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To Dennis L. McKiernan, for inspiring me not only to write but to keep writing.

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And last, but certainly not least, to Gordon "Sarnakyle" Brown, who ventured through umpteen levels of a dungeon with me in search of evil. . . .

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DEMONSBANE



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1

THE NIGHT OF SOULS



And the hosts of Hell looked upon man, and swore vengeance for their defeat by the Vizjerei.

“No more will these creatures deny us,” swore the Prime Evils, “for we are greater than they.” And thus began the Sin War.

—The Holy Scriptures of Zakarum

Siggard startled awake, the sounds of battle still ringing in his ears, as though he had just been in the midst of the bloodshed.

Exhausted, he lay on the bank of a road, the trees on both sides obscured by a light mist illuminated by moonlight. He tried to sit up, only to have his back explode in pain. For a moment he rubbed the sore muscles and kidneys, and then he struggled to his knees.

Blinking, he wondered where he was and how he had gotten there. The road did not look familiar at all, and there were no visible landmarks. He scratched his head, trying to think, and winced for a moment when his fingernails ran over a tender spot.

Siggard was a large man, well grown, with a full brown beard. But now his usually placid gray eyes were haggard and his beard was in a tangle. He shook his head; he knew he had been at the field of Blackmarch, a shield-man in the army of Earl Edgewulf. And they had been fighting someone, but who he could not say.

Groaning, Siggard gained his feet. He would first have to find his way to the battlefield and try to rejoin the army, but what he truly wished was to rejoin his family in Bear's Hill. That would have to wait until the fighting was done, though.

Taking stock of his gear, he noticed his sword was rather more notched than the last time he remembered, and his leather jerkin and trousers were ragged but intact. Where his coat of mail had gotten to, he had no idea. His wide shield was also missing.

Cloaked in a mist drawn eerie in the moonlight, Siggard tried to get his bearings, but no matter which way he turned, he couldn't tell where Blackmarch might lie. Finally, he picked a direction and began walking.

How long he walked before he reached the gallows, Siggard could not say, though it seemed hours. Regardless, he found himself facing a fork in the road. To one side of the road there was a three-way sign, but it was too dark to read it. On the other side stood a gibbet, a decaying corpse dangling from it by a worn hemp rope.

Unbidden, the words of one of his comrades in arms came back to him. "Hanged men have angry souls, you know," old Banagar had said. "That's why they hoist them at crossroads. That way they can't find their way back for vengeance." Banagar had always been rather morbid, he reflected.

Siggard shook his head, trying to ignore the stench of putrefying flesh. The road had to lead to a town somewhere, even if it was in the twice-damned underworld itself. So all he had to do was pick a direction and follow it.

He looked up at the corpse and smiled. "I don't suppose you'd know the way to Blackmarch, eh?"

The corpse's rotting head turned and glared at him.

Siggard leapt back in shock, drawing his sword and staring at the gibbet. The body dangled, lifeless, as it had before Siggard had spoken, and as it no doubt had long before the soldier had even arrived.

Siggard felt a chill go down his spine as he looked at the corpse. He prayed silently to the gods to let him see his family again, just one more time. He didn't want to die here,

trapped among lost spirits.

His sword still drawn, Siggard backed down one of the paths, finally turning once the gibbet had vanished in the mist. The ethereal fog curled around him as he walked, Siggard mouthing a silent prayer with every step.

The path twisted and turned among the trees, and the dirt crunched under Siggard's boots. For a moment he wondered if he wasn't in some endless forest of the damned, forced to wander a haunted woodland for all eternity. He shook his head; if he was to find his way out, he would have to stop thinking like that.

Faint shapes appeared in the mist ahead of him, and for a moment Siggard could make out a horse and rider, standing under a large oak tree. He blinked hard, but the figure remained. He pursed his lips; whatever it was, it wasn't a figment of his imagination, though it did seem ghostly.

As he walked forward, he saw another figure appear in the mist. The newcomer drew a blade and, before Siggard had a chance to shout a warning, plunged it into the rider. Siggard rushed forward, his sword at the ready, praying he would not have to fight, yet as he ran the two figures faded into the swirling fog. Finally, he stood under the oak, but not even a footprint suggested that anybody else had been there that night.

"If this keeps up much longer, I'll go mad," Siggard muttered. "I might even start talking to myself."

He moved away until he had a respectful distance between himself and the oak, and then began to gather deadwood. After a bit of work, he reclined under an ancient elm, watching the flames dance on his small fire until he drifted to sleep.



Siggard stood in the shield wall at Blackmarch, watching the horizon. Earl Edgewulf walked from man to man, complimenting each on their standing and promising glory ahead. For his part, Siggard just wanted to see his family again. But he knew that the bloodshed was necessary; if they weren't stopped here, the enemy would be able to roam freely in Entsteig, spreading terror and destruction.

He closed his eyes for a moment, visualizing Emilye and his newborn child. His wife's golden hair had glittered in the sunlight when they had last spoken, and her crystal eyes had been unable to contain the tears she had been trying to hide. He had told her that it would be fine, that he would be back soon.

Thunderclouds scudded above, lightning arcing between them, followed by blasts of thunder. "It looks like it's going to rain," old Banagar muttered. Siggard grimaced at the

elder man, running his eyes over the gray stubble surrounding a faint mustache on the wrinkled face. Siggard mouthed a silent prayer that the rain wouldn't turn the ground into a slick wasteland.

He stood on the bare hill, an army around him, like something out of a legend of the Mage Clan Wars, with every soldier clad in a shining coat of mail. They had taken the high ground, and had cleared some of the trees from the bottom of the hill. When the enemy charged, they would be completely exposed.

“Here they come!” one of the lookouts shouted. Siggard squinted and watched the treeline, looking for any sign of the enemy. Even after Earl Edgewulf had put them into formation, he still didn't know what enemies he would be facing. From the corner of his eye he thought he could see glowing eyes staring out from the shadowy woods, but when he looked directly at them, all he saw was darkness.

Then the woods began to boil, the trees themselves twisting and turning in torment. Siggard inhaled sharply as the enemy burst out from the tortured woodland with a shrill screaming, his gut churning in terror.

None of them were even remotely human.

Some were small and doglike, carrying bloodstained axes and hatchets. Others stood tall, their muscular bodies capped with the head of a goat, what little skin showing painted with demonic symbols. And in the background there were shadowy THINGS, defying any description.

Something shook him, and a voice said, “Would you mind if I share your fire?”



Siggard sat up, finding himself back beside the forest path. A cloaked figure stood above him, and Siggard could make out a sharp, but strangely kind visage in the shadows of the cowl. The fire crackled beside the man, and in the flickering glow of the flames and the waning moonlight, Siggard noticed that the man seemed to be clad entirely in gray.

“Help yourself,” Siggard said. “I'm afraid I have no food to offer.”

“That is not an issue,” the man said, sitting down by the fire. “I have already eaten. Perhaps I can offer you something?”

Siggard shook his head. “I'm not hungry.”

“There are many restless spirits out tonight,” the stranger said. “As I walked, I saw several ghosts.”

“I noticed that too,” Siggard stated, scratching his beard. “For a while, I wondered if I had gone to Hell.”

The man chuckled. “I can assure you, this is neither Heaven nor Hell. However, it is the Night of Souls, when it is said that in some places the restless dead will return.”

“And what do they come back for?” Siggard asked.

“Some come for vengeance. Some come to see their loved ones again. And for some, they just cannot rest. Sometimes it is the earth itself that brings them back, remembering the life force that once was.”

Siggard shuddered. “It is unnatural.”

The man laughed, his voice strangely musical. “On the contrary, it is entirely natural! Life does not simply give in to death, and the soul is more than some abstract idea. These spirits merely walk their own path, most unaware of any others around them. But there are some, particularly in the forces of Hell, who would raise the dead, animating them so that they do not hold a spirit, but are merely an automaton. I think that is what you speak of.”

Siggard shook his head. “I do not know if I should be terrified or awed by what you say.”

The stranger lowered his hood, revealing eyes sparkling with life and a long mane of blond hair. “I think both would be appropriate. There are more things in Heaven and Hell than any mortal man could dream.”

“And how would you know all of this?” Siggard asked.

The man shrugged. “I am a wanderer; I have seen more than most would ever imagine. That is merely my nature.”

“Will you give me your name?” Siggard said.

The stranger nodded. “My name is Tyrael. May I ask your name?”

“Siggard.”

Tyrael smiled. “Your trust does you credit, but be careful with whom you place it. I am safe, a traveler sworn to the light. But there are others who are sworn to darkness, and they do not reveal themselves unless they are forced to.”

Tyrael leaned forward. “Tell me, friend Siggard, what brings you onto this road on this of all nights?”

Siggard shrugged. "I wish I knew."

Tyrael raised an eyebrow. "I don't understand."

"The last thing I remember is the battle at Blackmarch. If this is the Night of Souls, then that would be two days ago. I can't remember anything between lining up in the shield wall and awakening earlier this evening on the ground."

Tyrael nodded sagely. "Sometimes one will see something so horrifying that the mind will block it out, as though the soul itself cannot bear to remember it."

Siggard suddenly recalled the strange shadows behind the treeline at Blackmarch, and found himself nodding in agreement. "I guess I just want to find out what happened at Blackmarch and see my wife and child again."

Tyrael pursed his lips. "I have heard fell things about Blackmarch. I would not go there if I were you."

"I have to know what happened."

Tyrael shook his head, and for a moment Siggard thought he could see a great sadness in the man's eyes. "If you must go, then you must go. You are ten leagues south of Blackmarch as the crow flies. You can reach it in a couple of days by following the road north." He pointed back in the direction that Siggard had originally come. "If I were you, however, I would go south for one more league, and then take the fork west. It will take you back into Entsteig."

Siggard nodded. "I will consider your advice."

Tyrael smiled kindly. "That is all one could ask."

Siggard watched as the waning moon finally slid down under the treeline and the eastern sky began to brighten. "It will be dawn soon."

"It seems that the Night of Souls has come to an end at last," Tyrael mused. "All of the restless dead now return to their graves in the hopes of peace."

Siggard turned and stretched, wincing for a moment as his back ached. "I should begin my journey; I have a long walk ahead of me."

"May your feet be swift and take you into places far from harm," Tyrael said, still sitting by the dancing flames.

Siggard turned and looked at the road. "You have the tongue of a poet, my friend. I thank you for your good wishes."

But when he turned, he stood alone by the fire.



The mist was gone by the morning, burnt away by the autumn sun. Siggard carefully smothered the fire, trying to ensure that no billowing smoke revealed where he was. He still remembered the sights of the previous night with fear and awe, and wanted to ensure that he did not run into any restless spirits who did not respect the dawn.

Thinking back on the evening, he still wondered at some of what he had seen. He had never been a superstitious man, but the memories of the hanging corpse and the ghosts in the mist seemed too real to have been a vivid dream. And then there was Tyrael.

Was the stranger a ghost, come back for a friendly chat? Or was he something else? A figment from a dream, perhaps?

Siggard shook his head; at this point in time, it was useless speculation. Aside from which, he still had to find out what had happened at Blackmarch.

He checked that his sword was securely fastened to his belt, and began the journey north.

2

ENCOUNTERS



Alas, mourn for the open road!

For where there was once wonder and mystery,

Now there is mistrust and death.

—Jiltarian of Khanduras, *Lamentations*

After only a couple of hours of walking, Siggard found himself once again facing the fork and gibbet. In the light of day, the hanged man was little more than a desiccated corpse, barely any flesh left on the pearly bones. The eyes that had seemed to stare so dangerously at him were reduced to empty sockets.

Siggard shook his head. It was amazing how easily the terrors of the night vanished once the sun rose. He was still left with the crossroads, however, one path leading back northeast and the other leading westwards. Either path could twist and turn, appearing to go one way when in reality it did the opposite.

Such is life, Siggard mused. Regardless, he had no time, and needed to get to Blackmarch. Scratching his beard, he finally chose the northeastern path, and began to walk.

As he traveled, the forest seemed to stretch on into eternity. At least the path seemed to be consistently taking him northwards; Siggard checked the position of the sun at what he thought was every hour, and everything seemed to be as it should. The path did weave, however, and when the sun finally sank into the west Siggard estimated that he had only traveled about five leagues.

Once again, he built a fire off to the side of the road. As he watched the flickering flames, giving the light mist around him an eerie glow, he suddenly realized that he wasn't very hungry at all.

Siggard blinked. Perhaps it was the concern he had for his friends in the army, he thought. Regardless, with virtually no food and nothing to hunt with, it was a blessing. Still, in some ways the hunger pangs would have been a blessing; the roads were known to be dangerous, and he could use the edge in staying alert.

Even as he watched the dancing flames, trying to remain awake, sleep claimed him at last.



Siggard broke into a cold sweat when he saw the demonic army approaching the shield wall. They literally boiled out of the trees, like some horrifying infestation. As if on cue, a bolt of lightning struck the forest, the crashing thunder deafening him.

For a moment, Siggard saw a small pheasant walking on the ground, oblivious to the men on the hill and the monsters approaching. It pecked at the ground, snatching at a worm. Then, prize caught in its beak, the bird took flight.

We are the interlopers, Siggard thought. All of us. And nature simply doesn't care.

“Barrage!” the lookout shouted.

Several rocks smashed into the ranks, flattening entire sections of the shield wall. Siggard watched in horror as one man tried to free himself from under a boulder, his entire lower body crushed into a bloody pulp.

But when he looked back at the demons, they hadn’t moved. Strange shadows flickered just beyond the trees, and the creatures reared up, calling out with earsplitting screams.

As Siggard offered yet another silent prayer to see his family just once more, it began to rain, a drizzle at first, and then a downpour. After only a couple of minutes he felt as though he was soaked to the bone, despite the heavy leather and coat of mail. And, for some strange reason, he could smell a fire smoldering.



Siggard opened his eyes to find a cold autumn rain falling upon him. His fire lay smoldering, the last flames put out by the downpour. He shivered, wishing that he had a cloak to wrap around himself. He had owned one, he remembered, but where it had gone was yet another thing he could not account for.

At least there was no lightning, he reflected. That meant he could safely seek shelter in the forest.

But even as he forced himself to rise, the rain slackened and ceased. The soft light of dawn peeked through the clouds, and a bird sang in the distance.

Siggard was not at ease, however. In all of his experience a forest should smell fresh and magical after a rainfall, but the woods reeked of decay instead. For a moment he remembered all of the times he had gone hunting mushrooms with his wife during the early spring, just before the planting. They would venture into the forest, seeking their bounty and watching as the hares and squirrels went about their daily business. Once, they had even seen a great deer, but only briefly.

He shook his head. He still had several leagues to travel, and only the gods knew what had happened to the army. He began to walk, following the path even farther north, trying to concentrate on the task at hand.

As he walked, the forest became strangely silent. Other than the birdsong right after the rain, the only sound he heard was the crunching of his own boots in the earthen road.

“I’m going to have to get out of here,” Siggard muttered uneasily, picking up the pace. As before, the path twisted and turned as he walked, but always bore northwards.

Finally, the sun began to set once again, and Siggard retired to the side of the road. He began to gather firewood, hoping that this time the flames wouldn't be smothered by rain.

"Excuse me, my dear sir!" called a voice. Siggard turned to see a tall, dark-skinned man with a bushy goatee regarding him. The stranger wore long light red robes, and carried a traveler's pack on his back. "Would you mind if I joined you? I would be happy to help in any way I could."

"How do you know I'm not a bandit?" Siggard asked.

"If you were a bandit, you wouldn't have asked that question," the stranger replied. "Besides, you have an honest face. Shall we trade names?"

"Siggard of Entsteig," Siggard said carefully. "And you are?"

The stranger bowed, his hands held together. "I am Sarnakyle of Kehjistan, a great land far to the east. I am one of the Vizjerei."

"A wizard?" Siggard asked.

Sarnakyle grinned. "Definitely not a shoemaker."

Siggard finished building his fire-pit and picked up a couple of dried sticks. Unceremoniously, he dropped them into the pit. "What brings you out on this road?"

Sarnakyle held up a hand. "Please, let me help you with that." He gestured quickly, and a spark leapt from his hand into the wood, lighting the fire. The wizard sat down, warming his hands. "I am a wanderer, friend Siggard. I have recently seen some . . . disturbing things, and I am trying to sort them out. And you?"

"I am trying to make my way to Blackmarch," Siggard stated.

"I do not believe I have been there," Sarnakyle said. "I have heard some terrible things about it, but I have not seen it. I think I will go, if you will have my company."

"Just so long as you don't slow me down," Siggard said.

"I can walk quite quickly," Sarnakyle said, still smiling. "Besides, you could probably use my help."

Siggard raised an eyebrow.

"No offense, my good sir, but with the exception of your sword you do not appear to be attired for battle. I am an experienced wizard."

Siggard grunted. "We will see."

Sarnakyle reached into his pack and pulled out some rations. Silently, he offered a bit of dried beef to Siggard.

"Thank you," Siggard said, taking the offering. When he bit into it, however, he found that he still had very little appetite. He ate half of the ration, and then wrapped the rest up in a leaf and put it in his belt.

"By the looks of it, you are not nearly as rested as I," Sarnakyle said. "Please, allow me to take first watch."

Siggard was about to object, but then thought better of it. After all, he only actually had a battered sword and a piece of dried meat to his name right now; nothing worth stealing at all.



For the first time in two days, Siggard didn't dream of battle. He was shaken awake by Sarnakyle, who told him that nothing had happened. He watched the wizard make some gestures at the ground, and then settle down to sleep.

He'd have to ask him what those were in the morning, Siggard thought. He watched the forest, his mind slowly wandering back to his farm, village, and family. Soon, he promised himself, soon he would see them again.

As his mind wandered, the eastern sky began to lighten, and finally the sun rose in all of its glory. Sarnakyle stretched and yawned beside him, and finally rose, scratching his goatee.

"That was a good night," the wizard said.

"You did something with your hands," Siggard said. "It was just before you went to sleep. What was that?"

Sarnakyle smiled. "A bit of extra protection. I set some magical wards earlier, and I just made certain they were still strong."

"If you can set magic wards, why did you need me to keep watch?"

"Magic is not as . . . powerful as many think," Sarnakyle said, and for a moment Siggard thought he could see a sadness in the wizard's eyes. "Sometimes a good sword arm can be as valuable as a hundred spells."

Siggard unwrapped the ration from last night and took a couple of bites. Somehow, he still wasn't terribly hungry. It could be simple concern; in less than three days, he had heard two people talk about Blackmarch as a dire place, and he was beginning to fear the worst for the army.

He wrapped the ration up again and looked over at Sarnakyle. The wizard sat on a rock, eagerly eating his breakfast. Well, Siggard reflected, at least this visitor hadn't vanished with the dawn.

"We should be going soon," Siggard said. "I want to be at Blackmarch as soon as possible."

"You should relax," Sarnakyle mumbled in between bites. "Blackmarch is a place; it won't go anywhere if we take an extra couple of hours."

"It is very important that I get there," Siggard insisted. "I am a soldier of the army of Entsteig, and I have to rejoin my companions."

Sarnakyle blinked and stopped chewing. He swallowed hard and stared at Siggard. "My friend," he began, "you are on a fool's errand. The army of Entsteig was annihilated at Blackmarch by a demonic force. It is said that fewer than ten men survived the battle."

Siggard found himself swimming in fear. If the army had been defeated, then the enemy could rampage amongst the countryside. And that meant that his family . . .

Siggard bolted upright, gathering his meager belongings and buckling his sword to his waist. "My family is in danger," he said. "I have to go."

"That army of demons was heading towards Entsteig, wasn't it?" Sarnakyle mused. "I'd better come with you."

"It could be very dangerous," Siggard warned.

Sarnakyle pulled his pack onto his back and smoothed out his robes. "I have more experience with demons than I would care to have, my dear warrior. Trust me, you are better off with me at your side."

"What is the fastest road west?" Siggard asked.

"A bit to the north there is a crossroads," Sarnakyle stated. "The western path will take us out of the forest and into Entsteig."

Siggard nodded. "It's about time we got out of this twice-damned forest."

As they set off, Siggard wished that he had the wings of angels, for every minute that they traveled brought the demons closer to Emilye and his child.

3

REVELATIONS AND SORROW



Do not embrace hatred, for it can breed only destruction.

Embrace love instead, for those who love can change the world itself.

—Gesinius of Kehjistan, *Tenets of Zakarum*

As Sarnakyle had predicted, they came to the crossroads in the midmorning. A forlorn gibbet stood at the roadside, but not even a rope remained. For a moment, Siggard wondered how many had died at this place, their spirits returning on the Night of Souls to walk the earth in search of their executioners. He suppressed a shudder, and without a word began to stride down the western path.

As they walked, Sarnakyle talked of the wonders of Kehjistan, telling stories of the great temples and cities. He told of the Mage Clans in the east, and the dark magic farther south. It did not remove the horrible feeling from the pit of Siggard's stomach, but it did lighten the mood somewhat.

Much to the soldier's relief, by the time they stopped at sundown the trees had thinned considerably. Siggard breathed a sigh of relief; once he was out of the forest, he never wanted to return.

It only took them a couple of minutes to gather the wood they needed for a fire. Siggard tried to dine on some more of the ration Sarnakyle had given him earlier, but found he was too worried to eat.

"Are you feeling well?" the wizard asked. "You've barely eaten anything these last couple of days."

Siggard shook his head. "How could I be hungry when my family might be in dire danger?"

Sarnakyle nodded. "I understand."

They bedded down for the night, Sarnakyle first setting his wards with an abrupt series of gestures and then taking first watch. Siggard tried to sleep, but his dreams were filled with the screams of the dying and horrible visions of Emilye being tormented. Finally, Sarnakyle woke him up, and Siggard gladly took the watch. The minutes stretched into hours, and Siggard tried to think of anything but the terrors that could be occurring to those he loved.

Finally, the dawn came, and they smothered the last of the fire and began on their way again. The path twisted and turned, but finally the road led them out of the trees into the open fields of Entsteig.

Sarnakyle took a deep breath, wonder overcoming him as he saw the rolling green fields and sparse woodlands, each filled with the many colors of autumn. "What a beautiful country! Its natural beauty puts even the great temples of Viz-jun to shame!"

Siggard nodded grimly. "Let us hope that this 'beautiful country' is not being overrun by demons."

"Do you know the way to your village?" Sarnakyle asked.

"Once we get to the King's Road I'll be able to get my bearings," Siggard stated. "All roads lead to the King's Road."

With that, they walked westwards until the sun began to set. They camped near a copse of trees; after his experience in the forest, Siggard couldn't call these anything greater than woods. Sarnakyle wanted to make a campfire, but Siggard wouldn't have it; the demons could be anywhere, and the last thing he needed was to attract their attention with a pillar of smoke.

This time Siggard took the first watch, taking a little comfort from being in his homeland once more. He woke Sarnakyle just after midnight, and tried to sleep. Once again, his dreams were troubled, and it was a relief to be roused at the dawn.

By midday they had reached the King's Road, a wide path paved with rough-hewn stone. At the crossroads stood a large wooden sign, inscribed with simple letters.

"We have to go north," Siggard said. "My village is about a day east of Brennor, and Brennor is about three leagues northwards."

Sarnakyle smiled. "To Brennor we go!"

Siggard shook his head. "I almost think you are enjoying this too much."

The wizard shrugged. "What is the point of visiting new places if you can't enjoy yourself?"

"Under any other circumstances, I would agree with you," Siggard said, and began walking. Sarnakyle strode beside him, remarking on the freshness of the air, and comparing it to the stifling cities in Kehjistan.

"Don't get me wrong," Sarnakyle said. "Viz-jun is a beautiful and great city, and you should visit it someday. But there are so many people that the air can be difficult at best. I sometimes think that the ideal place to live is in the country."

The wizard suddenly stopped. "What is that smell?" he remarked, sniffing the air.

Siggard took a deep breath. Indeed, he could detect a bit of smoke, as though some fire close by had been smothered.

"Is there anything nearby?" Sarnakyle asked.

"Just a small village," Siggard replied. "It could be the harvest festival."

Sarnakyle licked his lips. "Now that is something to look forward to!"

As they walked, they found themselves facing a rise in the road, and behind the hill rose a curl of smoke.

"I hope we haven't missed anything!" Sarnakyle exclaimed. "It has been some time since I attended anything remotely like this!"

But when they crested the hill, Siggard's heart sank. The village itself had been fired, and in the town square, surrounded by the husks of burnt-out buildings, lay a pyramid of severed and decaying heads.



An investigation of the village revealed no life whatsoever. When the demons had passed through, they had killed every living soul. As they staggered out of the village, stunned to their very souls, Siggard and Sarnakyle saw the maimed and brutalized bodies of livestock at one of the local farmsteads. Siggard had no doubt the animals had been slaughtered to feed the army and then left to rot; after all, the demonic army would be able to move faster if it lived off the land than if it carried its food with it.

"We should travel through the night," Siggard said, regarding the horrifying pyramid. "With some luck, the demons won't have gotten to my home yet."

“Haste is important, but so is rest,” Sarnakyle said. The wizard’s playful demeanor was gone, replaced by a solemn determination that surprised Siggard. “The demons will try to cause as much destruction as possible, probably working in a circular pattern. If we travel directly to your village, we should be able to beat them.”

“How do you know all this?” Siggard demanded.

“I am a Vizjerei,” Sarnakyle stated. “One of the ‘Spirit Clan.’ I have summoned demons, and I have also fought them. I’ve seen these tactics used before by Bartuc, the Warlord of Blood.”

“Could Bartuc be behind this?” Siggard asked.

“I sincerely hope not,” Sarnakyle said. “I helped to kill him. Do you know a direct route from here?”

Siggard nodded. “I think I’ve been here before. If I’m right, this was Gellan’s Pass, and that means that there is a path toward my village to the northeast.”

“Damned demons,” Sarnakyle cursed. “If only they hadn’t killed all of the horses.”

They found the path, and had managed three leagues by sundown, stopping for the evening at the side of the road.

That night, although Siggard managed to finish off the ration Sarnakyle had given him days ago, he could not sleep. The fear gnawed at his gut, and with every minute that passed he wished that the dawn would come.

As the sun rose out of the east, they set off again, Siggard walking more anxiously than he had even when Emilye had begun her labor pains. If only she was safe, he could be happy. Then he could take her away from all the madness into a walled town like Brennor, where they would be safe for eternity.

“We have the advantage, you know,” Sarnakyle said as they walked. “We only have to move ourselves; whatever demon leads this army has to march thousands across the land. We can cover double the distance they can.”

“It still won’t matter if we get there too late,” Siggard gritted, marching forward even more quickly. He finally slowed down when Sarnakyle jogged up beside him, puffing in exertion.

That night, Siggard reckoned that they had covered seven or eight leagues, and should be at the village sometime tomorrow. Sarnakyle had actually managed to catch a hare during the walk, and cooked it with a bit of magic. While the wizard ate with relish, Siggard found that he had no appetite at all, and left his share of the animal alone.

“If you won’t eat, and you should,” Sarnakyle said, licking his fingers, “tell me of your home.”

Siggard thought for a moment, and then began to speak. “We own a farm, just outside of the village square. My father brought us to Bear’s Hill when I was very young, and we did quite well.”

“Bear’s Hill?”

“My village,” Siggard clarified. “I met Emilye when we were both children, at one of the village dances. She was absolutely radiant, and I, well, I was a rustic farmer. Still, she saw me, and I saw her, and it was love at first sight.”

Sarnakyle grinned. “It must have been wonderful.” He took another bite out of the rabbit.

Siggard nodded, and for a moment, there was a hint of a smile. “It was. When we got married, I promised her I’d always protect her. Whenever we could, we would go out exploring or picking mushrooms in the countryside, even when she was bearing our child. I tried to make her go gently, but she told me that she was pregnant, not fragile.”

“Quite a woman.”

“Yes,” Siggard said. “The call to arms came only a couple of weeks after my daughter was born. We hadn’t even decided on a name. I told her I’d be right back, and we’d choose one then. It’s bad luck, you see, to leave a Naming for more than two months.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine,” Sarnakyle stated.

“I hope so,” Siggard said. “By all the gods, I hope so.”



They left their camp before the dawn, so eager was Siggard to get back to his home. They walked silently, Siggard trying at every step to convince himself they would arrive in time, and would be able to convince the village’s Ealdorman to evacuate everybody before the demons came.

As they walked, Siggard touched his sword hilt, praying that the battered blade would serve if there was any trouble. The memories of the battle had become something secondary; all that mattered was getting to Emilye and his daughter in time.

Finally, they passed the engraved marker stone for the village, and Siggard breathed a sigh of relief. There didn’t seem to be any damage to the outlying farmsteads, which meant that they had probably made it in time.

Still, there were no people about, which was odd for this time of year. It was the harvest, and at the least the Ealdorman would have had them preparing for the harvest festival. An uneasy feeling began to gnaw at Siggard's gut.

When they entered the town square, Siggard's heart almost stopped. Many of the buildings were burned, and in the center of the square lay a pyramid of severed heads.

Sarnakyle looked around in shock. "Perhaps she made it out in time," he suggested. "She might not have perished here."

Siggard almost grunted an agreement until he saw a glint of golden hair in the pyramid. He told himself that it had to be somebody else, it couldn't possibly be her. But when Siggard stepped forward, he saw Emily's dead eyes staring at him from the pile, her face a mask of horror, the flies consuming her flesh.

He backed up, unable to speak. Then he fell to the earth, weeping. Everything he had lived for was now gone. Had the demons come at that moment to take his life, he would have had neither the strength nor the inclination to defend himself.

4

BETRAYALS



How can I possibly stay? I have seen my own brother die before the gates of my city, possessed by darkness.

I have seen all that I know changed beyond recognition. I must leave, for my soul is empty of all but sorrow.

—Velinon the Archmage, *The Words of Horazon*

How long he wept, Siggard could not be sure. He sat by the horrific pyramid and sobbed until his eyes were bloodshot and dry, lamenting the loss of his wife. To make matters worse, he didn't know if his daughter was alive or dead.

Entirely spent, he looked around weakly. The world was cast in the reddish light of the setting sun. Sarnakyle sat on a fallen tree, regarding him with casual interest. How the wizard could remain unmoved, Siggard did not know.

“We aren’t alone,” Sarnakyle said quietly. “There are at least three people watching us from the shadows.”

Siggard swallowed and stood unsteadily. “Demons?”

“I cannot tell,” Sarnakyle said. “I have a spell ready, though.”

“With luck, we won’t need it,” Siggard stated. He turned and called out to the deepening shadows. “I am Siggard of Bear’s Hill! Are you friend or foe?”

“Siggard, is it you?” a familiar voice called. A gaunt, ragged man stepped out of the shadows, scratching his weathered face. Siggard’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Tylwulf,” Siggard breathed. He turned to Sarnakyle. “There are survivors!”

The wizard shook his head. “This does not feel right.”

Tylwulf staggered forward, and Siggard saw dried blood caked on his face. “We heard the army was destroyed, and we feared the worst,” he stammered. “Then the demons came, and some of us ran, and . . .” Tylwulf broke down into tears.

“My daughter, Tylwulf,” Siggard demanded, taking hold of the man’s torn tunic. “What happened to my daughter?”

Tylwulf shook his head, almost as if he was fighting with himself against horrible memories. “Dead, all dead. They ate the children, and killed all the women they could. Some of the men they took with them.” He glanced at the pile of heads and immediately shied away. “We try not to think about it. If we’re good, they might not come back.”

“I don’t like the feeling of this,” Sarnakyle cut in.

Tylwulf looked at the wizard for a moment, his eyes widening in shock. “A Vizjerei! You travel with interesting friends, Siggard. This is one of the Spirit Clan.”

“Is there a place we can stay for the night, Tylwulf?” Siggard asked. “It is getting late, and I would prefer to be indoors this evening.”

“Camylle and I will put you up,” Tylwulf stated. “Even your friend may come. Come, my farm was untouched.”



After a short walk through the shattered village to Tylwulf's cottage, Siggard and Sarnakyle found themselves left to the tender mercies of Tylwulf's wife, who cooked a meal and set a hospitable table. But Siggard wished he could have been here under better circumstances.

He watched Sarnakyle sniff a plate of roasted beef cautiously, and then began to eat slowly, as if the wizard was tasting every part of the food. Siggard shook his head and ate a couple of bites, then put the plate aside. He was just too depressed to eat; the death of his family weighed heavily on him, a wound that might never heal.

"You should have some," Tylwulf said, eagerly tearing at some meat. "You'll need your strength to help us rebuild."

"I fear it will be an eternity before I have an appetite again," Siggard said. "I have lost too much, and seen such carnage . . ." He shook his head.

"What happened at Blackmarch?" Camylle asked, tousling her auburn hair.

"I don't remember," Siggard admitted sadly. "I remember the shield wall, and then the demons attacked, and something was happening in the forest. But then I must have blacked out and been carried off. I woke up alone in a forest in Aranoch two days later on the Night of Souls." He blinked. "At least, I think I was in Aranoch."

"And that is where you met the Spirit Mage?"

Siggard nodded, sipping some ale.

"A strange tale," Tylwulf muttered.

"How many survived here?" Siggard asked.

"Ten," Tylwulf replied. "We were able to hide while they did their work. They killed all of our animals, so at least we have meat."

"Have you sent warning to Brennor?"

Tylwulf shook his head distractedly and muttered something about not having time, and then excused himself. Oddly, Camylle gave Siggard a come-hither look, and then left for one of the bedrooms, her tattered dress falling around her legs.

Sarnakyle leaned over. "Something is very wrong here."

"What was your first hint?" Siggard snapped. "The pyramid of heads? Or how about the

burning buildings?”

“I understand that you are grieving,” Sarnakyle said quietly. “I respect that. However, please look around and see what there is to see.”

Siggard scowled and looked at the plates of food, wishing he was sitting at Emilye’s table and holding his child. But that would never be. He began to sob again, only barely aware of Sarnakyle standing and keeping a watchful eye on the door.

Tylwulf came through the wooden hallway bearing a torch. “Your lodgings are ready. I trust you are willing to share a room; we only have one to spare.”

“That will be fine,” Sarnakyle answered quickly.

Tylwulf led them down the hall to a small chamber with a large bed. To the side was a round table with a bright candle slowly burning down. Siggard thanked him and sat down on the bed.

“If you need anything, my wife and I are in the next room,” Tylwulf said, closing the door.

“Prepare for battle,” Sarnakyle said quietly. “There will be treachery tonight.”

Siggard shook his head. “How could you possibly tell that?”

Sarnakyle sighed. “I know it is difficult, but you must see clearly. You are not asking the questions you should be. How did they survive when barely anybody else did?”

“How did I survive Blackmarch?” Siggard retorted. “There is such a thing as good luck.”

“Next question,” Sarnakyle began. “How did they know I was a Vizjerei? And why did he call me a ‘Spirit Mage’? Through your journeys with your father, you are well traveled, and you didn’t know until I told you. Has this farmer honestly seen as much as yourself? Has he visited the east?”

Siggard shrugged.

“The words ‘Spirit Mage’ are only used by two groups of people, my friend. The first is by the other Mage Clans. The second is by the demonic forces themselves. Add this question: where are the graves? Have you seen a single fresh burial or body?”

A chill went down Siggard’s spine. “What do you suggest we do?”

“Put out the candle and wait. And refrain from killing the one that attacks us.”

Siggard nodded, and they silently stuffed their pillows under the blankets. As quietly as

he could, Siggard drew his sword and snuffed the candle. He took position at one side of the door, while Sarnakyle stood at the other.

As they waited in the darkness, Siggard's mind spun with both hope and fear. Perhaps Sarnakyle was wrong, and the carnage in the town square had unbalanced him. Yet, at the same time, the wizard's concerns could not be dismissed. Siggard had known Tylwulf for years; they had even been friendly rivals for Emilye's hand. The only time the man had ever left the village was to go into Brennor for supplies.

Sarnakyle began to snore. Siggard started and looked over at the other side of the door, to see the wizard's eyes open and alert. He nodded and began to make a snoring sound himself. The ruse was worth a try.

So quietly that he nearly didn't notice it, the door began to open. Siggard watched as both Tylwulf and Camylle crept towards the bed. The two farmers took positions on opposite sides of the bed and raised their hands. There was a flash of steel, and Tylwulf brought a dagger down onto one of the forms under the covers, right where the heart would be.

With a shout of anger, Siggard leapt forward, followed by Sarnakyle. Tylwulf gasped in shock and dropped his blade as Siggard's sword came to meet his throat. There was a startled cry from Camylle, and Siggard looked to see Sarnakyle holding her tightly by the waist, a dagger of his own at her neck.

"Talk," Siggard demanded.

"They'll kill me," Tylwulf said.

"So will I."

"They came to free us," Tylwulf began. "They gave us power, but we had to give them everybody pledged to the light. We told them that the demons would show them mercy, and they surrendered. They didn't even fight when the demons started killing them. They just stood there in disbelief." Tylwulf leaned forward against the blade, drawing a drop of blood. He spoke again, a mad glare in his eyes. "I especially liked watching them kill Emilye. You never did deserve her. Then they let us have some of their spirit, and we got to share in the children. A freshly born babe is a taste to die for, you know, and we didn't waste a single cut of meat. Of course, they had to kill the livestock so that we could eat. After all, there aren't always people around to feast on . . ."

Siggard gasped in horror as he listened. As the traitor spoke, a reeking vileness seemed to clutch him. With an angry blow, Siggard struck Tylwulf's head off.

Then the rage took control. Screaming for vengeance, he pulled Camylle away from Sarnakyle and plunged his blade into her breast again and again. Then, once he finished watching her die, he roared in fury, stalking out of the house.

Eight people stood outside, all holding farm implements, and in each eye there was a dark madness. Siggard growled and attacked, not caring that he had once called them friends. The first one he slew was an old farmer from the western end of the village, who barely had time to raise his hoe. Siggard killed him with a slice to the throat, leaving him gurgling as the blood sprayed from his neck. He then turned on a woman with a cooking knife, spilling her intestines with a single stroke.

“Vengeance!” he screamed, sidestepping as the third one, the village leather worker, attacked. Siggard cut the hoe in half with his sword, then with his free hand snatched up the broken wood, driving the stake into the man’s face. He growled in satisfaction as brains hit the earth.

He felt a piercing pain in his back, and turned to see a slight woman, the blacksmith’s daughter. She was a girl no older than nineteen, still blossoming into womanhood. She held a long bloody knife in one hand, and her face bore a demonic smile. He thrust his sword into her heart, killing her with one blow.

The last four tried to run, and he screamed in fury as he cut them down. The last one turned and tried to fight, a fat man whose face was oily with sweat. When he struck the man’s head off, his sword broke in half, as though it could take no more. He found himself once again in the village square, his hands and clothes covered in blood and gore.

Then the rage left him, and he felt a combination of horror and disgust. He collapsed to the ground, throwing up everything he had eaten in the last two days. Even when he had nothing more to vomit, he still retched, and finally he sat up, trying to spit the horrible taste out of his mouth.

“When you get angry, you don’t do it by half measures, do you?” Sarnakyle said. Siggard turned to see the wizard sitting on the overturned tree again, watching him.

“I’ve done something monstrous, haven’t I?” Siggard asked weakly.

Sarnakyle shook his head. “Although this won’t make you feel any better, you did what had to be done. I have never seen a demonic possession ended without the death of the host.”

“I feel so hollow,” Siggard mumbled.

“This kind of killing does that,” the wizard said. “You were not in the middle of battle, you were slaughtering those you might consider defenseless. But they were clutched by evil, and could not turn back. You probably did their souls a favor.

“When I was back in Viz-jun, I was called upon to investigate a possession. A small child, no more than two years old, had killed his parents. Even in the heart of Kehjistan, there was nothing that could be done. Finally, I had to kill the child to banish the demon.

My reaction afterwards was almost identical to yours.”

Sarnakyle leaned forward. “Had you not reacted this way, I would have wondered if you were still human.”

“I have killed the traitors,” Siggard said. “Why don’t I feel as though I am revenged? Is vengeance truly this hollow?”

“Sometimes,” Sarnakyle said. “In your case, I think you have not destroyed what you needed to destroy.”

“What do you mean?”

The wizard pointed to one of the bodies around them, his orange-red robes billowing in the breeze. “These were victims themselves. These are the effects of the illness, but the ailment still lives. Their crime was to be weak-willed in the face of darkness. The death of your family, and all of this horror, has been ordered by the archdemon leading the demonic army. It is he who must die.”

“How do you know there is an archdemon?” Siggard asked.

Sarnakyle smiled. “Armies like this are led by a baron of Hell. The lesser demons will not follow one of their own kind. Some greater power must lead them.”

“I see,” Siggard said. He stood up, his resolve giving him strength. “I swear, by the blood of my family, and the lives I have taken today, that I will find this archdemon and destroy it.”

Sarnakyle nodded grimly. “That is a worthy goal, my friend. Come now; we should rest for the morning, but first I should tend to you, and make certain that none of this blood on you is yours.”

5

PLANS AND JOURNEYS



Arkaine spoke, opened his word-hoard,

“Fate will always aid when one’s bravery holds,

and when one's cause is great and just."

—The Lay of Arkaine

"You're rather lucky," Sarnakyle said, bandaging Siggard's back. "You were wounded once, and it was very light. Already it is mostly healed."

Siggard stood and looked around. At Sarnakyle's suggestion, they had retired to Tylwulf's cabin, for, given the farmer's words, all of the village traitors were dead. Still, the wizard had insisted on placing wards around the cottage, just in case there were one or two others that Tylwulf hadn't mentioned.

Siggard donned his tunic, wincing slightly as his back strained against Sarnakyle's bandages. The flames from the torches mounted on the wall cast an eerie, flickering light, and for a moment Siggard just wanted to leave and be done with the place.

"It will be morning soon," Siggard said. "Perhaps a couple of hours until sunrise."

"We should rest in the time we have," Sarnakyle said. "But first, we should draw up a plan. Where do we go from here?"

Siggard shrugged. "We find the archdemon, and then we kill him."

Sarnakyle smiled, an amused look on his face. "That might just work, assuming our enemy's army has decided to take leave of him. If I might suggest another plan: when we were fighting Bartuc, he would raid the undefended villages, cut off the support to the walled towns, and then attack them. It seems to me that this demon would do the same; it makes strategic sense. Perhaps we should go to a fortified town, and let this archdemon come to us."

"Very well," Siggard conceded. "We'll go to Brennor, then."

"I will hold watch," Sarnakyle offered. "You look like you could use the rest more than I."

Siggard nodded and wearily stepped into the master bedroom. His eyes widened when he saw blood smearing the walls, and a demonic star painted on the window. He shook his head and walked into the kitchen lying opposite the room they had been attacked in.

"At least I might be able to sleep here," he muttered. He lay down on the wooden floor, fully clothed lest some harm come in the night, and fell into a slumber.

His dreams were a maelstrom of faces, most in torment. He saw the people he had killed, laughing at him as he struck them down again and again. And then he saw Emilye, her beautiful eyes filled with sorrow, as though in pity for what he had become.

He sat up, his body awash in a cold sweat. Sarnakyle stood over him, some fresh clothes in his arms. "It is mid-morning," the wizard said. "I decided you should rest as long as you could." He passed the bundle to Siggard. "Try these on; they will suit you better than what you have now."

"Where did you get them?" Siggard asked, examining the clothes. He held up a warm-looking black-hooded cloak and some leather trousers. Both seemed to be of exceptional workmanship. Then he looked at the remains of the bundle, a long-sleeved gray tunic that seemed to be made of sheepskin.

"I found them in a chest in the cellar," Sarnakyle replied. "They seemed to be too large for either Tylwulf or his wife, so I can only assume they must have belonged to his father."

When Siggard paused, looking at the clothes suspiciously, Sarnakyle added: "I have checked them. There are no traces of magic on them, either good or evil."

"Were you able to find any weapons?" Siggard asked, fondling the cloak.

Sarnakyle shook his head. "I'm sorry."

Siggard nodded. "Thank you, my friend. If you will give me a moment to get dressed, we can be on our way."



The clothes fit Siggard almost perfectly, the only problem being that the trousers were slightly overlarge. That difficulty was easily fixed, though, by Siggard's sword belt, the empty sheath swaying at his side.

They strode west on the Queen's Road, a cobblestone path that Siggard remembered his father taking him along several times. The sky was overcast, and on occasion there was a brief burst of rain. It was enough that Sarnakyle stopped and drew a red cloak from his traveling pack.

"If we are to fight this archdemon," the wizard said as he pulled the cloak on, "I do not wish to die of a chill first."

Siggard gave him a slight grin, and then they began to walk again. It was difficult to tell

how late in the day it was; the sky was completely cast over, and at best there was a brief ray of sun as the clouds scudded across the sky.

“I fear there may be lightning,” Sarnakyle said. “I can feel it coming in my bones.”

“Let us hope that we can find shelter before then,” Siggard said. “If you hadn’t let me sleep so long, we could have been there by nightfall. As it is, we will probably arrive sometime tomorrow morning.”

“Are there any inns on the road?” Sarnakyle asked.

“I think there is one halfway to Brennor,” Siggard replied. “This is a good road for travelers.”

“Odd that we haven’t seen any yet,” Sarnakyle mused.

After a moment, Siggard realized that the wizard was right. They had been traveling for hours, and the daylight was fading. Yet they had not encountered another soul while they walked.

Siggard shook his head. This did not bode well: especially during the harvest season, there should be traffic along the main roads. With all he had seen, it was not a concern he could easily dismiss.

“Let us hope that the inn is still there,” Siggard said, his stomach slowly twisting into a knot. Somehow, he dreaded the worst.

An hour later Siggard’s fears were confirmed. There had indeed been an inn along the Queen’s Road, but now it was reduced to a burning husk.



Lightning flashed in the darkening sky, the booming of thunder filling the air. Siggard and Sarnakyle pulled their cloaks closer to them and trod around the ruins of the inn.

“This can’t have happened too long ago,” Sarnakyle said, using a fallen branch to point at a maimed corpse. “These bodies are very fresh, and they have not been used for . . . other purposes. The archdemon must have been in great haste.”

“Brennor could already be under siege,” Siggard muttered.

Sarnakyle nodded. “The only way we can find out for certain is if we go there. We need a place to stop for tonight, though.”

Siggard shook his head and pulled up his hood. "I think there might be a barrow-ground to the south, but that is all there is aside from Brennor itself."

Sarnakyle grimaced. "If that is all there is, then that is where we must go. I think I can protect us."

Siggard began to follow a small side road near the inn. "Come with me," he said, motioning. "The burial ground is this way, if I remember correctly."

"Have you ever taken shelter there before?" Sarnakyle asked.

Siggard shook his head. "We always stayed at the inn. My father once took me to see the mounds, though. He wanted to show me where the ancient kings rested. I remember some of the tombs being open at the time. It was many years ago, though."

Their walk became a jog as a heavy rain began to fall, quickly soaking both of them despite their cloaks and leathers. The thunder became deafening, and the only thing keeping Siggard from running was the fear of getting lost in the blinding rain.

Finally, they came to a large grove of evergreen trees. Inside the grove lay several mounds of earth, each grass-covered. For a moment, Siggard thought he could see vague shapes moving among the mounds, but when the lightning flashed, it appeared to be only his imagination.

Sarnakyle shook his head. "This is a place of the dead. I do not know how welcome we will be here."

"What choice do we have?" Siggard asked.

As if on cue, a bolt of lightning struck one of the trees. As the flaming branches fell to the earth, Sarnakyle shrugged and said, "On second thought, a barrow can't be that bad."

"We have to find an open one," Siggard shouted, his ears still ringing from the thunder. "There will be a curse on us if we defile an unbroken grave."

Siggard strode around one of the mounds, only to find the ancient stone door standing resolutely shut. A look at the tomb across from him revealed another sealed doorway.

Siggard suddenly felt himself being drawn. He walked towards one of the middle barrows and stopped. The wide maw of the open mound seemed to welcome him, as though it was where he belonged.

"Sarnakyle!" Siggard called. "I've found one!"

Siggard turned to see the wizard jogging up, his makeshift staff swinging in his hand. Siggard then turned and entered the tomb, disregarding Sarnakyle's shouted warning.

The inside was mercifully dry, and as Sarnakyle followed, he set his staff on fire, providing a crude torch. In the flickering light, Siggard saw several skeletons lying by the stone wall, their bones jumbled together. In the center of the mound lay a large stone sarcophagus, its sides ornamented with ancient runes and carvings of battle.

Something glittered in the torchlight, catching Siggard's eye. He stepped forward, to find a long, shining sword lying on top of the coffin. The crossguard was shorter than he was used to, and the pommel was large and ornamented. On the blade itself several runes were carved into the fuller, runes that seemed to writhe with life in the torchlight.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were . . . in the name of Horazon!" Sarnakyle exclaimed. "This is a sword forged by Velund!"

"It is a special blade," Siggard mumbled, only half aware of his words. The sword drew all of his attention, and he wanted more than anything to pick it up. On the edge of his consciousness it seemed he could hear the whisper of a song coming from the blade itself.

"These swords were forged to be great allies," Sarnakyle said eagerly. "They choose their masters carefully, and serve them to the death. If it calls to you, and you can name it, the sword is yours."

Siggard turned to look at the wizard. Sarnakyle's eyes almost glowed with wonder, and then something drew Siggard's gaze elsewhere. Several of the skeletons had moved, or so he thought, and empty eye sockets seemed to gaze at the two.

Siggard slowly reached forward, placing his hands on the ancient leather of the hilt. As he touched it, the sword came to life, singing to him of glory and battle. It sang of armies of angels and demons, and battles at the gates of Heaven itself. And throughout the song there was a single name, a name that Siggard only had to say once, and the blade would serve him forever.

Siggard turned and raised the sword. Around them, the skeletons shifted, the bones coming together, as though they might rise up to strike if the wrong words were spoken.

"Do you know the sword's name?" Sarnakyle asked.

Siggard nodded and called out at the top of his lungs. "Guthbreoht!"

With a clatter, the bones fell back to the earth, the skulls turning away from the two wanderers. Sarnakyle drew a breath in wonderment.

"They were the guardians of the blade," the wizard said, watching the last skeleton slump down and turn away. "Had you said the wrong name . . ." He shuddered.

Siggard sheathed Guthbreoht. "The sword has a new guardian now." He suddenly looked

towards the entrance, listening. The rain had stopped, and the cloak of night was broken by a brief bird song and the chirping of crickets.

“I wonder how long you’ve been drawn here,” Sarnakyle muttered.

“The storm is over,” Siggard said.

Sarnakyle nodded. “Let us rest outside, my friend. This place has brought me much closer to the underworld than I ever desired to be.”

Siggard nodded, and they left the tomb. For a moment, Siggard felt something watch him leave, but when he turned, the barrow was empty of all but shadows.

6

ARRIVALS AND SETBACKS



Cherish all of Mankind, for Man has as much of the divine as the Archangels themselves. But unlike the Heavenly spirits, Man must overcome his failings, and chief amongst them is pride.

—*The Holy Scriptures of Zakarum*

They spent the night sleeping under the stars, Siggard holding Guthbreoht in his hands as he slept. The sword sang to him, and during its song, Siggard dreamed.

He stood again in the shield wall at Blackmarch, watching the demonic army break through the treeline. Giant boulders smashed into the ranks, flattening entire groups of soldiers. Still the lines held, the spear-men shouting insults at the demons.

Old Banagar smiled. “This is the way battle should be!”

“I’d rather be home!” Siggard shouted, raising his shield as the arrows started to fly. The goat-things stood before the army, holding great bows in their hands. Each time they loosed, a soldier fell, screaming in agony.

The smaller dog creatures and several of the goat creatures charged, bearing crude axes and clubs. They crashed against the shield wall, and the front lines became a struggle for survival. Siggard cut a goat-demon down with his sword, the force of the blow nearly unbalancing him. Something seemed strange about the blade, though, as if it wasn't really the one he should have . . .

The rush subsided, leaving the shield wall intact. Before the front lines lay a pile of bodies, some human, most monstrous. For the first time since the enemy came out onto the field, Siggard felt hope. Now that most of the demonic force was in the open, he saw that Entsteig had the advantage in numbers. More demons came out of the treeline, but they were outnumbered fivefold.

Once again they charged, this assault even more furious than the last. Siggard found himself barely able to think, his reflexes alone keeping him alive. As one creature came before him, he lifted his shield, the blow from an axe nearly knocking him over. His counterthrust took the creature in the belly, and the monster keeled over, screaming in anguish. As it fell, another took its place, and Siggard's blow almost severed the creature's head. The monster fell back in a spray of blood, a flap of skin the only thing holding its head to its neck.

"I think we might just win this battle!" Banagar shouted in triumph, raising his shield to mock the enemy.

With a fierce rustling, the shadows at the treeline parted, and a horrific monster strode into the open. Several of the Entsteigian archers loosed their arrows at it, but the shafts bounced harmlessly off the terrifying thing's muscular crimson chest.

Siggard gasped. The demon was a giant, easily dwarfing the goat creatures assailing them. Its eyes shone bright red, and horns protruded from its shoulders, elbows, and knees. It wore only a primitive loincloth and a belt, and it bore a giant sword. On its chest a strange symbol was emblazoned, and Siggard could not tell if it was a tattoo or something the creature wore.

"I am the favored of the Lord of Terror!" the creature bellowed, shaking the ground itself. "You will drop your weapons and submit to me, or all of you will die!"

A voice, tinny in comparison to the demon's, but still proud, called out. "We will never surrender to darkness. Go back to the underworld and trouble us no more!"

Siggard blinked, suddenly recognizing the voice. It was Prince Hrothwulf himself, the heir of Entsteig, a man beloved by the entire kingdom. He hadn't realized that the king had sent his son with this army, and for a moment he wondered if it was a good idea.

The demon smiled, and in that grin Siggard saw more malice than he had experienced in an entire lifetime. "Then all of you will die!"

The monster walked back into the trees, and the shadowy things moved again, covering its exit. There was a moment of silence, as Siggard and the rest of the army wondered what would come next.

“They’re behind us!” came a startled cry from the rear of the line. Siggard turned to see several soldiers cut down, seemingly by nothing. Yet the blood spilled was real. Then a creature materialized, holding a long jagged knife, right in the middle of the shield wall.

Confusion reigned, and in that moment the demons attacked. This time, they broke through the shield wall, and Siggard found himself trapped in a sea of enemies. He fought like a madman, taking several of the creatures down, but there were still more, and the line was broken.

There was a gurgling cry from Banagar, and Siggard turned to face another of the materializing demons. With a great blow, he split open the creature’s head, but more came, and Siggard found himself in a crush of men such that he couldn’t move.

At that moment, sheer panic took hold.



He startled awake to see Sarnakyle standing watch. The wizard had draped his damp cloak over one of the tree branches, and seemed to be waiting for it to finish drying. The morning sun was still close to the horizon, giving off a pleasant heat tempered by a light breeze.

“It is a good day to be alive, my friend!” Sarnakyle said, motioning towards the clear sky. “This promises to be a great day.”

Siggard stood and stretched. “I only hope that the people of Brennor agree with you.”

Sarnakyle walked over, a piece of meat in his hand. “I was able to catch a hare last night. It was a bold creature; it almost walked right up to me.”

Siggard took the offering with a nod and ate a small piece. Then he put the rest away.

“You really should eat more,” Sarnakyle said. “This cannot be healthy.”

“I found out only two days ago that my family was dead,” Siggard pointed out. “How can you possibly expect me to be hungry?”

“If you don’t eat, you will not have the strength to meet the foe, and you may end up joining your family before you can claim your vengeance,” Sarnakyle chided. “Do not

soil their memory by dying needlessly.”

Siggard conceded the point and finished off the meal, even though he had no appetite for it. It seemed to settle, though, so he turned his mind to other things.

He stood and walked to the edge of the clearing, looking out at the barrows. In the morning light, they appeared old and decrepit, as though they were merely old tombs that would soon be forgotten. Perhaps one day they would fade into the land, and be passed by travelers who would mistake them for small hills.

Such is the way of things, Siggard thought. All things must be forgotten in the end.

“We should go,” Sarnakyle said behind him. “The open road awaits.”

Siggard nodded, turning away from the mounds. Somehow, he knew that he would never see them again in his lifetime. He pulled on his cloak, and joined the wizard as they ventured off towards the Queen’s Road.



Around midday, they finally came to Brennor, and as with every other time he had been there, Siggard felt overwhelmed. The town was huge, surrounded by a large stone wall that was said to be impenetrable.

They stood at the gate, watching the guard allow a trickle of travelers inside the wall. The guards were impressive, their deep blue tabards and shining mail putting the entire army of Entsteig to shame.

“So this is your idea of a town,” Sarnakyle mused. “Quaint. I like it, though.”

“Surely you can’t think this to be small,” Siggard scoffed. “This is one of the greatest towns in the land.”

“In Kehjistan, there are villages larger than this,” Sarnakyle said. “But that is Kehjistan, and this is Entsteig. Standards are different.”

“Let’s go in and see the earl,” Siggard sighed. He didn’t want to get the wizard started on another long-winded story about the wonders of his homeland.

Sarnakyle held his hand up for a moment. “You saw how easily a demonic presence can lurk in a human form. We must be cautious, and tell only the earl what we know.”

Siggard nodded. “Or the enemy might know our secrets. Don’t worry; I understand.”

As they approached the gate, the two guards lowered their spears to block the way. “State your names and business.”

“Siggard of Bear’s Hill, and Sarnakyle of Kehjistan,” Siggard replied. “We are here to stay for the night, and then head southwards on the King’s Road.”

“Why are you heading south?”

Siggard pursed his lips, then spoke. “My friend and I are visiting some of my relatives in Gellan’s Pass.”

The first guard’s mustache bristled. “You might have some difficulty with that. We haven’t had word from the south since shortly after Blackmarch. Pass and be recognized.”

They entered the town, immediately assaulted by a menagerie of sights and scents as they went along one of the narrow winding streets. The blocky stone buildings rose high above them, and several times they had to dodge a rain of reeking excrement as somebody emptied out a chamber pot.

“I suppose some people enjoy living like this,” Siggard muttered, wiping some mud from a passing horse off his cloak.

“People like to dwell together,” Sarnakyle said. “And in a city or town you can find artisans, craftsmen, all those trades that cannot flourish in a village.”

“Art for squalor,” Siggard said. “I wonder if the trade is worthwhile.”

Sarnakyle smiled. “When you come to the east with me one day, my friend, you will see why it is. Now, do you know anything of this earl?”

“I served under the Earl of Brennor at Blackmarch, but I do not know if he survived,” Siggard replied.

“We can probably assume that he didn’t,” Sarnakyle said. “I did not hear of any of the leaders living through the battle, and if any had, the bards would have spoken of them in their songs. Does he have a son?”

Siggard nodded. “Tilgar. Earl Edgewulf is a good man, who knows when and how to listen. I have not met his son, though. I have heard that Tilgar is brave, but not much else.”

“We must hope that he is the equal of his father,” Sarnakyle stated.



When they arrived at the stone castle that housed the seat of the Earl of Brennor, they were shown in to a small audience chamber. There they waited, Sarnakyle taking a close look at the tapestries on the wall while Siggard sat in one of the three chairs that had been provided.

“This is interesting,” Sarnakyle said, pointing at one of the pictures. “This shows a battle between Heaven and Hell. I didn’t think that mythology had spread so far.”

Siggard blinked. “We have always believed in Heaven and Hell. We may even have learned of it first.”

Sarnakyle chuckled. “Now there you must jest! No learning could equal the greatness of Kehjistan!”

The door opened, and a rotund man with a bushy gray beard walked in. Siggard looked at him closely, but it was not Earl Edgewulf. The man appeared too old to be the earl’s son, though.

“I am Hunfrith, the steward of Brennor,” the man said. “Please, be seated. I understand that you request an urgent audience with his lordship, Earl Tilgar.”

Sarnakyle nodded and sat. “It is of the utmost importance.”

Siggard blinked. “Not Earl Edgewulf?”

Hunfrith shook his head sadly. “His lordship was slain at the battle of Blackmarch. Earl Tilgar now holds the seat of Brennor.”

“Our condolences,” Sarnakyle said. “But we really must see his lordship now.”

“Now, what this is about?” Hunfrith asked, leaning forward.

“It would be better if his lordship heard it first,” Siggard said.

“Understand my position here,” Hunfrith said. “You are asking to see his lordship, who is a very busy man. Not only is there now a food shortage, due to a lack of merchant trade, but the king’s son, Prince Hrothwulf, was slain with the old earl at Blackmarch, a battle for which we have no reliable accounts. This means that there is now no successor to the throne, and now that his majesty has become ill every landowner who has rings to give away is trying to solidify his power. For all I know, you two could be assassins, or you could have news of minor importance at best. So I need to know that this is worthwhile.”

Siggard decided to take the risk. “There is an army of demons raiding the lands around

Brennor. My own village has been attacked and destroyed, and so have most of the settlements around the town. That is why no merchants have come with harvest goods.”

“Their strategy will be to cut off your supplies and then attack the town,” Sarnakyle added reluctantly. “I have seen this before in Kehjistan. From what you have told me, they have already succeeded.”

Hunfrith looked at them incredulously. “Do you honestly expect me to believe this?” he demanded. “An army of demons? I wish that was a new rumor; I think I preferred the stories of goblins and a dragon. This must be some sort of ridiculous joke.”

“It is no joke,” Siggard asserted. “I was at Blackmarch, and I saw what faced us. We were not fighting against men, but the foulest creatures of Hell.”

“You were at Blackmarch,” Hunfrith said.

Siggard nodded.

“And how did you survive the battle, may I ask?”

Siggard shrugged. “I do not remember. I just recall the shield wall breaking, and then I was in the forest with a giant lump on my head. I lost two days.”

“It sounds to me like you are a deserter trying to cover your cowardice with tales of ghosts and goblins,” Hunfrith stated.

“Siggard is no deserter, and we have important news,” Sarnakyle said impatiently. “You may come under attack any night now. Will you kindly let us pass?”

Hunfrith stood up. “Absolutely not!” he bellowed. “You are lucky I don’t order you two hanged for cowardice! Now get out of my sight before I change my mind!”

Siggard shook his head and stood angrily, turning to Hunfrith. “This is not over.”

The steward smiled thinly. “Shall I have the guards escort you out?”

“We know the way,” Sarnakyle said bitterly. With that, they turned on their heels and left.



They found a suitable inn shortly before sundown. The accommodations were acceptable, but barely, and it was the best they had seen in the northern side of town. At least the help didn’t try to harass them while they ate.

“We will have to try again tomorrow morning,” Sarnakyle said, supping on some thin vegetable soup. “If this town isn’t prepared, the archdemon will simply walk through it.”

“We’ll need a way to get past the steward,” Siggard said, ignoring his own soup and longing for some of Emilye’s delicious mutton stew. The very thought of her brought a tear to his eye, and as he wiped it away he had to wrench his thoughts back to more immediate matters.

“Perhaps we can deliver something,” Sarnakyle suggested. “Is there anything the castle is in desperate need of, besides a new steward?”

Siggard shrugged and stood up. “I have to get some fresh air.”

“One moment,” Sarnakyle said. “I’m almost finished.” He downed the last of his soup, left a small silver coin on the table, and joined Siggard.

In the street, Siggard took a deep breath, but the air was not as fresh as he had hoped. Sarnakyle leaned against the inn’s gray stone wall, and together they watched the few townspeople meander around, some looking as though they had some sort of direction, others appearing to be lost souls.

“Do you remember anything about the archdemon you fought?” Sarnakyle asked. “Anything at all could help.”

“Lots of horns,” Siggard replied.

“Most greater demons have lots of horns,” Sarnakyle said. “I have no doubt that the Prime Evils themselves must look like balls of spikes. Anything else?”

Siggard thought for a moment. “There was a symbol on its chest. I can’t remember what it was, though.”

“A glyph,” Sarnakyle said. “That could be very ill news. That means that the archdemon is enchanted in some . . . do you smell smoke?”

Siggard started and inhaled sharply. Indeed, an acrid stench now filled the air. He looked around to see a large pillar of smoke rising from the eastern side of town.

Siggard was overcome with dread. Part of Brennor was burning, and there was no thought of it being an accident; surely the demonic siege had begun.

7

FIERS AND DEMONS



What is bravery? Are those who fight in a hopeless cause brave, for they die for their beliefs? Are those who run from death brave, for it is easier to die than live? Or is bravery instead pushing aside one's fear to do what is necessary, be it to live or die?

—Godfrey of Westmarch, *Questions*

Siggard and Sarnakyle pounded through the streets of Brennor, desperately racing eastwards where the fire burned. As he ran, Siggard searched his memory for what was in that section of the town, from the few times he had visited with his father or wife.

There was the service entrance to the castle, along with the main barracks and armory . .

A cold chill began to run down Siggard's back. If the demons destroyed the armory, the town would be lost. Brennor had already been cut off from any new supplies.

He cursed and skidded to a stop. They faced a dead end, terminating in a small shop selling wicker baskets. The shop was closed for the night, and a wooden sign hung from the oaken door informing all who could read when it would be opening the next morning.

They whirled about and raced towards a side street. "This place is a labyrinth," Sarnakyle called. "Do your people not plan their towns carefully, so that it is easy to get from place to place?"

Siggard panted and shook his head. "Most towns just grow in Entsteig. People find a good place and live there. I've heard the capital is even more of a maze than Brennor. There was a left turn back there. If we take that, we should be able to find our way."

His robes and cloak flapping, Sarnakyle shouted, "Right!"

They wound their way quickly through the maze of streets and alleys, passing several ladies of the night who barely had time to call out their wares even as the two passed. After several turns, always keeping the plume of smoke in sight, they nearly collided with a fire brigade.

“Damnation,” Siggard muttered. “It’s begun.”

Siggard and Sarnakyle slowed to walk down the side street, passing the guardsmen. One of the guards turned and called after them to stop, but they both ignored him.

The street emptied out into a small square, where Siggard saw several soldiers crowded into a circle, desperately fighting for their lives. They were surrounded by froglike creatures that appeared strangely indistinct, as though they were here and yet not. Behind the battle stood the stone walls of the barracks, fire belching forth from every window to sear the air.

Siggard felt rage begin to take hold, and he drew Guthbrecht. The sword’s song filled his being, fueling his fury, and he screamed an ancient battle cry whose words were older than the world itself.

He rushed into the fray, cutting down one of the demonic things with such force that the monster was sliced in half. His sword sang in exaltation as he turned to the next demon, quickly spilling its guts onto the cobbled road. Had anybody been watching, they would have wondered if he wielded the sword or vice versa.

He heard a shout from Sarnakyle, and a bolt of fire struck behind him. He turned away from the heat to see one of the demons staggering back, its body a living torch. With a quick thrust Siggard pierced it through, and turned again to barely dodge another demon’s lunge. The claws of the thing scraped past him, and Siggard’s blow severed the monster’s spine.

He looked to see the soldiers forming into a shield wall and charging. His frantic attack had distracted at least half of the demons, giving the guardsmen a chance to rally. Two of the monsters fell to the soldiers’ swinging blades, but the melee was not without a cost. One of the guards went down, clutching at his gaping throat as his lifeblood poured out in a scarlet rush to stain the ground crimson.

Siggard began to work his way towards the wall, suddenly realizing that if he didn’t join the other soldiers, he could be surrounded and killed. Two more creatures fell to his sword, Guthbrecht’s song becoming stronger with each demonic life it took.

Just before he reached the advancing shield wall, he felt an evil presence behind him. He reversed his grip and struck, feeling the sword pass through flesh and bone, but when he turned to look he saw that the steel impaled thin air. An ichorous blood began to run from the blade, and one of the creatures slowly started to appear, Guthbrecht transfixed in its neck. Siggard wrenched the sword clear, levering off the demon’s head.

And then the shield wall overtook and engulfed him, and he took his place at its head. The soldiers continued to advance, cutting down every demon in their path. With Siggard in their ranks, they had become unstoppable, his sword destroying a monster with every stroke.

Several bolts of lightning struck down from the sky, killing the last of the demons. Siggard turned to see Sarnakyle nearly staggering from exertion, his face a sweaty mask. The wizard was reaching towards the heavens, and where he pointed a small cloud had formed. Finally, Sarnakyle lowered his hand, the thunderhead above vanishing into a bluish mist.

Even as the firemen rushed past them, the captain of the guard, a large mustached man with a slight limp, stepped up to Siggard. "Sir, I thank you. If it hadn't been for you, they would have destroyed us and burnt down the armory."

"So long as the armory is safe," Siggard said, feeling the exhaustion as the adrenaline left his system. He stepped over to one of the dead soldiers and said a small prayer, then wiped his sword clean on the body's tabard. He didn't know if blood would rust a blade forged by Velund, but he didn't want to take any risks. Strangely, the edge was not dulled at all, as though he had been cutting through cloth rather than flesh and bone. He sheathed Guthbreoht and sat on a wooden bench at the edge of the square, watching as the bucket brigade formed and dashed water on the billowing flames.

Sarnakyle walked over and sat beside him. "Given the clear skies, I didn't know if that lightning spell would work. I'm glad it did."

Siggard patted the wizard on the back. "You did well, my friend."

"Do you suppose the steward will allow us to see the earl now?"

Siggard raised his head and surveyed the square. The firemen continued to pour bucket after bucket into the rising flames and choking smoke. "They won't be able to put it out, will they?" Siggard mused, wrinkling his nose at the acrid smell.

Sarnakyle shook his head. "It is too far gone. I only hope that nobody was trapped inside."

"We should probably help."

"Probably."

"In a moment."

"Yes," the wizard agreed, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Once we're rested."

Two more people entered the square, both wearing tunics of office and rich cloaks. One, a tall red-bearded figure, wore an ornamental mace at his side. The other was shorter and rotund. They talked to the captain of the guard for a moment, who pointed first at several of the monstrous bodies lying on the ground and then at Siggard and Sarnakyle. They spoke a few words more, then the two newcomers strode towards the weary pair.

Siggard sighed in frustration when he realized that the first man was Hunfrith. He didn't recognize the second man, though. As they approached, Siggard stood, Sarnakyle following his lead.

"These are the men who sought an audience with me earlier today?" the strange man asked Hunfrith.

The steward nodded, and Siggard realized who the tall man was.

"It is an honor to meet you, your lordship," Siggard said, bowing. "Siggard of Bear's Hill and Sarnakyle of Kehjistan, at your service."

"From what Captain Hagan has told me, I owe both of you several debts of gratitude," Earl Tilgar said. "You may have saved our town. You may have however many rings you wish from my treasury."

"We have more important matters," Sarnakyle stated. "This town may be under siege by a powerful demon within a matter of days. We request an audience so that we may tell you what we know."

Tilgar nodded. "I will see you at midday tomorrow. Come to my castle, tell the guards your names, and they will bring you to me. Hunfrith will take care of any arrangements. If you will excuse me, there are several things I must do now."

Siggard and Sarnakyle both bowed as the earl turned and walked back to the captain of the guard. Hunfrith remained and wrung his hands uneasily.

"I believe I owe both of you a grave apology," the steward said. "Please pardon me. We have heard many strange stories about the death of the old earl and prince, and it is easy to be suspicious."

"I understand," Siggard said. "I too have witnessed many things that I would not have believed a year ago."

"I will see you both tomorrow then," Hunfrith said, bowing. "It would be good decorum to wear your finest. The earl is a royal cousin, and there are matters of politics to be aware of."

With that, Hunfrith returned to the earl. Sarnakyle shrugged to Siggard, and the two strode back through the winding streets to their inn. When they reached their room, Siggard removed his cloak, sword, and tunic, fell onto the bed, and within moments was in a blessedly dreamless sleep.

8

WARNINGS



It is possible to have freedom, and it is possible to have peace.

It is rare to have both.

—Dil’Gerran of Kehjistan, *Sayings of the Northmen*

Siggard was up at the crack of dawn. He rose from the bed and opened the shutters to watch the town come to life. First the merchants began to open their shops, and then the apprentices came out, buying the items their masters would need to go about their business, cleaning out windows, and preparing the displays.

The street peddlers arrived next, jockeying for position to hock the passersby. After them came the retainers of the minor nobles’ houses in the city, and the streets filled with the sounds of vendors calling out their wares.

From Siggard’s few trips to Brennor, he knew that this was just the surface. Inside, the blacksmiths would begin to forge iron and steel, and bladesmiths would prepare new arms and armor for the city guard. There were also illuminators who would even now be drawing new illustrations on their manuscripts, artisans creating tapestries, bards composing the next saga of Arkaine, and any number of other artists and master craftsmen plying their trades.

With a start, Siggard realized that it was not just a fortified town that hung in the balance, it was an entire civilization.

He turned away from the window to see Sarnakyle beginning to stir, wiping his hands on his white underrobe. Once the wizard was up and about, they would go to the castle and seek their audience with Earl Tilgar. Before that, though, they would have to be ready.

Siggard picked up his tunic and frowned. The once-gray shirt had become covered with brown bloodstains. He would be able to wear it while he bought a new one, but it would

certainly not serve when he went to see Earl Tilgar.

He watched Sarnakyle blink the sleep out of his eyes and sighed. There was so much to do, and so little time.



They were able to find Siggard some new clothes at a shop close to the inn. Once again, he found himself dressed in a gray tunic and black cloak, but of a much finer cut than he had worn before. Sarnakyle not only happily paid for it all, telling Siggard that it was the least he could do for somebody who had lost so much, but also handed him a small jingling coin purse. Although Siggard couldn't be sure, it seemed that there was something more on Sarnakyle's mind, but the wizard revealed nothing to him.

Sarnakyle wore his usual reddish robes and cloak. Siggard wondered for a moment if he would ever see the man dressed in any other color, but then dismissed the thought as unimportant.

They ate a light breakfast of milk and freshly baked bread at a local bakery, and then made their way to the castle. By the time they got there, the sun was high in a cloudless sky.

They gave their names to the guard, a massive man bearing Earl Tilgar's crimson colors. Siggard could only assume that he was part of Tilgar's housecarls, the earl's personal warband, rather than the city guard. The guard passed a message inside, and very quickly Siggard and Sarnakyle were greeted by Hunfrith, who led them deep into the castle.

They were taken up several flights of stairs to a bright office where Earl Tilgar and three soldiers were waiting. A large table stood in the center of the room, several maps spread across its oaken surface. From the window Siggard could easily see the battlements and towers of the castle and town walls.

"I am glad you are both here," Tilgar said. "Don't bother to bow; this is a war council, and I understand there is very little time. Please allow me to introduce you to my companions." He pointed at the first man, dressed in a deep blue, who Siggard remembered from the battle outside the barracks. "Captain Hagan, who commands the city guard." He pointed at the second man, a red-bearded warrior who wore Tilgar's personal colors. "Wulfgar, the commander of my housecarls." Finally, he pointed at the third man, a wiry gentleman in royal purple. "Guthwulf, the commander of the King's men stationed here."

"A pleasure to meet you all," Siggard said, bowing just in case. As he rose, he noticed a look of approval from Guthwulf.

Tilgar pointed to the map. "It has now been a week and a half since we have had any word from the villages around the seat of Brennor, and our scouts have yet to report. Our supplies are now running low, and we have perhaps a reserve of one month before people start starving. I understand that Siggard and Sarnakyle have information pertaining to this?"

Siggard nodded and stepped forward. "Your lordship, I fear that there is little or no relief coming. The settlements that supply the town have been destroyed by a demonic army."

Hunfrith raised his hand. "I will vouch for them. We have all seen the bodies found after the attack on the main barracks. They were not human."

"Your lordship, if I may," Sarnakyle broke in. "I fought at Viz-jun against Bartuc, the Warlord of Blood. He was one of our number who had become, for all intents and purposes, an archdemon. He followed a similar strategy against us. First he destroyed all the settlements supporting the city, and then he assailed the city itself. If this attack last night is any indication, the main army of whatever archdemon we face will be here within days."

Guthwulf looked at Siggard for a moment. "I understand you were at Blackmarch, and that we will be fighting the same enemy. What did you see there?"

"We formed a shield wall on the highest ground we could find," Siggard reported. "None of us expected a demonic army, but we were able to hold our own for a while. There were creatures that seemed to be walking goats, bearing bows, axes, and clubs. The archers were very accurate, and every shaft found its mark. There were also some smaller monsters resembling dogs, carrying axes. They seemed to have some sort of missile weapons, and there were these shadowy things near the archdemon. I didn't see what they actually did."

"What were the numbers like?" Hagan asked.

Siggard shrugged. "We seemed to outnumber each charge fivefold, but there were far more coming. I would guess we were facing about five thousand, but I cannot be certain. I got caught in a crush when they broke through the shield wall, and I don't remember anything after that."

"How did they break through?" Tilgar said, leaning forward on the map table.

Siggard shook his head. "I just don't know. The line was solid, then the archdemon appeared, and suddenly these creatures were among us, killing every man they could."

"We Vizjerei call them 'Hiddens,'" Sarnakyle cut in. "We don't have a better name for them. They were at Viz-jun, though. They were probably within the ranks before the battle even began, waiting for the archdemon's signal. Bartuc used that tactic as well. Those creatures we fought last night were also a sort of Hidden."

Tilgar scratched his beard. "Could we be facing this 'Bartuc' you mentioned?"

Sarnakyle shook his head. "The Warlord died two years ago at Viz-jun. I helped kill him, and I saw the body."

"So it is some other demon, using Bartuc's tactics," Hagan mused.

"Using his strategies," Sarnakyle corrected. "I do not know what this archdemon will do once the siege begins. The demonic forces are chaotic at best, and it would be very dangerous for us to assume anything. The only way the armies of Hell have ever been consistent has been in how they approach a walled town. They cut it off, then they attack."

"We'll need to prepare for a full siege," Tilgar stated, turning to his commanders. "Hagan, pull the catapults out from the armory and put a full guard on it. Also, put your men on alert; there may be more of these Hidden creatures to deal with. Guthwulf, I'll need some advance scouts to scour the land. Find out where this demonic army is, how many of them there are, and how long it will take for them to get here. Wulfgar, get the housecarls ready for battle, and prepare the tunnels underneath the town. We may have to evacuate the city if the worst comes to pass."

"There is one hope," Sarnakyle said. "The other demons are being kept here by the power of the archdemon. In order to exist on this plane, it will have had to possess a mortal body. If we can kill this baron of Hell, the other demons will be banished from this plane. Be wary, though; Siggard has told me that the archdemon is enchanted with a glyph of power, so it will be difficult to destroy at best."

"We will find a way," Tilgar promised. "The elder earl prided himself in his ability to keep his people from harm, and I am my father's son. If this archdemon attacks the walls of Brennor, it will die here."

The wizard smiled. "That is all one could ask."

Tilgar nodded. "I will have Hunfrith find rooms for you in the castle. With your experience, Sarnakyle, I feel it would be good to have you close by."

Sarnakyle shook his head. "With all due respect, your lordship, we already have suitable accommodations. The comradery of the inn will be good for both of us, I think."

Tilgar shook the hands of both Siggard and Sarnakyle. "Very well, then. You two should go and rest. Inform Hunfrith of where you are staying, and any news will be sent to you."

Siggard and Sarnakyle nodded, bowed, and allowed themselves to be shown out.



The waiting proved to be much worse than the fighting had been. They stood on the town wall and watched as the mounted scouts left the city, breaking off in several directions to search for the demonic army. And then the hours began to pass, the sun set, and Siggard was left tossing and turning in his bed, longing for the touch of his sweet Emilye.

He spent the next morning tending to Guthbreoht, whose song had become soothing and gentle. After the sword was oiled to a mirror polish, he sheathed it and walked downstairs to the inn's common room to wait for news. No word came that day, although several bards sang epics of the hero Arkaine, who had won some great victory in the east against demonic forces.

The mood of the town had changed overnight. Where before the inn's common room had been filled with life and laughter, now everybody was grim, waiting for the battle they knew would come. When Siggard watched Brennor come to life the next morning, after another nearly sleepless night, the denizens seemed to go through their daily business as though it was just a routine and nothing more.

He oiled his sword once again, went downstairs, listened to more epics, and waited for news. And, as another night fell, still no word came, and he was almost sick of hearing tales about Arkaine slaughtering demons with superhuman strength.

Sarnakyle was not much help. The wizard spent most of his time in the room, reading some old books he had stored in his pack. When Siggard had asked him what they were, he had been told they were spellbooks. The answer had been curt, though, unlike Sarnakyle's usually kind demeanor.

That night he dreamed of Emilye, but her face was ancient and decaying, and no matter how hard he tried to hold on to her, she slipped from his grasp and turned to dust. He awoke in tears, the pain of her death fresh once more, and silently wept for almost an hour before the sun rose.

That morning, after he had oiled his sword and gone down into the common room for a bite to eat, the innkeeper handed him a message.

"Just came in for you, sir," the innkeeper said. "Has Earl Tilgar's personal seal, it does."

Siggard handed the man a silver coin and opened the paper. He read it quickly, the elegant script suddenly reminding him of Emilye's gentle reading lessons, and felt absolute dread curl around in his stomach. He rushed upstairs, and threw open the door to their room, startling Sarnakyle, who was carefully going over a passage in his codex.

"Read this," Siggard said, handing the parchment to the wizard. Sarnakyle's eyes

widened when he looked at the page.

“Army will arrive within a day from the east,” he read aloud. “The demons number between three and four thousand. All nearby villages are destroyed, and all roads are blocked. We are completely isolated.”

Siggard shook his head. “If we are truly cut off, then if the town is evacuated, there will be nowhere for the people to go. The demons will destroy them at will.”

“I have not seen a situation this bad since Viz-jun,” Sarnakyle stated. “We must prepare ourselves. Tomorrow, darkness falls upon Brennor.”

9

REVELATIONS



To fight the battle is easy.

To wait for it to begin is terrifying.

—Godfrey of Westmarch, *Quotations*

Siggard stood on the eastern town wall, watching the horizon for any sign of the demonic force. He fingered the leather-bound hilt of his sword nervously as he waited, his gut churning in impatience and fear.

Unbidden, his mind turned back to the horrifying carnage of Blackmarch. The archdemon stood clear in his mind, and he knew he would recognize it immediately when it came. Somehow, despite Guthbreoht’s soothing song echoing in his ears, the thought of fighting the archdemon brought a shrill terror. Still, he thought, there was vengeance, and his heart hardened.

He heard soft footfalls behind him, and he turned to see Sarnakyle approaching. The wizard held one of his books, which he set down on the parapet.

“I thought you were in the inn studying your magic,” Siggard said.

Sarnakyle shrugged. “I decided to get some fresh air. Besides, I couldn’t stand to wait in the inn any longer.”

“You wouldn’t have missed anything,” Siggard pointed out. “Tilgar has messengers waiting to find us as soon as anything appears.”

Sarnakyle smiled and looked to the west, where the sun hung low in the sky, casting a shadow over the town. “And I suppose you just came out here for a brief midday stroll?”

Siggard grimaced. “Something like that.”

“The warning is only a few hours old,” Sarnakyle said. “To be honest, I think this demon will appear sometime in the morning. It does have a large army to march here, you know.”

“Doesn’t make the waiting any easier.”

Sarnakyle nodded. “I know what you mean.”

The wizard leaned on the rough stone wall, looking out to the darkening horizon. “If Tilgar is smart, and I believe he is, his catapults will strike the demons as they come close to the town, forcing them to camp far away.”

“What good would that do?”

“It would give us some space,” Sarnakyle explained. “The farther away they have to camp, the less likely it will be that they can completely surround us. And we can use any advantage we can get.”

“We have your magic,” Siggard pointed out.

“Yes, well,” Sarnakyle muttered. “We do indeed.”

“Here they come!” the lookout called. A horn blast sounded, and commanders barked orders to their soldiers.

He looked out over the parapet, squinting as he peered towards the horizon. Tiny shapes began to appear in the distance, bearing strange banners.

Siggard drew his sword, felt the blade’s song infuse him with strength. He tried to make out the device on the banners, but they were too far away. He looked at Sarnakyle, who was leaning forward as well, lost in concentration. Beside them were several soldiers, weapons at the ready.

The wall was filling with men-at-arms.

“Archers!” one of the commanders called. “Wait for my signal!”

Siggard looked back at the boiling horizon. The demonic army literally filled the landscape, overwhelming the hills and fields outside the town. Finally one of the banners became visible, a horrifying depiction of a flayed corpse against a black moon, mounted under a human skull. Siggard’s gorge rose, and he fought back a dizzying nausea.

“No,” Sarnakyle cursed. “Anybody but him!”

“What is it?” Siggard asked. “Who do we fight?”

“Assur,” Sarnakyle hissed. “The favored baron of the Lord of Terror.”

Siggard jumped as a catapult loosed a ranging shot, the load flying overhead only to fall short of the approaching horde. Still onward they came, creatures of all sizes, and in their center, surrounded by shadowy things that could only come from a horrible nightmare, stood the giant archdemon.

“That can’t be three thousand,” Siggard muttered. “Maybe five, or six, but not three.”

“He’s brought help.”

Another rock was loosed, the boulder falling into the demonic ranks, and a barrage followed. Several monsters fell, but the horde continued to advance, relentless as a force of nature. Each gap in the line the catapults made was immediately filled as more demons entered the crush.

“We have to warn Tilgar,” Sarnakyle said, turning from the wall. “We have to evacuate the town.”

“What is wrong?” Siggard demanded. “What is so special about this ‘Assur’?”

Sarnakyle turned, and Siggard recoiled. The wizard’s face was ashen, his eyes wild with fear. “There is no way we can possibly slay this archdemon,” Sarnakyle said with absolute certainty, picking up his book from the parapet. “The battle is already lost.”



They passed towards the castle, pushing past entire bands of soldiers heading to the eastern walls. No matter where they walked, they could hear the thudding of the catapults lofting rocks.

Finally they arrived, winding their way through several groups of guardsmen. Siggard tried asking many of them where Earl Tilgar could be found, but none seemed to know, telling him to ask somebody else. Siggard growled in frustration, but there was little he could do; the confusion was too great.

Eventually, they came across Hunfrith directing some soldiers to the castle walls. Sarnakyle tapped the steward on the shoulder, and the man turned abruptly.

“This had better be important,” Hunfrith snapped. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re in the middle of a siege.”

“We have to speak with Earl Tilgar immediately,” Sarnakyle demanded. “This is a matter of life and death.”

“He’s in the war room,” Hunfrith said. “You’ll have to find your own way there. I’m too busy to guide you.”

Sarnakyle nodded. “I remember the way.” Spinning on his heel, the wizard strode into the castle, Siggard struggling to keep up. With almost unnatural deftness, Sarnakyle picked a path through the crowds of soldiers and guardsmen, calling for space to move.

The gatehouse opened into a courtyard bustling with activity. Several soldiers were repairing a catapult, and archers were rushing to the walls. Sarnakyle ignored it all, and Siggard found himself running to catch up to the wizard after taking a quick glance around.

Without ceremony they entered the keep, Sarnakyle winding his way through the maze of corridors, Siggard close behind him. Finally, they reached the war room to find Earl Tilgar pouring over maps with his three commanders and one other figure.

“Our scouts have managed to destroy their catapults,” one soldier said, pointing at a map. “So we have at least one advantage.”

Siggard’s eyes widened as he recognized the tall, gray-cloaked man with sandy-blond hair who rose from the table to greet him.

“Greetings, Siggard,” he said. “I am pleased that you found your way out of the forest.”

“Tyrael,” Siggard breathed, remembering the man who had shared his fire. “I had thought you a ghost.”

Tyrael smiled. “I am happy to say that I am no restless spirit.”

Tilgar looked over at Siggard in surprise. “You know the Archangel Tyrael?”

Siggard raised an eyebrow. “Archangel? You didn’t tell me you were an angel.”

“You didn’t ask.”

“Lord Tyrael, it is good to see you again,” Sarnakyle said, bowing. “Unfortunately, I have grim news. The archdemon we fight is Assur.”

Tyrael nodded. “I know. It will be a difficult fight.”

“Did everybody know Tyrael was an archangel but me?” Siggard wondered out loud, but nobody answered him.

“If you are here, Tyrael, does that mean that the Lords of Heaven will intervene?” Sarnakyle asked. “I fear that is our only hope.”

Tyrael shook his head sadly. “It is very difficult for the most powerful of us to appear on the mortal plane. Even I cannot manifest myself for more than a night at a time. I can offer advice, but nothing else.”

“Then we are already lost,” Sarnakyle said, turning to Tilgar. “We must evacuate the town, your lordship.”

Tilgar shook his head. “I do not understand. What is so special about this ‘Assur’? From what I can see, even with his current numbers, we still have equal forces and the town walls to protect us.”

“He is enchanted by a glyph that can only be cast once every millennium,” Sarnakyle said. “He cannot be slain by any hands alive, be they mortal or angelic. No weapon we have could touch him.”

“How could you possibly know this?” Tilgar demanded. “How can you be certain?”

“I am one of the Lords of the Vizjerei,” Sarnakyle explained. “For decades I studied the summoning of spirits and demons, and came to lead many of my clan in the council. The demons do not give information easily, and often it is enveloped in lies, but recently we have learned the names of most of the barons of Hell. Their lords, the lesser and Prime Evils, we know only by title. Of all of the barons, Assur is the most feared. We know little about him, save that he is the favored of the Lord of Terror, and that he is enchanted with the Glyph of Invincibility.”

“You can summon demons, correct?” Wulfgar asked. “Then can you summon monsters of your own to fight them?”

Sarnakyle shook his head. “My magic is not what it once was. When Bartuc, the Warlord of Blood, attacked the city of Viz-jun, we Vizjerei led the smaller clans into battle, believing that the demons we could summon, combined with the elemental magic of the lesser clans, would easily destroy the army of Bartuc.

“For centuries, we had summoned the creatures with ease, thinking that we could control them. At the siege, we discovered that for all these centuries we had been misled. The demons we summoned turned on us, savaging our own lines. When we attempted to banish them, we could not. If it had not been for the lesser clans, the city would have fallen on the first day. We had ten times the numbers of Bartuc’s army, and a third of us died in the siege, most lost not because of the forces of the Warlord, but because of our own summonings.

“After the siege, we of the Vizjerei were shattered. Most of the clan lords, such as I, began to wander, trying to rediscover what was real. I have spent the last two years relearning the elemental magic that saved us, but I am not nearly as powerful as I once thought myself. We cannot fight Assur with demons.”

Tyrael nodded. “Lord Sarnakyle is correct. You must rely on your own resources in this fight. If at all possible, however, you must not let Assur take the town. This could be the most important battle ever fought in the mortal realm.”

“I don’t understand,” Siggard said.

“Heaven and Hell have warred for millennia, but only recently have the forces of darkness taken an interest in the mortal realm. The realm used to be protected from the higher and lower planes, but the Prime Evils have used the Vizjerei to weaken that protection. If they can establish a foothold and keep it, then they will have a place that the forces of light cannot besiege, from which they can assault the very gates of Heaven. That is why they sent Assur; with him, they are certain they will be victorious.”

“How can we fight him?” Sarnakyle said.

“You can try to kill him,” Tyrael said. “Perhaps there is one among you who might succeed. But there is little chance of victory along that path. Instead, you should destroy his army. If you can drive it back, we will win this battle.”

Tilgar looked down, his face ashen. “I was once told by a seer that I was touched by fate, but I do not wish to fight Assur in single combat.” He raised his head to gaze at Tyrael. “And what happens to us if we lose?”

“An eternity of darkness,” Tyrael stated calmly. “And that is why they must not take this place.”

10

BATTLE



Always respect the purity of battle. For only in the heat of combat are all pretenses of nobility and quality stripped away, replaced by survival and death.

—Leoric of Khanduras, *The Craft of War*

As Siggard and Sarnakyle walked out of the castle, Siggard paused and struggled to don a shining coat of mail, a parting gift from Earl Tilgar. At last the byrnie settled into place, and Sarnakyle passed him his black cloak. As they walked, they heard the whistling of arrows and the screams of dying demons.

Siggard broke into a jog. “It has already begun in earnest.” He didn’t even bother to look if the wizard was following, but instead drew his sword. The runes on Guthbreht’s blade writhed as though they had a new life.

Sarnakyle finally caught up to him. “You are that anxious for your revenge?” he asked, then added, “Do not let your fury undo you.”

Siggard stopped before the rough-hewn stairs to the wall and turned to face Sarnakyle. “Assur destroyed my village, my family, and my world. There will be blood for blood.”

With that, he ran up the hoary stone steps, Guthbreht’s song becoming overpowering in his ears. As he crested the wall, he looked down into the roiling mass that had surrounded the town. The horde seemed almost infinite, despite the constant bombardment from the catapults, a rain of boulders that crushed all it touched. For a moment there was a silence as the demonic ranks surged under the wall.

Then the sun set.

There was a great roar from the monstrous army, and it rushed forward. The smaller dog creatures began to scale the wall, leaping from crevice to crevice with their claws. Guthbreht took two of the creatures as they reached the top, splitting their heads like overripe melons. Still, a mass of the monsters leapt over the battlement, landing within the Entsteigian ranks with a shrill shriek.

A rush of flame singed Siggard’s side, and the charred corpse of one of the demons fell beside him. “Somebody has to watch your back,” Sarnakyle shouted, as even more of the foe poured over the wall.

Siggard screamed an ancient battle cry and advanced, gutting one of the monsters before it even knew he was there. Another leapt at him, axe at the ready, only to have Siggard strike, cutting the creature's head in half and spraying brains onto the stone floor.

There was a nearby cry, as housecarls struggled against a larger group of demons. With a shout of rage, Siggard charged, scattering the creatures and killing two.

And still the foe flooded over into the ranks like a foul sludge.

Siggard found himself strangely separated from the battle, watching himself act. There was no longer any thought in his actions. He and the sword acted in concert, as though they had always belonged together. As the demons came over the wall, the blade greeted them with joyous song, spilling guts and black blood wherever it struck. Time itself became meaningless, and soon he could remember nothing before the fighting.

He was beyond exhaustion. Somehow, he knew that Earl Tilgar had joined the fray with more of his housecarls, heard the man's hoarse war cries echo out over the wall. Although he was not certain how, he was aware of Sarnakyle sending spell after spell into the masses, the wizard protected by a ring of guards. As the red-tinged moon rose into the starry sky, the fetid stench of blood and death filled the air.

And then, abruptly, the demons stopped.

Siggard stood at the wall, his blade and mail-coat covered in blood and gore. Somehow, during the battle he had shed his black cloak. He suddenly wondered where it was, and whether he would have to get a new one.

"Are you all right?" Sarnakyle panted, stepping over several bodies towards him. "Are you uninjured?"

Siggard nodded. "I took no wound."

"That must have been the first wave," Earl Tilgar stated, leaning against the wall nearby, cleaning blood from his sword. "How long did that last?"

Siggard shrugged. "I've lost track." When he looked down, he saw vague shapes moving in the darkness, but nothing else.

"I'll try to get some light down there," Sarnakyle said, holding out his hand and chanting softly. A bolt of lightning split the air, landing just outside the wall. In the flash of light Siggard saw the still-roiling landscape, a pile of bodies lying beside the wall.

Siggard blinked, suddenly noting the unnatural silence. "What happened to the catapults?"

“They ran out of boulders a while ago,” Tilgar replied. The earl then turned to one of his housecarls. “Have lit bundles of wood lowered down the wall. We need to be able to see more than the moon will allow.”

As the soldiers carried out Tilgar’s commands, Siggard wished Assur himself would attack, scaling the wall so that he could strike at the monster that killed his family. In that moment, Siggard did not care about the archdemon’s enchanted glyph, or whether he himself would survive the battle. He shook his head clear of these thoughts to look over the battlement, the bottom now illuminated by flickering flames.

“Here they come again!” came a cry from the north, and Siggard looked over the parapet. In the moonlight, the goat creatures were attacking, carrying giant ladders to the hoary stone.

“Poles to the ladders!” Tilgar ordered. “Don’t let them reach the top!”

Siggard joined the others in a desperate race to topple the ladders, long poles pushing them from the walls, demons screaming as they fell to their deaths, but for each ladder that fell, another took its place. Siggard came to one, only to have a grinning goat head rise before him. With a stroke of Guthbrecht, he sent the head flying, and then helped the pole-men knock over the ladder.

The whistling of arrows filled the air, and several of the housecarls fell. Siggard heard a grunting behind him, and he turned just in time to skewer a goat demon. Guthbrecht’s song surged through him, and he began a dance of death, every step leaving a dead monster.

“They’re gaining the wall!” came a shout, and Siggard turned to see a mass of demons scale the parapet close to Earl Tilgar. With a shout of rage, he charged. The first monster he cut down from behind. Another turned and attacked, and he first cut the creature’s club in half, and then spilled its intestines onto the parapet.

Somebody shouted a warning, and Siggard turned, his sword raised. A demon was running at him, screaming for vengeance. With a thrust he put Guthbrecht through the creature’s head, splattering pink and white brains onto a nearby guardsman. He withdrew his blade only to attack the mass of monsters again in earnest.

Three more goat creatures fell to his sword, and then it became quiet, Guthbrecht’s song still throbbing in Siggard’s head. Tilgar looked up, the earl’s mail-coat torn and so blood-soaked that it no longer shone in the torchlight, yet little of the blood was his own. “Once again, I owe you a debt of thanks,” Tilgar said. “You just saved my life. If you ever have need, come to me or my family, and we will see to you.”

“If we survive this, I’ll redeem your pledge.”

Something twigged at Siggard’s mind, though, something important that he should be

remembering. But the only thing he could liken this situation to was Blackmarch, and that was a stand-up battle rather than a siege.

“Where’s the third wave, do you suppose?” Tilgar asked.

Siggard shrugged, wiping sweat from his brow. How he was fending off exhaustion was beyond him, but he wasn’t going to complain about the blessing. “I’m happy for any break we can get.”

Tilgar smiled and nodded. He turned to a housecarl. “Have these bodies flung from the wall, and see what can be done about the blood. If we get attacked again, we’ll be in greater danger of breaking our necks from tripping over the slain and slipping in their gore than from the demons.”

“I am the favored Baron of the Lord of Terror!” came a bellowing roar from the demonic ranks. “You have seen the might of my army! Know now that I have many more ready for battle! I will give you a choice, pitiful mortals! If you give us the town now, only half of you will die! If you fight, none of you will survive! Give me your answer!”

Tilgar rose and stood by the wall. “It is you who will not survive, Assur, Baron of Hell! Know now that any one of us would rather die than serve you! Come to fight me, and I will kill you with my own hands!”

“You are a fool, little man, for no creature alive can slay me!” Assur cried. “All of you will die, mortals! For you have already lost!”

Even as the archdemon answered, Siggard’s stomach sank in realization. The battle at the wall had been a diversion . . .

“By all that’s holy, Tilgar, evacuate the town,” Siggard cried.

Tilgar turned to him in shock. “Surely you aren’t going to believe this foul . . .”

Suddenly, from the keep there was the hiss of arrows, and almost half of the soldiers still on the wall fell, struck down by the deadly bolts. A great roaring came up from the demonic ranks as they surged forward, bearing more ladders.

“The Hiddens took the keep while we weren’t looking,” Siggard said. “Give the signal to evacuate. This battle is lost!”

Tilgar gave Siggard a look of horror, his face pale as a ghost. Then he turned to the housecarl and nodded. The soldier raised a horn and blared several notes.

“Siggard, Sarnakyle, you are coming with me,” Tilgar ordered. “The city guard knows what to do now.”

“Are you sure we aren’t needed here?” Sarnakyle asked, stepping forward. Siggard turned to see the wizard’s face was flushed with sweat, the man swaying from exhaustion.

“Any man who stays on the wall now dies,” Tilgar said, motioning to the men around him with his mace of office. The blue-clad soldiers were busy knocking over the ladders and loosing arrows on the keep. “The guards know what they must do, and they are all ready to make the sacrifice. We now have a sacred trust to the innocents in this town. They have already been taken into the tunnels. We must ensure that they are not followed.”

Siggard nodded, and looked towards the demonic ranks. “This isn’t over,” he vowed, speaking above the hissing of arrows. With that, he and Sarnakyle followed the earl down, trying not to look back at the brave men on the wall, who knew that they would die that night but continued fighting regardless.



Tilgar led them through the maze of streets, Sarnakyle quickly snagging something from an abandoned shop as they walked. The sounds of the fighting had grown faint, although the arrows still flew overhead.

Finally, they came to a rough stone building in the town square. Outside stood Hunfrith, waiting impatiently, a sword in his trembling hand. “All of the remaining housecarls are inside,” he said. “The King’s Men have elected to stay and fight.”

Tilgar shook his head. “The loss of life is wasteful, but it will buy us some time. Let us go.”

As Hunfrith turned, something swooped out of the shadows. Siggard raised his sword, a cold sweat running down his back. One of those shadowy *things* from Blackmarch had arrived, and from its strange form emerged razor sharp claws.

“Go!” Sarnakyle shouted, raising his hand and uttering an incantation. A bolt of fire exploded from his palm, splashing into the creature to no effect. Then Siggard struck, slashing out with Guthbreht while shouting a war cry. As he moved, he was aware of Tilgar and Hunfrith dashing into the building.

The thing recoiled as Guthbreht touched it, and Siggard struck again and again, until the strange monster fell back and dissolved into the darkness. Whether it was dead or just mending its wounds, Siggard did not know. Regardless, he was certain the time had come to flee.

Siggard backed into the building, followed by Sarnakyle, who closed and barred the door

behind them. He jumped as a hand touched his shoulder, nearly striking out with Guthbrecht, but something in the sword's song stopped him. "Come, the way is clear," Earl Tilgar's voice said, and he and Sarnakyle turned to find themselves facing a large staircase leading into the earth.

Tilgar led them down, a torch in his hand, and Siggard soon lost track of the number of steps they descended. When they got to the bottom, they found themselves in a large, torchlit tunnel. Deep in the tunnel they could hear a multitude of hushed but fading voices, as though a large number of people were moving away.

"Come with me," Tilgar said, and he took several steps forward. Then he wrenched one of the torches from the wall. There was a great roar from the earth, and several tons of stone fell down the staircase, sealing it.

"Now they cannot follow," the earl said, and led them into the tunnel. "These passages have been here since the earliest days of the town," he said, motioning to the rocky gray walls. His pale face flickered in the torchlight. "Recently, they were expanded into an escape route, and several of them were sealed off. This will take us well into the west, where we can begin to make our way to the capital. Hopefully, the archdemon will be too busy in Brennor to stop us."

"When were they evacuated?" Siggard asked. "There have to be ten thousand people in the town."

"We started evacuating people shortly after your warning," Tilgar replied, quickening the pace. "We had them wait in the tunnel, to avoid revealing its existence. A quarter of the housecarls went with them, just in case the tunnel was discovered. The signal I sent was the one to begin moving people out of the passage, not into it."

How long they walked, Siggard could not be certain. Deep in the musky earth, without sun, moon, or stars, he had no way of measuring time, and with his deepening fatigue, the entire experience seemed like a waking dream.

Suddenly, from behind them there was a dull rumbling, like a distant thunder. Earl Tilgar smiled grimly. "I do not think Brennor will be the fortress Assur had hoped," he said, but he would not say more.

Finally, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Dawn's amber glow broke through the gloomy earth, and they emerged from a hill into the cloudless morn. Siggard shivered at the morning chill, and Sarnakyle pressed something warm and soft into his hand.

"I noticed you had lost your cloak during the fighting," Sarnakyle said. "So I got you a new one. If I can find the shopkeeper, I will pay him for it."

Siggard nodded wearily and pulled on his new black cloak, wrapping it about himself like a second skin. He looked around to see a large group of milling people, people from

every age, craft, and discipline. They stood behind a cluster of hills that Siggard surmised must be large enough to hide them from the sight of any watcher from Brennor.

Siggard climbed the hill and peered over the rocky tor. As he looked toward the distant town, his eyes widened. The walls of Brennor were no more, lying in a crumbled heap. The castle still stood, surrounded by the abandoned town, and the windows of the keep shone with an unearthly red light.

When he came down, Tilgar smiled in grim satisfaction. "The final orders of the city guard were to bring down the walls. One of Brennor's great secrets is that any enemy who takes the place will only gain a small fortress. The King of Entsteig has never allowed one of his own towns to be used against him."

Tilgar turned to a housecarl, asking if Wulfgar still lived. When the answer came back as a negative, the earl shook his head sadly and began to give marching orders.

"Siggard, I would be grateful if you would stay with us," Tilgar said, placing his hand on the warrior's shoulder. "Your sword arm would be a great help."

Siggard shook his head. "I'm going to rest here, and then go back to Brennor at nightfall."

Sarnakyle startled. "Are you mad, my friend? What can you possibly hope to accomplish against a demonic horde?"

"I'm going to kill Assur," Siggard replied coldly.

"You know what that glyph means," Sarnakyle insisted. "Assur is invincible."

Siggard smiled grimly. "The murderer of my family is in Brennor, so I will seek him out and destroy him if I can. I know he can't possibly expect me."

"If you do this, you will probably die, Siggard," Tilgar said. "Are you certain that's what you want?"

Siggard affixed the earl with a cold stare. "Everything I love is already dead. If I must perish trying to avenge it, then so be it. But one way or another, I swear that Assur will die at my hands by daybreak."

11

RECKONINGS



While an army can accomplish more than one man, there are times when an individual can achieve that which a legion cannot.

—Tobarius of Kehjistan, *Philosophies*

Siggard strode through the night, his hand resting on Guthbreoht's hilt under his black cloak. He was careful not to walk too fast, lest he attract unwanted attention from the castle of Brennor.

The refugees had left around midday, Earl Tilgar giving Siggard explicit instructions of where they would be going, and to find them if he survived. Sarnakyle had offered to help, but Siggard had refused. The last thing he wanted to do was endanger the wizard's life, particularly when Earl Tilgar would have a far greater need of magic protection than he.

After the refugees had departed, Siggard had cleaned the caked blood and gore from his sword and mail-coat, checking both for rust. He had oiled the sword, and blackened the mail with coal, removing as much of the shine as he could. Then he had waited for sunset.

Siggard finally reached what was left of the gates of Brennor. The wall truly had crumbled, and the air reeked of death. From the faint light of the castle windows, he made out bodies lying throughout the rubble. No doubt the crows and carrion eaters had eaten their fill during the day.

He made sure his cowl properly covered his face, and began to walk through the town. Most of the buildings he passed were scarred and hollowed out from the last of the fighting, and the corpses of guardsmen lay sprawled over the street. He slowly picked his way across the carnage, careful not to disturb anything.

A flickering fire caught his attention, and he stepped back into the shadows. Two of the goat creatures passed by, one carrying a torch, the other a severed head. As they passed, Guthbreoht's song became insistent, but Siggard held back. "Soon," he whispered. "Soon there will be vengeance."

He waited for another moment, and then took to the street again, carefully keeping in the darkness. He was certain that there would be guards at the castle door, but an idea was beginning to form in his mind. A vision of Tylwulf returned to the forefront of his

memory, and he smiled grimly. The traitor would be helpful, after all.

But he still had to get into the castle.

He wound his way through the rubble of the town, sliding again into the shadows as he came to a campfire in the middle of one of the town squares. Several demons sat by the blaze, chortling and speaking in some guttural tongue. One of them held up a severed human arm and gnawed on the flesh.

Siggard forced down a wave of nausea and turned aside, slipping farther into the darkness. The reckoning would come soon enough. He wrapped his cloak tighter about him and began to wind his way around the group at the fire, hoping he wouldn't attract their attention.

Finally, the fire lay in the distance, and he walked onward through the maze of crumbling streets, keeping the castle firmly in sight.

Before he could react, one of the dog creatures rounded the corner ahead of him. The creature rose to its full height of four feet and glared.

"What you want?" it demanded.

"Go away," Siggard growled, standing perfectly still.

"You tell me what you want or me call guards!" the creature shriled. "Now what you want?"

"I've come to serve lord Assur," Siggard answered gruffly. "Now are you going to get out of my way, or am I going to have to hurt you?"

"You come with me," the dog-man said. "Me take you to others."

Siggard rolled his eyes theatrically. "Very well."

"Baron Assur need many men," the creature rambled, leading him to the castle door. "He need to call more demons, need more power. You give body, you give soul, you give power!"

The door appeared unguarded, but as they approached, two Hiddens emerged from the darkness, one on each side of the way. The dog-man spoke a few words, and they moved aside. Siggard followed the creature into the castle courtyard, taking careful note of where the Hiddens had placed themselves.

"You serve Baron Assur well!" the demon crooned, leading him past another pair of dog-men guarding the entrance to the keep. "You give him good soul!"

Siggard tried to ignore the creature's demented grumblings as he followed it through the passageways. As he walked, his hand flexed on Guthbreoht's leather hilt.

"Where is Lord Assur?" Siggard demanded.

"He in room with many maps," the dog-man said. "You no go there. Overseer take care of you."

Siggard stopped and looked down the corridor. It was empty on both sides, as far as the eye could see.

"Why you stopping?! You follow me!"

Siggard smiled coldly and struck. Guthbreoht flashed in the darkness as he drew and slashed in a single stroke, sending the dog-man's head thudding against the wall. Siggard began to walk purposefully down the corridor, hiding his sword under his cloak. He knew exactly where the war room was from here.

He made his way through the corridor, passing several demons who appeared to think that since he had gotten in, he must have some legitimate business. He smiled inwardly as he came to the door of the war room, a red light flowing from the crack between the hinges. It was seemingly unguarded, but Siggard knew better.

As quickly as he could, he slashed the air with his sword, and the heads of two Hiddens fell to the ground, the bodies appearing and crumpling shortly afterwards. He looked around again to ensure that there were no other demons in sight, and then opened the door and stepped in.

The huge form of Assur loomed before him, but the archdemon's back was turned. A second shadowy thing turned toward him, however, as if realizing he was not possessed, and charged, talons outstretched. As lithe as a cat, Siggard disemboweled the monster, and the creature faded, screaming in agony. Guthbreoht's song began to grow in strength.

Assur turned, fixing Siggard with angry black eyes. The archdemon drew a giant sword of his own from a sheath at the side of his loincloth.

"You are foolish, mortal," Assur rumbled. "No weapon wielded by the living can harm me, not even a sword of Velund."

Siggard held up Guthbreoht and began to speak, every word filling him with rage. "I am Siggard of Bear's Hill, whose family and village you slaughtered. Know now that I died inside the day my wife did, and my soul is empty of all but a lust for revenge. I will have my vengeance upon you, for you fight a dead man this day!"

Siggard roared in fury and attacked, his assault pushing the demon back. The two swords clashed with incredible speed, crying out with a ringing of tormented steel. Assur's face

was a mask of amusement, but it quickly turned to anger as the onslaught continued.

“Die in truth, mortal!” Assur bellowed, counterattacking. He raised his blade and brought it down with all his might, Siggard barely blocking the deadly stroke. He thrust forward, forcing Siggard to dive out of the way. Snarling, Assur rounded on him, attacking again. The power of the blows drove Siggard back, every parry numbing his arm until he thought that it would take superhuman strength to defeat the demon.

Then Guthbreoht’s song filled his spirit, and Siggard began to laugh. With an ancient battle cry, he lunged forward, striking the sword from Assur’s hand. As the demon recoiled in shock, Siggard thrust, impaling the glyph and driving the steel deep into the monster’s flesh.

Assur screamed, a cry of rage, fear, and pain. Blood poured from the wound as Siggard wrenched his sword, bringing the archdemon to its knees. With a cruel yank, Siggard freed his blade.

“Now it is over,” he said, and with a great sweeping blow struck Assur’s head off. It flew across the room, thudding against the wall and falling to the floor. As Siggard watched, the demonic face melted into the visage of a middle-aged man, a look of horror painted across his face. Siggard turned to the body to watch it topple to the ground. Silently, it changed into a human corpse in tattered robes.

He walked from the war room and strode down the corridors, exhausted. A pair of demons approached him, but even as he turned they gave a shrill cry of agony and exploded into flames. He stepped over to one of the windows and looked out across the ruins of the town. Brennor was alive with small blazes, dancing fires running around like creatures in torment and then vanishing.

“You slew our master!” came a cry behind him. He spun, sword at the ready, to find a guardsman with mad bloodshot eyes lunging at him. Siggard sidestepped casually and slashed, cutting the possessed man down. Then he continued on his way out of the castle. If there were still some demonic forces in the town, so be it; he had his revenge at last.



Siggard sat on a hill near the crumbled walls of Brennor, watching the sunrise. He shook his head, trying to understand why he still felt empty and unfulfilled. His family had been avenged; surely that was enough to give him some peace, wasn’t it?

And there were some other things that he had only just begun to think about. Little aspects of the last few days that had been nagging him, but he hadn’t had time to consider. Horrible things, that could only lead to one terrifying conclusion.

“You’ve done surprising well,” a familiar voice said.

“Tyrael,” Siggard said, raising his head to gaze upon the placid face of the gray-clad archangel. “I thought you would come.”

Tyrael nodded. “After Brennor fell and you stayed behind, I had to see what you would do. You should be proud; you’ve rid the world of a great evil.”

Siggard tried to smile, but he found he just couldn’t feel happy. “I’ve been thinking about some things. My missing days, my lack of appetite, how I was untroubled by wounds during the battle, those sorts of things.”

Tyrael sat down on a rock and pursed his lips. “And?”

“Assur’s glyph was absolute, wasn’t it? No living hand could slay him.”

“That is true.”

Siggard wrapped his cloak around him and tried to stave off a chill. “When did I die, then?”

“At Blackmarch,” Tyrael replied. “You were stabbed in the back by a Hidden during the last crush of the battle. The blade sheared through your mail-coat and slew you.”

“And Heaven brought me back,” Siggard added.

Tyrael shook his head. “No, we didn’t. You did that all by yourself.”

“I don’t understand.”

Tyrael leaned forward. “Very rarely, perhaps but twice in ten millennia, there is a soul so full of life that death cannot claim it. I have seen it only once before. All I did was direct you to where you could do some good. Your timing, I am pleased to say, was excellent.”

“Am I a ghost then, or a ghoul?”

“No,” Tyrael replied thoughtfully. “It is difficult to say what you are. Death cannot claim you, but neither can life. You are trapped in between, until you find some way to rest your incredible vitality. And then, perhaps, death will find you.”

“I suppose now that I’ve avenged my family, I can rest,” Siggard said. “That’s the way the ghost stories go, isn’t it?”

Tyrael shook his head sadly. “You will not find your rest through revenge, no matter how hard you try. Vengeance is an act of hatred, and hatred never brings peace. No, if you are to discover some peace, you must do it through an act of love. I think you will

find it, although it may take you centuries.”

“Lovely,” Siggard grumbled.

“Do not feel too badly about it,” Tyrael said. “The way I see it, you have a choice. You can search for some act of love that will bring you peace, or wander the earth and help us in our fight against Hell.” The archangel leaned back and regarded Siggard warmly. “You have quite a gift, you know. The only hand that could possibly still your heart is your own. This was but one battle in a much larger war. The Prime Evils now want dominion over the mortal realms, and they will continue to seek it. You would be an ideal soldier against them.”

“It is a great deal to think about,” Siggard said.

Tyrael smiled and began to fade away. “Do not worry,” his voice echoed. “You have all the time in the world. May the light go with you, my friend.”

Siggard sat for a while, considering. Then he stood, stretched, and began to walk back towards Earl Tilgar and his men. He had a long road ahead of him, but at least he knew his first destination.

EPILOGUE



Who can see the plans of Heaven or Hell?

Do not seek to know the unknowable, for fate will

reveal all when the time is right.

—Gesinius of Kehjistan, *Tenets of Zakarum*

The destruction of the archdemon Assur at Brennor in the year 302 would prove to be one of the most significant early victories of the Sin War, and the lands of Entsteig remained untroubled by the forces of Hell for at least two centuries afterwards.

Earl Tilgar reclaimed the town and destroyed the few demonic forces that had survived

Assur's death. In the following years, after weathering a devastating famine that cost many lives, he founded the dynasty that ruled Entsteig until the capture and binding of the Prime Evils themselves, some six hundred years later.

Sarnakyle traveled in the western lands for another five years, finally returning to Kehjistan and leading the Vizjerei back into the practice of elemental magic. His death is not recorded, as twenty years after returning to his homeland, he again began to wander, and never returned. He was remembered as "the Red Wizard," and to this day the Vizjerei believe that in a time of great troubles he will come back to lead them.

Siggard remained with Earl Tilgar for several years to help rebuild Brennor. He then began to roam the world, fighting in many of the battles of the Sin War. It was said that he fought in battle after battle over the centuries, although what is truth and what is the bards' fiction is impossible to tell. After some five hundred years, however, he disappears from the sagas and epics. Whether Siggard finally found his peace or just grew tired of the conflict, none can say.

However, it is still held among the Entsteigians that if one goes to the ruins of a certain village on the Night of Souls, one will see a lonely figure standing a silent vigil in the mist, seeking a glimpse of loved ones long gone to dust.

AFTERWORD



This has been a very involved book, and I could not have done it alone. There are dozens of people to thank, from composers and authors who have provided inspiration over the years to the editor and agent who have helped me secure this opportunity. There are eight people who deserve special mention, however: Marco Palmieri, the editor at Pocket Books who gave me the chance, Jennifer Jackson, the agent who took me on, and the six tolerant souls who read the pre-submission draft and gave me some very helpful comments—Frances Maxwell, Trudy A. Goold, Arlene Marks, Gordon Brown, David Marks, and Dennis McKiernan.

Somehow, though, I never figured that I'd start my professional writing career with a *Diablo* book. But here I am, and proud to be here.

The world of *Diablo* is one of those magical places that grabs you. The game itself was a dungeon romp, with some nice side-quests to keep things interesting. When everybody was playing cooperatively, the multiplayer game was the best I'd ever seen. But it wasn't even the multiplayer game play that stood out the most; rather, it was the incredible and vast mythology behind the world.

The *Diablo* mythos is an epic one. It is a world where the forces of Heaven and Hell war on the mortal plane, and where mankind stands with them is never entirely clear. It is a deeply religious mythology, based on the war between Satan and God in the Anglo-Saxon book of Genesis. And, as such, it is a background where one can deal with moral, philosophical, and theological issues.

To be quite blunt, it is a joy to be able to write in this wonderful, but extremely dark realm. Unlike many other licensed worlds, where so little is left to the imagination that an author feels fettered, this one is wondrous and terrifying, with plenty of nooks and crannies to explore.

And, to be the author of the very first piece of *Diablo* fiction is an immense honor. Along with that honor, however, comes a deep responsibility. The first author must set a tone for the overall series, filling out bits and pieces of the world where necessary, and maintaining both the terror and wonder. The first story must present the world in such a way that the reader wants to come back, no matter who is telling the story.

I have tried to make this the best book possible, and I think it is one I can be proud of. I hope that those who read this will want to return once more to this amazing world where demons and angels walk among mortal men.

Robert B. Marks

September 2000

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Robert B. Marks is a graduate of the Medieval Studies program at Queen's University, Ontario. He is both a writer and editor, and his current projects include a fulllength fantasy novel, an anthology of Beowulf stories titled *Beowulf's Legacy*, and the first issue of a web magazine on amateur fantasy titled *Dragons and Demons*

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(www.angelfire.com/zine/DragonsAndDemons).

When he isn't writing, he can be found painting fantasy miniatures and killing monsters on Battle.net under the alias of "Garwulf."

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