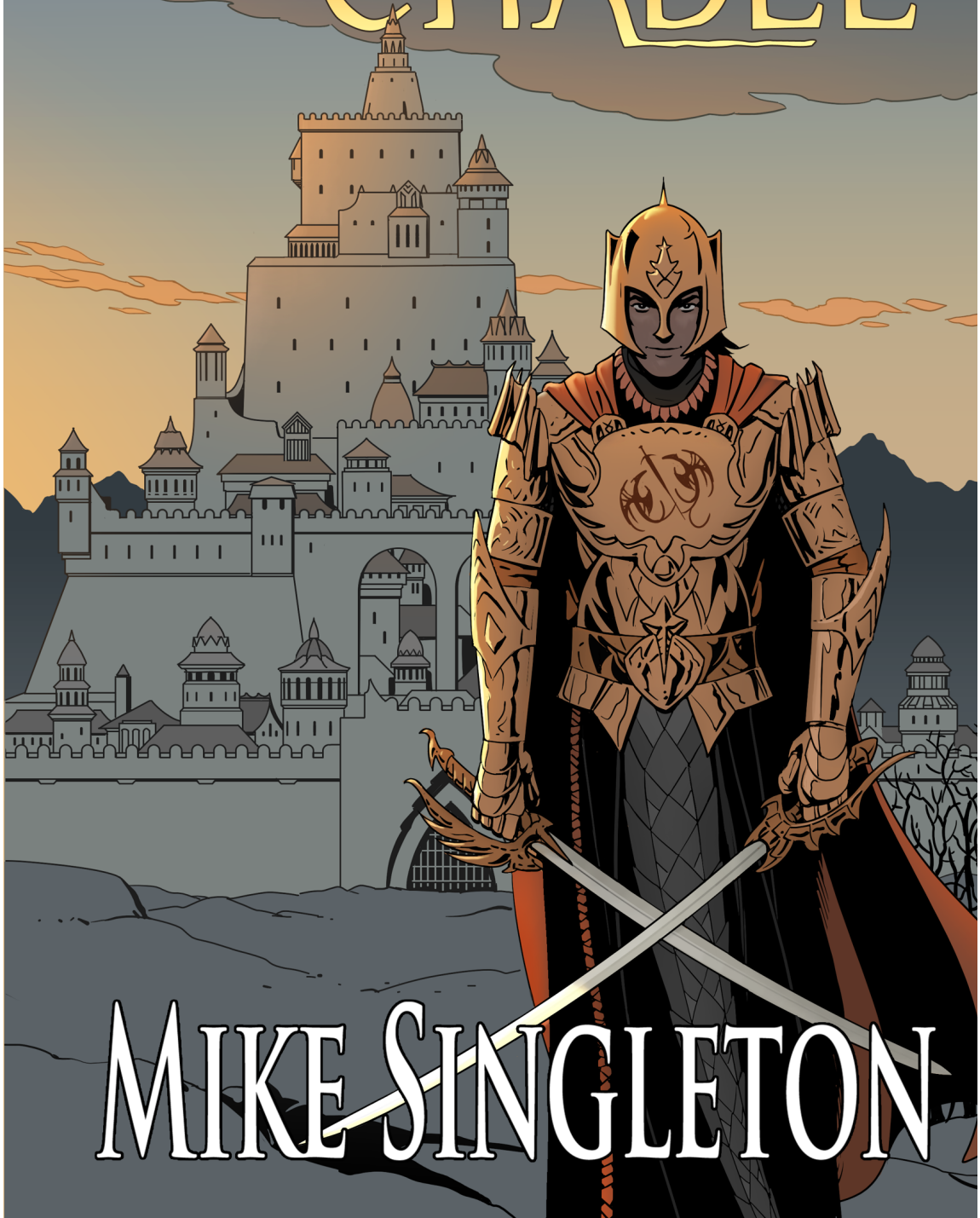


Lords of Midnight:
THE CITADEL



MIKE SINGLETON

the lords of midnight
the citadel

By mike singleton

CHAPTER ONE

THE MINSTREL



As the smouldering dusk fell, the Citadel of Xajorkith towering above them on the opposite bank seemed lit by a great fire in the west. Luxor the Moonprince gazed up at the Great Tower where his banner fluttered in the gentle breeze. Already the torches were being lit and the slender windows of the Tower were filled with a bright glow. He turned to his grandson.

"Well, Corleth, I would not yearn for adventure too much. Only fools seek danger eagerly."

"Grandfather!" said the boy in exasperation, "I only want a little excitement. Father was younger than me when he set forth to destroy the Ice Crown."

"Those were desperate times, Corleth. If that sort of excitement comes your way, I dare say it will be as unexpected as it is unwelcome. Come, let us return now before the feast starts without us," said Luxor.

The pair set off again along the riverbank towards the Bridge of Whispers, a stone's throw upstream. A last caravan of carts and wagons and packhorses was making its way across the bridge and through Dawngate into the city. As they approached the bridge, Luxor noticed a ragged, barefoot boy sitting on the stone

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wall, cradling a lute. Beside him on the wall was a cap with a handful of copper coins in it. The boy looked dejected but as Luxor and Corleth drew closer, he looked towards them, gave a dazzling smile and began to play. After a few notes, he began to sing.

Luxor paused to listen. The boy's voice was pure and golden and his song swelled out and filled the twilight air. Then the song was over and the air seemed empty. Luxor walked up to the boy, who slid off the wall onto his feet, cap in hand.

"Can you spare a copper, sir?" said the minstrel boy.

Luxor peered into the boy's cap, five small coins lay within.

"That seems niggardly pay for such song, lad. This is more fitting. I'm sure."

Saying so, the Moonprince dropped a gold piece into the cap. The boy gazed at it in astonishment. Then, coming to his senses, he picked it up and bit it. Finally convinced he looked up at Luxor, puzzled.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but surely you've made some mistake. This is a gold piece!"

"No mistake my lad, and there'll be another three if you care to play and sing at the Moonprince's feast tonight."

"I'm hardly dressed for a feast sir," said the boy.

"Some new clothes, a hot bath, a good meal and a bed for the night in the Great Tower, that's the rest of the bargain," said Luxor.

"I don't mind new clothes sir, nor meal nor bed - that's plenty generous - but a bath?"

Luxor laughed.

"You never know, you might even enjoy it," said the Moonprince.

The feast was in honour of Luxor's old friend, Lord Blood, who was visiting Xajorkith with his eldest son, Arin. The feast was in the open air, in the courtyard of the Great Tower. There were seven at the Moonprince's table. To Luxor's right was his son, Morkin, then Morkin's wife, Tarithel the Fey, then Tarithel's father, Araleth, Lord of Dreams. To Luxor's left was Lord Blood, then Arin and finally Morkin and Tarithel's son Corleth. At the other tables, a hundred guests or more were seated.

Luxor and Lord Blood, both white-haired now with age, talked of old battles, of how they had stood side by side on the Plains of Blood to hold back Doomdark's foul hordes for just a few days and gain time for Midnight to be roused, of the desperate retreat to Shimeril with the enemy at their heels, of the long march north to Ushgarak and the great battle there that sealed Doomdark's fate.

One by one, Prince Morkin, Tarithel and the Lord of Dreams were drawn into these reminiscences. Inevitably, the conversation turned to the Icemark and the war against Shareth the Heartstealer. For once, Lord Blood fell silent while the others told their tales. Tarithel still shuddered as she remembered her long struggle through the dark labyrinth of tunnels beneath the Icemark, searching for a way under the frozen wastes that ringed and guarded Kahangrorn, the Heartstealer's great fortress.

Luxor and Araleth spoke of the many battles on their way north, of the rallying of dwarves and giants and fey to their banners as they heaped defeat on

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the Empress's armies and of the great battle when Shareth herself was slain.

Morkin's memories were vaguer, but he spoke of his joy and confusion when Tarithel found him and broke Shareth's spell with a single kiss. And then they all spoke of the long journey back through the Frozen Empire to the Gate of Varenorn and Midnight.

Arin and Corleth, having heard these tales a dozen times or more, or so it seemed to them, paid little heed and fell to boasting to each other of their moments of glory in the hunt, in sword practice and in courting. Meanwhile, in the centre of the courtyard, there were acrobats, jugglers, a dancing bear, fire-eaters, clowns, dancing girls. Finally, the minstrel boy came on, washed and scrubbed and wearing fine new clothes. Quietly, almost unnoticed, the boy began to play. Then, when he sang, his voice soared like a lark and a hush fell in the courtyard as people stopped talking and turned to listen.

The minstrel's songs were old ballads that everyone knew well but his golden voice gave them each a new lustre. The boy's final song, however, was different. The melody was strange and haunting, the words spoke of cities and kings that no one had heard of.

"...Then he plucked the glittering ring from the sand
And took the Eye of the Moon in his hand.
A ring for his wedding, a wife for his bed,
Sherehar and Asim now could be wed."

It was the end of the song. The gathered throng broke into rapturous applause, but Luxor looked startled. The boy blushed at such applause and then bowed before his audience. As everyone clapped and shouted, the Moonprince quietly slipped away from the feast.

Luxor waited by the players' entrance for the boy to return. When he did so, Luxor simply beckoned him to follow, then silently led him a winding way through torchlit corridors and up spiralling stairs to a small, terrace garden high in the Great Tower. The garden was deserted and lit only by the moon and stars. Luxor sat down on a stone bench close to the tower wall and motioned the boy to sit beside him. From here, you could look out over the river to the Plains of Corelay beyond and Luxor would often come here to sit and watch in peace.

"Your singing was wondrous yet I do not even know your name, boy," said the Moonprince.

"I am Derim, my Lord," said the boy.

"Tell me, Derim. You are not of these parts, are you?"

"No sir. I have wandered through many lands."

"I guessed as much. Midnight has been a land of peace and plenty now for many years and I do not let my people go ragged and hungry, even wandering minstrels. And your speech has strange accents. Where are you from then, Derim?" enquired the Moonprince.

"I am of Coromand, my Lord," said the boy.

"Coromand! That is a faraway land indeed - or so I hear."

"Very far, my Lord, and none I would return to."

"What befell you there?" asked the Moonprince.

"I was apprenticed to a songmaster and we travelled from town to town. Each time my singing earned him enough for a flagon of wine, he got drunk and then

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beat me for no reason, so I ran away."

Derim loosened his shirt and turned his bare back towards Luxor. Even in the moonlight, Luxor could still see the old scars on the boy's back. He winced.

"So would I have," said Luxor, "Those are more like warrior's wounds. How long ago was that?"

"More than a year. I knew a song that told of the wars of the Moonprince and the melting of the Frozen Wastes and the opening of the land of Midnight to the world again and how beautiful and abundant and peaceful Midnight was. So I headed north out of Coromand and into the Blood March where I knew he'd never pursue me," said Derim. "I've been travelling ever since, stopping in each place for few days and then moving on before they grew bored of my songs."

"And that last song you sang, where did you learn that?" said Luxor.

"In Coromand, sir. The ballad of Sherehar and Asim is famous there. Did you not like it, sir?" said the boy, puzzled.

"The opposite, lad, quite the opposite. It was an astonishing song, especially the last verse."

"The last verse? That always makes the ladies reach for their handkerchiefs but - begging your pardon - I think it's a bit soppy. It would be much better if it ended with Asim bloodied and victorious in battle, his enemies cowering at his feet."

Luxor laughed.

"If only you knew!" said the Moonprince.

"Knew what sir?"

"Can you keep a secret, Derim?"

"Yes sir, my lips are sealed."

"Centuries ago, before Midnight had been sullied by Doomdark and trapped in endless winter, Midnight had a great war-ring to keep it safe. That was the Moon Ring and on it was set the most precious of jewels, the Eye of the Moon." Luxor opened the neck of his tunic. There, against his chest was a golden ring, hanging by a slender golden chain.

"This is the Moon Ring," he said. "I keep it with me all the time."

"But the Eye of the Moon is gone!" said Derim, grasping the mystery. "And that last verse of Sherehar is a clue to where it might be."

"Exactly. If your song be true, it seems the Eye of the Moon has been found again and set in another ring."

"It's true sir. A ring called the Eye of the Moon still lies in the King's Tower in Coromand. No one but the King himself is allowed to touch it."

"It would be better if none were allowed to touch it. When Asim took it from the sand, he held a thing more dangerous than any sword or lance. The Eye of the Moon lent dread power to the Moon Ring and doubtless will lend the same to any other ring in which it is set," said Luxor.

"How was the jewel lost sir?" asked Derim.

"By foolishness. Rarnor the Unlucky was Moonprince then. The Moon Ring has such power it should only be placed on a finger in times of war and great peril, but Rarnor was unlucky in love. One night, in frustration, he donned the Moon Ring to impress and enchant a pretty maiden. He did so with some success, but in the morning, when he woke, the maiden was gone and so was

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the Eye of the Moon, plucked from the ring on his finger as he slept. Neither maiden nor jewel were ever seen again."

"Will you try to get it back, now you know that it's been found?"

"I must," said Luxor, "I fear that the Eye of the Moon in the wrong hands could be turned against Midnight and put the land in the greatest of peril. And there is another reason too. The Eye gave the Moonprinces of old fleeting glimpses of things to come. I am growing old. Before I die, I would dearly love to know that this is a lasting peace that Midnight enjoys."

"When will you leave, sir?" said the boy.

"On the morrow! If a moment is not seized, it may slip from your grasp."

Luxor rose to his feet and went over to the battlement. He leant forward pointing.

"Look, Derim," he said.

The minstrel boy came to Luxor's side and peered down at the dark river. There, moored alongside a wooden jetty further upstream, was a beautiful, slender ship rocking gently as the current curled around it. In the moonlight, it seemed to the boy that it was made of silver.

"There lies the Cormorant, swiftest of my fleet," said the Moonprince.

"Tomorrow, bearing rich gifts for the King of Coromand, we'll set sail down the Imilvir towards the Last Mountains and the Blood March."

"Will you take me with you then?" asked the boy eagerly.

"Nay lad! You have done enough already and suffered many hardships to bring me this tale. Rest here, where there is laughter and joy. Besides, the minstrel to the Court of the Moonprince must stay here in Xajorkith and compose new ballads for my return."

"Minstrel to the court?" said the boy, suddenly a treble once more.

"If you will accept the post," said Luxor.

"Gladly, my Lord!" said Derim.

In the moonlight, Luxor did not notice the boy blush.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CORMORANT



Corleth paced the quarterdeck, his face flushed with anger.

"It is for the best," said Luxor quietly. "You are too young."

And you are far too old, thought Corleth but did not say it. He stopped and glared at his grandfather.

"Only yesterday you were warning me not to be over-eager for adventure but you and Lord Blood have been up half the night, happy as larks, plotting this expedition! You still thirst for adventure, Grandfather. Yet you will not let Arin and I quench our equal thirst. Is that fair, Grandfather?" said Corleth, impassioned.

Luxor paused for a moment, thinking. The boy's words had truth.

"Your father would be furious," said the Moonprince, stalling.

"Father is furious already. He says that you and Lord Blood are behaving like a pair of headstrong children and would that he were sailing to Coromand in your place."

"I know. He said as much to me," said Luxor, sighing.

"In any case, I have already asked him."

"What did he say?" asked Luxor, taken by surprise.

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"He said that I could go if I wished and you granted your permission."

"That was all?"

"No," said Corleth, hesitantly.

"What else? Tell me!"

Corleth looked embarrassed.

"He said that perhaps it would be better to have someone with a bit more sense accompany you on your journey."

The Moonprince laughed.

"He would say that! The wheel turns! Very well then, Corleth, you and Arin shall sail with us to Coromand. What say you, Lord Blood?"

Lord Blood turned from the rail where he had been watching provender being hauled up from the jetty.

"Eh?" he said, cupping his hand to his ear.

"What say you to Arin and Corleth joining us, Blood?" shouted Luxor.

Lord Blood smiled.

"Try stopping 'em and we'll be here forever arguing, that's what I say," he shouted back.

Corleth grinned and then hugged the Moonprince.

"Thanks, Grandfather, many thanks! You'll not regret it, I promise. I shall go to tell Arin."

Corleth broke away and ran off.

"Don't forget to pack some kit!" shouted Luxor after him.

Corleth turned briefly.

"It's packed already - and stowed down below," he added before rushing off again.

It was late afternoon before the Cormorant was finally ready to sail. A small crowd had gathered on the riverbank and on the jetty. Prince Morkin and Princess Tarithel had come to say their farewells.

"May your quest go well, Father," said Morkin, "Return swiftly and safe!"

"I shall, my son, I shall," said Luxor.

Then Luxor moved his hands behind his neck, unclasping something, and drew forth the Moon Ring on its golden chain. Smiling, he pressed it into Prince Morkin's hand.

"This must be in your keeping now, Morkin. Guard Midnight well whilst I am gone!" said the Moonprince.

"I feared you might give me the Moon Ring, Father. Take it with you. I beg of you. You must travel through wild and troubled lands to reach Coromand and, likely as not, there will be times when you will be glad of it," said Morkin.

"And leave Midnight unguarded? I could never do that!" said Luxor.

"These are times of peace. What threat can there be to guard against? Who knows? But ravenous wolves strike without warning."

"Have it as you will then, Father. I will guard Midnight well, be sure of that. Guard yourself well, Father!" said Prince Morkin.

Then, with fond embraces, Luxor, Corleth, Lord Blood and Arin, said their farewells to Morkin and Tarithel. As Morkin wrapped his arms around his son's shoulders, he whispered in his ear to take good care of himself and of his grandfather. Corleth smiled and nodded, then turned to join the others who

were already boarding the Cormorant.

The gangway was hauled on board. At a shout from the captain, the mooring ropes were loosed and the great sail unfurled. The light breeze rippled over the sail, shaking it out like a curtain at first, then catching it tight and filling it. To the cheers of the crowd, the Cormorant swung slowly out into the stream. Then, as if it knew, the breeze stiffened and the Cormorant gathered speed. To Corleth, leaning over the rail of the quarterdeck, the cheers of the crowd grew thin and distant, the figures on the jetty dwindled to specks and the great Citadel of Xajorkith slid away, its white towers gleaming like snow in the afternoon sun, its bright banners flying in the gathering wind.

The Imilvir meandered lazily across the Plains of Corelay before turning south towards the Last Mountains. The ship's crew knew the river well and the Cormorant made all speed, sailing by moonlight and starlight as well as by sun. By dawn of the next day, they had reached the Castle of Corelay and by noon they had raced through the breach that the Imilvir carved through the Last Mountains into Erifel and the Blood March. It was the first time that Corleth and Arin had ever journeyed beyond Midnight and their eyes were lit with excitement as they watched the gentle plains of Erifel glide past.

Without pause, the Cormorant sped through the Witherlands. By the third day, they had reached Glimormir, a lake so broad that Corleth and Arin fancied they had come to the Great Ocean already. As they sailed away from the rivermouth, the shoreline became a dwindling thread on the horizon until there was no land to be seen at all. The eye wearied of gazing at water without end for hour upon hour and when, as dusk grew nigh, the Isle of Immiel rose up on the horizon before them, a shout of joy came from all alike, from captain to sail-monkey.

The wind fell away to a soft breeze and the Cormorant drifted slowly towards the distant island. As the sun drew down in the west scattering golden fire upon the lake and the sky darkened in the east. Corleth spied a white swan against the ink blue sky above Immiel, winging swiftly towards them. Gradually, the swan drew closer until it was circling above them. Then, suddenly, the wind sprang up again. The sails filled and the Cormorant leapt forward, flying across the water. Above them, the swan turned and flew eastwards, as though leading them to the island now gilded by the setting sun.

The sun was blood-red in the west as they rounded the western tip of Immiel, the white swan still ahead of them. Tall trees lined the shore and the waves lapped against gentle beaches but, presently, the shoreline grew craggier and steeper until towering cliffs loomed over them. The wind grew stronger too, lashing the waves against the dark rocks and hurling the Cormorant along. The slender ship pitched and shuddered as it crashed through the swell. Standing on the fo'c'sle, beside the prow, Corleth gripped the rail tightly and laughed as the spray splashed over him. At his side, Arin was white and silent and tight-knuckled but stood his place even though there seemed a greater turmoil in his belly than in the thrashing waters below.

At length after they rounded a headland, an inlet came in sight. The captain, fearing the weather might worsen, steered the Cormorant towards it but the swan had already turned and was at the inlet already. The Cormorant

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hurtled between the rocks and cliffs but no more than a hundred yards into the inlet the waters calmed and the wind dropped away. The ship slowed and slid smoothly through unruffled waters. Arin, for one, breathed a sign of relief and a little colour came back to his cheeks.

Soon, the inlet gave way to a broad bay, a natural harbour. The mouth of the bay was still flanked by rocks and tall cliffs but at the far shore a golden strand sloped gently into the water. Another ship was already moored there, its sail furled.

The swan they had followed all the way circled at the shoreline and landed on the still waters just off the beach. The light was failing as they neared the shore. As they drew closer, Corleth and Arin spotted figures moving towards them along the beach, bearing torches and brightly coloured lanterns. Then a herald's voice hailed them from the shore.

"Luxor the Moonprince, Prince of Midnight, my lord Galahar, Lord of Immiel, King of Glimormir, bids thee welcome to the Golden Isle!"

"The Moonprince bids thee to thank the Lord of Immiel most kindly for his welcome!" came the loud reply.

The Cormorant hove to and dropped anchor. Then seven small boats pushed out from the shore, each with a lantern at the prow, and came alongside the Cormorant. Rope ladders were slung out over the rail and, one by one, the occupants of the rowing boats climbed aboard. The first to step on deck was a tall, slender fey clad in white and silver and blue. A golden circlet studded with sapphires sat upon his golden hair. Luxor was there to greet him.

"I am Luxor the Moonprince. Welcome aboard the Cormorant, stranger."

"Stranger no more. Galahar the Calm, Lord of Immiel am I and for thy welcome, I thee thank, Moonprince."

Saying so, Galahar the Calm bowed deeply. Though he disliked too much ceremony, Luxor felt obliged to follow suit. Then he smiled warmly at Galahar and clasped him by the hand.

"Come, we'll spend no more time in introductions. The day grows old. Let us repair to the quarterdeck where food and drink aplenty are being laid out as we speak. This eve, you'll sup of the best fare that the abundance of Midnight can offer."

Corleth, watching, smiled to himself.

Grandfather must be hungry, he thought. Usually he strings out the introductions for ages.

"Well said, Luxor!" said Galahar, with a laugh in his voice. "To keep such matters brief often for the best it is. More than a little hungry am I also, I must confess. The Cormorant didst we expect a little sooner."

"Then news must spread swiftly in these parts, indeed!" said Luxor with some surprise, "Since we left Midnight, we have travelled fleet as the wind without a stop or break!"

"A white swan is the device upon the shield of Immiel," said Galahar, obliquely.

CHAPTER THREE

GALAHAR'S TALE



The feasting was done and the songs had drawn to an end. Luxor and Lord Blood were talking with Galahar but this time, unlike the feast in Xajorkith, Corleth and Arin were listening eagerly. These were new tales.

"We have heard much over the years about Midnight, Moonprince, but I fear thou knowest little of the Blood March. There is an evil that stalks this land, an evil more potent than Doomdark and all his brood and minions," said Galahar, dropping the courtly convolutions of the fey and speaking simply now, in the manner of men, to drive his point home.

"Here, in Immiel, we yet live in peace," he continued, "The powers I still possess are sufficient to keep Glimormir safe and make the Golden Isle a sanctuary against darkness and evil. Yet if we venture beyond our realm, the powers of the Golden fey wane and wither and we become as weak as children. And it is beyond our realm that the dark storm gathers!"

"Indeed, we have heard nothing of this in Midnight!" Yet the Blood March lies upon our borders. How have we not heard of this?" said the Moonprince, frowning, "What is this evil that you speak of?"

"Fear, Luxor, fear keeps it secret. Though they do not rule it yet, the Dark Fey

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hold the Blood March in terror. They have spies and assassins everywhere save Immiel. It is a brave man who speaks a word against them and a lucky one who does so and lives to tell the tale."

"The Dark Fey?" said Luxor, "The Fey are a goodly people. The world over, they are untainted by evil."

"Yes," said Galahar, "It was always so, and so it used to be in the Blood March..."

In Eldark, the Eldrin weave with nimble hands

The silken threads that frame the fate of other lands,
The Long Dwarves in the Mountains, the Athelings in the Lee,
The Arakai in the Last Northing gazing out to sea,
The Uskarg in the Fallows free in the hills to roam
The Giants in the Delve hewing out the stone,
More Dwarves in the Deeping, their digging just begun,
In the Gelm, the Gelmings basking in the sun,
The Kith in the Witherlands seeking lands more fair,
In Arungor, the Dragonlords riding through the air,
The Golden Fey in Immiel amidst the shining lake,
The Dawn Fey in Dawnwood where the sun first breaks,
In Weirdwood, the High Fey under the shimmering trees,
In Ravenwood, the First Fey taking their ease.

The First Fey were the eldest and noblest of us all," said Galahar, "No one could have foreseen the darkness that overtook them."

It was nigh on four hundred years ago, when Coronoth the Fair was King of Ravenwood. The land was at peace and was abundant. In the forest, the trees grew tall and shady and bright flowers carpeted the floor. There was little need for toil and the people made songs and told tales, there was laughter and joy morning, noon and night.

One summer's morn, Coronoth had been strolling through the forest and was reading a while in a glade beside a rushing stream, watching a kingfisher dive into the clear water. Then, behind him, Coronoth heard a faint moan. He turned to see a young maiden stumble from the forest into the glade. She was barefoot and in rags, her dark hair matted and bedraggled, her face and arms and legs begrimed and scratched but even so, Coronoth saw at once how beautiful she was. The girl stumbled a few steps more and then collapsed upon the grass.

The young king leapt to his feet and rushed to the maiden's side. Gently, he lifted her up in his arms and carried her to the bank of the stream. He laid her down on the soft turf, making a pillow for her head with his tunic. Then, tenderly, he bathed her face with cool water. As the grime and blood were wiped away, Coronoth could see her skin was as soft and smooth as silk. The girl opened her eyes and they seemed deep, dark pools into which he was drawn. The girl, likewise, gazed at Coronoth in wonderment.

From the king's cupped hands, the girl drank of the cold, clear water and revived a little. Biding her to rest, Coronoth went into the forest, returning shortly with a handful of dark, red merilberries, the richest fruit of Ravenwood.

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The maiden's lips were a rose. One by one, Coronoth put the berries between the girl's lips and she ate them hungrily. Swiftly, like a potion, the sweet juices brought new strength to her tired limbs and some colour returned to the maiden's cheeks. She smiled and thanked him.

"How comest, thou here in such distress?" asked Coronoth.

Tears welled in the maiden's eyes.

"I am in mortal peril, sir. They have been hunting me for five hundred leagues or more," she replied.

Gently, Coronoth brushed a tear from her cheek.

"Fear not, I prithee, here in Ravenwood thou art safe from all peril." he said, "But who art those that hunt thee?"

"Warriors from the north," replied the maiden, sobbing. "Their prince desired me but I could find no fondness for him in my heart. I rebuffed all his advances to no avail. One night he used his witching ring to cast an enchantment upon me and took me to his bed. In the dark hours of the morning, waking from his spell, I fled, realising with loathsome horror what had befallen me. But before I fled, I vowed to repay him for his wickedness. While he slept, I prised from the ring on his finger the stone that gave it power. His warriors and hounds have been hunting me ever since as they would a wild beast. I fear for my life sir."

"These cowards shalt not find thee in Ravenwood, I promise," said Coronoth, "All they will find is my steel through their craven hearts. Pray, tell me thy name, sweet maiden."

"Arithel, my Lord," said the girl.

"And I am Coronoth, at thy service, my lady," said the king.

Then Coronoth, kneeling beside her, placed a single kiss upon Arithel's lips. It is said that he was in love with her from the first moment he set eyes upon her and she likewise. In any event, before the moon could wax and wane again, the twain were married in the Golden Citadel of Maranor and there was great rejoicing throughout the land.

Two days after Coronoth found Arithel in the glade, warriors from the north did indeed reach the borders of Ravenwood and, on the king's command, were allowed to pass unhindered into the forest. Then lost midst the towering trees, they found themselves surrounded by the king's host and were slain in a hail of arrows. Not a single warrior escaped. Thus was the king's promise kept.

Within a year, Arithel bore Coronoth a son, Careth and two years later, another son, Boroth. The two princes were fine and handsome boys. Careth golden haired like his father, Boroth dark like his mother, and they grew strong and sturdy. When Careth was twelve, however, there was an accident in the forest. The brothers had been firing arrows at apples to bring them down from the branches. Boroth's arrow had missed its apple, striking a branch instead and staying there, so the boy climbed up the tree to fetch his arrow back. Boroth crawled out along the branch, reached down and tugged his arrow free but as he did so, he lost his grip and slipped from the bough. Careth, watching from the ground, ran to catch his brother who tumbled into his outstretched arms, knocking Careth backwards. Boroth scrambled to his feet unhurt, but in the fall his arrow had pierced Careth's shoulder.

"Bo! It's stuck me!" Careth cried out in pain and shock.

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Boroth watched in horror and disbelief as a red rose of blood blossomed at the shoulder of his brother's white shirt. He knelt down beside him, sobbing.

"Car, th'art bleeding!" he wept.

"Don't cry," said his brother, fighting back his own tears, "Twas no one's fault. Just take out the arrow, it hurts me badly."

Boroth wiped the tears from his face with his grimy fingers, leaving streaks of black beneath his eyes.

"That will hurt thee even more," said Boroth.

"Then do it quickly," said his brother.

Trying not to tremble, Boroth gripped the arrow tight.

"Thou art the best brother in the world," he said, "Thou shouldst have let me fall."

Then, closing his eyes, he ripped the arrow free. Careth screamed and fainted. Weeping afresh, Boroth cut away the sleeve of his brother's shirt with his hunting knife and bound the wound with the blood-soaked sleeve as best he could. Then, finding a strength he did not know he had, he hoisted the older boy over his shoulder and stumbled homewards through the forest.

Though the healing arts of the First Fey were famous, the wound in Careth's shoulder festered and the boy grew weak and feverish. Careth's bed was moved into the Queen's bedchamber so that Arithel could tend to him night and day. Three days passed and each day the boy grew weaker. A less sturdy child would have been dead by now, the healing master told Coronoth grimly, out of the Queen's hearing.

Arithel was sitting at the boy's bedside, gently wiping his brow with a damp cloth. In a corner of the room, Boroth was idly exploring his mother's jewellery boxes, trying on her rings and bracelets. Then, in one box, he found a large bright stone, sitting alone unadorned by gold or silver. With an unvoiced gasp, Boroth knew that this was the witching stone of which he'd heard, the magical gem that the wicked prince of the north had used to ensnare his mother. His thoughts leapt ahead. If the stone could charm, perhaps it could also heal. His heart racing, Boroth took the witching stone from its wooden box and clenched it tightly in his small hand. "I wish my brother were healed, I wish my brother were healed," he whispered, over and over again.

Then, quietly, Boroth placed the stone back in its box and closed the lid. He stood up and walked over to his brother's bed, beside the window. Standing at his mother's shoulder, he gazed down at his sleeping brother.

"Is Careth better yet, Mother?" he asked.

"Nay, child, the fever still has him," said Arithel, quietly.

But at her words, a glimmer of sunlight fell upon the boy's face and Careth stirred, opening his eyes and smiling up at her.

"Have I been sleeping long, Mother?" the boy asked.

The fever had passed and, mysteriously to all save his brother, the boy's wound had healed. In the Golden Citadel, there was much rejoicing that day and happiest of all was Boroth. But this deed, done in all innocence and out of his love for his brother, was the beginning of Boroth's downfall into darkness."

Galahar paused, a deep sadness in his eyes.

"As the years passed, Boroth returned to his mother's chamber again and

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again to take the witching stone from its box and hold it in his hand, whispering a boyish wish, a fine hawk for his brother, a sunny day for his father's return from the Gelm on the morrow, a silken dress from Coromand for his mother. Each time, his wish was granted, but each time the witching stone took deeper hold upon him.

It seemed to others that he had become studious and where his brother was chided for paying little heed to his letters and lore, Boroeth was praised. But the books that Boroeth read most avidly were ancient books of magic arts and spells and the writing that the boy most loved to do was all the sorcerors and their enchantments.

As he grew, so did his knowledge of the magic arts. There was one book that he longed to read, the Last Book of the Wise. All the other books referred to it and a dusty copy of it lay in his father's library but it was written in the ancient tongue and script of the Wise which the boy could not decipher. Determined not to be thwarted, Boroeth set out to learn the ancient tongue.

He studied until his head ached and his eyes throbbed but, try as he might, he could not understand. Each new word seemed to have a dozen meanings, each part of speech a thousand rules. Each night he sobbed with frustration and his head span. One evening, his mind in a daze, he threw his books against the wall and flung himself on his bed, weeping. Careth tried to console him.

"Rest thine eyes, brother," he said. "Tis a dry old tongue that no one speaks any more. Come to the dancing with me and we'll study pretty maidens instead."

But Boroeth shook his head and refused. Careth left him and his misery deepened. It seemed to the boy that he understood less than when he started. Finally, angry and confused, Boroeth turned to the witching stone for help. For the very first time, he found himself wishing for something for himself.

"I wish I could understand the tongue of the Wise," he wept, clutching the witching stone tight in his hand, "I wish I could understand!"

He repeated himself again and again, waiting for something to happen but nothing seemed to. Then, with astonishment, he realized that he had been whispering not "I wish I could understand!" but "Ara darith uranar garak thaitih!" over and over again, without even thinking.

"Du-aran ara!" he yelled in joy, I can speak it!

As his words rang out, there was flicker of lightning at the window and, with a roll of thunder, a mighty storm broke over the Golden Citadel. Boroeth ran to the window and leaned out. Down below, in the courtyard, the dancers were scurrying for cover as the rain lashed down. He spotted his brother and called out to him.

"Car!" he shouted.

Careth, running for shelter, stopped and looked up.

"Du-aran ara!" shouted Boroeth, "Car, I can speak it! I can speak it!"

Careth grinned and shouted back, "Well done, Bo! This night must be ours! Thou hast won knowledge, I a maiden's sweet heart!"

The storm raged all night, Boroeth sat beside his open window, reading the Book of the Wise by candlelight, glancing up from time to time to watch the rain sheeting down over the roofs and the lightning flicker across the forest. By

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daybreak, the boy had just reached the last page when his brother burst into the room and flung himself down on the bed, full of smiles.

"Hast thou finished the book already, Bo?" he said.

Boroth looked at him, his eyes red and weary but filled with wonder.

"Yes, every page," he said.

"I fancy I learnt sweeter secrets last night," said Careth.

Boroth smiled at his brother.

"What secrets? I thought thou werest asleep in bed, Car."

"I was in bed but not in mine and I swear to thee I slept not a wink."

Boroth laughed in delight. He was thirteen years of age and the thought tingled.

"Idronel, ara b'ka e irin ur-anar!" said Boroth.

"Bo! Thou canst speak that tongue, but I canst not," said Careth.

"I said, brother, I shall have sweethearts too!" replied the younger boy.

"If they like reading, I suppose thou shalt," said Careth, laughing.

"Oh that! I am done with that! That's the last book I shall ever read. Th'art telling me always that I study too much. Well I'm not going to study a thing more, even if I'm beaten for it. Now I'm going to enjoy myself, for ever and ever!" said Boroth.

The boy was true to his word. Careth was amazed and joyous at the change in his pallid, sore-eyed brother. It was high summer and for day after day, the two brothers were blissfully happy together, hunting in the forest, swimming in the river, wrestling in the long grass, making rope swings in the trees or just lazing in the sun, talking and laughing. The colour quickly came back to Boroth's young face and his eyes grew clear and sparkling once more. Of an evening, the two would go down to the courtyard together for the dancing and it was not long before Boroth caught the eye of a young girl as pretty as his brother's sweetheart.

The summer seemed to last forever. Yet the witching stone preyed upon the boy's mind, giving him strange, unsettling dreams. He felt uncomfortable without it, as though he was naked, and took to carrying it everywhere with him. In idle moments, he would roll it about in the palm of his hand, watching it glisten and sparkle in the sunlight. Careth thought nothing of it, imagining it was just a glass bauble given to his brother by his girl, as a keepsake.

Unfortunately, it was not, as Careth was soon to find out. One late afternoon, walking homeward through the forest, the boys were set upon by five tall warriors, wearing coats of mail and armed with swords. In a flash, Boroth realized the prize they sought and clenched the witching stone in his hand. Unarmed, Careth had been gashed already and flung to the ground. One of the warriors was towering over him, his sword already slicing downwards towards the boy's neck. Another two of the men were closing in on Boroth, but Boroth darted between them, crying "Garog ithar-harak!"

For a moment, the warrior attacking Careth froze and the boy rolled clear just before the gleaming sword thudded into the ground. Then Boroth leapt upon the man, tearing at his neck with his bare hands. The witching stone fell to the ground, but its power was already burning fiercely in Boroth. With strength unheard of, the boy's fingers stabbed deep into soft flesh. Blood spurted from the man's neck and, in a frenzy, Boroth ripped out the man's throat with his bare

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hands. The warrior fell to the ground, writhing in agony and terror.

Then, whirling round, the boy plucked the warrior's sword from the ground and ran at the other warriors, shrieking as he ran. As men would when faced with a callow boy, they stood their ground but the sword in Boroth's hand was just a blur of silver slicing through the air. Wild-eyed and drenched in blood, the boy cut through the warriors as though they were naught but straw and as they lay dead and dying on the ground, still he hacked at them. At last, Careth grasped his brother's wrist and stayed his hand.

"Enough, Bo, enough," he said quietly, leading the boy away.

Boroth, dazed and exhausted, let the sword fall to the ground and turned to his brother, hugging him tightly.

"They were going to kill thee," he wept.

"Thou didst save our lives, that's for sure," said Careth, "Though I canst not fathom where thou didst find such strength."

"Twas the witching stone," said Boroth, "The witching stone that Mother brought with her from the north."

Then Boroth turned and pointed at the gem gleaming brightly in the grass beside the fallen warrior. Boroth pocketed the stone again and, wearily, the two boys headed home. Along the way, Boroth explained everything to this brother, who listened in wonderment. Then, as they approached the gates of Maranor, Careth turned to his brother.

"Bo, say naught of the witching stone when we speak to Father. He would be furious, thou knowest. Place it back in the jewel box, but do not touch it again after that. There is something wicked about it, I fear. Promise me," said Careth.

"I promise thee, Car! I felt it burning me inside," said Boroth.

"Tell me one last thing, Bo, what didst thou shout at the one who nearly killed me?"

"Oh, that! It was a spell to turn him to stone, but I think I missed a word out," said Boroth.

Boroth did as his brother suggested and did not touch the stone again. The witching stone, however, had tasted blood. Summer turned to autumn. Ravenwood grew golden and misty. But the land was at peace no longer. The king, hearing how his sons had so narrowly escaped death - or some part of that tale at least - posted guards at every border and had patrols ceaselessly criss-cross the great forest. Yet no attack came and no more murderous brigands were found. The king's fears receded and he stood down the patrols, although keeping the watch on the borders of Ravenwood.

Late in the month of the squirrel, the two brothers were in the forest gathering conkers, more for Boroth than for Careth, who had already begun to put aside the games of childhood. Seemingly from nowhere, a thick fog gathered, so thick that the boys were almost touching before they could see each other. So as not to lose each other in the cold, clinging fog, Careth took Boroth by the hand and they tried to make their way home. Although they both knew the forest well, quickly they became lost, stumbling deeper and deeper into the endless trees.

Every direction was white. Boroth's eyes ached with peering into the mist and, faint in the distance, he fancied he heard a voice calling to him. Then, through the smothering whiteness, he saw a light glimmer. He tugged at his

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brother's hand, steering them both towards the flickering light. Then suddenly, as they approached the light, the fog parted like a curtain and they emerged in a glade where the air was clear and the sun shone brightly.

At the heart of the clearing, an old man was sitting hunched by a campfire. He looked up and greeted them kindly, beckoning the boys to join him. Cold and weary, they did so gladly. The old man gave them each a warming drink from the pot boiling on the fire and the brothers told him of their plight. The old man smiled sympathetically and told them not to worry, saying that the mist would soon lift and then they would find their way home with ease. Careth, stretched out beside the fire to warm himself, grew drowsy and presently fell fast asleep. Boroeth's eyes felt heavy too, but he felt strangely uneasy, so uneasy that he could not let his eyes close.

"This clearing is like an island in an ocean of fog," said the boy, looking hard at the old man, "How can that be so?"

"Oh! Come now! I think thou knowest that! Th'art the one that dabbleth in the witching arts. Thy brother sleepeth and thou dost not, yet that draught I gave thee would put a whole kingdom to sleep," said the old man, "No other would keep awake like thee, Yes, th'art the one I seek!"

"If 'tis I thou seekest, then wake my brother! He has done thee no harm," said Boroeth.

"Oh I shall! Of course I shall! Twould be such a pity not to! But first, give me the stone!" said the old man.

"What stone?" said Boroeth, trembling.

"What stone!" laughed the old man. "Why, the witching stone whose powers thou didst, unshrine but three moons ago, slaying five strong and battle-hardened warriors, one with thy bare hands, boy!"

"Th'art mistaken sir! Twas my father's houseguards that killed those men." The old man spat into the fire, his spittle sizzling on the bright embers.

"Dragonshit, boy!" he snarled, "When a witching stone is used, the ripples spread far and wide: I felt it in my bones, I sniffed it in the air, I heard the stone sing out and in the witching fire, I saw the bloody deed! Twas only they face I could not see. The stone, boy, give me the stone!"

"And if I do not?" said Boroeth.

"Oh come now! Let us not bicker so! The stone is too powerful for thee! 'Tis too great a burden. Let me lift that burden from thee!" said the old man, becoming gentle once more.

"'Tis not mine to give thee," said Boroeth.

"If thou hast used it, then 'tis thine to give," said the old man, softly.

"But if I do not?" asked the boy.

"How many midnights are there in a day, boy?" said the old man.

"Only one, sir," replied Boroeth, puzzled.

"Precisely!" said the old man.

"But if I do not?" Boroeth persevered.

"Ah! Twould be such a pity not to wake thy brother, such a good boy, such a handsome boy," said the old man, shaking his head sadly.

Boroeth grew hot with anger and his thoughts grew black with hatred.

"Do not even think of it," said the old man, "Try to harm me in any way and

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thy charming brother will sleep for ever. The spell guards against such things, in a quite intriguing way. Of course it does! Now be good and give me the stone."

To demonstrate, the old man drew the blade of a knife across the back of his hand. His hand did not bleed but Careth cried out in his sleep. When Boroth turned to his brother, he saw that the back of Careth's hand was bleeding instead.

"I do not have the stone with me," said Boroth.

"Such a wise boy!" said the old man, soothingly, "Go then and fetch it. Oh yes! And be back before the sun sets or I shall worry so much I might forget how to lift the spell."

Then the fog that surrounded the glade rolled away and Boroth recognized, at last, where he was. He stood up, looked at his sleeping brother and then ran off through the forest. Lest he be spied, he entered the Golden Citadel by a secret passage that led to the old well under the king's tower. Boroth fetched the jewel box without mishap. Then, leaving the Citadel by the same route, he slipped at the dry bottom of the old well, tumbling forward onto his face. The jewel box fell open and the witching stone rolled out, glowing softly in the darkness.

Gazing into the stone, Boroth could see what was about to happen. He saw Careth awakening, he saw himself handling the stone to the old man, he saw himself helping Careth to his feet, he saw the old man swirl around upon them, laughing, blue lightning crackling in his cupped hands. The old man flung the lightning towards them and he and Careth were struck down by blue tongues of fire that sizzled into their writhing bodies. He and Careth rolled about on the ground, screaming in agony. Then they grew still and quiet. The blue flames died away, leaving two charred and lifeless shapes on the ground.

Boroth knew why the stone had let him see this, knew that it was trying to grip him in its power, trying to persuade him to use it in anger once more but he also could see that there was little reason the old man should not do such a thing once the witching stone was his.

Whispering softly, in the tongue of the Wise, Boroth spoke to the stone.

"Stone, let all wickedness from thee drain!

Let only the goodness within thee remain!

And if aught wouldst use thee to work some harm,
Upon him instead turn the evil charm!"

The stone shrieked aloud and burned with a terrible crimson brightness, deafening and blinding Boroth. Beneath him, he felt the bowels of the earth rumble. A gust of hot, fetid air rushed against his face, so foul and putrid that the boy's stomach churned and he almost vomited. Then all grew still and cool and dark again. Trembling, the boy scooped up the witching stone into the jewel box again and closed the lid. He clambered to his feet. His head span. He felt weak and shiverish and his skin was damp with sweat. He wanted to turn back and lie down in his cool, soft bed but he forced himself onwards into the dark passage under the Citadel. By the time he reached the open air again, the strength had returned to his limbs and he felt a new vigour, as though his blood was tingling. The sun was already dipping down towards the tree-tops and Boroth ran through the forest, fleet as a deer, back to the glade.

The old man looked up at him, smiling.

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"Ah, such a good boy! Thou hast brought me the stone! Well then," he said, stretching out his arm and opening his hand, "Give it to me and I shalt wake thy brother."

"Nay, old man, thou shalt wake my brother first. Only then wilt I give thee the stone," said Boroeth coldly.

"Oh come now! Would I break my word to thee?" said the old man, soothingly.

There was a flicker of anger in Boroeth's eyes, but calmly and quietly, he simply repeated, "Wake my brother."

The old man shivered and withdrew his hand. There was a deep compulsion in the boy's words and, somehow, he did not doubt that the boy would give him the stone. Yet the boy had spoken so gently, not as the old man would have done if he were wanting to compel. Uneasily, the old man turned to Careth, laying his hand upon his brow and whispering an incantation.

In a few moments, the sleeping boy woke. He looked at Boroeth and smiled. Boroeth smiled back and beckoned him. Careth sprang to his feet and went to his brother. When he reached Boroeth's side, Boroeth tossed the jewel box to the old man who caught it nimbly in his hands.

"There, thou wizened old fool, have thy bauble!" said Boroeth, his voice bitter and dark with anger.

The old man rose to his feet, turning his back on the boys. He opened the box, taking from it the witching stone and let the jewel box fall to the ground.

Then suddenly the old man swirled around upon the boys, laughing, blue lightning crackling in his cupped hands. The old man flung the lightning towards them but the lightning curved around, back towards him. The old man screamed as he was struck down by blue tongues of fire that sizzled into his writhing body. He rolled about on the ground, screaming in agony. Then he grew still and quiet. The blue flames died away, leaving his charred and lifeless shape on the ground.

On their way home, Boroeth told his brother of all that had passed, laughing darkly when he touched upon the old man's death. His brother looked troubled but said little save that he wished the witching stone were a thousand leagues from here. Boroeth agreed, saying that he feared that wickedness might still remain within the stone despite his command to it. Then he suggested that on the morrow they ask their father's permission to make a journey to the Isle of Storms at the eastern tip of the Delve and there, secretly, cast the stone away forever into the Great Ocean. On their return, they mentioned nothing of the old man and on the morrow, Careth put the question of the journey to his father. Coronoth would hear nothing of the idea.

"It's out of the question!" he said, "Tis but three moons since both thy brother and thou were near murdered in cold blood not a league abroad and now thou hast the foolishness to ask this! And why, for pity's sake, wouldst thou want to visit the Isle of Storms?" There's naught but rocks and waves and mumbling giants there!"

"Tis the place where the Great Ocean rages fiercest, Father," said Boroeth, "Where the shore is strewn with ancient wrecks and dead man's bones and treasure lies drowned in the creeks and bays."

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"A treasure hunt is it? Are not the riches of the Golden Citadel enough for thee, Boroth? Dost thou lack of anything here, Careth?" said Coronoth.

"Only adventure, Father," said Careth.

Coronoth sighed wearily. He remembered his own youth and that same unscratchable itch.

"I know," he said, smiling, "I know how adventure beckons, but I cannot allow it. You are my only sons."

A black anger boiled up within Boroth.

"What's that got to do with it?" he shouted, "Th'art our only father, yet thou wouldst march off to war if the need arose. Thou dost scorn danger yet wouldst tuck us safely away like babes in our cots!"

"Enough!" commanded the king, "Get thee to thy chamber, Boroth, and do not show thy face until thou canst speak more civilly!"

Careth tugged at his brother's arm, saying, "Bo, let it be!" but Boroth shook himself free.

"No, I shall not! I will not leave until thou dost answer me, Father, Answer my question!" said Boroth, hotly.

"Thou wilt obey me!" said Coronoth, striking the boy across the cheek with the back of his hand but Boroth stood his ground, a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth.

"Art thou afraid to answer my question?" goaded Boroth, a dark fury in his eyes.

Careth looked at his brother, aghast. Coronoth raised his hand again but then paused. The boy's forehead was beaded with sweat, his face was deathly pale and his eyes dark-rimmed. Did the boy have a fever? He must have a fever, else he would not speak in such a manner. The king laid his hand gently on Boroth's shoulder but Boroth twisted away, glaring.

"Very well, Boroth, thou shalt have thy answer," said Coronoth mildly, "Being king, I must march to war if the need arises. Likewise, being the heirs to the kingdom, thou and Careth must keep thyself safe and well against the time of my passing from this world. Surely thou dost, understand this?"

Grudgingly, Boroth said, "Yes, Father, I know all that, but..."

"Perhaps a smaller adventure could be arranged, a journey upriver to the mountains of the Deeping on our eastern borders," said the king, smiling.

Then the king took Careth aside and said to him, "Take Bo to his room. Then fetch the doctors. He is not himself and I fear he has a fever."

The king was right, it seemed. The doctors confirmed that the boy indeed had a fever but their salves had little effect. By the next day, Boroth was delirious, writhing and twisting in his sleep, mumbling nonsense and, from time to time, screaming out in pain. His brow was like a furnace to the touch and the boy sweated so much that his bed was drenched, needing fresh sheets three or four times in the course of a day. In Boroth's every breath, there was a fearful stench. Incense from distant Coromand burned ceaselessly beside the boy's bed to sweeten the air.

Day after day the fever raged. Occasionally Boroth would still and wake. Then, weakly, he would take a little nourishment before slipping back into his delirium. One day, when Careth was sitting along at his brother's bedside side,

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the boy awoke and, for the first time since the fever began, spoke lucidly.

"Car?" he said, blinking against the light.

"Yes, Bo, 'tis I," said Careth.

"Car, 'tis the witching stone! I can feel it! It burns me terribly, inside, like hot irons in my head and, and in my guts," said Boroeth.

"Hush now, Bo, th'art feverish," said Careth, taking his brother's hand.

"Nay, 'tis no fever, Car, 'tis the witching stone! Please, please believe me," said Boroeth, tears welling in his eyes, "Take it and cast it into the Great Ocean as we planned, take it far away from me, 'tis killing me, Car!"

"In truth, I think I do believe thee, Bo," said Careth, squeezing his brother's clammy hand, "Fear no more, before dusk the witching stone will be gone from here. I will not let thee die."

Boroeth smiled weakly, squeezed his brother's hand in return, then closed his eyes again. Careth pleaded with his father once more to be allowed to make the journey to Great Ocean but this time told him of Boroeth's meddling with the witching stone. Coronoth was much afeared and swiftly agreed, although not before admonishing Careth roundly for not telling him of this sooner.

"There is a trading ship, the Green Mermaid, moored in the river and it sets sail this very noon for Coromand," said Coronoth, "Twill get thee to the Great Ocean far swifter than foot. Within the hour, thou must take passage for upon the Green Mermaid. Six of my houseguard will I provide thee with for thy safe keeping. 'Tis no journey for a callow boy to make alone."

And so, that very day, Careth set sail into the east upon the River Falthrang and watched the Golden Citadel of Maranor dwindle into the distance, not realising that he would never set eyes upon it again.

As the day drew on, Boroeth's fever began to wane and his sleep grew less troubled. Upon the following day, his brow was cool, he sweated no more and he sat up awake in bed. Still only permitted soup, he ate it hungrily. Within a week, the boy was fit and well again and was allowed from his bed.

To be sure the boy was strong and healthy, the king waited a month before he called Boroeth to his chambers to talk of the witching stone. Coronoth listened patiently to what his son had to say.

Finally, sighing, he said, "It was a dangerous thing to do, to use the witching stone to stay thy brother's fever but 'twas well meant and done in kindness only. It seems, indeed, that thou didst save Careth from death. I cannot chide thee for that. But the rest! To use such a thing as a toy and to dabble in magic arts! I can barely believe it, even now. By thy foolishness, thou hast enticed evil men into the very heart of Ravenwood! For this alone, thou knowest I must punish thee, Boroeth, though it pains me to do so."

From a wooden clothes chest, the king drew a leather belt and bid the boy bend himself over the table he was standing by. Boroeth drew back, furious and defiant.

"Thou shalt not! I did no wrong. 'Twas the witching ring, thou knowest that!" shouted Boroeth. "Don't touch me!"

But the king was coldly determined that the boy should be punished. He seized Boroeth and flung him across the table, pinning him there. Though the boy kicked and struggled and screamed and cursed, Coronoth thrashed him soundly

until Boroth, in exhaustion, grew still and quiet.

Then, as the king turned and went back to the wooden chest, Boroth sprang to his feet, his eyes blazing with dark fury, and snatched his father's hunting spear from where it hung on the wall. With all the force he could muster, the boy flung the spear at his father. It struck the king between the shoulder blades and pierced him through, bursting out of his chest. Coronoth fell forward onto his hands and knees. In agony, he managed to push himself upright and then, still on his knees, the spear through him, he turned and looked in horror at his son. He tried to speak but only blood bubbled from his mouth.

"I warned thee not to touch me, Father," said Boroth calmly, "Now I shall be king and do exactly as I please."

With a mighty effort, the king pulled the whole spear out of his chest, and staggered to his feet. Then he lunged forward at the boy, who was too amazed to move. Boroth fell backwards, borne down by the weight of his father who tumbled down on top of him. Coronoth's hands closed around the boy's throat but there was no strength in them now and in a moment, they fell away again, lifeless. Boroth struggled free and stood up, drenched in his father's blood.

Boroth knew he must act quickly now, for if he was caught in this, neither his rank nor his tender age would offer him protection. He stripped off his bloodied clothes and boots and washed himself at the bowl on his father's table. After scrubbing himself clean, he wrapped himself in an old, torn cloak that his father used for hunting and which would draw little attention if he were to be seen in it. Then, to hide his crime completely, he sprinkled the room and his father's body with lamp-oil, took a burning brand from the fire and flung it onto the bed. The bed began to blaze merrily and then the flames caught the oak-panelled walls.

Smiling, Boroth took one last look at the burning room before fleeing to his own. He encountered no one on the way. Then, safely in his own room, Boroth put on fresh clothes and cast his father's cloak onto the fire. Boroth left the tower by the secret way, out by the old well under the citadel and went deep into the forest. Eventually, he rested by a stream. He ate some sweetbread, drank of the cool, clear water and presently fell to sleep.

By the time he woke, it had grown dark but in the sky to the east, there was a red glow. Boroth leapt to his feet and scrambled up a nearby tree. As he reached the upper branches, in the distance he could see that all the Golden Citadel was ablaze, great tongues of flames leaping up into the sky. For a while, he just gazed at the sight in wonder and amazement. Then, coming to his senses, he scrambled back down to the ground and began to run back through the forest towards the burning city.

When he reached the approaches to the Golden Citadel, he was tired and filmed with sweat. People were pouring from the gates hauling carts and barrows, some laden with possessions, some with the sick and the injured who had been charred and burnt and who screamed terribly. Beyond, in the city, the rooftops were ablaze and flames gushed out of the windows of every tower.

Boroth made his way against the flow towards the Eastgate but a soldier standing at the roadside, took him by the arm.

"Nay, lad, there's naught that thou canst do!" said the soldier, gently.

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"Unhand me, I am the king's son!" said Boroth, whirling round on the soldier. The soldier looked at him in astonishment and let go.

"The powers be praised! Thou art an' all! Why, we thought thee dead and burned, my lord! 'Tis a miracle!" said the soldier.

"Where is my father?" said Boroth.

The soldier shook his head sadly.

"No one knows, sire. Some are still searching for him in the city. The Captain of the Houseguard has taken charge in his place. See that tent over yonder, at the edge of the forest. That's his headquarters." said the soldier, putting his arm around the boy's shoulder to comfort him, "Come, lad, let me take thee to the Captain. He will tell thee more than I can. This is a terrible night."

Boroth let himself be drawn against the soldier's side and began to sob convincingly.

"There, there lad," said the soldier, kindly, "There's yet some hope."

In the headquarters tent, Boroth was seated at the Captain's table. A soldier brought him a warm drink and another wrapped a blanket around his shoulders against the chill of the night air. Boroth listened gravely to Elireth, the Captain of the Houseguard who had known the boy since he was knee-high. Tears streaked Boroth's face.

The fire began in the king's tower," said Elireth, "Some say they saw the first flames of all leap from thy father's own windows but others say it began in the kitchens. They had the pumps working within minutes but the tower was too tall for the water to reach all but the lower windows. Then the wind blew up, fanning the flames and scattering burning cinders across the rooftops. The blaze raced across the city, Boroth. There was naught that anyone could do."

"What of my father and my mother?" asked Boroth, a tremble in his voice.

"They have not been seen or found. Parts of the city we cannot reach until the fires die down, but I must tell thee, we fear the worst," said Elireth.

Boroth covered his face with his hands and fell forward onto the table, weeping afresh with renewed vigour.

"Thank the good powers, thou art safe and thy brother abroad in Coromand," said Elireth. "Come, to bed with thee now. Let us see what morning brings."

The city burned for three days more, leaving no more than a smouldering, blackened ruin. At length, when the searchers could reach the king's tower within there was just a tangle of charred timbers and bones. All hope of finding the king or queen alive was lost. Elireth broke the sad tidings to Boroth, who seemed overcome with grief. Then, on the morrow, there were more ill-tidings. A ship had just sailed upriver, coming from the south, with news from Coromand. In a storm, the Green Mermaid had foundered off the coast of Coromand and no survivors had been found.

On hearing this news, Boroth grew angry, saying that his brother could not be dead, that he would know if Careth were dead, that he would feel it in his bones if he were dead. He screamed at Elireth to cut out the tongues of all that had told this wicked lie. Elireth, for his part, fearing that the boy's mind had become unhinged by sorrow heaped upon sorrow, tried to calm Boroth, saying that he would deal with them. Then, he went to the captain of the ship and commanded him to begone with all haste. Yet, when he returned, Boroth was calm and

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composed and mentioned nothing more of his gruesome demand.

As time went by, all remarked how nobly the young prince bore his grievous loss. A new city of tents sprang up beside the old one and, as the days began to grow bitter with winter, Boroth went amongst the people, consoling those who had lost loved ones in the great fire and giving food and winter clothing to those in need.

The building of a new citadel upon the ashes of the old had already begun. The young prince had asked that it be rebuilt in black marble, in memory of those who had perished, and all were struck by the thoughtfulness and decorum of this. So it was that Boroth, son of Coronoth, became king of Ravenwood at the tender age of thirteen. Stone by stone, Maranor was rebuilt. And how well the people loved their handsome young king! People began to refer to him as Boroth the Good, Boroth the Kind. But Boroth had killed, and had enjoyed the killing, his blood burning and tingling, his mind reeling in ecstasy, and the killing did not stop. Yes, the boy had drained the wickedness from the witching stone, but it had seeped into himself and into the very ground on which Maranor stood. And yes, the stone had been killing him but only because of the goodness that remained within it.

Year by year, the evil in the land grew, but none suspected that the fount of it was their good, young king. Children would mysteriously disappear in the forest, their bodies to be found weeks later, mauled and torn beyond recognition. Pretty maidens would be ravished in their beds at night and found of the morning, their throats slit. Strong warriors keeping watch atop the battlements in the small hours would be found the next day at the foot of the walls, disembowelled, their ears lopped off, their eyes gouged out.

A great fear fell upon Maranor. At night, people locked their doors and barred their windows and did not venture out. Children were kept at home, bored and listless and the streets emptied of their laughter and carefree games. Even the warriors kept watch in three or fours and kept awake no matter how late the hour. The young king imposed a curfew and announced a generous reward for the capture of any of these fiends.

The penalty that Boroth set for breaking the curfew was death. Erileth, still Captain of the Guard, protested that this was too harsh, that more innocent souls would perish than guilty but the king was adamant, saying that the people must be shown that some action was being taken. Elireth refused to have any part of it, replying that if death were the penalty, he would not order the Houseguard to impose such a curfew. Thereupon, Boroth accused Elireth of being in league with the murderous fiends and told him that he would pay with his life.

And so, the executions began. The following day, Elireth was dragged from his cell by his own guards and taken to the marketplace, gagged and bound.

A great crowd had gathered there. The young king made a speech, saying that there was a canker in the very heart of Ravenwood and that, however painful the surgery might be, he would cut it out. Weeping, he said that he had loved Elireth as he would a father but that his beloved captain had refused to impose the curfew and, in doing so, had revealed himself to be in league with the evildoers.

The king said that he could show no mercy, even to those who were his

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friends, that this evil must be rooted out. The crowd, much moved, applauded, some weeping in sympathy for the king, others cheering wildly. Then, weeping afresh, Boroth drew his sword and severed Erieth's head with a single blow. As though distraught, the king turned from the crowd, his head bowed and let himself be led from the dais by one of the guards. In truth, however, Boroth was merely trying to contain his laughter.

As Boroth had planned, his harsh measures appeared to work. Within the first month, twelve curfew-breakers were publicly executed, each by the king in person, who declared that since it was his edict, he alone must bear the heavy weight of carrying it out. And, able to sate his bloodlust openly now with a crowd to applaud and cheer him on, Boroth abandoned killing in stealth. The murders ceased and the king's reputation grew further. No longer did the people call him Boroth the Good or Boroth the Kind. Now it was Boroth the Ironheart or Boroth the Strong. He was but seventeen years of age.

Unsurprisingly, curfew-breaking dwindled quickly but the people wanted more blood. It pleased Boroth greatly to assuage their thirst. A steady stream of informers came to the king's court at handsome reward and the slightest whisper of any evil intent was enough to have someone hauled away to the king's dungeons for questioning, a sergeant of the guard whose attic bats had been found, a maiden accused of putting a curse on her lover who died of fever, a young boy who, play-acting, had threatened to kill his friend. All were put to the torture by Boroth himself. Drunk with bloodlust, he would play with his helpless victims for hour upon hour until, to end the unbearable pain, they repeating their confession urgently lest the torture be renewed, their heads would be severed by Boroth's sword to rapturous applause.

The wicked power of the witching stone was in the very ground under their feet, and the people of Maranor grew lost deep in bloodlust too. Yet still there were some within the city who thought that the king had gone too far, that there had been enough killing, some who began to call him Mad Boroth or Boroth the Wolfheart. One by one, these few were rooted out and put to the sword. But Boroth realized that now, his people needed something more than public executions to slake their thirst for blood. It was time to make war, to let every warrior get blood on his hands, to unite the whole kingdom of Ravenwood in an orgy of killing. He would enslave the entire Blood March and have thousand upon thousand of helpless before him.

So did the long fall of the First Fey into darkness begin. The great forest of Ravenwood was plundered relentlessly for fuel to feed the fires of Boroth's swordsmiths and as the long wars of the Blood March drew on, the land became bare and barren. No longer was the kingdom referred to as Ravenwood but instead the Marish, meaning, in the ancient tongue, the desolate land. And the First Fey, drawn deeper and deeper into evil as the bloodletting went on, became known as the Dark Fey, the once fair and golden city of Maranor as the Dark Citadel.

There, even now, does Boroth the Wolfheart still keep his reign of terror. Time after time have his armies been beaten back to the borders of the Marish, only to return stronger, more bloodthirsty and more rapacious than before and each time, the realms of the Blood March have grown weaker and more afraid.

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No, I fear, we are in the worst of times. In turn, these past ten or twenty years, the Wolfheart has threatened each realm with utter desolation lest they yield to him a hostage of his choice of royal blood or connection and, in turn, to keep a peace with him, each realm has reluctantly complied. Of late, he has demanded further tribute, at first in gold but now in slaves. Year after year, these poor wretches, selected by lot, are sent to their doom in the Dark Citadel. Only Immiel has remained untouched by Boroth's evil and now, I fear, he is planning a grand campaign that, one by one, will crush every kingdom of the Blood March. If that comes to pass, nowhere is safe."

As Galahar finished his long tale, his audience gazed at him in stunned silence. At length, Luxor broke the silence.

"These are ill-tidings, Galahar. I knew naught of this," said Luxor.

"Long have I peered into the past, Moonprince, to unravel the mystery of Boroth's fall into wickedness," said Galahar.

"Yet perhaps I can add a little to your knowledge," said Luxor.

Gravely, Luxor told him the story of how, long ago, Rarnor the Unlucky had lost the Eye of the Moon from the Moonring which bound it. He told him of the minstrel boy's song of Sherehar and the news the jewel still lay in the king's tower in Coromand. Then he told him of how, at this very time, he was bound for Coromand, bearing gifts, to try to reclaim the gem.

"This is surely the witching stone that was Boroth's downfall," said Luxor, "And surely, if the goodness within it near killed him once, it can do so again!"

"So Boroth was right!" exclaimed Galahar, "His brother did not perish in the storm, else the stone would still languish in the ocean deeps! These are fair tidings indeed, Luxor!"

"We must set sail on the morrow, with all speed. If the winds be good, it may be that this Boroth can be thwarted before more evil befalls this sorry land," said the Moonprince.

"May the winds be with thee, Luxor, but beware the Marish!" said Galahar.

CHAPTER FOUR

RORTHRON THE WISE



At the time of Luxor's arrival in Immiel, Rorthron the Wise had heard nothing of the Eye of the Moon and the discovery of its whereabouts for he was abroad in the Icemark, his first journey there since the war against the Heartstealer.

His purpose was to visit the Fey of the north and see how they fared now that the land was no longer oppressed.

The Icemark was indeed a changed place. The land was no longer gripped by bitter cold and was green and fertile. In the great forests, the trees towered tall, tinged by autumn gold and between the forests were lush meadows and babbling streams. In the far blue distance, the mountains of the dwarves could be seen, their peaks white with snow. And when Rorthron at last approached the City of Imorthorn, it seemed more fair and beautiful than ever and his heart was glad.

There, he was welcomed most heartily by the Lord of Imorthorn, who had changed little over the passing years. Imorthorn told him of the peace that had befallen the Icemark after the Empress's demise, of how giants and dwarves, men and fey had ceased to war with one another and of how the ice had melted away from the land, year by year, leaving it green and abundant.

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But then, Rorthron learnt stranger news from the Lord of Imorthorn. Before she was slain, Shareth the Heartstealer had been with child. To save herself the inconvenience of having to carry it within her womb for months on end - it would be so wearisome, it would ruin her perfect figure and, after all, she had a war to direct - Shareth had used her witchcraft to spirit the troublesome burden within her into the womb of another. She knew, of course, that the unborn child was a boy, which pleased her greatly. She would love him and nurture him and, in time, teach him all the witching ways but suffer the agonies and indignities of childbirth, she most certainly would not.

The surrogate was a young slave-girl, Cirithel, from lands beyond the Icemark, far to the south. She had only recently been brought to Kahangrorn and was, reputedly, of noble birth. Still better, the girl was, as yet, unbedded and Shareth thought it would be most amusing if a virgin were to give birth to her son.

As battle after battle was lost and the Moonprince thrust closer and closer north towards Kahangrorn, Shareth thought to save her unborn son and sent Cirithel by secret ways out through the Forest of Fangrorn, accompanied by three slave-women to tend her and twelve of the Iceguard for their protection. The girl Cirithel now with child and the weather bitter, they travelled slowly. After some weeks, news of the Heartstealer's defeat and death overtook them and the warriors of the Iceguard fled, in fear of their lives. Still the girl and the three women trudged further and further south, seeking safety and shelter. At length, Cirithel now heavy with child, they came to the City of Imorthorn.

The Lord of Imorthorn took the party into his household. Cirithel told him that they were slaves who had escaped from Kahangrorn before Shareth's defeat but said nothing of the origin of the child within her and nor did the other women. Imorthorn was concerned for the girl's health after such an arduous journey, but the birth was an easy one. A beautiful, healthy boy was born, blue-eyed and golden-haired and Cirithel named him Anderlane meaning, in the words of her people, unexpected gift. Cirithel loved and nurtured the boy as she would her own. As the years passed, the longing for home grew in her and, when the boy was but four years old, Cirithel and Anderlane set forth from Imorthorn for the girl's homeland. The snows had vanished, the Frozen Wastes around the Icemark had melted away, there was peace now and the roads south were open and safe. For two years, Imorthorn heard nothing further of Cirithel and her boy. Then, at last, a travelling merchant delivered a letter to him from the girl, saying that they had reached her home safely, that Anderlane was well and strong and thanking him for all his kindness. The three women who had journeyed with her served in Imorthorn's household for many years but, one by one, age had taken them. A month ago, the last of them, on her deathbed, had told Imorthorn the full story of their journey from Kahangrorn, of Shareth being with child, of the spiring of the child to Cirithel's womb and of the flight to safety escorted by the Iceguard. And when he asked her who the father was, she whispered with her last breath, "Morkin, prince of Midnight!"

Imorthorn, much troubled by this news, sought out others who had been enslaved in Kahangrorn. He found others who had been handmaidens to the Heartstealer and each confirmed the tale, some adding that the Empress had

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been much amused to have Morkin father the child - then the boy would be unquestioned and rightful heir not just to the Icemark but to Midnight also. Rorthron, astonished, asked Imorthorn if he knew the child's whereabouts now.

"I know only this, my friend," said the Lord of Imorthorn, "Cirithel spoke to me many times of her homeland. Her people were called the Arakai. She had grown up in the Crimson Castle and her aging father was Lord of the Crimson Mountains. When I said I had not heard of this place, she explained that it lay in the Last Northing, in a land called the Blood March. Still no wiser, I asked where the Blood March lay and she told me that it was five or six hundred leagues south of the Icemark, on the shores of the Great Ocean."

"I know of the Blood March. It lies on the southeast borders of Midnight," said Rorthron, "And there, I fear, I must journey and find this boy. So, Luxor has two grandsons now, Morkin another son and Corleth a brother! I only pray that he has none of the Heartstealer's witching ways in him."

"Rest your worries, Rorthron," said Imorthorn, "I'll vouch that there was naught but goodness in the boy! I am a Lord of the Fey and such things cannot hide themselves from me."

"Yes, I'm sure that you are right, Imorthorn. None are born evil. They are taught it or tricked into it," said Rorthron, smiling, "Nevertheless, I leave on the morrow for the Blood March and the Crimson Mountains. Though I know not what, I have an uneasy feeling that something deeper turns upon Anderlane of the Arakai than the finding of kin."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MARISH



The Cormorant raced on towards Coromand. The winds were behind it and the weather was fair. Through the Eldmark into Weirwood, then through a deep ravine gouged in the Long Mountains into Dawnwood, the Imilvir carried the swift ship at last to the Bay of Eregoth. For Luxor's small party, it was the first time they had set eyes upon open sea and they gazed upon it with wonder at such an endless expanse.

For many leagues, they hugged the coast of the Fallows until, passing the shores of Roreon, they headed due south into the Grey Sea. League upon league, there was naught but empty ocean all around them. Then, at last, they sighted land again, coming to the easterly headlands of the Delve. Once more they hugged the coast, rounding the Isle of Storms without mishap. Then the wind changed, blustering in from the east, and on the far horizon dark clouds began to gather. Rather than head due south again directly for Coromand, the captain, fearing a storm, kept to the coast and they sailed westwards along the southern coast of the Delve through the Sea of Skulls.

Here, the storm from the east caught them. The waves grew tall and terrible, the wind tore at the sail. The captain did not dare to turn the ship lest it be

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overturned and the Cormorant flew along on the wings of the storm, deeper and deeper into the west. Then, in the Bay of Ulmor, the wind turned again, dragging them northwards towards the rocky coast.

The sky darkened, thunder exploded all around them, lightning crackled into the tumultuous sea and rain lashed down upon them. As the rocky shore loomed closer and closer, the captain, in desperation, tried to turn the ship. Its timbers creaking hideously, the Cormorant strained westwards again, heaving to starboard as it came around. Suddenly a fiery bolt of lightning struck the mainmast, snapping it in two like a twig and the mast crashed down onto the foredeck, crushing two of the ship's crew.

The raging storm drove the Cormorant relentlessly towards the shore, dashing the crippled ship against the rocks. As the Cormorant broke like a child's toy, crew and passengers alike leapt into the roiling sea. Some were sucked under by the fierce currents, some were smashed against the rocks but a few managed to struggle ashore.

A sorry party gathered on the shoreline. Luxor lay unconscious, having dashed his head against the rocks as he tried to clamber ashore. Corleth and Arin had plucked him from the waves just before he would have been dragged under.

Lord Blood had gained the shore too, together with three of the Moonprince's houseguard and four of the crew.

"We must find some shelter, else we will all freeze to death. What is this place?" said Lord Blood, addressing no one in particular.

"This is the Marish, sir," said one of the crew.

"Accursed storm!" exclaimed Lord Blood, "It has borne us to the Wolfheart's domain!"

One of the houseguard shouted, "Look, my lord!"

All eyes turned to where the man was pointing. There, in the west against the reddening sky, they saw the silhouettes of dark warriors coming swiftly towards them over the brow of the hill, swords drawn.

"Hell's teeth!" cried Lord Blood, "And we are near disarmed, our coats of mail cast aside, our shields lost. In sword alone must we put our trust. Gather round me. We will die afore our prince is taken!"

Though sorely outnumbered and already weary from battle with the sea, the ten fought bravely, slaying near twice their number, but one by one they fell wounded or dying. Arin was struck on the head by a shield and fell to the ground, unconscious. Corleth was disarmed as the back of his hand was sliced by a sword and then felled by a heavy blow from behind. Lord Blood was the last to fall, a Dark Fey warrior plunging his sword through the old man's chest, piercing him through the heart.

Two of the crew who were wounded were swiftly decapitated by the Dark Fey commander, who perceived they would be valueless, but Luxor, Corleth and Arin, who were clad in richer garments, he spared, guessing that these might bring a pretty ransom.

So it was that Luxor the Moonprince, his grandson Corleth and Arin, now Lord Blood were brought to the Dark Citadel of Maranor and thrown into a cell. Presently, Boroth himself came to the cell to assay his new possessions. Luxor

was dragged to his feet by the guards.

"Well, what have we here, then?" said the Wolfheart, "An old man and two boys! Still, by their dress I would venture they have some small nobility, at least."

Luxor, enraged, shook himself free of the two guards who held him.

"I am Luxor the Moonprince, Prince of Midnight! Whomsoever you may be, you will set us free forthwith - if you value your life!" cried Luxor.

The Dark Fey guards moved to strike Luxor down but Boroeth, smiling now, raised a hand to stay them.

"Charmed, I am sure!" said Boroeth, bowing his head, "How pleased I am to meet thee, Luxor, Prince of Midnight! Of thee, many tales have I heard. I prithee, allow me to introduce myself. I am Boroeth, High King of the Marish! I fancy thou wilt fetch a handsome price."

"And I fancy that you will find a mighty army hammering at your gates if you dare to hold me to ransom!" said the Moonprince.

"I doubt that. There is little point in rescuing a corpse. And who, pray, might these two pretty boys be?" said Boroeth, still smiling with considerable charm.

"They are two servants of mine. Release them, at least. They will fetch you no ransom," said Luxor.

"And if I do, what do I gain?" asked Boroeth.

"I will give you my mark whereby my son will know that I still live, but first I will see them set free and their swords returned," said Luxor.

"Very well," said Boroeth, "So be it. Thou art wise, Moonprince, to ease my path. Come, let us to the gates of Maranor and thou shalt see thy servants set free."

It was midnight when Corleth and Arin were released at the great gate. As they disappeared into the darkness, Luxor's eyes were filled with tears. He knew that they were in great peril, that Boroeth could, at a whim, send warriors after them and have them slaughtered but he knew in his heart that this was their best chance. Boroeth had nothing to gain by their deaths and, even if they were to be hunted, Corleth and Arin were young and strong and could well escape.

Corleth, however, was not about to abandon his grandfather and Arin was with him in this. Once they were safely out of sight, the boys turned back towards the Dark Citadel, circling round it looking for a way back in. Thus it was that the warriors Boroeth sent after them along the road to the river could find no sign of them. After hours of stumbling through the darkness, Arin suddenly disappeared from sight. By chance, he had fallen into a stairway hidden by undergrowth that led to an underground passage. He called up to Corleth and Corleth followed him. Feeling their way blindly along the dark passageway, they finally emerged in what must have been an old well, deep in the bowels of the Dark Citadel.

As they climbed out of the well into a stone flagged room, Corleth whispered, "Fear not, Grandfather, we will set you free!"

"And any other ill-fated hostage that we might find!" added Arin.

A swift-winged raven bore Boroeth's ransom note to Corelay. It was a simple message: five chestfuls of gold to be sent to Maranor and Luxor would be returned unharmed. If the gold did not reach Maranor within twelve moons,

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Luxor's head alone would be returned. To leave no doubt, Luxor's mark was set upon the parchment.

Prince Morkin gazed at his father's signature. There was no doubt it was his, but at the end there was an extra flourish, an extra branch on the last stroke. For a while, it puzzled him and then he realized what it was meant to be. The last stroke was a snake's tongue. Luxor had added a message to his mark, Place no trust in what this letter says. How the tables had turned since the Icemark! Now it was he who must free his father!

Although he could muster the mightiest of armies, he dared not rouse Midnight lest this Wolfheart hear of it and slay Luxor. Some stealth must be used and what help they could gather within the Blood March itself. If an army were to rescue Luxor, it could not be seen to come from Midnight. With a handful of warriors, Prince Morkin and Araleth the White, Lord of Dreams set forth for the Castle of Corelay and thence to the Blood March.

When the prince drew within sight of the last Mountains, at last he placed the Moonring upon his finger, lifted his fist to the sky and cried out, "For the Moonprince, for Midnight and the Free!

Boroth the Wolfheart, you shall pay for this with your life!" and the air trembled. Far, far, away, already deep within the Blood March on his way to the Crimson Mountains, Rorthron heard the faint whisper thrown forth by the Moonring. Suddenly, all grew clear to him as he bent his mind towards Luxor's plight. Anderlane of the Arakai, the unexpected gift, of course! Already, away in the Last Northing, there could be help at hand from the Moonprince's unsuspected kin. In his wildest dreams, Boroth would never link the two. Now he knew why he had hurried here. Rorthorn looked into the east towards the long Mountains and beyond them Rilleon and the Last Northing, then hurried on. The War of the Blood March was about to begin.

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