The shield was slung to Morghan's arm, and he could see the faintest sign of the green eyes straying down to the mark there as the Myrnan smith's had. A thing that only one who knew of it would notice, the dark rune all but invisible.

Those who know it will kill for this mark.

Morghan couldn't shift his eyes without giving away that the spell's effect had passed, but at the edge of his vision, he saw the look of shock on the girl's face.

Ectauth saw that look, too. He saw the black rune that inspired it. With a shout, he twisted his fingers in a silent summoning of spellpower, a blade of white light suddenly erupting in his hand to stab for Morghan's heart. The warrior was already moving, though, finishing the stroke he had held motionless, driving the battle-caster's eldritch blade wide and catching him hard on the backswing as he wheeled away.

Morghan managed to fall back toward tall shelves at the closest corridor, protecting him from the first volley of arrows. Scúrhand took to the air to twist away from the knot of blades that erupted around him. As he sailed toward Morghan, he heard Ectauth's voice.

"Kill them both!"

"Call it," Scúrhand shouted.

Morghan appraised the mass of figures circling, another

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volley of arrows hissing past as he pressed back.

“Run,” he said.

They ran. Out and down the narrow course of a winding stair, then into the shadow of uncounted corridors beyond. By an instinct Scúrhand couldn't name but was grateful for, Morghan lost their pursuit faster than he had any right to hope for. From shadow to darkness to shadow again, they ran blind through a maze of stairs and corridors where Ectauth's forces were already exploring ahead of them.

More than once, they tripped across patrols with no warning, the soldiers of the black boar left incapacitated by Scúrhand's spellcraft. The guards came by pairs, mostly. A squad of six once, but where the mage came up short against them, Morghan's sword was a blur of red and grey that made up the difference. No quarter given, the warrior slipping into the well-honed reactions of a lifetime at the blade.

Scúrhand was slower than the warrior, but Morghan kept himself and his armor between the mage and pursuit. He lost track of the turns they had taken, empty and crumbling chambers flashing past to both sides, when he had to signal Morghan to stop. In a five-way staggered intersection, he fought to slow his breathing. Morghan stepped far enough away to listen for any sign of pursuit, but there was only silence above and behind them.

“Do you have any idea where we are?” the mage whispered. Morghan shook his head. “Just checking.”

“Traffic through here, though,” the warrior said. He bent low to the floor, traced the dust with one hand, Scúrhand trying in vain to read the faint tracks there. All around them, pale light glowed from the frames of arched doorways, intact here. Marking off the deadly traps of Razeen's workrooms and archives, which Scúrhand would have struck any bargain to peer into under other circumstances.

“Where do you think...” the mage began, but then Morghan was on him, one hand pushing him to the wall while

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the longsword came up in the other. Scúrhand registered the footsteps racing toward them only an instant before he saw motion in the dark intersection, five figures on top of them. Morghan's blade slashed out even as Scúrhand stumbled back.

He felt the moment stretch, blind in the near-darkness that crippled his ability to target his magic with any accuracy. However, he knew better than to raise a light. Morghan was at his best in the shadows, able to pick out his targets with an uncanny ease. Scúrhand heard strangled cries, caught the movement of blood-dark steel in the half-light as five bodies fell.

“Light,” the warrior hissed. Scúrhand set his dagger's lightning to life as he pressed back, the storm glow illuminating the landing and the stairs around them. Four Norgyr guards were beyond any aid he could give them, Morghan taking no chances in close quarters. The fifth figure was still moving, however, trying to crawl back into the retreating shadows. Morghan was there first, lifting the body as if it weighed nothing, slamming it back to the wall with a force that stunned it, head lolling forward as the figure went limp in his grasp.

“Blood and moons...”

It was the girl. Thiri. Scúrhand saw the gash where Morghan's blade had cut her leg almost to the bone. He noted the pool of blood spreading, the pallor of her face where the red hair framed it. Then he glanced to Morghan, following his gaze to the girl's shoulder. He realized that it wasn't the recognition of the young mage that had inspired the warrior's look of absolute shock.

Even before they stumbled out through Eltolitus's ruined gates and gave thanks to sky above and ground below for their lives, Scúrhand had recognized a darkness lurking in Morghan that hadn't been there when they parted a year before on the Norgyr frontier. He had gone east then, Morghan catching up to him as promised by the time winter turned. But in that lost year, something had happened to the warrior.

When they met up in Yewnyr, the great Free City,

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Morghan had carried only the clothes he wore and an ivory-hafted shortsword Scúrhand didn't recognize. The wealth and the weapons the warrior spent the previous year amassing were gone, and there was an anger in him, threading through spirit and body alike, that the mage had never seen before. On the road to Myrnan, he loaned Morghan what he could for broadsword and mail without complaint. When the warrior paid him back tenfold after the dungeons of Eltolitinus, he no longer needed the money but he knew better than to argue.

Only once, in the month of recovery from what Eltolitinus had done to them, did he ask what happened to Morghan in that year. The warrior's stony silence convinced him of the wisdom of not asking again.

There had been a moment within the ruins. Morghan was dressing a neck wound after a particularly brutal skirmish with Eltolitinus's undead hordes. Scúrhand saw the mark. A narrow sequence of three interlocking loops, barbed like links of spiked chain. It was set in black ink at the warrior's shoulder, tattooed with a precision that suggested whoever had done it meant it to last. Now, where Thiri's shoulder had been bared by her torn tunic bunched in Morghan's fist, Scúrhand saw the same tight knot of jagged line on her pale skin.

In the ruins of Myrnan, close to the breaking point already, Morghan had drawn steel against the mage when he caught Scúrhand's gaze on the black mark, seemingly ready to kill. He spoke of it much later, only to apologize. Never an explanation.

From behind and far off came faint footfalls. Scúrhand willed the dagger's illumination away, startled suddenly to find Morghan's bloody hand at his wrist, squeezing with a strength that the mage had seen break bones.

"Light..."

In the warrior's voice, Scúrhand heard a need he didn't recognize. In the pulsing gleam that the dagger's lightning conjured again, Morghan was on his knees. His sword was cast to the side as he pulled out his own dagger, laying the girl gently to the floor. He checked her breathing as he cut the legging

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away to fully expose the wound beneath. A deep gash, dangerously close to the fast blood.

Morghan motioned to Scúrhand for his waterskin. He flushed the wound, hacking an edge from Thiri's cloak to bind it. He motioned again, Scúrhand digging within his cloak, pulling free a carefully packed glass vial. A healing draught within it, gleaming pale blue with its own light. The mage thought to remind Morghan that the two of them might have better need for it later, but he said nothing as the warrior slipped the vial to the girl's lips, checked her suddenly even breathing, her eyes still closed, face ashen.

Scúrhand wasn't watching, focused only on the footsteps getting closer.

"She'll have aid soon enough," he whispered. "Or we could take her. They might ransom..."

"No." Morghan's voice held a dangerously dark edge as he grabbed up his sword and stood, appraising the girl's unconscious form. He pointed down the passageway in the direction that Thiri been running. "Move," he said.

As they pounded along endless corridors of black stone and dark stairs, Scúrhand lost track of time, lost track of where the noise of pursuit was coming from. He was already gasping air, Morghan barely breathing hard. They hit more patrols twice, Scúrhand taking them out with routine spellcraft, leaving the Norgyr warriors to slumber or to wander befuddled, stripping their armor and weapons off as they went.

Against a foe set for the fight, the subtler spellcraft was often the best offense, Scúrhand had discovered long ago. As he always did when the stakes were high, he felt the call of the eldritch power in him. The darker energy of his blood, the birthright of the names he bore. Waiting always for its chance to be unleashed, but he was content to hold it back for now. It was more than a hunch that told him he would be needing it later.

Ahead, there was sudden darkness. They skidded to a stop where the corridor seemed to disappear into empty space.

"Light," Morghan whispered. Scúrhand obliged.

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At the end of the finished passageways they passed through, a space of raw stone opened up. A blister of shadow, a rough-edged rock dome rising where the floor suddenly fell away. It was cold there, Scúrhand feeling it in the air, in the stone at his feet. Across a space of perhaps a dozen strides, a narrow stone bridge arced into shadow, open space to both sides.

Far below them, a pool of black water faintly caught the light of Scúrhand's blade and the gleam of lamps where Ectauth's force was spreading on the opposite side, shifting into defensive positions along a wide terrace.

Footsteps grew louder behind them. Scúrhand glanced ahead and back as Morghan stepped up.

"Call it," the mage said.

"We fight here, we're closed in. We break for the bridge fast enough, we have a chance."

"Of course."

With a snarling cry that he could only hope sounded like battle-ready rage, Scúrhand soared out across the stone arch, Morghan one stride behind him. The first hail of arrows hit like black rain, Scúrhand summoning up the dweomer that sent each dark-barbed shaft splintering off into empty space. Morghan ran the rough stone of the arch at a speed that made the mage's stomach turn, the warrior already shouting tactical directives for when they hit the other side. Scúrhand only dimly registered them, all his focus directed to protecting them and hoping that Morghan could avoid looking down to the dark water below.

Ectauth hit them just past the halfway point, as Scúrhand knew he would. He sought out the silver-armored battle-caster in the ranks, but there was no sign of him where he must have been holding back behind the protective cordon of archers and shield fighters. The flare of spellforce exploded in the darkness of the chasm nonetheless, smashing into him and Morghan both like a hammer blow.

He heard the rending of steel, saw the warrior's longsword sundered. It was a dweomered blade with the strength of ancient

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magic, Ectauth's spellcraft as strong as Scúrhand had feared. The warrior's armor and shield, the mage's black cloak all flared as they were scoured with eldritch energy, but they were spared. Morghan cursed as he hurled the broken hilt-end of his blade toward a well-armored axe-fighter leaping to the attack, its jagged edge punching through the figure's neck to unleash a fountain of blood.

Scúrhand touched down along the rough stone ledge that fronted the terrace, breaking hard right behind Morghan exactly as the warrior had called it, heading straight for the thickest bulwark of defenders where they massed behind pillars some dozen strides away. Ectauth missed them completely with his second attack, sending the full fury of his arcane blood slamming down into the ledge behind them. Scúrhand felt a moment's elation that they were clear, the battle-caster caught off guard by their suicidal charge. No chance to hit them again as they closed with the dark-cloaked Norgyr forces.

Then he heard the grinding of stone twist through the echo of the eldritch blast, and the rough ledge beneath his feet gave way. Ectauth had hit behind them on purpose, judging the relative weakness of the ledge where it was carved from the rough face of the chamber. The bridge cracked and split behind it, cutting off escape. Nowhere to run.

Scúrhand found himself admiring the battle-caster's tactic as the floor ahead of them cracked cleanly and detached. He hoped he might stay alive to use it himself some day.

Morghan stumbled as the floor disappeared, his feet churning empty air as he fell. Then he felt hands on his shoulders, Scúrhand swooping in beneath him, cape spread like black wings in the shadow. There was a lurch as the mage fought to hold him against the pull of gravity. Then they were rising clumsily, the collapsing bridge shunted off into endless shadow below them.

Ectauth hit them dead center with a pulse of spellfire as they climbed. The shattered landing was almost within reach, Morghan feeling a blast of heat and light swallow them both,

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Scúrhand taking the brunt of it as he screamed. A razor-point of pain erupted where the mage's hands gripped beneath Morghan's shoulders, the copper ring burning as it swallowed eldritch flame.

Then those hands slipped. The warrior twisted in midair, grabbed at Scúrhand's smoldering form as they both fell. All around was motion and shadow, the black pool circling far below at the edge of vision, no time to react, no time to think.

Morghan felt for a moment's desperate instinct, obeyed it without question even as the thought flitted through his mind that Scúrhand would have pointed out the futility of his actions if he had been conscious. Through an endless moment of falling, he pulled the cloak from the mage's shoulder, managed to force most of one arm into the sleeve as he willed the dweomer there to fly with all his will.

It didn't work. Not enough to send them skyward again at any rate, though Morghan somehow managed to slow their frenzied flight. He felt a lurch as they twisted and shot sideways, felt them slowing even as the water rushed up at them.

There was a moment of crushing impact, then a moment of numbing cold. There was a darkness that Morghan fought hard, but it took him anyway in the end.

When he awoke, he was sprawled on cold stone, no light to betray any detail of place or position. The fact that he was soaked to the skin was the only reason he didn't wonder idly if he was dead, the ice water of the black pool still clinging to him. He felt the pain in his side that told him he'd broken ribs, senses reeling as he fought to stay awake. He gave vague thanks to fate that his limbs were whole as he rolled to sitting, then began the slow shifting through the blackness to find Scúrhand's motionless body where it lay three strides away.

He checked the mage's blood, found a reassuring tremor of life at his neck. Another moment's grasping and he had the dagger free from its scabbard, awkwardly willing its storm-light

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to life. A quick turn to all sides, making sure they were alone. The vaulted space around them ran to dark walls on all sides, empty save for the rubble of the collapsed bridge where it spread in chalk-white drifts.

In Scúrhand's wet cloak, Morghan found a second and last draught of healing. He forced it between the mage's lips and saw his breathing grow less erratic. He remained unconscious, though. Some injury beyond the physical, or the taint of death magic in Ectauth's spellcraft. Nothing to do but wait.

In the dagger's bleaching light, Morghan reached for his longsword before he remembered it was gone. Taken from the ruins of Eltolitinus, the ancient blade had seemed destined for Morghan's hand when he claimed it. A sign of a new beginning after all that had come in the long year before. Broken now, just as every blade broke in the end.

Around him, Morghan recognized the lines of a tomb with uneasy familiarity, but where six stone vaults stood spaced between the buttresses, their tiers were empty. An equal number of columns circled the center of the chamber, but there was no sign of stairs. No ladders, no handholds, no door or other egress above. No means of exit apparent, no sign of the emptiness ever having been disturbed.

Then above, he saw the buttressed ceiling, and a dark plane of rippling shadow that he realized with a shock was the bottom of the ice water pool they had plunged through. Morghan stared in disbelief for longer than he liked, the water held there somehow by strength of sorcery. Deep enough to cushion the fall from above, then to slow them for the second leg of the fall to the floor below.

He had to assume that up through the pool offered an escape as straightforward as their entrance had been. He tried not to think about what happened if the unseen spellpower that held the water up also prevented them from passing through it again.

Even sharper than the ache in his side, he felt the pain at his shoulder where the black tattoo still burned even after a year.

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He felt the dark memories that dogged his sleep and that he had spoken of to no one, conscious of the questions always lingering. That spring, when he followed Scúrhand to Myrnan at last, he had tried to turn his back on the dreams that pursued him out of the frontier.

People who had followed him, dead now. Their faces still with him.

Too many times, he had dreamed of the Sorcerers' Isle. Too much, he dreamed of the darkness of Eltolitinus.

The ruins of Myrnan were a knacker's bone mill through which would-be heroes were ground. Too many lives spent dreaming of places like it. Too much wealth to be had in the catacombs and tombs that underlay the lost Empire and the empires that fell before it. But even after the thirty centuries since the island-castle was lost, no place in the Elder Kingdoms, perhaps in all the world, held as much lore and wealth of the ages as Myrnan. Rumors spoke of the farmers of the Sorcerers' Isle too frequently tilling some relic, some blade or other item of arcane power, up from the dead past with the passage of a plow.

Their group had gone in as twenty-one. Only eleven came out again. Morghan had learned the names of most of those who were lost only the night before they took the Black Stair down beneath the earth. All the dreams that had carried them to the Sorcerers' Isle, all their ambition lingered now only as dust and the memories of those who survived.

Too many dead in the name of unearthing the past and the secrets it held.

Avenge them...

In his head, the unknown voice resonated with a sudden familiarity that made Morghan realize he had all but forgotten it in the chaos of the levels above.

He had too much left to do.

That was the thought that tore at him now. Out from the dark dreams came the memories of the slave caravan that had set out from the foot of the Ceilamist Mountains and wound its way through frost and forest to the barbarian kingdoms of the

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untamed Jharlaash.

Now, as then, he hadn't been afraid to die. Not exactly.

Among the Vanyr, it was said that all life, all the world was the balance between dark and light, between good and malice. That great western realm of the Elder Kingdoms was a land whose folk had clashed with the brutality of Norgyr northward and the cunning of Ajaeltha to the blistering south for four millennia, and which had never been conquered.

At nine years old, Morghan had been taken in by a mercenary band in the northern borderlands, his parents barely a memory even then. He held a dagger for the first time. He'd been shown how to kill with it, quick and dirty. Over a fire the night before the young Morghan fought his first sortie, a one-eyed veteran watched for a long while. And seeing the fear in him, the warrior quietly told the boy to not be afraid.

We hide from the darkness all our lives, though darkness takes us all in the end. But those who embrace the dark, those who meet death and are not afraid, can face that end with power, for we know the voice of death when we hear the shadow speak.

The memories he carried now were all that remained of those who had followed him.

We face the dark without fear, the old warrior said. *We who know the name of the night.*

He had too much left to do.

Vindicator...

He saw the blade then.

Beyond one pillar indistinguishable from all the others, unseen until he circled slowly around it, a figure sat. The mummified warrior was in chain shirt and helm, dead for longer than Morghan cared to guess. The clothes and the leather of belt and scabbard were shredded and split with dry rot and age. The figure sat upright, back to the pillar, legs crossed and head bowed as if deep in the throes of some endless contemplation. The sword in its hands flared in the dagger's pale light.

It was a hand-and-a-half blade, tapered wide to the base,

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and hilt-wrapped with pale leather showing no sign of age. The guard was black steel in the shape of what looked like the teeth of some creature Morghan was glad he'd never met. It curved opposite directions at either end, no sign of where it ended and the steel of the blade began. Down the center of that blade, a damask pattern caught the light in blue-white lines. The dust that clung to it was spread evenly, but even as Morghan touched the blade, he watched it slough off like gently falling snow.

In the center of the pommel, he saw the mark of Barrend. The same sigil that his shield bore where the Portown weaponsmith had shown it to him. A black rune that seemed to swallow the light.

Avenge them...

The voice had been calling to him since he set foot within the citadel, but there was a clarity to it now that left no doubt where it was coming from. And where it almost seemed his own voice at the outset, his own thoughts tripping him up as they sometimes did, Morghan felt the words of the blade now as a metallic echo in his mind.

He crouched low, appraising the body carefully for a long while. "Barrend's Bane," he whispered, and as he spoke, he felt a faint twist of power thread through him. He ran a callused thumb along the blade, felt its razor edge draw blood. The dead figure's hands had kept their grip, fingers locked tight to hilt and guard where Morghan was forced to snap them off, one by one.

When he finally seized the sword, Morghan felt the power again, spiking in a sensation like the emptiness of unspoken words. A bloodless rage twisted through him just as the voice had twisted through him before, and in that instant, in a heartbeat, in the rawness of memory where it clawed at him from the dark dreams that the day tried to push away, he knew that anything was possible.

Too many things still to be done.

So many debts to repay.

Avenge them...

"The black mark, on the girl's arm. What is it?"

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Morghan started, spinning back to where Scúrhand was rising shakily.

“Not important,” the warrior said as he handed the dagger back, tried to mask the tremor in his hand. He didn’t ask after Scúrhand’s return to consciousness. No other pleasantries between them. Not necessary anymore.

Morghan raised the new blade carefully, felt its balance send the subtle signals of control through his arm.

“What is this place?” he asked as he began to swing the sword in long arcs, working to assess its subtleties, adjusting to them. Working on a level below thought, below consciousness. The sword seemed almost weightless in his hands, shifting like something alive.

“Old,” was all Scúrhand said. He was pacing slowly, still finding his strength as he circled along the walls. “Older even than the citadel, judging by the stonework here. The one built first, then the other raised above it.”

“What was that one’s story, do you think?” Morghan gestured to the figure, slumped in shadow now.

“In a tomb, one shouldn’t be surprised to find the dead,” Scúrhand said. The dagger was still the only light, shadow lurching around them each time he swung it to scan to either side.

“No dead here except him, though. And usually you arrange to be laid down, not sit.”

Morghan saw the mark then. At the figure’s shoulder, a faint red glow flared through a dark shroud of rusted chainmail links. He stepped back instinctively, the bastard sword up before him as if he expected the figure to suddenly rise.

Scúrhand saw. He followed Morghan’s gaze to the corpse, staring for a moment before he stepped up to kneel at its side. He felt the warrior’s blade follow his movement, ready.

“Unless the one you have to arrange to bury is yourself,” the mage said thoughtfully. He carefully pulled away the screen of mail to reveal a mark still etched in the leathery flesh beneath.

It was a shape Morghan had never seen before. Three part-

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circles turning around each other, interlocked like a harrier's claws. At their ends, three scalloped blades were nocked, their edges locked into a triad. The symbol pulsed with a blood-red gleam, rising and fading in a steady pattern like the beating of a dying heart.

Vindicator...

The warrior felt the voice as much as he heard it now. A presence pressing in on him, threading through his hands where they wrapped the haft of the bastard sword tightly. He felt that red glow burn his eyes suddenly, felt the pain of the slave brand at his neck. Three loops, interlocked. Their shapes were wholly different, but he felt the two sigils reflected in each other in a way he didn't understand.

"What is it?" he hissed.

"Was, not is," Scúrhand said. "Lotherosien. But he's as dead as he looks, I assure you."

Morghan's eyes narrowed. "The Imperial Guard?" He had little interest in history, but it was a name he knew. For the fifteen hundred years that the Empire of the Lothelecan held sway across the continent, the Lotherosien were the force by which they ruled. Elite troops, legendary in their dedication, falling to shadow just as inevitably as the Empire had in the end. Fallen to the unnamed cataclysm that turned the distant capital of Ulannor Mor to a sheet of black glass. Another bit of history that even Morghan had heard.

"Why is he here?"

Scúrhand said nothing in answer, but he glanced back to the sword in Morghan's hand.

"Is that the blade they seek?"

Morghan only shrugged. Scúrhand was thoughtful a long while. "So long as we hold it, negotiations might go in our favor..."

"They won't have it," the warrior said.

Scúrhand laughed. "This is hardly the time for trophy hunting..."

"Arsanc will not hold this blade while I live!" Morghan's

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cry cut the silence, cut the cold. The smile died on Scúrhand's lips, no sound now except the warrior's breath, visible in the chill air. Morghan looked up to see the mage's gaze fixed on the guard of the blade, the black mark there.

"This Arsanc," he said carefully. "The one the girl spoke of. This one you seem to know, who is he?"

"Just a name."

"Indeed. The Freelord of Thorfin in Norgyr goes by that name."

Morghan wouldn't meet his friend's gaze. "And when did the politics of the northlands become one of your endless fascinations?"

"When politics crosses over into history, I pay attention. Arsanc of Thorfin was poised to become High King of Gracia, five years past. The height and end of the Wars of Succession that restored Gracia to monarchy and sanity. A long fall from grace for him since then, or so they say."

"Do they." Not a question. A spark of anger in the warrior now as Scúrhand pulled history from memory.

"He was killed even as he tried to claim the throne," the mage said thoughtfully. Remembering. "Gone for a time, then brought back to the light. Or so they say."

Morghan said nothing, but Scúrhand saw the uncertainty in the flicker of the warrior's eyes as he looked away.

"He controlled all the northlands once. Threw it away for the sake of wanting more. Reclaimed Thorfin after a time, or most of it. You fought in Reimari, you said. The battles for the borderlands. Those were Arsanc's lands you were warring for, after he'd lost them."

Morghan glanced back quickly. The look in his eyes told Scúrhand he hadn't known any of it, and that he was angrier now that he did. He shrugged coldly.

"My interest is more recent."

"Recent enough to have brought us here," Scúrhand said, understanding suddenly. "You knowing that this force of Arsanc's would be here to meet us. Yet you asked me of

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Razeen, said you sought the lore and history of the shield. That maker's mark. But that quest meant nothing, didn't it? A ruse to keep my company."

Morghan stood in dark silence a moment. "Can you fly us out?"

"I can fly myself out," Scúrhand said. He pulled the black cloak tight around him as he paced away.

Twelve days into the nightmare of Eltolitus, Morghan had done his closest dance with death. Twelve days in, fate only knows how many levels deep into the ancient dungeons of Myrnan that were once the foundations raising up the entire Sorcerers' Isle in towers of white stone. In a dead garden of onyx trees, he was scouting with three mercenaries of the Vanyr, battle-hardened and senses sharp as slivered glass. He was leading, not watching behind as they were cut down by living shadow that seeped from the stones.

Morghan had tried to fight his way through to them, only to fall beneath the paralyzing cold of living death, nearly consumed. Scúrhand saved him, pulled him up from a narrow well of black where the shapeless forms of the three who had already fallen tore at him with taloned fingers, their faces, their bodies shredded by a darkness with no end.

In their names... the sword whispered to him. Morghan started, stumbled back even before he realized he was moving. With effort, he loosened his grip on the pale leather of the haft, knuckles white where his fingers were locked tight.

"When I left you in Einthra a year past, I traveled north." Against the silence, Morghan heard his own voice, uncertain. Across the chamber, Scúrhand turned back, the warrior pale at the fading edge of the dagger's glow. "I took up a call to arms. Mountain giants of the Ceilamist raiding farmsteads, sweeping down as far as the Thorann wood."

"Thorann in Thorfin. Those are Arsanc's lands."

"Those were Arsanc's lands. He abandoned the frontier two days past midwinter. Didn't want to commit the resources necessary to defend it. Homesteaders, farmers. I told myself I

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could save them.”

In the mountains of Jharlaash, in the blackness beneath Myrnan, Morghan had learned the name of the night. But rather than quelling the warrior’s fear, that name had scarred him. Cut him through flesh, bone, and spirit. Filled his dreams with the faces of those who followed him and were gone now.

Scúrhand was silent a while. “The girl. Thiri.”

“She bears the slave mark. One of those given up, cleared from the mountains. Marked for sale to Jharlaash along with me. Arsanc must have found some worth in her. Bought her back.”

Scúrhand felt something change in the warrior’s manner. He thought he saw the darkness shift just slightly.

“The slavers wore Arsanc’s own black boar. He used the threat of raid to cut away his own lands. Sell the people that paid him fealty. Betray them all.”

Through the darkness, within the pain that threaded the voice, Scúrhand heard the Morghan he knew. The answer unfolded in his mind, making sense of what he had seen even as it spawned more questions that he ignored for the moment.

Instead, he asked, “You’ve faced him? This Arsanc?”

“No.”

“Stood against him? Incited uprising?”

The warrior shook his head.

“You know that vengeance really only works best when the other party has some inkling that they’ve wronged you.”

“This isn’t about vengeance.”

In all their names...

Threading through the warrior suddenly, a shredding pain rose and faded in a heartbeat. Morghan felt something twist inside him, Scúrhand seeing it where he circled closer, wary suddenly.

“You see something,” the mage said. Not a question. “You’ve seen it since we arrived here. What?”

Morghan shook his head slowly. “I hear it. The blade has a voice. For me, at least.”

Where Morghan held the sword out, the mage appraised it,

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the blue-white damask seeming to shift and flow in the dagger's pale light. He glanced to the shield, saw a hint of the same pattern in the shimmering steel of its rim. "The arms of Barrend are too-long separated, perhaps. Anxious to know each other again."

Morghan only shrugged. "Arsanc had a people who looked to him for protection, and he sold them as chattel. I called for those who would follow me and found six strong enough, six brave enough. If you'd gone with me, you'd be dead along with them." The warrior's voice was even. "Arsanc will not hold this blade."

Scúrhand was silent again.

"Can you fly us out?"

The mage glanced to the darkness above them. "They'll be waiting for us. We should regain strength, let them wonder if we're dead before we surprise them."

"They won't wait. What's here is too important to them." Morghan raised the blade. "They'll kill for this mark..."

As if in answer, there was a dull crash of thunder from above. Along the lines of the tall arches, dust shook and fell.

Morghan appraised the flat shadow of the pool bottom above him, faint light rippling beyond it now. "Ectauth expected to pick us up from the water, dead or alive," he said thoughtfully. "Claim the shield. He'll be panicking now. Vulnerable."

Another blast from above. Scúrhand shook his head. "Of course..."

As with every other time, it was more a moment of awareness than an actual decision. An acceptance that the fight closing in on them was the only path open. No other options, no alternatives to that final stand. Neither of them spoke as they checked weapons, Morghan unslinging the empty scabbard of his shattered longsword and casting it aside. He fit the new blade to belt and hand, swinging it carefully in ever-wider arcs.

It was a warrior's ritual, Scúrhand knowing it from observation. Morghan had been trained to the sword from those

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first mercenary days of his childhood, and it showed. Each morning, each evening, every moment of respite in campaign or exploration, the warrior checked each weapon he carried for heft and weakness, a blade or bow fought with a hundred times examined as if it might have been brand new.

Scúrhand's skill with a dagger had been mostly accidental when he and the warrior first met, and checking that his scabbards weren't about to fall off was the extent of his preparation for combat. So many showdowns in the three years since then. So many times like that first time, back to back against an ever-shifting sea of foes and running on the timeless instinct to just survive.

They were older now, stronger. Always in the end, though, there was someone a little stronger, a little better than you.

Always in the end, it came down to something deeper than strength.

They shot out through the pool faster than even Scúrhand thought himself capable of flying them both, a half-dozen passes made around the inside of the tomb to build up speed before they climbed. Morghan held tight to the mage, didn't blink against the shock of cold water that hit him like a body blow, then against the sudden riot of light and frantic bowshot that met them as they emerged into the chasm.

Morghan had already picked their spot, Scúrhand twisting as they soared. Arrows passed harmlessly by them as he dropped the warrior to the open terrace where the bridge had fallen, Ectauth standing at the fore this time where his force was circled to all sides. Scúrhand stayed aloft, the air a blur before him as the screen of arcane force he summoned up shattered a wall of bowshot that came his way. The silver battle-caster's voice rang out against the stones, frantically ordering the archers to stand down, but Scúrhand could see that their attention was already fixed firmly on the opposite side of the cavern.

There, Morghan stepped to the terrace edge, every eye in the Norgyr troop following the slow swinging of the blade in his hand where he held it out over dark water below. The damask

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pattern of its steel caught the bright light of evenlamps around the room, flaring like the sun on clear water. No one moved.

Ectauth's gaze looked to be as dispassionate as he could make it, but Scúrhand noted the anger in the battle-caster's eyes as he drifted slowly closer. There was no sign of Thiri with him, no time to look for her. "If you wish to parlay, say your piece," he called.

"That one drops the blade safe to the ground," Ectauth shouted. "Both of you submit. When we've crossed the frontier, you'll be released to your own fate."

Where Morghan shifted suddenly, a dagger that hadn't been in his hand a moment before flashed as it buried itself in the neck of a lone scout coming up almost unseen from the side. The would-be assassin fell noisily.

"Let's assume the surrender option is off the table," Scúrhand called.

"Here are our terms," Morghan shouted over him. "Your lord Arsanc needs a message sent. You can take it or I can, delivered along with your head."

There was a rustling of bows, Arsanc's archers eager to begin the bloodletting. Too eager, Scúrhand thought.

"Madmen, fools, and heroes all fit the same grave." The young voice caught him and Morghan by equal surprise, both wheeling to see Thiri standing alone where she had slipped through the ranks. She was limping, her leg still bleeding. When Scúrhand tried to meet her gaze, she looked away.

Beneath Ectauth's anger, there was no trace of the uncertainty that Scúrhand heard in Thiri's voice. This should have been a precision operation, a night of stealth and recovery. The sage's death was something the girl had already paid for in her conscience, but the battle-caster was thinking only about what he might pay if he failed to deliver the goods whose retrieval he was charged with. A tension between the two Norgyr spellcasters that Scúrhand hoped desperately he and Morghan could use.

"The message is this." Morghan called to Ectauth, but his

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eyes were on the girl. “The right to wield power is earned by deed. Not delivered by proxies, stolen and paid for by murder.”

Ectauth only laughed, Morghan’s glance shifting to where the Norgyr battle-caster stepped forward. “And what deeds have earned you the right to a king’s blade?”

“Arsanc sold his people...”

“The Lord Arsanc made rightful disposition of those who rejected his flag and his will,” Ectauth shouted. “The Lord Arsanc surrendered lands in the name of peace that could not be defended, except by those with a wish to die beneath your banner, mercenary.”

Only because he was watching, Scúrhand saw Thiri’s reaction to the Norgyr captain’s words. Where he had shifted to keep his shield between the closest archers and himself, Morghan froze.

“I know you,” Ectauth laughed. “All your pathetic pursuit on the Sorcerers’ Isle, you thought you wouldn’t be noticed? Watched in return as you watched us? Your name came easily enough. Then came the memory that one of that same name led a futile assault from the Lord Arsanc’s lands to the mountain lord’s own halls. A self-styled warlord and his mercenary band taking on a mountain giant garrison. How many made it out alive behind you?”

In Morghan’s hands, the sword called Barrend’s Bane flared blue-white. Then it began.

It should have been over quickly. They were outnumbered, outpowered, the odds too much like those of too many previous fights that Scúrhand had been sure would be his last. He counted eleven figures surging even as Morghan slammed into them, saw Ectauth curse as a bolt of spellfire intended for the warrior struck one of his own lieutenants instead.

In each fight like it, there was always a moment when the tide turned. A point where odds first were evened, then the balance tipped in favor of improbable victory or timely escape. There was no tide this time, though. There was only Morghan, moving with a speed and a fury that drove him through the ranks

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of Arsanc's forces like a bloody storm.

He was gaining no ground, though, Scúrhand in the best position to see it from the air. Too many, more coming, a dozen pouring in from above. That was Morghan's plan, though, and Ectauth's dark expression showed that he knew it. The battle-caster's spellpower was focused for maximum destruction, and all but useless now where the warrior fought within the screen of bodies pressing against him.

Scúrhand stayed in motion as he watched, not bothering to waste his own spellpower against Ectauth and the wards of protection he could sense even at the distance between them. The girl Thiri was another issue. But though Scúrhand did his best to draw her fire along with the attention of the archers, in the ebb and flow of the power that passed between them, he noted the uncertainty in the young mage's tactics.

His own first salvo was ice and fire, but she countered it with an ease that astounded him. In response, she filled the air around Scúrhand with darkness and mist that kept him moving, prevented him clear line of sight to the battle below. She was focusing on harrying him, he realized. Ignoring Ectauth's shouted orders to target Morghan, the battle-caster trying in vain to break through the press of bodies.

Shadow blurred Scúrhand's vision, Ectauth unleashing spellfire in close quarters even as Morghan slipped back and three more of the battle-caster's own warriors were cut down. The pulse of light and flame suspended the melee into motionless moments, frozen images.

In one of those moments, Scúrhand saw the snarling Ectauth finally break through. He tried to shout where Morghan spun in the mortal dance his wrath made, but the mage had no voice to overcome the screams of the dying and the steady crash of steel that surrounded the warrior where he fought.

Spellpower pulsed in the battle-caster's hand, a twisted whip of smoke and shadow lashing out, coursing through Morghan as brands of piercing black flame. Scúrhand heard the warrior cry out. But then even in the moment that it should have

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taken for Ectauth to finish him, the battle-caster's sudden scream rose as a dark echo of Morghan's own. Tendrils of black fire wrapped tight in his fist flickered and flared out as twin bolts of white light tore through his armor and convulsed him as if he'd taken a blade in the back.

Morghan reacted without seeing, screaming with pain as he twisted back and around and drove the blue-white blade through the battle-caster's throat.

From the air, Scúrhand could only stare to where Thiri stood, eyes wide as if somehow only just realizing that her spellpower had put her captain down. Then she was moving even as cries of treachery arose from the warriors closest to her, a surge of shock and anger rising as she ran to Morghan's side.

The dagger the girl drew told Scúrhand that her spellpower was close to spent. She unleashed a last barrage of magical force against a howling axe-fighter who struck from the side, and who fell to Morghan's blade as the warrior spun past in a blur of blood and steel.

Then four more were on them, Thiri slashing awkwardly at the closest attackers as they pushed in. Scúrhand laid down three points of arcane shielding around them, but the fight was too fast. He could see Morghan shouting, could feel the words without hearing, telling the girl to run.

She didn't.

Where a pair of archers erupted from the shadows, she spun toward them. Four arrows that would have claimed Morghan unleashed a shroud of blood as they tore through her.

Afterward, when he looked back on it, when he tried to remember, Scúrhand couldn't summon up the images that should have recalled for him what happened next.

In his head, he thought he heard a scream. A voice that was Morghan's but not Morghan's somehow. He saw arrows fly, saw the shield the warrior had borne from the Myrnan ruins seem to pull them from the air as he fought with a ferocity Scúrhand had never seen before. And through the fury of the warrior's movements, the mage imagined for a moment that he

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could see a blue-white light in Morghan's eyes. A glow to match the steady pulse flaring now from the damasked heart of the blade as it bit deep again and again.

Scúrhand couldn't see the moment when Ectauth fell in the chaos, but he was dead with the rest of them when Morghan finally slowed. The warrior's armor was flecked red with gore, breath white on the air, the cold of the chasm chamber deeper now. He wiped his face and arms with Ectauth's black cloak. He didn't wipe the blade as he slipped it to his belt. Didn't need to, no blood clinging to the blue-white steel.

"What in fate's name was that?" Scúrhand was crouched in the shadow a short distance away, faint light showing above through narrow windows he hadn't noticed before. Dawn breaking outside. He briefly considered holding the question for a better time, realizing in the end that he had no idea what that time would look like.

"That was staying alive."

Where Thiri had fallen, Morghan knelt at her side. Her skin was white as ice and blood-streaked, the arrows fanning out across her chest. But even as Morghan fumbled bloody fingers at her neck, Scúrhand called out to see the faint movement of the black shafts.

"She's breathing..."

Morghan felt the blood weak at her neck, saw the steel-edged hunting heads where they punched out through her back. He had the skill to bind the wounds, but there was no point. The girl was at the edge of death, no way to pull the arrows without only hastening the end.

"Search Ectauth," he whispered to Scúrhand, fear in his voice. "He'll have healing..."

"I did. Nothing."

Save her... whispered the breathless voice of vengeance as it threaded through his mind, and Morghan's vision blurred suddenly, eyes burning.

He remembered Eltolitus. He remembered the faces of the others and saw the dread in their eyes that was their last sight

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before the final darkness, as they were consumed body and soul. He remembered the mountain giant's halls, heard the howling of wolves and the screams of those who had followed him. All the ones he couldn't save.

"Save her," he whispered, and he felt the words twist in him like a thing closer to prayer than any oath the warrior had ever spoken.

He felt the metal of the bastard sword grow warm beneath his gore-streaked hand.

Without thinking, he grasped the girl's fingers, forced them closed around the haft. He felt her shudder, saw color twist through her cheeks as he quickly snapped the shafts that pinned her, grasped each in turn and pulled. In the dark sleep of pain, she screamed, but even as she did, Morghan saw the wounds close over as she consumed the healing power held in that blade of damasked steel, the blood-streaked skin smooth again as her eyes snapped open.

The sword slipped from her hand, clattering to the stones as she scrambled back. Scúrhand was close by now, catching the disorientation in her eyes that he knew would quickly pass. But it was the sword he stared at as Morghan picked it up.

The warrior turned away, looked to the light above and walked toward a distant flight of stairs twisting up from the shadows of the cavern.

"It's done," Scúrhand said to Thiri. He saw her staring to the carnage around her, wide-eyed as if waking from a half-remembered dream. "You're safe, with us at least. If you're still here when Arsanc sends another force to discover what happened to this one, I wouldn't like your chances."

She followed him shakily as he followed Morghan in turn. The stairs led on to a passage he recognized from his previous dealings with the dead Razeen. The main doors of the citadel were ahead, open now where the sentinels they first avoided had been called in by Ectauth. The scent of sea air and the rising sun were beyond.

Scúrhand fought the urge to break for the library, the

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incalculable worth of lore still scattered there. When he had searched the dismembered Ectauth, he found scroll tubes that he slipped to his pack by quick instinct. Another time for the rest, he thought. He had a more important mystery to assess at present.

Beyond the doorway, Morghan stood atop a rise of stone a dozen strides away. He had the sword in hand, was swinging it idly, a dark silhouette against the sky.

“Vindicator,” the warrior called.

“You?” There was an edge in Scúrhand’s voice. It took him a moment to hear it, then another moment for him to recognize the fear there. “Taking vengeance against whom? You blame Arsanc for what happened here? Ectauth?”

“I blame myself. For all of it.”

There was a familiar weariness in the warrior’s voice, but something else as well. A kind of peace Scúrhand hadn’t heard in all the time since Morghan returned from the north, but it chilled him now, the mage not sure why. In any of the previous narrow escapes he had followed Morghan into, fear was never in short supply. But before he could think on it, Thiri’s voice came from behind him, stronger than he would have expected.

“You seek vengeance against your own past, you fight a foe you’ll never defeat.”

Morghan turned to appraise her for a long moment, a darkness flashing momentarily in his gaze. And then he laughed out loud. From somewhere below the cliffs, the call of seabirds rang out as if in echo.

The warrior shook his head. “‘Vindicator’ is the blade’s name. He was right,” he said, pointing to Scúrhand. Thiri’s look told him she didn’t understand, but Morghan only laughed again.

Scúrhand watched, smiling himself after a time. “Are you absolutely sure you’re quite all here?” He caught Thiri’s eye as he glanced back, but it was Morghan she moved toward.

“More sure today,” the warrior said. He shrugged as he nodded to Thiri. “We’ll see what tomorrow brings.”

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There was nothing more to say as they returned to the horses, just waking from a fitful sleep within the hissing curtain of the wind. They rested themselves only for a short while before they set off, Morghan with Thiri behind him, Scúrhand thoughtful as they rode out against the red flood of dawn.

The Wood

WITHIN THE WOOD, yellow-green tendrils of creeping snow-vine thread the eye sockets of a frost-splintered skull. *Old magic lingers in these secret places of the world*, the Quick Ones say. He hears their songs. Knows that this place that is his is one such place they sing of.

The skeleton spreads beneath the green shroud of endless branches. Its fingers of grey bone, still as death, clutch the ice that binds them. His fingers of black wood shift slowly with a silent wind, scratching distant sky. Great roots hunch and rise like talons dug deep into freezing earth, a wide swath that pushes up and out as thick ridges of buckled stone. Ice-choked rills mark the shattered lines of the land, root-web twisting down and out through a skin of earth and wood-bark, shrouding the living ground beneath.

He knows the ancient magic of this place, drinks it deep through the roots that are his feet. He spreads it to sky and air through the ancient bare fingers of his blackened arms. He feels the sun, cast along the edge-precipice of western horizon, jagged gash of crimson flaring beyond cloud and freezing haze. The dome of dark sky presses down, split by pale dusk like cracks in

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the acorn that let frost seep within. He feels white flowers thread their way between weathered teeth, triggered to life by winter's first breath.

He knows the reckoning of seasons since the body fell and turned to bone. Seasons come and pass endlessly for him, each stretched and twisted out to the next, glistening mirror-moments of time catching each other's reflections like raindrops striking still water. For an age, golden grass grows up and through the skeleton's weathered bones, fragile mineral of life fissured and broken, overgrown and swallowed in a heartbeat of passing days.

The bones are of a Quick One, whose kind pass only rarely through the wood, but who are not of the wood. Born of blood as are all the creatures of the world, the Quick Ones are set above the world by bright minds, by spirits that burn like no other creatures'. Quick Ones come in smooth and tall, scaled and short, the green and grey of forest shadow, the pale rose of first light at dawn. Sharing shapes and colors with other Beasts and Birds, but standing always tall where their kin of blood crouch low.

The Quick One fallen at his feet had been smooth-skinned, had borne a shell of steel long years before. That shell has long ago turned to rust in his slow senses, fused with bone and rock, flaked finally to nothing. Steel is a secret of the Quick Ones, who collect the soft stones of the open desert to burn and hammer to a cutting brightness.

From the day when the Quick One fell, only the sword is left behind.

He knows blades from the past. He feels axe and adze raised against the groves around him when he is young. Even in that ancient youth, though, his visage and power drove the Quick Ones from the wood. In later years, they did the task themselves with dark legends and warning tales, felt through the touch of those few who once walked within his shadow.

Warriors, mostly, avoiding the wyrms that prowl the dry wastes and the mountains that are the lands within which the wood is

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set. The old magic that lingers here is thing that the Quick Ones do not understand, and so their fear builds on the dread rumors of this place that is his.

His perception is all the living things he touches through the roots that bind him to the land. His perception is all the living things that touch him in return. In the touch of those that once came with offerings of sacrifice and totem, blood and bone, he feels the world. Memory made and unmade. Taken in to become part of the time that is his.

Along the highest of the narrow ridges outthrust from the great roots that are his feet, the sword is a steel-grey spike buried in white stone. Its edges are straight like the line-paths of shooting stars, tall even with two-thirds of its length swallowed by the earth. Vine-twined and silver-bright in winter. Flanked by flowers in summer whose sun-white cups catch each day's dew, wind whistling razor-clear through crown of haft and hilt.

Few Quick Ones have come here since even long before the sword fell. The world outside the wood is changing. No shelter sought at his twisted feet, in cool shade where ever-stretching fingers spread their net of green. The grey blade stands unchanged beyond that green, untouched by winter and summer, never rusted, never weathered.

Midway along the ridge, shrouded and all but unseen within the green, a cloak of black leather survives the same long cycles of bitter cold, blinding heat. Lost now, covered with layer-years of leaf and mold, creeping tallgrass kept at bay in a twisted circle all around. None see it. None watch the blade mark out the passage of years by the shadow of the sun, moving from horizon to height to horizon again as it circles slowly around the sky.

With no warning, he feels the shadow cast by the blade flicker in the last light of a winter's day. A shift of time touches it, twists through him like bitter wind across the white-black etching of his skin.

The world changes.

Something catches his indistinct attention then.

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Movement twists beyond the trees that grow to the line of his roots and stop there in a reverent grey-green wall. The howling of wolves, an echo of rasping breath tracing through snow-shrouded silence. An instant later, a Quick One bursts out from frosted shadow, skin limned with a bloody light within the haze of sunset as it runs. A dozen paces behind it, three wolves crash through the screen of trees, flanks winter-lean. Fierce voices lash the air, blood at their tongues.

The Quick One sees him there, twisted-trunk wall of shadow against the sky. And in the touch of its desperate life that unfolds through freezing air, he feels a recognition that he does not understand. The Quick One hungrily sucks air, struggles ahead on feet wrapped in leather and fur, red tracks staining the unbroken white of the ground.

He feels the Quick One's mind as a blur of fear and shadow. Feels thoughts and future trace out as rippled lines. One step ahead of death's pursuit across a bloodied crust of snow, it will leap to his lowest branches, his trailing fingers, thick around as the Quick One's legs. It will climb to safety, rest in resin-scented shadow, cling tight to his blistered skin. He feels that future, as he feels all futures. Feels wolves circle, howl to the black sky, eventually slink off to seek easier prey. Answering the hunger of empty stomachs, starving white eyes.

A dozen strides away, the Quick One sees the blade.

The world changes.

The figure lurches, slowing. Stares in wonder.

Recognition. Fear. It looks back behind it, sees the wolves but its eyes are glazed, blue like summer sky beneath a dirty shroud of sun-red hair.

The ripples of the future twist through him, then are gone. Swallowed by shadow. In its moment's hesitation, the Quick One has turned from him, turned from the future in which it climbs to safety. He feels those almost-moments fade, shred like morning mist beneath bright sun.

The Quick One runs again, bolts for the narrow ridge of ice and stone, but the wolves are already there. It stumbles on the

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snow-shrouded skull of the one who is there before, falls to its knees and claws forward, thrusts gloved hands toward the blade even as the wolves hit.

Forgive me...

He feels words slip into chill air. Feels the screaming start and finish in an unmarked moment of time.

The wolves feed until long after the pale Clearmoon rises, sets again. More wolves come, following the faint scent of offal on the frozen wind. He feels their voices, feels them fight for the life they take from the dismembered body, but his thoughts are gone from the moment, gone from this place.

He is in the past. He remembers when the first Quick One falls.

It is warm. He remembers the moment of it. Feeling and fear as the Quick One crawls forward from the thick shadow of the closest trees. The sun is high, the red of the Quick One's life marking its path back across the green as that life drains away.

That first Quick One finds its way beneath him, lingers within his shadow for an unmarked moment of time. Its eyes are bright, taking in the wonder that is the wood. Cicada song is a silver haze, but against the chill of death, the Quick One wraps a cloak of black leather tight despite the heat of sun and air. The black leather is clasped at its neck, pinned with metal in the circle-shape of three twisted lines, linked and intertwined. Sharp-edged like the unsheathed blade in its gloved hands.

It crawls up and along the ridge, scrabbles across the mounded crowns of white stone thrust up through grass and vine. It weeps in the honey scent of flowers gold and white as it moves to the edge, to that highest point that marks the unseen vortex of the old magic that threads through this place.

That first Quick One lies there, weeping. It has no strength left. It rises all the same. He feels dying fingers drive the grey blade down, down, striking the crown of white rock with a scream of dweomered steel. Sending it deep within a sheath of stone and black soil.

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He feels the clasp that holds the cloak rend as the figure falls, dead weight tearing it free. Unhooked, the cloak touches the rising wind, pulled back to twist like broken wings along the ground.

On my life, the Quick One whispers. Then impression and memory and deed are done.

Cold metal cuts deep, slices through leather gauntlet, finger flesh and bone as the Quick One dies.

Its hands are tight around the blade of the sword. Clinging vines wrap its dark metal with a longer grip as the land brightens, darkens, fades.

A ripple in the long line of time twists through him. A moment whose power he feels but does not understand. But it passes, disappears in the name of new moments, new days, new seasons.

Time shifts. The world changes.

Winter again. Now. Bone and sinew spread in the flat-pounded circle of blood-streaked snow, all that remains as the last of the wolves slip away to the wood and he is alone once more.

Memory twists through the silence of his senses. Faint resonance. A shimmer though black air and white ground. In the lingering energy of the Quick One's death, he reads the impressions of a life, feels names and memories flit unfiltered through his mind.

Holy woman. Priestess of the Green Path.

The days slip past. Light to dark again a dozen times by the time he absorbs those names, makes them part of his understanding.

For the first time, he reckons the seasons back to that bright-sun day when the first Quick One falls. A different creature than this second Quick One, whose blue eyes are plucked out by the crows at dawn. The second Quick One is slight, fair of hair and flesh. The first is taller, thicker, eyes dark, skin dark beneath its metal shell.

The first Quick One has a mark at its shoulder, revealed

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when the carrion cats dig in through the seamed metal skin, burst it blood-bright from the inside. The same mark as the clasp that holds the cloak, and which breaks and fades away in time to rust. But this second mark is carved into blackening flash.

Burning with a red glow that pulses and fades in slow rhythm.

The same circle-shape of bright-edged lines. Three crescents all interlocking, set at their edges with straighter shapes, sharp like the razor edge of the grey blade thrust deep into rocky ground as the first Quick One dies. Only when all its flesh is gone, bones all that remains, does the magic of blood-red mark fade beyond the threshold of his senses.

The bright Clearmoon in the sky those nights is the crescent whose shape echoes the bright marks at the Quick One's shoulder. It swells to full as he thinks, then wanes again, days turning colder in a haze of hoarfrost and grey skies. Snow falls to shroud red ground with white. Then the bones of the flame-haired Green Priestess are gone to all senses but memory.

He remembers the future of the Quick One who is the first to die. That day, he feels the mind of the steel-shelled figure, a blur of fear and shadow. He feels future-lines twist out from the Quick One's staggering steps, spread like ripples in the unseen shroud of the old magic where it circles him like an endless storm.

He hears names then, as he hears names now. He casts himself back, digs deep as days lengthen one by one and snow melts to rivulets of blue water curling between the roots of his feet, eddying along the rills and away. The bones of the Green Priestess are kissed by the sun, last remnants of flesh scoured by the first flies and stripped clean by the warmer day when he finally recalls the name.

Lotherasien.

The Quick One who died and thrust the sword deep into stone and ground names itself thus. Names its place and purpose as a knight of the Blood of the Commonwealth, and in the last will and purpose of that dying mind, this name is all the Quick One is and was and will ever be.

THE WOOD

He remembers now.

Twenty-one full cycles of the sun, carefully reckoned, reckoned again. Brief pulse of time and time passing, barely visible within the record of his endless memory. Back to times before time, seasons without end that flare, pass, fade before him.

The Blood Knight is running, but no wolves follow this day. Only staggering footfalls, tracing back beyond the edge of the grove and past him. His long fingers trace the air as gently hanging curtains of green leaves, drinking rain and sun as the figure falls.

He feels the Blood Knight's desire then. Its eyes are set on the edge of the ridge that crests beneath his outstretched arms. It feels the ancient life that steeps these stones, the power of this place that is the power of earth, of heat and deep magic pulsing within the earth.

The power of the sword fights against the old magic that is here. The power of the sword knows what is coming.

To hide the sword is the vow the Blood Knight has made, but the strength that is its will and purpose is nearly consumed by the sword. Nearly consumed by the ancient hunger that is the birthright of the great grey blade. A power that pulses like the red flow of life that marks Beast and Bird and Quick One alike. A power all but drained from the Blood Knight as it collapses at his feet.

Twenty-one years ago, the sword is the fulcrum around which the Blood Knight's life ends. The momentary distraction of life and death so quickly embraced by earth and time.

Twenty-one years later, the grey blade calls the Green Priestess through the gate of life to death, and he feels a darkness spreading out from the great sword, twisting through the wood around him.

He ruminates while the dull bruise-light of the Darkmoon trails behind its brighter brother, blooming to its fullness over long nights, fading again. He feels the blood-black shadow the blade casts upon the open space around it.

THE WOOD

He tries to understand this thing, but he cannot.

Twenty-one years ago, the Blood Knight's goal is to bury the sword in the ridge of stone and earth that thrusts out at his gnarled feet. The old magic that is the magic of this place is a thing the Blood Knight feels, a thing it seeks over the endless leagues and hardships that bring it here. The desire to lose the grey blade in this place that is his. To see it hidden for all time.

He feels that desire reaching for him, feels it twist through his awareness with an acuity that slows all thought for two seasons. Then winter is done, and other things must be thought on, and only in the passage of time has that long-ago day now come back to him.

The Blood Knight dies in anguish as its goal is met. Embracing the death it sought. And as he feels that death resonate again, he casts back through time and memory to taste the sorrow that died with the Quick One that day.

Through the spring and into the close days of the long sun, he thinks. Then finally, he decides.

From one of the great roots that hold him fast to rock and soil and the vastness beneath, buds unfurl. Shoots twist forth at his thought, pale green. He flexes them, guides them, feels creeping movement over the slow passage of days. The season swings by. Wind blows, hissing through his upper branches. The heat of summer cracks the few bones the wolves left whole. Fat hornets feast at dried marrow scraps as they nest within the Green Priestess's splintered ribs, leave a screen of paper walls behind.

As autumn falls, wolves howl, reminding him what it is he waits for.

As the cold rains come and the screen of leaves begins to fall, he is ready to set his will within the twisting tendrils. A reach across long days, marching almost into winter, then he is there.

Tufts of grey grass rise through the eyes and mouth of the Green Priestess's skull where the wolves discarded it. The Blood Knight's empty eyes are half-shrouded by creeping violet.

THE WOOD

He sends shoots through and within both caverns of bone, splitting within the shadows. Cold tendrils spread, touch all the space within.

He feels day shift to night, reckons off a dozen sunrises before it is done.

The morning is cold, bright and cloudless and carrying the night-chill of empty sky and white stars. The vines reach the sword, surround it with all his senses.

He feels the freezing aura of arcane dweomer in that grey steel. The magic of the Quick Ones, drawn from the mana of the unliving world. The newer power whose strength twists counter to the life that is the old magic of him and his kind. He holds it at a distance, lets it twist and expand like the slow unfolding of leaf-showers on the rising wind.

The priests of the Green Path hold the old magic, or some small fragment of it. The Quick Ones who are so-named for the speed with which they pass through life tame the old magic to themselves, but only as a single stallion is tamed within the larger herd that darkens the grey plains. The old magic of life and green and living things, set against the new magic of stone and mana like oil and water. No convergence of forms. No underlying connection between both magics, but he remembers the Green Priestess falling before the blade in an act of final supplication. Remembers the longing to touch, to hold, to possess that weapon that is the Quick One's last thought.

Over the passage of days, he wraps his subtle perception tighter around the sword's grey blade, sends it up to touch the cold metal of the crossguard. A single slab of bright steel is forged as an unbreaking cross, wrapped with filament lines of dwyrsilver that gleam a pale grey.

He feels the life of the Blood Knight, its memory held sharp within that steel now.

Lotherasien.

The energies of life are ripples in the world. Points from which time and past and future split off, forged and broken and cast back to the unwrought realm of possibility once more.

THE WOOD

These are things he senses, feels as he touches a thousand centuries of history all at once. All the infinite futures, shed and split off as singular paths. Like the unseen magic of this place, twisting through him and spreading out to fill the wood as the unseen touch of a world lost to time.

I am the Imperial Guard, and in my blood runs the honor and duty of the Lothelecan...

He feels the names unfold again, faint play of words surrounding and supporting them with the history of the fabled and fallen Empire. With the words comes again the shape, the interlocking circles. The shadow of life and spirit that touches and imprints on grey steel.

It isn't enough. He feels for the fullness of what it means. The blade's power of new magic spikes, flares white-hot against his unfelt touch, but he ignores it. He thrusts deeper into the maelstrom of faint impressions, seeking the stronger truth beneath. All the scars of mind and memory set upon the sword by all the hands that ever wield it, by the hands that forge and fight for it. The Blood Knight, last to touch it. The Green Priestess, reaching for it with the last strength of life. Not knowing the dark power promised by that touch.

He feels the past split open, his faint caress of mind and understanding tearing away the veil of lost impressions. He feels a spider's web hung with dewdrop spheres of crystal, feels it shredded by the chaos wind that is all those futures denied, splitting off from a single line of the past.

He feels the Green Priestess, feels the Blood Knight. Feels the cold spirit of the grey blade as sight and voice ringing separately, then as one.

Death...

Once, this is the sword of a warrior-folk on a green isle far to the east, and from the hands of those warriors, the Lotherasien steal it. He hears it named by long-dead voices. *Kelastaen*. The Kelist Razor, blade of the war-kings. He sends his touch to wrap

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haft and pommel, feels that impression break off from the faint trace of memory that the Blood Knight's hands have left imprinted on steel and tight-wrapped white leather that shows no sign of age. But when he tries to seek the reasons for that theft, he finds only shadows and secrecy locked deep beneath an oath whose name he cannot know.

Death...

On a day of first frost, brown-black leaves plucked from his swaying limbs by the icy wind, he feels the Empire fall. A moment of long years ago. A time well within his reckoning but beyond his ability to judge by its faint reflection in the Blood Knight's life as the unseen scars in blade and bone reveal it.

From the fall of Empire, a thousand years pass backward, and then twice that long again, and he senses a great plain of grassland and wandering watercourse. A pristine land whose air is clear morning mist, pushed by the soft-scented breeze of distant woods. A ring of high mountains, molten-gold sky of the rising sun. On those peaks gleam towers and bridges of ivory white, shapes reflecting the gently twisting lines of trees along the forest slopes beneath them.

Then something passes his perception and twists away the shroud of light to reveal the shadow beneath. He senses the plain boiling with the shapes of unnatural creatures of stone and metal, feels war unfold and spread and scour the living land like plague. Black fire sweeps across the endless grasslands, white towers shattered and fallen, built again to be torn down once more.

Death.

It is the memories of the Blood Knight that thread through him now. Memories of a dark age lost to time but never forgotten by those who sought to hold that darkness from rising again. Against the shadow of those memories, the blade is hidden, found, taken, hidden again. He reckons off this time over which the Lotherasien keep the sword safe. From the day it

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was claimed from the hands of the last Kelist war-king, he feels the passage of a thousand seasons flash four times past. Old impressions, locked in cold steel and the spirit-memories of all the Quick Ones who die in the sword's name.

He senses the sword lost in the aftermath of the Empire's last war. The great war-king betraying a nation's birthright and beholden to a darkness that has no name. He senses a shadow pass through the strength of steel, a thousand years turning for the blade with barely any touch of living hands.

Memories and legends. Over the fast-blurred space of a hundred winter days, the blade is forged within a fallen castle, a shadowed tower of a distant golden land. A force of spellcasters with power enough to lay waste to cities gathers to infuse that power into molten steel. New magic, fell and pure and black as midnight's storms. A strength in the dweomer of that steel that will keep the grey blade from ever being destroyed.

Memories and legends. He senses the hands of the king that wields the sword, feels the unreckoned hands of other sovereigns seize it from the dying grasp of the hands before. Fathers and daughters, mothers and sons in a long line, ruling by dint of history and the blood of kings in their veins.

Against the shadow of those memories, the Blood Knight takes an oath that the blade which cannot be destroyed will stay hidden, far from the hands of those that would wield it. Those that would succumb to its shadow. A pledge that the Quick One will die to uphold.

The Blood Knight runs with the blade, even as it feels a dark despair course through its mind for the oath that cannot be upheld anymore. The Empire is fallen, and the grey blade is found and stolen back again. But when he falls as he knows he will, there will be no one to hide it again. In the aftermath of the Lothelecan, the Blood Knights are cast to the winds. Spread as a memory already fading to legend.

Pledged unto death, the Blood Knight seizes the sword and carries it across dangerous realms to a place of faint legend. A forest where the old magic might be stronger than anywhere else

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across the world-land the Quick Ones call Isheridar. The shroud of magic that is the legacy of this place, that is his name and birthright. A veil within which the blade might be safe, might be lost for all time.

The ancient magic of this place will wrap and conceal the dark dweomer of the blade. Or so the Blood Knight hopes as it dies driving the sword into the living ground at his dark and twisted feet.

He feels darkness again, feels it chill him as the first vision wraps around him once more. War on the black plain, the sword in the hands of its first master, whose name is burned away even as the memory shapes it.

The wind drives leaves turned frost-white and black. He loses track of time passing, of memories playing out like the songs of wind and rain that make up each storm scouring the distant mountains.

He sees himself now, cast in the final memory of the Blood Knight's lost gaze as it looks up to the sky. The spread of his own great arms are a welcoming embrace through the Quick One's eyes, bright sun flaring to whiter light that occludes all else, then is gone.

On my life, the Blood Knight whispers, and its life is no more.

Spring blooms again.

Grey-brown fingers of vine flare green, drinking the life of sun and sky as they entwine the sword, the skeletal shadows still grasping for it. Summer comes, and the Green Priestess is all but gone now within the tall grass and the shroud of sun-touched flowers.

In his mind, he is moving. Running with blade in hands and across his shoulder, his body not yet stilled by death as it shadows him close, a predator's step running fast behind him.

Death.

This is the song sung by all the memories of the grey blade, and he is joined to them now. Feelings and impressions, a single mind within his. Broad web of past and futures threading

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through dull steel from molten birth to this space of shade and sheltered wind.

Within that mind, he feels the great distance between the two lives inextricably bound to this place. The Blood Knight, the Green Priestess. A clash of spirit and purpose.

He focuses. Reaches within himself for the selves he has become, splitting and shaping them. Seasons pass in a blur, the first taste of frost touching his fingers. The wind turns from the north once more.

It is the heart of winter, the wolves prowling the deep forest again, and he is the Blood Knight. He is the Lotherasien in whose doomed heart burns the fear of what the grey blade is, of what it becomes.

It is the heart of summer, the cicada song a silver haze, and he is the Green Priestess. He is the holy seeker of the Kingmakers, the name that is given to the Green Priestess's path. His is the longing to restore the greatness promised by the sword that is Kelastaen, the long history reflected in a razor edge of grey steel. A line of kings once straight as haft and blade, then broken. Waiting to be restored now with the hated Empire's fall.

He feels the enmity of these two spirits that die with no knowledge of each other. Feels a hatred twist out between them, entwined in his own experience. Caught within the warp and weft of the past unfolding as a thousand histories touching those minds.

He looks forward then.

Ripples spread out from the blade where the wind sends spiral clouds of autumn leaves around it. That shroud of red is the color of the Green Priestess's hair, falling and spreading like a stain of blood when the storms come. He feels the shadow spread in echo, senses the future open up within it.

For long years, the sword stays hidden within his shadow. But in every future, every line of time forced open before him, there comes a time when he senses a figure step up to the crown of the narrow ridge once more. When it leaves, it holds the grey

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blade in its hands.

On each path, the figure's shape is different, shifting between all the possible futures that the shadow holds. On each path, a thousand thousand blades fit two thousand thousand hands, all the unreckoned possibilities branching out from this place, this time. But as far as he follows, he feels each path lead to the same place of blood and shadow. Black and red occluding all futures into a dead haze.

From the depths of the spirit heart that has defined him since the beginning of time, he mourns.

A storm of seasons passes. He loses track of them, senses the stars sweep past as endless arcs of blue-white fire.

He slips back, senses the Blood Knight fall, claw its way forward, die, fall, fall and die in an endless cycle. But no matter how many times the Blood Knight dies, no matter how many ways the grey blade is hidden, no matter how strong the magic of this place that hides it, he feels the sword reclaimed.

He knows this. The future unfolding before his thought.

As the Green Priestess does, other Quick Ones seek and find the sword. They die in battalions to track it to this place, seizing it as they crush the bones of the Blood Knight, the Green Priestess beneath their feet. The grey blade is taken, its wielder slain, claimed, slain again over endless lifetimes of the Quick Ones in their endless search.

For untold thousands of undone years, he touches the Quick Ones, feels their movement along the fringes and boundaries of his realm. He hears their spirit songs carried on the summer wind, senses the impressions their lives and minds make on the other creatures of the wood. Ripples of shadow.

Within the spirit of the Green Priestess locked tight inside him now, a light burns like white fire. He feels it sear him, looks within the fate of the Green Priestess to feel it flare brighter, scouring the shadow of the Blood Knight's oath.

He feels it as the sword is born, senses liquid steel glow the white of first daylight, poured in a shroud of smoke and shrieking flame. The weapon's mold is a slab of perfect black

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marble broken off from the throne that once sits within a ruined hall, walls pulled down and overgrown five hundred years before. The history and power of that throne is drawn within the blade, and as its white metal cools first to blue, then grey, its heat splits that great slab asunder, leaves it rent upon this makeshift foundry floor.

A song threads within the lives of the Quick Ones that he hears for the first time. And over a year of days that are a moment for him and the earth from which he drinks and the sun that is his heart, he comes to understand that he is wrong in all that he knows. He is wrong in all he feels in the long years of observing the Quick Ones and the pattern their short lives make against the slow passage of seasons.

The Quick Ones move from life to death in a single heartbeat of the world, and they slay each other with a focus that he has always understood to mean they embrace death. It has been clear to his reckoning always that the Quick Ones welcome death's release, and the chance to become one with the world from which they arise and to which they return. Death the end and beginning of the cycle of all seasons.

He is wrong. He knows now. The Quick Ones do not embrace death.

They fear it.

For a season, he ponders.

In the time that another winter approaches, then passes, he decides.

All the possible futures he perceives. All the endless exchanges of madness and war that branch off as ripples from this spot.

All the death that surrounds each vision of the blade, each facet of the future and past splintering like ice. Steel and stone and blood lock together in a delicate and deadly embrace across the chasm of time. Within the spirit of the Blood Knight that lives now only within his memory, he senses shadow that threads through him, freezing all the innermost veins of the liquid of life.

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His is the old magic. But in the space beyond all history, there lives a magic that is older still.

It is a thing that he and his kind do not dwell on, do not think about. A thing they turn their senses from, always unknowable. This is the sword's magic, he realizes. The deep magic that is older than he, older than any living thing.

It is the deep magic that forges the grey blade long ago, imbuing it with the shadow that will scour the world if that magic is ever unleashed. The deep magic has no equal anymore, no force of life or spellcraft in all Isheridar that might stand against it.

Except for one.

Old magic lingers in these secret places of the world, the Quick Ones say. He hears their songs. Knows that this place that is his is one such place they sing of.

For the first time, he thinks on how very old he is.

He thinks on the world that is older still, and on the Quick Ones who partake of so little of that world in the short time given to them. He thinks about the death they face, and the history that reaches beyond life.

He thinks on the endless death that twists out from this place, this time, because the presence of the grey blade here creates a single future that will not be denied. The quest of the Green Priestess, the sacrifice of the Blood Knight. No difference made. The Green Priestess falls, the Blood Knight falls, and the rift between these two is never breached. Cut by long years between them and the door of death that closes off their perceptions.

There stands a future beyond which he cannot feel. There stands a place that seethes with the noise of storm wind across the dry grasslands, that burns with the heat of the unseen earth that will consume all the wide world in the end.

This is the end of each future in which only death unfolds each time the grey blade is seized, claimed by another that will turn its power to destruction in the name of the hunger that the deep magic brings.

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All futures save one. An impossible place where the Green Priestess and the Blood Knight are made to see the things each knew. Things the other should have known.

He reaches deep within himself.

He summons all the old magic that is in this place. He creates a moment beyond which he cannot stretch his endless thought. A moment beyond all the long centuries of his awareness and the farthest expanses of all the futures he can touch. A single future that he will shape. A possibility that is all he is. All he can be.

The Blood Knight's dedication burns bright in the dead heart of every oath ever uttered in the Empire's name, and in the knowledge of a darkness hidden from the world at the cost of blood and in the name of the common good. In the name of the commonwealth of the Lothelecan, gone now.

The Green Priestess's hope flares within a shroud of white-hot anger and defiance at the Empire that steals the Kelist Razor away, and the death that shreds the dream of reclaiming the sword becomes the sword, because death and the grey blade are one, the knotted cord of life tearing before its edge like rotted gauze.

He feels spring turn as he begins it, and by the time of deep summer, he feels nothing at all.

There stands a place that seethes with the noise of storm wind across the dry grasslands, that burns with the heat of the unseen earth. This is the future beyond which he cannot feel.

In the blindness of that last moment, he understands what it means.

She awoke in the spring, lurching to life in a wave of pain and bright blindness. She heard wind and water, twisting over her, flowing beneath her, impossibly loud. The sun was high above her, stabbing her eyes as she reflexively turned away. Rolling to her side on her bed of soft grass, she froze suddenly

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with a guttural fear, seeing the sloping edge of the broad and crumbling ridge she rested upon. She felt a pounding pain in her head, felt a spell of dizziness take her that caused her to seize the very ground beneath her, hold it tight.

She saw the sword then.

It stood where her memory placed it, buried to more than half the length of its broad blade in a crest of white stone, as if it had been plunged there to cool its final forging. A vision came back to her in a rush of cold. She remembered running, remembered wolves behind her. She lurched to her feet in sudden fear, half-fell, half-stumbled back and away from the edge of the ridge. She felt her heart race in the expectation of jaws clamping hard against her legs, tearing flesh and muscle, pulling her down. She screamed with the memory, and then it was gone. Just a dream.

She looked down to see herself, staring in shock. She stood naked as her birth, wrapped only by the crumbling tendrils of dead vines. She brushed them away in frantic fear, felt her pale skin drink the heat of the sun that slowly sent the chill away. Before her, in the space where she had lain, were spread fragments of leather that she knew with unknown certainty were all that was left of the armor she once wore. She picked up a section of breastplate and rusted buckle with shaking hands, felt it crumble with the rot of endless years.

She remembered running, remembered seeing the sword even as she sprinted for safety and felt herself stumble at that long dreamed-of sight.

She remembered running, remembered the sword's great weight in her hands as she drove it down to shatter the rock and tear the soil that would sheathe the blade until the end of time.

She blinked, felt both sets of memories twist past each other in an impossible embrace. The sword was three strides away from where she fell. The sword was where she left it, thrust down as a vine-strewn offering into the earth itself.

Above and around her, a whisper traced the still air.

She wheeled, stumbling again as she looked up, but all she

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saw above and around her were the skeletal arms of an ancient oak. Its heavy branches were dead black, leaves hanging dark and slicked with grey mold. The size and spread of the tree spoke of incalculable age, its great base as wide across as a castle tower, countless trunks splitting off from it to spread like a vast wall. Around her, great roots furrowed the ground, touched by rot where winter had peeled their ancient bark away.

In a shudder of memory, she saw the great tree spreading above the snow, black branches limned with frost. She felt her heart twist with that memory, felt a sudden spike of pain and longing for the mission that set her against the will of a dead Empire. She felt her sight clouded by the dead eyes of the knight who was pledged to die in the defense of that Empire, and who had tried to stop her mission even before she was born.

Around her, inside her, she felt the old magic sing.

This was the magic from which life sprung, coursing now in every breath, in the space where that breath became the wind, in the wind's caress of golden leaves and the white bark of the lesser trees that spread out and around the open space of ridges and ravines above which the great oak had climbed. She felt it in the burning heart of the sun that was the source of all life, watching its twisting shadows across the grove around her.

She felt a fear she didn't understand.

Old magic lingers in these secret places of the world, the high priests said.

She found a black cloak with which she covered herself. It lay half-hidden beneath a layer of loam and dead leaves, but she knew it was there, had always known it. Two strides from where the cloak was fallen, she saw the same dead vines that had clutched at her twisting through an ancient skull.

She remembered everything. Remembered nothing. All the hope that brought her here, that had carried her across half a world. She was one of hundreds, scouring the farthest corners of a dozen kingdoms in search of a legacy stolen from her people twelve hundred years before.

She was one of hundreds taking the oath of blood to defend

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an Empire against the rise of ancient evil that spread like a dark stain from the deeps and legends of the past.

She was the last of the Lotherasien, following ancient portents and the shadowed signs of divination to the dark wood. Last of a fated handful who had sworn to die in order to bury the dread blade beyond all thought and memory. Out of the reach of any who might seek it.

She was the knight whose skull had lain here for uncounted years, twined now by dead vines and wind-touched grass. She was the acolyte that had died within sight of her peoples' dream, was the spirit of life reborn and hope rekindled, and of a future that dwelt in her as a dark memory she could not name.

She tried to tear the cloak but its strength was beyond her. She felt the strength of spellcraft in its weave, keeping it whole against the passage of time. In the end, it took the sword itself to cut it, the cloth snapped taut and drawn against the razor edge of grey steel standing immobile in its cradle of stone.

She wrapped the haft in the shorter piece of cloak, twisting it tight in three layers before she would draw it forth from the ground. Careful not to let any part of it touch her flesh, just as they had all been taught. As he had been taught, she realized. The other mind in hers, all the fear that had been someone else's once, guiding her now in a way she didn't understand but could not ignore.

It took the better part of the day for her to slowly wrench the grey blade free of the grasp of ancient stone. She stood it before her carefully when she was done, only half a head taller than the sword at its full height. She weighed in her mind the difficulty of carrying it, measured out the effort of finding shelter, finding clothing, finding sustenance as she dragged it in secret across the distance home. A journey she would make because there was no one else to make it.

With the larger piece of cloak, she wrapped herself against the chill that advanced with the setting sun. She would set out in search of a more sheltered space, the open ridges too exposed to

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spend the night before the first day of that long march.

She heard the whisper again. But when she turned, she saw only the stooped and twisted trunks, the time-bent limbs of the ageless oak above, its black leaves spreading to cover all the bluff like a shroud. She thought she felt eyes on her, felt a timeless touch thread through her like the incessant stitching of a silver needle. She heard the voice of the wind, heard the hiss that carried a black storm of dead leaves to the air as she turned away.

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