

'A master of lost and forgotten epochs,  
a weaver of ancient epics'

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# STEVEN ERIKSON



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## House of Chains

A TALE OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

Archaeologist and anthropologist **Steven Erikson** is the bestselling author of the genre-defining *The Malazan Book of the Fallen*, a multi-volume epic fantasy that has been hailed a masterwork of the imagination and one of the top ten fantasy series of all time. The first novel in the series, *Gardens of the Moon*, was shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award. He has also written several novellas set in the same world. *Forge of Darkness* is the first Kharkanas novel and takes readers back to the origins of the Malazan world. *Fall of Light* continues this epic tale. A lifelong science fiction reader, he has also written fiction affectionately parodying a long-running SF television series and *Rejoice*, a novel of first contact. *The God is Not Willing* is the opening chapter in a new sequence – *The Tales of Witness* – and is set in the world of the Malazan Empire, ten years after the events recounted in *The Crippled God*.

Steven Erikson lives in Victoria, Canada. To find out more, visit [www.steven-erikson.org](http://www.steven-erikson.org) – and you can also find him on Facebook: Steven Erikson – Author

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*For more information on Steven Erikson and his books,  
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House of Chains  
A Tale of the  
Malazan Book of the Fallen  
STEVEN ERIKSON



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For Mark Paxton MacRae, for the KO  
punch. This one's all yours, my friend.

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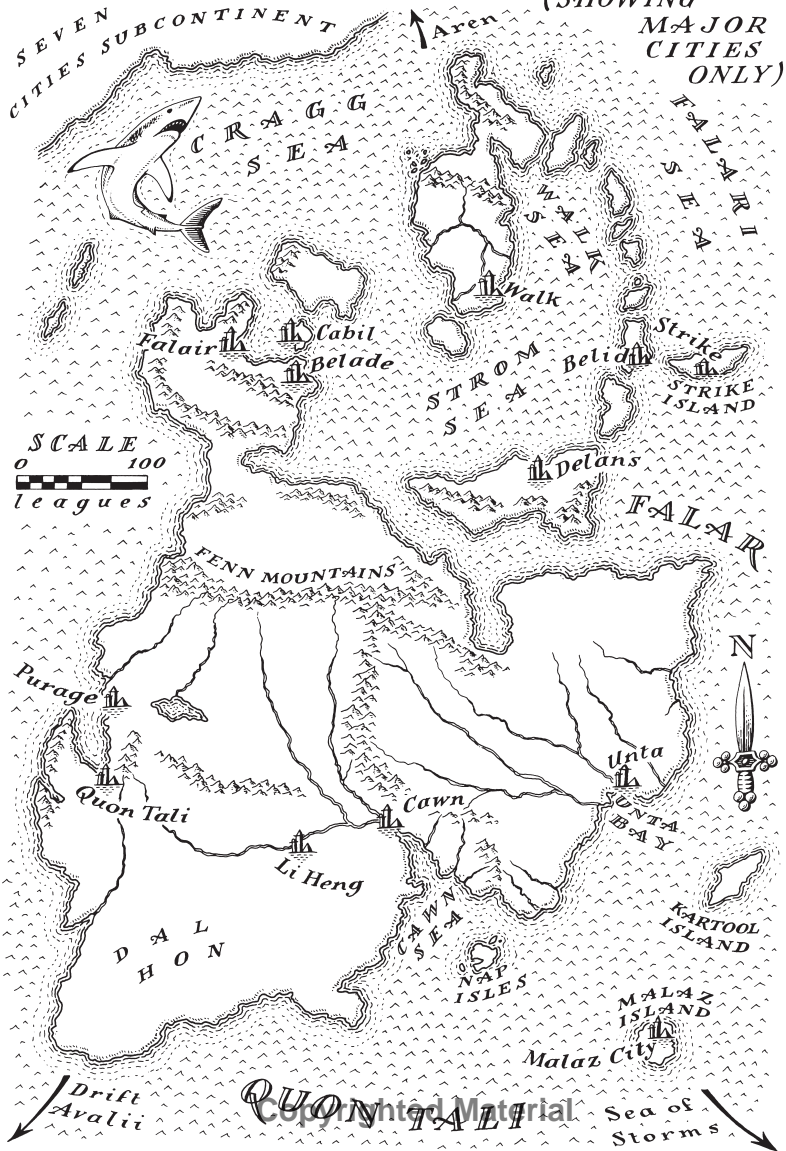
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# CENTRAL MALAZAN EMPIRE

(SHOWING  
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ONLY)



# NORTHWEST GENABACKIS

*circa 1160*  
 (POST MALAZAN CONQUEST)



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R A



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# PAN'ARAK OASIS (RARAKU'S HEART)

Dunes

SCALE  
0  $\frac{1}{2}$  1  
league

ANCIENT  
BEACH  
RIDGE

Dunes

FOREST  
STONE  
GROVES

Old (West) Coast Road

Dogslayer  
Encampment

Dunes

The BASIN

The CORAL "ISLANDS"

Steppes

To  
Escarpment

- 1 Shaik's Hill
- 2 W. Dogslayer Ramp
- 3 Centre Dogslayer Ramp
- 4 E. Dogslayer Ramp

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# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

## THE URYD TRIBE OF THE TEBLOR

**Karsa Orlong**, a young warrior  
**Bairoth Gild**, a young warrior  
**Delum Thord**, a young warrior  
**Dayliss**, a young woman  
**Pahlk**, Karsa's grandfather  
**Synyg**, Karsa's father

## THE ADJUNCT'S ARMY

**Adjunct Tavore**  
**Fist Gamet/Gimlet**  
**T'amber**  
**Fist Tene Baralta**  
**Fist Blistig**  
**Captain Keneb**  
**Grub**, his adopted son  
**Admiral Nok**  
**Commander Alardis**  
**Nil**, a Wickan warlock  
**Nether**, a Wickan witch  
**Temul**, a Wickan of the Crow Clan (survivor of the Chain of Dogs)  
**Squint**, a soldier in the Aren Guard  
**Pearl**, a Claw  
**Lostara Yil**, an officer in the Red Blades  
**Gall**, Warleader of the Khundryl Burned Tears  
**Imrahl**, a warrior of the Khundryl Burned Tears  
**Topper**, the Clawmaster

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Sergeant Strings  
Sergeant Gesler  
Sergeant Borduke  
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Corporal Stormy  
Corporal Hubb  
Bottle, a squad mage  
Smiles  
Koryk, a half-Seti soldier  
Cuttle, a sapper  
Truth  
Pella  
Tavos Pond  
Sands  
Balgrid  
Ibb  
Maybe  
Lutes

SELECTED HEAVY INFANTRY OF THE 9th  
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Sergeant Tugg  
Flashwit  
Uru Hela  
Bowl  
Shortnose

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Sergeant Moak  
Sergeant Thom Tissy  
Corporal Deadsmell  
Corporal Burnt  
Corporal Tulip  
Throatlitter  
Widdershins  
Galt  
Lobe  
Stacker  
Ramp  
Able

OTHER SOLDIERS OF THE MALAZAN  
EMPIRE

Sergeant Cord, 2nd Company, Ashok Regiment  
Ebron, 5th squad, mage  
Limp, 5th squad  
Bell, 5th squad  
Corporal Shard, 5th squad  
Captain Kindly, 2nd Company  
Lieutenant Pores, 2nd Company  
Jibb, Ehrlitan Guard  
Gullstream, Ehrlitan Guard  
Scrawl, Ehrlitan Guard  
Master Sergeant Braven Tooth, Malaz City Garrison  
Captain Irriz, renegade  
Sinn, refugee  
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Hawl

NATHII

Slavemaster Silgar  
Damisk  
Balantis  
Astabb  
Borrug

OTHERS ON GENABACKIS

Torvald Nom  
Calm  
Ganal

SHA'IK'S ARMY OF THE APOCALYPSE

Sha'ik, The Chosen One of the Whirlwind Goddess  
(once Felisin of House Paran)  
Felisin Younger, her adopted daughter  
Tohlakai  
Leoman of the Flails  
High Mage L'oric  
High Mage Bidithal  
High Mage Febryl  
Heboric Ghost Hands  
Kamist Reloe, Korbolo Dom's mage  
Henaras, a sorceress  
Fayelle, a sorceress  
Mathok, Warleader of the Desert Tribes  
T'morol, his bodyguard  
Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, an officer in Leoman's  
company

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Scillara, a camp follower  
Duryl, a messenger  
Ethume, a corporal  
Korbolo Dom, a renegade Napan  
Kasanal, his hired assassin

## OTHERS

Kalam Mekhar, an assassin  
Trull Sengar, a Tiste Edur  
Onrack, a T'lan Imass  
Cutter, an assassin (also known as **Crokus**)  
Apsalar, an assassin  
Rellock, Apsalar's father  
Cotillion, Patron of Assassins  
Traveller  
Rood, a Hound of Shadow  
Blind, a Hound of Shadow  
Darist, a Tiste Andii  
Ba'ienrok (**Keeper**), a hermit  
Ibra Gholan, a T'lan Imass Clan Leader  
Monok Ochem, a Bonecaster of the Logros T'lan Imass  
Haran Epal, a T'lan Imass  
Olar Shayn, a T'lan Imass  
Greyfrog, a demon familiar  
Apt, a matron demon (Aptorian) of Shadow  
Azalan, a demon of Shadow  
Panek, a child of Shadow  
Mebra, a spy in Ehrlitan  
Iskaral Pust, a priest of Shadow  
Mogora, his D'ivers wife  
Cynnigig, a Jaghut  
Phyrlis, a Jaghut  
Aramala, a Jaghut

**Icarium**, a Jhag  
**Mappo Runt**, a Trel  
**Jorrude**, a Tiste Liosan Seneschal  
**Malachar**, a Tiste Liosan  
**Enias**, a Tiste Liosan  
**Orenas**, a Tiste Liosan

## PROLOGUE

*Verge of the Nascent, the 943rd Day of the Search  
1159 Burn's Sleep*

Grey, bloated and pocked, the bodies lined the silt-laden shoreline for as far as the eye could see. Heaped like driftwood by the rising water, bobbing and rolling on the edges, the putrefying flesh seethed with black-shelled, ten-legged crabs. The coin-sized creatures had scarcely begun to make inroads on the bounteous feast the warren's sundering had laid before them.

The sea mirrored the low sky's hue. Dull, patched pewter above and below, broken only by the deeper grey of silts and, thirty strokes of the oar distant, the smeared ochre tones of the barely visible upper levels of a city's inundated buildings. The storms had passed, the waters were calm amidst the wreckage of a drowned world.

Short, squat had been the inhabitants. Flat-featured, the pale hair left long and loose. Their world had been a cold one, given the thick-padded clothing they had worn. But with the sundering that had changed, cataclysmically. The air was sultry, damp and now foul with the reek of decay.

The sea had been born of a river on another realm. A massive, wide and probably continent-spanning artery of fresh water, heavy with plants and animals, the murky depths

home to huge catfish and wagon-wheel-sized spiders, its shallows crowded with the crabs and carnivorous, rootless plants. The river had poured its torrential volume onto this vast, level landscape. Days, then weeks, then months.

Storms, conjured by the volatile clash of tropical air-streams with the resident temperate climate, had driven the flood on beneath shrieking winds, and before the inexorably rising waters came deadly plagues to take those who had not drowned.

Somehow, the rent had closed sometime in the night just past. The river from another realm had been returned to its original path.

The shoreline ahead probably did not deserve the word, but nothing else came to Trull Sengar's mind as he was dragged along its verge. The beach was nothing more than silt, heaped against a huge wall that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon. The wall had withstood the flood, though water now streamed down it on the opposite side.

Bodies on his left, a sheer drop of seven, maybe eight man-heights to his right, the top of the wall itself slightly less than thirty paces across; that it held back an entire sea whispered of sorcery. The broad, flat stones underfoot were smeared with mud, but already drying in the heat, dun-coloured insects dancing on its surface, leaping from the path of Trull Sengar and his captors.

Trull still experienced difficulty comprehending that notion. *Captors*. A word he struggled with. They were his brothers, after all. Kin. Faces he had known all his life, faces he had seen smile, and laugh, and faces – at times – filled with a grief that had mirrored his own. He had stood at their sides through all that had happened, the glorious triumphs, the soul-wrenching losses.

*Captors*.

There were no smiles, now. No laughter. The expressions of those who held him were fixed and cold.

What we have come

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The march ended. Hands pushed Trull Sengar down, heedless of his bruises, the cuts and the gouges that still leaked blood. Massive iron rings had been set, for some unknown purpose, by this world's now-dead inhabitants, along the top of the wall, anchored in the heart of the huge stone blocks. The rings were evenly spaced down the wall's length, at intervals of fifteen or so paces, for as far as Trull could see.

Now, those rings had found a new function.

Chains were wrapped around Trull Sengar, shackles hammered into place on his wrists and ankles. A studded girdle was cinched painfully tight about his midriff, the chains drawn through iron loops and pulled taut to pin him down beside the iron ring. A hinged metal press was affixed to his jaw, his mouth forced open and the plate pushed in and locked in place over his tongue.

The Shorning followed. A dagger inscribed a circle on his forehead, followed by a jagged slash to break that circle, the point pushed deep enough to gouge the bone. Ash was rubbed into the wounds. His long single braid was removed with rough hacks that made a bloody mess of his nape. A thick, cloying unguent was then smeared through his remaining hair, massaged down to the pate. Within a few hours, the rest of his hair would fall away, leaving him permanently bald.

The Shorning was an absolute thing, an irreversible act of severance. He was now outcast. To his brothers, he had ceased to exist. He would not be mourned. His deeds would vanish from memory along with his name. His mother and father would have birthed one less child. This was, for his people, the most dire punishment – worse than execution by far.

Yet, Trull Sengar had committed no crime.

*And this is what we have come to.*

They stood above him, perhaps only now comprehending what they had done.

A familiar voice broke the silence. "We will speak of him

now, and once we have left this place, he will cease to be our brother.'

'We will speak of him now,' the others intoned, then one added, 'He betrayed you.'

The first voice was cool, revealing nothing of the gloat that Trull Sengar knew would be there. 'You say he betrayed me.'

'He did, brother.'

'What proof do you have?'

'By his own tongue.'

'Is it just you who claims to have heard such betrayal spoken?'

'No, I too heard it, brother.'

'And I.'

'And what did our brother say to you all?'

'He said that you had severed your blood from ours.'

'That you now served a hidden master.'

'That your ambition would lead us all to our deaths—'

'Our entire people.'

'He spoke against me, then.'

'He did.'

'By his own tongue, he accused me of betraying our people.'

'He did.'

'And have I? Let us consider this charge. The southlands are aflame. The enemy's armies have fled. The enemy now kneels before us, and begs to be our slaves. From nothing, was forged an empire. And still our strength grows. Yet. To grow stronger, what must you, my brothers, do?'

'We must search.'

'Aye. And when you find what must be sought?'

'We must deliver. To you, brother.'

'Do you see the need for this?'

'We do.'

'Do you understand the sacrifice I make, for you, for our people, for our future?'

'We do.' **Copyrighted Material**

‘Yet, even as you searched, this man, our once-brother, spoke against me.’

‘He did.’

‘Worse, he spoke to defend the new enemies we had found.’

‘He did. He called them the Pure Kin, and said we should not kill them.’

‘And, had they been in truth Pure Kin, then . . .’

‘They would not have died so easily.’

‘Thus.’

‘He betrayed you, brother.’

‘He betrayed us all.’

There was silence. *Ah, now you would share out this crime of yours. And they hesitate.*

‘He betrayed us all, did he not, brothers?’

‘Yes.’ The word arrived rough, beneath the breath, mumbled – a chorus of dubious uncertainty.

No-one spoke for a long moment, then, savage with barely bridled anger: ‘Thus, *brothers*. And should we not heed this danger? This threat of betrayal, this poison, this plague that seeks to tear our family apart? Will it spread? Will we come here yet again? We must be vigilant, brothers. Within ourselves. With each other. Now, we have spoken of him. And now, he is gone.’

‘He is gone.’

‘He never existed.’

‘He never existed.’

‘Let us leave this place, then.’

‘Yes, let us leave.’

Trull Sengar listened until he could no more hear their boots on the stones, nor feel the tremble of their dwindling steps. He was alone, unable to move, seeing only the mud-smearred stone at the base of the iron ring.

The sea rustled the corpses along the shoreline. Crabs scuttled. Water continued to seep through the mortar, insinuate the Cyclopean wall with the voice of muttering ghosts, and flow down on the other side.

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Among his people, it was a long-known truth, perhaps the only truth, that Nature fought but one eternal war. One foe. That, further, to understand this was to understand the world. Every world.

*Nature has but one enemy.*

*And that is imbalance.*

The wall held the sea.

*And there are two meanings to this. My brothers, can you not see the truth of that? Two meanings. The wall holds the sea.*

*For now.*

This was a flood that would not be denied. The deluge had but just begun – something his brothers could not understand, would, perhaps, never understand.

Drowning was common among his people. Drowning was not feared. And so, Trull Sengar would drown. Soon.

And before long, he suspected, his entire people would join him.

His brother had shattered the balance.

*And Nature shall not abide.*

BOOK ONE



FACES IN THE ROCK

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The slower the river, the redder it runs.

Nathii saying

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## CHAPTER ONE

Children from a dark house  
choose shadowed paths.

Nathii folk saying

The dog had savaged a woman, an old man and a child before the warriors drove it into an abandoned kiln at the edge of the village. The beast had never before displayed an uncertain loyalty. It had guarded the Uryd lands with fierce zeal, one with its kin in its harsh, but just, duties. There were no wounds on its body that might have festered and so allowed the spirit of madness into its veins. Nor was the dog possessed by the foaming sickness. Its position in the village pack had not been challenged. Indeed, there was nothing, nothing at all, to give cause to the sudden turn.

The warriors pinned the animal to the rounded back wall of the clay kiln with spears, stabbing at the snapping, shrieking beast until it was dead. When they withdrew their spears they saw the shafts chewed and slick with spit and blood; they saw iron dented and scored.

Madness, they knew, could remain hidden, buried far beneath the surface, a subtle flavour turning blood into something bitter. The shamans examined the three victims; two had already died of their wounds, but the child still clung to life.

In solemn procession he was carried by his father to the Faces in the **Copyrighted Material** made before the

Seven Gods of the Teblor, and left there.

He died a short while later. Alone in his pain before the hard visages carved into the cliff-face.

This was not an unexpected fate. The child, after all, had been too young to pray.

All of this, of course, happened centuries past.

Long before the Seven Gods opened their eyes.

### *Urugal the Woven's Year*

#### *1159 Burn's Sleep*

They were glorious tales. Farms in flames, children dragged behind horses for leagues. The trophies of that day, so long ago, cluttered the low walls of his grandfather's longhouse. Scarred skull-pates, frail-looking mandibles. Odd fragments of clothing made of some unknown material, now smoke-blackened and tattered. Small ears nailed to every wooden post that reached up to the thatched roof.

Evidence that Silver Lake was real, that it existed in truth, beyond the forest-clad mountains, down through hidden passes, a week – perhaps two – distant from the lands of the Uryd clan. The way itself was fraught, passing through territories held by the Sunyd and Rathyd clans, a journey that was itself a tale of legendary proportions. Moving silent and unseen through enemy camps, shifting the hearthstones to deliver deepest insult, eluding the hunters and trackers day and night until the borderlands were reached, then crossed – the vista ahead unknown, its riches not even yet dreamed of.

Karsa Orlong lived and breathed his grandfather's tales. They stood like a legion, defiant and fierce, before the pallid, empty legacy of Synyg – Pahlk's son and Karsa's father. Synyg, who had done nothing in his life, who tended his horses in his valley and had not once ventured into hostile lands. Synyg, who was both his father's and his son's greatest shame.

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True, Synyg had more than once defended his herd of horses from raiders from other clans, and defended well, with honourable ferocity and admirable skill. But this was only to be expected from those of Uryd blood. Urugal the Woven was the clan's Face in the Rock, and Urugal was counted among the fiercest of the seven gods. The other clans had reason to fear the Uryd.

Nor had Synyg proved less than masterful in training his only son in the Fighting Dances. Karsa's skill with the bloodwood blade far surpassed his years. He was counted among the finest warriors of the clan. While the Uryd disdained use of the bow, they excelled with spear and atlatl, with the toothed-disc and the black-rope, and Synyg had taught his son an impressive efficiency with these weapons as well.

None the less, such training was to be expected from any father in the Uryd clan. Karsa could find no reason for pride in such things. The Fighting Dances were but preparation, after all. Glory was found in all that followed, in the contests, the raids, in the vicious perpetuation of feuds.

Karsa would not do as his father had done. He would not do . . . *nothing*. No, he would walk his grandfather's path. More closely than anyone might imagine. Too much of the clan's reputation lived only in the past. The Uryd had grown complacent in their position of pre-eminence among the Teblor. Pahlk had muttered that truth more than once, the nights when his bones ached from old wounds and the shame that was his son burned deepest.

*A return to the old ways. And I, Karsa Orlong, shall lead. Delum Thord is with me. As is Bairoth Gild. All in our first year of scarring. We have counted coup. We have slain enemies. Stolen horses. Shifted the hearthstones of the Kellyd and the Buryd.*

*And now, with the new moon and in the year of your naming, Urugal, we shall weave our way to Silver Lake. To slay the children who dwell there.*

He remained on his knees in the glade, head bowed

beneath the Faces in the Rock, knowing that Urugal's visage, high on the cliff-face, mirrored his own savage desire; and that those of the other gods, all with their own clans barring 'Siballe, who was the Unfound, glared down upon Karsa with envy and hate. None of their children knelt before them, after all, to voice such bold vows.

Complacency plagued all the clans of the Teblor, Karsa suspected. The world beyond the mountains dared not encroach, had not attempted to do so in decades. No visitors ventured into Teblor lands. Nor had the Teblor themselves gazed out beyond the borderlands with dark hunger, as they had often done generations past. The last man to have led a raid into foreign territory had been his grandfather. To the shores of Silver Lake, where farms squatted like rotted mushrooms and children scurried like mice. Back then, there had been two farms, a half-dozen outbuildings. Now, Karsa believed, there would be more. Three, even four farms. Even Pahlk's day of slaughter would pale to that delivered by Karsa, Delum and Bairoth.

*So I vow, beloved Urugal. And I shall deliver unto you a feast of trophies such as never before blackened the soil of this glade. Enough, perhaps, to free you from the stone itself, so that once more you will stride in our midst, a deliverer of death upon all our enemies.*

*I, Karsa Orlong, grandson of Pahlk Orlong, so swear. And, should you doubt, Urugal, know that we leave this very night. The journey begins with the descent of this very sun. And, as each day's sun births the sun of the next day, so shall it look down upon three warriors of the Uryd clan, leading their destriers through the passes, down into the unknown lands. And Silver Lake shall, after more than four centuries, once again tremble to the coming of the Teblor.*

Karsa slowly lifted his head, eyes travelling up the battered cliff-face, to find the harsh, bestial face of Urugal, there, among its kin. The pitted gaze seemed fixed upon him and Karsa thought he saw avid pleasure in those dark pools. Indeed, he would describe it as

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truth to Delum and Bairoth, and to Dayliss, so that she might voice her blessing, for he so wished her blessing, her cold words . . . *I, Dayliss, yet to find a family's name, bless you, Karsa Orlong, on your dire raid. May you slay a legion of children. May their cries feed your dreams. May their blood give you thirst for more. May flames haunt the path of your life. May you return to me, a thousand deaths upon your soul, and take me as your wife.*

She might indeed so bless him. A first yet undeniable expression of her interest in him. Not Bairoth – she but toyed with Bairoth as any young unwedded woman might, for amusement. Her Knife of Night remained sheathed, of course, for Bairoth lacked cold ambition – a flaw he might deny, yet the truth was plain that he did not lead, only follow, and Dayliss would not settle for that.

No, she would be his, Karsa's, upon his return, the culmination of his triumph that was the raid on Silver Lake. For him, and him alone, Dayliss would unsheathe her Knife of Night.

*May you slay a legion of children. May flames haunt the path of your life.*

Karsa straightened. No wind rustled the leaves of the birch trees encircling the glade. The air was heavy, a lowland air that had climbed its way into the mountains in the wake of the marching sun, and now, with light fading, it was trapped in the glade before the Faces in the Rock. Like a breath of the gods, soon to seep into the rotting soil.

There was no doubt in Karsa's mind that Urugal was present, as close behind the stone skin of his face as he had ever been. Drawn by the power of Karsa's vow, by the promise of a return to glory. So too hovered the other gods. Beroke Soft Voice, Kahlb the Silent Hunter, Thenik the Shattered, Halad Rack Bearer, Imroth the Cruel and 'Siballe the Unfound, all awakened once more and eager for blood.

*And I have but just begun on this path. Newly arrived to my eightieth year of life I have heard the*

*oldest words, the whispers, of the One, who will unite the Teblor, who will bind the clans one and all and lead them into the lowlands and so begin the War of the People. These whispers, they are the voice of promise, and that voice is mine.*

Hidden birds announced the coming of dusk. It was time to leave. Delum and Bairoth awaited him in the village. And Dayliss, silent yet holding to the words she would speak to him.

*Bairoth will be furious.*

The pocket of warm air in the glade lingered long after Karsa Orlong's departure. The soft, boggy soil was slow to yield the imprint of his knees, his moccasined feet, and the sun's deepening glare continued to paint the harsh features of the gods even as shadows filled the glade itself.

Seven figures rose from the ground, skin wrinkled and stained dark brown over withered muscles and heavy bones, hair red as ochre and dripping stagnant, black water. Some were missing limbs, others stood on splintered, shattered or mangled legs. One lacked a lower jaw while another's left cheekbone and brow were crushed flat, obliterating the eye-socket. Each of the seven, broken in some way. Imperfect. Flawed.

Somewhere behind the wall of rock was a sealed cavern that had been their tomb for a span of centuries, a short-lived imprisonment as it turned out. None had expected their resurrection. Too shattered to remain with their kin, they had been left behind, as was the custom of their kind. Failure's sentence was abandonment, an eternity of immobility. When failure was honourable, their sentient remnants would be placed open to the sky, to vistas, to the outside world, so that they might find peace in watching the passing of eons. But, for these seven, failure had not been honourable. Thus, the darkness of a tomb had been their sentence. They had felt no bitterness at that.

That dark gift came later, from outside their unlit prison, and with it, opportunity.

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All that was required was the breaking of a vow, and the swearing of fealty to another. The reward: rebirth, and freedom.

Their kin had marked this place of internment, with carved faces each a likeness, mocking the vista with blank, blind eyes. They had spoken their names to close the ritual of binding, names that lingered in this place with a power sufficient to twist the minds of the shamans of the people who had found refuge in these mountains, and on the plateau with the ancient name of Laederon.

The seven were silent and motionless in the glade as the dusk deepened. Six were waiting for one to speak, yet that one was in no hurry. Freedom was raw exultation and, even limited as it was to this glade, the emotion persisted still. It would not be long, now, until that freedom would break free of its last chains – the truncated range of vision from the eye-sockets carved into the rock. Service to the new master promised travel, an entire world to rediscover and countless deaths to deliver.

Uruul, whose name meant Mossy Bone and who was known to the Teblor as Urugal, finally spoke. ‘He will suffice.’

Sin’b’alle – Lichen For Moss – who was ‘Siballe the Unfound, did not hide the scepticism in her voice. ‘You place too much faith in these fallen Teblor. *Teblor*. They know naught, even their true name.’

‘Be glad that they do not,’ said Ber’ok, his voice a rough rasp through a crushed throat. Neck twisted and head leaning to one side, he was forced to turn his entire body to stare at the rock-face. ‘In any case, you have your own children, Sin’b’alle, who are the bearers of the truth. For the others, lost history is best left lost, for our purposes. Their ignorance is our greatest weapon.’

‘Dead Ash Tree speaks the truth,’ Uruul said. ‘We could not have so twisted their faith were they cognizant of their legacy.’

Sin’b’alle shrugged disdainfully. The one named Pahlk

also . . . *sufficed*. In your opinion, Uruul. A worthy prospect to lead my children, it seemed. Yet he failed.'

'Our fault, not his,' Haran'alle growled. 'We were impatient, too confident of our efficacy. Sundering the Vow stole much of our power—'

'Yet what has our new master given of his, Antler From Summer?' Thek Ist demanded. 'Naught but a trickle.'

'And what do you expect?' Uruul enquired in a quiet tone. 'He recovers from his ordeals as we do from ours.'

Emroth spoke, her voice like silk. 'So you believe, Mossy Bone, that this grandson of Pahlk will carve for us our path to freedom.'

'I do.'

'And if we are disappointed yet again?'

'Then we begin anew. Bairoth's child in Dayliss's womb.'

Emroth hissed. 'Another century of waiting! Damn these long-lived Teblor!'

'A century is as nothing—'

'As nothing, yet as everything, Mossy Bone! And you know precisely what I mean.'

Uruul studied the woman, who was aptly named Fanged Skeleton, recalling her Soletaken proclivities, and its hunger that had so clearly led to their failure so long ago. 'The year of my name has returned,' he said. 'Among us all, who has led a clan of the Teblor as far along our path as I have? You, Fanged Skeleton? Lichen For Moss? Spear Leg?'

No-one spoke.

Then finally Dead Ash Tree made a sound that might have been a soft laugh. 'We are as Red Moss, silent. The way *will* be opened. So our new master has promised. He finds his power. Uruul's chosen warrior already possesses a score of souls in his slayer's train. *Teblor* souls at that. Recall, also, that Pahlk journeyed alone. Yet Karsa shall have two formidable warriors flanking him. Should he die, there is always Bairoth, or Delum.'

'Bairoth is too clever,' Emroth snarled. 'He takes after Pahlk's son, but only because his ambition is only for

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himself. He feigns to follow Karsa, yet has his hand on Karsa's back.'

'And mine on his,' Uruul murmured. 'Night is almost upon us. We must return to our tomb.' The ancient warrior turned. 'Fanged Skeleton, remain close to the child in Dayliss's womb.'

'She feeds from my breast even now,' Emroth asserted.

'A girl-child?'

'In flesh only. What I make within is neither a girl, nor a child.'

'Good.'

The seven figures returned to the earth as the first stars of night blinked awake in the sky overhead. Blinked awake, and looked down upon a glade where no gods dwelt. Where no gods had ever dwelt.

The village was situated on the stony bank of Laderii River, a mountain-fed, torrential flow of bitter-cold water that cut a valley through the conifer forest on its way down to some distant sea. The houses were built with boulder foundations and rough-hewn cedar walls, the roofs thick-matted, humped and overgrown with moss. Along the bank rose latticed frames thick with strips of drying fish. Beyond a fringe of woods, clearings had been cut to provide pasture for horses.

Mist-dimmed firelight flickered through the trees as Karsa reached his father's house, passing the dozen horses standing silent and motionless in the glade. Their only threat came from raiders, for these beasts were bred killers and the mountain wolves had long since learned to avoid the huge animals. Occasionally a rust-collared bear would venture down from its mountain haunt, but this usually coincided with salmon runs and the creatures showed little interest in challenging the horses, the village's dogs, or its fearless warriors.

Syng was in the training kraal, grooming Havok, his prized destrier. Karsa could feel the animal's heat as he

approached, though it was little more than a black mass in the darkness. 'Red Eye still wanders loose,' Karsa growled. 'You will do nothing for your son?'

His father continued grooming Havok. 'Red Eye is too young for such a journey, as I have said before—'

'Yet he is mine, and so I shall ride him.'

'No. He lacks independence, and has not yet ridden with the mounts of Bairoth and Delum. You will lodge a thorn in his nerves.'

'So I am to walk?'

'I give you Havok, my son. He has been softly run this night and still wears the bridle. Go collect your gear, before he cools too much.'

Karsa said nothing. He was in truth astonished. He swung about and made his way to the house. His father had slung his pack from a ridgepole near the doorway to keep it dry. His bloodwood sword hung in its harness beside it, newly oiled, the Uryd warcrest freshly painted on the broad blade. Karsa drew the weapon down and strapped the harness in place, the sword's leather-wrapped two-handed grip jutting over his left shoulder. The pack would ride Havok's shoulders, affixed to the stirrup-rig, though Karsa's knees would take most of the weight.

Teblor horse-trappings did not include a rider's seat; a warrior rode against flesh, stirrups high, the bulk of his weight directly behind the mount's shoulders. Lowlander trophies included saddles, which revealed, when positioned on the smaller lowlander horses, a clear shifting of weight to the back. But a true destrier needed its hindquarters free of extra weight, to ensure the swiftness of its kicks. More, a warrior must needs protect his mount's neck and head, with sword and, if necessary, vambraced forearms.

Karsa returned to where his father and Havok waited.

'Bairoth and Delum await you at the ford,' Synyg said.

'Dayliss?'

Karsa could see nothing of his father's expression as he replied concisely, 'Dayliss' and raised her blessing

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to Bairoth after you'd set out for the Faces in the Rock.'

'She blessed Bairoth?'

'She did.'

'It seems I misjudged her,' Karsa said, struggling against an unfamiliar stricture that tightened his voice.

'Easy to do, for she is a woman.'

'And you, Father? Will you give me your blessing?'

Synyg handed Karsa the lone rein and turned away. 'Pahlk has already done so. Be satisfied with that.'

'Pahlk is not my father!'

Synyg paused in the darkness, seemed to consider, then said, 'No, he is not.'

'Then will you bless me?'

'What would you have me bless, son? The Seven Gods who are a lie? The glory that is empty? Will I be pleased in your slaying of children? In the trophies you will tie to your belt? My father, Pahlk, would polish bright his own youth, for he is of that age. What were his words of blessing, Karsa? That you surpass his achievements? I imagine not. Consider his words carefully, and I expect you will find that they served him more than you.'

'“Pahlk, Finder of the Path that you shall follow, blesses your journey.” Such were his words.'

Synyg was silent for a moment, and when he spoke his son could hear the grim smile though he could not see it. 'As I said.'

'Mother would have blessed me,' Karsa snapped.

'As a mother must. But her heart would have been heavy. Go, then, son. Your companions await you.'

With a snarl, Karsa swung himself onto the destrier's broad back. Havok swung his head about at the unfamiliar seating, then snorted.

Synyg spoke from the gloom. 'He dislikes carrying anger. Calm yourself, son.'

'A warhorse afraid of anger is next to useless. Havok shall have to learn who rides him now.' At that, Karsa drew a leg back and with a flick of the single rein swung the

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destrier smartly round. A gesture with his rein hand sent the horse forward onto the trail.

Four blood-posts, each marking one of Karsa's sacrificed siblings, lined the path leading to the village. Unlike others, Synyg had left the carved posts unadorned; he had only gone so far as to cut the glyphs naming his three sons and one daughter given to the Faces in the Rock, followed by a splash of kin blood which had not lasted much beyond the first rain. Instead of braids winding up the man-high posts to a feathered and gut-knotted headdress at the peak, only vines entwined the weathered wood, and the blunted top was smeared with bird droppings.

Karsa knew the memory of his siblings deserved more, and he resolved to carry their names close to his lips at the moment of attack, that he might slay with their cries sharp in the air. His voice would be their voice, when that time arrived. They had suffered their father's neglect for far too long.

The trail widened, flanked by old stumps and low-spreading juniper. Ahead, the lurid glare of hearths amidst dark, squat, conical houses glimmered through the woodsmoke haze. Near one of those firepits waited two mounted figures. A third shape, on foot, stood wrapped in furs to one side. *Dayliss. She blessed Bairoth Gild, and now comes to see him off.*

Karsa rode up to them, holding Havok back to a lazy lope. He was the leader, and he would make the truth of that plain. Bairoth and Delum awaited him, after all, and which of the three had gone to the Faces in the Rock? Dayliss had blessed a follower. Had Karsa held himself too aloof? Yet such was the burden of those who commanded. She must have understood that. It made no sense.

He halted his horse before them, was silent.

Bairoth was a heavier man, though not as tall as Karsa or, indeed, Delum. He possessed a bear-like quality that he had long since recognized and had come to self-consciously affect. He rolled his shoulders now, as if loosening them for

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the journey, and grinned. ‘A bold beginning, brother,’ he rumbled, ‘the theft of your father’s horse.’

‘I did not steal him, Bairoth. Synyg gave me both Havok and his blessing.’

‘A night of miracles, it seems. And did Urugal stride out from the rock to kiss your brow as well, Karsa Orlong?’

Dayliss snorted at that.

*If he had indeed stridden onto mortal ground, he would have found but one of us three standing before him.* To Bairoth’s jibe Karsa said nothing. He slowly swung his gaze to Dayliss. ‘You have blessed Bairoth?’

Her shrug was dismissive.

‘I grieve,’ Karsa said, ‘your loss of courage.’

Her eyes snapped to his with sudden fury.

Smiling, Karsa turned back to Bairoth and Delum. “The stars wheel. Let us ride.”

But Bairoth ignored the words and instead of voicing the ritual reply he growled, ‘Ill chosen, to unleash your wounded pride on her. Dayliss is to be my wife upon our return. To strike at her is to strike at me.’

Karsa went motionless. ‘But Bairoth,’ he said, low and smooth, ‘I strike where I will. A failing of courage can spread like a disease – has her blessing settled upon you as a curse? I am warleader. I invite you to challenge me, now, before we quit our home.’

Bairoth hunched his shoulders, slowly leaned forward. ‘It is no failing of courage,’ he grated, ‘that stays my hand, Karsa Orlong—’

‘I am pleased to hear it. “The stars wheel. Let us ride.”’

Scowling at the interruption, Bairoth made to say something more, then stopped. He smiled, relaxing once again. He glanced over at Dayliss and nodded, as if silently reaffirming a secret, then intoned, “The stars wheel. Lead us, Warleader, into glory.”

Delum, who had watched all in silence, his face empty of expression, now spoke in turn. “Lead us, Warleader, into glory.”

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Karsa in front, the three warriors rode the length of the village. The tribe's elders had spoken against the journey, so no-one came out to watch them depart. Yet Karsa knew that none could escape hearing them pass, and he knew that, one day, they would come to regret that they had been witness to nothing more than the heavy, muffled thump of hoofs. None the less, he wished dearly for a witness other than Dayliss. Not even Pahlk had appeared.

*Yet I feel as if we are indeed being watched. By the Seven perhaps. Urugal, risen to the height of the stars, riding the current of the wheel, gazing down upon us now. Hear me, Urugal! I, Karsa Orlong, shall slay for you a thousand children! A thousand souls to lay at your feet!*

Nearby, a dog moaned in restless sleep, but did not awaken.

On the north valley side overlooking the village, at the very edge of the tree line, stood twenty-three silent witnesses to the departure of Karsa Orlong, Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord. Ghostly in the darkness between the broadleafed trees, they waited, motionless, until long after the three warriors had passed out of sight down the eastern track.

Uryd born. Uryd sacrificed, they were blood-kin to Karsa, Bairoth and Delum. In their fourth month of life they had each been given to the Faces in the Rock, laid down by their mothers in the glade at sunset. Offered to the Seven's embrace, vanishing before the sun's rise. Given, one and all, to a new mother.

'Siballe's children, then and now. 'Siballe, the Unfound, the lone goddess among the Seven without a tribe of her own. And so, she had created one, a secret tribe drawn from the six others, had taught them of their individual blood ties – in order to link them with their unsacrificed kin. Taught them, as well, of their own special purpose, the destiny that would belong to them and them alone.

She called **Copyrighted Material** was the name by

which they knew themselves, the name of their own hidden tribe. Dwelling unseen in the midst of their kin, their very existence unimagined by anyone in any of the six tribes. There were some, they knew, who might suspect, but suspicion was all they possessed. Men such as Synyg, Karsa's father, who treated the memorial blood-posts with indifference, if not contempt. Such men usually posed no real threat, although on occasion more extreme measures proved necessary when true risk was perceived. Such as with Karsa's mother.

The twenty-three Found who stood witness to the beginning of the warriors' journey, hidden among the trees of the valley side, were by blood the brothers and sisters of Karsa, Bairoth and Delum, yet they were strangers as well, though at that moment that detail seemed to matter little.

'One shall make it.' This from Bairoth's eldest brother.

Delum's twin sister shrugged in reply and said, 'We shall be here, then, upon that one's return.'

'So we shall.'

Another trait was shared by all of the Found. 'Siballe had marked her children with a savage scar, a stripping away of flesh and muscle on the left side – from temple down to jawline – of each face, and with that destruction the capacity for expression had been severely diminished. Features on the left were fixed in a downturned grimace, as if in permanent dismay. In some strange manner, the physical scarring had also stripped inflection from their voices – or perhaps 'Siballe's own toneless voice had proved an overwhelming influence.

Thus bereft of intonation, words of hope had a way of ringing false to their own ears, sufficient to silence those who had spoken.

*One would make it.*

Perhaps.

Synyg continued stirring the stew at the cookfire when the door opened behind him. A soft, muffled, dragged foot,

the clatter of a walking stick against the doorframe. Then a harsh accusatory question.

‘Did you bless your son?’

‘I gave him Havok, Father.’

Somehow Pahlk filled a single word with contempt, disgust and suspicion all at once: ‘Why?’

Synyg still did not turn as he listened to his father make a tortured journey to the chair closest to the hearth. ‘Havok deserved a final battle, one I knew I would not give him. So.’

‘So, as I thought.’ Pahlk settled into the chair with a pained grunt. ‘For your horse, but not for your son.’

‘Are you hungry?’ Synyg asked.

‘I will not deny you the gesture.’

Synyg allowed himself a small, bitter smile, then reached over to collect a second bowl and set it down beside his own.

‘He would batter down a mountain,’ Pahlk growled, ‘to see you stir from your straw.’

‘What he does is not for me, Father, it is for you.’

‘He perceives only the fiercest glory possible will achieve what is necessary – the inundation of the shame that is you, Synyg. You are the straggly bush between two towering trees, child of one and sire to the other. This is why he reached out to me, reached out – do you fret and chafe there in the shadows between Karsa and me? Too bad, the choice was always yours.’

Synyg filled both bowls and straightened to hand one to his father. ‘The scar around an old wound feels nothing,’ he said.

‘To feel nothing is not a virtue.’

Smiling, Synyg sat in the other chair. ‘Tell me a tale, Father, as you once did. Those days following your triumph. Tell me again of the children you killed. Of the women you cut down. Tell me of the burning homesteads, the screams of the cattle and sheep trapped in the flames. I would see those fires once more, replicated in your eyes. Sit in the ashes, Father.’

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‘When you speak these days, son, all I hear is that damned woman.’

‘Eat, Father, lest you insult me and my home.’

‘I shall.’

‘You were ever a mindful guest.’

‘True.’

No more words were exchanged until both men had finished their meals. Then Synyg set down his bowl. He rose and collected Pahlk’s bowl as well, then, turning, he threw it into the fire.

His father’s eyes widened.

Synyg stared down at him. ‘Neither of us shall live to see Karsa’s return. The bridge between you and me is now swept away. Come to my door again, Father, and I shall kill you.’ He reached down with both hands and pulled Pahlk upright, dragged the sputtering old man to the door and without ceremony threw him outside. The walking stick followed.

They travelled the old trail that paralleled the spine of the mountains. Old rockslides obscured the path here and there, dragging firs and cedars down towards the valley below, and in these places bushes and broadleafed trees had found a foothold, making passage difficult. Two days and three nights ahead lay Rathyd lands, and of all the other Teblor tribes it was the Rathyd with whom the Uryd feuded the most. Raids and vicious murders entangled the two tribes together in a skein of hatred that stretched back centuries.

Passing unseen through Rathyd territories was not what Karsa had in mind. He intended to carve a bloody path through real and imagined insults with a vengeful blade, gathering a score or more Teblor souls to his name in the process. The two warriors riding behind him, he well knew, believed that the journey ahead would be one of stealth and subterfuge. They were, after all, but three.

*But Urugal is with us, in his secret. And we shall*

*announce ourselves in his name, and in blood. We shall shock awake the hornets in their nest, and the Rathyd shall come to know, and fear, the name of Karsa Orlong. As will the Sunyd, in their turn.*

The warhorses moved cautiously across the loose scree of a recent slide. There had been a lot of snow the past winter, more than Karsa could recall in his lifetime. Long before the Faces in the Rock awoke to proclaim to the elders, within dreams and trances, that they had defeated the old Teblor spirits and now demanded obeisance; long before the taking of enemy souls had become foremost among Teblor aspirations, the spirits that had ruled the land and its people were the bones of rock, the flesh of earth, the hair and fur of forest and glen, and their breath was the wind of each season. Winter arrived and departed with violent storms high in the mountains, the savage exertions of the spirits in their eternal, mutual war. Summer and winter were as one: motionless and dry, but the former revealed exhaustion while the latter evinced an icy, fragile peace. Accordingly, the Teblor viewed summers with sympathy for the battle-weary spirits, while they detested winters for the weakness of the ascendant combatants, for there was no value in the illusion of peace.

Less than a score days remained in this, the season of spring. The high storms were diminishing, both in frequency and fury. Though the Faces in the Rock had long ago destroyed the old spirits and were, it seemed, indifferent to the passage of seasons, Karsa secretly envisioned himself and his two companion warriors as harbingers of one last storm. Their bloodwood swords would echo ancient rages among the unsuspecting Rathyd and Sunyd.

They cleared the recent slide. The path ahead wound down into a shallow valley with a highland meadow open to the bright afternoon sunlight.

Bairoth spoke behind Karsa. 'We should camp on the other side of this valley. Warhorses and the horses need rest.'

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‘Perhaps your horse needs rest, Bairoth,’ Karsa replied. ‘You’ve too many feast nights on your bones. This journey shall make a warrior of you once again, I trust. Your back has known too much straw of late.’ *With Dayliss riding you.*

Bairoth laughed, but made no other reply.

Delum called, ‘My horse needs rest as well, Warleader. The glade ahead should make a good camp. There are rabbit runs here and I would set my snare.’

Karsa shrugged. ‘Two weighted chains about me, then. The warcries of your stomachs leave me deafened. So be it. We shall camp.’

There would be no fire, so they ate the rabbits Delum had caught raw. Once, such fare would have been risky, for rabbits often carried diseases that could only be killed by cooking, most of them fatal to the Teblor. But since the coming of the Faces in the Rock, illnesses had vanished among the tribes. Madness, it was true, still plagued them, but this had nothing to do with what was eaten or drunk. At times, the elders had explained, the burdens laid upon a man by the Seven proved too powerful. A mind must be strong, and strength was found in faith. For the weak man, for the man who knew doubt, rules and rites could become a cage, and imprisonment led to madness.

They sat around a small pit Delum had dug for the rabbit bones, saying little through the course of the meal. Overhead, the sky slowly lost its colour, and the stars had begun their wheel. In the gathering gloom Karsa listened to Bairoth sucking at a rabbit skull. He was ever last to finish, for he left nothing and would even gnaw, on the next day, the thin layer of fat from the underside of the skin. Finally, Bairoth tossed the empty skull into the pit and sat back, licking his fingers.

‘I have given,’ Delum said, ‘some thought as to the journey ahead. Through Rathyd and Sunyd lands. We should not take trails that set us against skyline or even bare rock. There for we must take lower paths. Yet these

are ones that will lead us closest to camps. We must, I think, shift our travelling to night.'

'Better, then,' Bairoth nodded, 'to count coup. To turn the hearthstones and steal feathers. Perhaps a few lone sleeping warriors can give us their souls.'

Karsa spoke. 'Hiding by day, we see little smoke to tell us where the camps are. At night, the wind swirls, so it will not help us find the hearths. The Rathyd and Sunyd are not fools. They will not build fires beneath overhangs or against rock-faces – we shall find no welcoming wash of light on stone. Also, our horses see better during the day, and are more sure-footed. We shall ride by day,' he finished.

Neither Bairoth nor Delum said anything for a moment.

Then Bairoth cleared his throat. 'We shall find ourselves in a war, Karsa.'

'We shall be as an arrow of the Lanyd in its flight through a forest, changing direction with each twig, branch and bole. We shall gather souls, Bairoth, in a roaring storm. War? Yes. Do you fear war, Bairoth Gild?'

Delum said, 'We are three, Warleader.'

'Aye, we are Karsa Orlong, Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord. I have faced twenty-four warriors and have slain them all. I dance without equal – would you deny it? Even the elders have spoken in awe. And you, Delum, I see eighteen tongues looped on the thong at your hip. You can read a ghost's trail, and hear a pebble roll over from twenty paces. And Bairoth, in the days when all he carried was muscle – you, Bairoth, did you not break a Buryd's spine with your bare hands? Did you not drag a warhorse down? That ferocity but sleeps within you and this journey shall awaken it once more. Any other three . . . aye, glide the dark winding ways and turn hearthstones and pluck feathers and crush a few windpipes among sleeping foes. A worthy enough glory for any other three warriors. For us? No. Your warleader has spoken.'

Bairoth grinned over at Delum. 'Let me gaze upward and

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witness the wheel, Delum Thord, for scant few such sights remain to us.'

Karsa slowly rose. 'You follow your warleader, Bairoth Gild. You do not question him. Your faltering courage threatens to poison us all. Believe in victory, warrior, or turn back now.'

Bairoth shrugged and leaned back, stretching out his hide-wrapped legs. 'You are a great warleader, Karsa Orlong, but sadly blind to humour. I have faith that you shall indeed find the glory you seek, and that Delum and I shall shine as lesser moons, yet shine none the less. For us, it is enough. You may cease questioning that, Warleader. We are here, with you—'

'Challenging my wisdom!'

'Wisdom is not a subject we have as yet discussed,' Bairoth replied. 'We are warriors as you said, Karsa. And we are young. Wisdom belongs to old men.'

'Yes, the elders,' Karsa snapped. 'Who would not bless our journey!'

Bairoth laughed. 'That is our truth and we must carry it with us, unchanged and bitter in our hearts. But upon our return, Warleader, we shall find that that truth has changed in our absence. The blessing will have been given after all. Wait and see.'

Karsa's eyes widened. 'The elders will *lie*'?

'Of course they will lie. And they will expect us to accept their new truths, and we shall – no, we must, Karsa Orlong. The glory of our success must serve to bind the people together – to hold it close is not only selfish, it is potentially deadly. Think on this, Warleader. We will be returning to the village with our own claims. Aye, no doubt a few trophies with us to add proof to our tale, but if we do not share out that glory then the elders will see to it that our claims shall know the poison of disbelief.'

'Disbelief?'

'Aye. They will believe but only if they can partake of our glory. They will believe us but only if we in turn

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believe them – their reshaping of the past, the blessing that was not given, now given, all the villagers lining our ride out. They were all there, or so they will tell you, and, eventually, they will themselves come to believe it, and will have the scenes carved into their minds. Does this still confuse you, Karsa? If so, then we'd best not speak of wisdom.'

'The Teblor do not play games of deceit,' Karsa growled.

Bairoth studied him for a moment, then he nodded. 'True, they do not.'

Delum pushed soil and stones into the pit. 'It is time to sleep,' he said, rising to check one last time on the hobbled horses.

Karsa eyed Bairoth. *His mind is as a Lanyd arrow in the forest, but will that aid him when our bloodwood blades are out and battlecries sound on all sides? This is what comes when muscle turns to fat and straw clings to your back. Duelling with words will win you nothing, Bairoth Gild, except perhaps that your tongue will not dry out as quickly on a Rathyd warrior's belt.*

'At least eight,' Delum murmured. 'With perhaps one youth. There are indeed two hearths. They have hunted the grey bear that dwells in caves, and carry a trophy with them.'

'Meaning they are full of themselves.' Bairoth nodded. 'That's good.'

Karsa frowned at Bairoth. 'Why?'

'The cast of the enemy's mind, Warleader. They will be feeling invincible, and this will make them careless. Do they have horses, Delum?'

'No. Grey bears know the sound of hoofs too well. If they brought dogs on the hunt, none survived for the return journey.'

'Better still.'

They had dismounted, and now crouched near the edge of the tree line. Delum had slipped ahead to scout the

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Rathyd encampment. His passage through the tall grasses, knee-high stumps and brush of the slope beyond the trees had not stirred a single blade or leaf.

The sun was high overhead, the air dry, hot and motionless.

‘Eight,’ Bairoth said. He grinned at Karsa. ‘And a youth. He should be taken first.’

*To make the survivors know shame. He expects us to lose.* ‘Leave him to me,’ Karsa said. ‘My charge will be fierce, and will take me to the other side of the camp. The warriors still standing will turn to face me one and all. That is when you two will charge.’

Delum blinked. ‘You would have us strike from behind?’

‘To even the numbers, yes. Then we shall each settle to our duels.’

‘Will you dodge and duck in your pass?’ Bairoth asked, his eyes glittering.

‘No, I will strike.’

‘They will bind you, then, Warleader, and you shall fail in reaching the far side.’

‘I will not be bound, Bairoth Gild.’

‘There are nine of them.’

‘Then watch me dance.’

Delum asked, ‘Why do we not use our horses, Warleader?’

‘I am tired of talking. Follow, but at a slower pace.’

Bairoth and Delum shared an unreadable look, then Bairoth shrugged. ‘We will be your witnesses, then.’

Karsa unslung his bloodwood sword, closing both hands around the leather-wrapped grip. The blade’s wood was deep red, almost black, the glassy polish making the painted warcrest seem to float a finger’s width above the surface. The weapon’s edge was almost translucent, where the blood-oil rubbed into the grain had hardened, coming to replace the wood. There were no nicks or notches along the edge, only a slight rippling of the line where damage had repaired itself. Material oil clung to its

memory and would little tolerate denting or scarring. Karsa held the weapon out before him, then slipped forward through the high grasses, quickening into the dance as he went.

Reaching the boar trail leading into the forest that Delum had pointed out, he hunched lower and slipped onto its hard-packed, flattened track without breaking stride. The broad, tapered sword-point seemed to lead him forward as if cutting its own silent, unerring path through the shadows and shafts of light. He picked up greater speed.

In the centre of the Rathyd camp, three of the eight adult warriors were crouched around a slab of bear meat that they had just unwrapped from a fold of deer hide. Two others sat nearby with their weapons across their thighs, rubbing the thick blood-oil into the blades. The remaining three stood speaking to one another less than three paces from the mouth of the boar trail. The youth was at the far end.

Karsa's sprint was at its peak when he reached the glade. At distances of seventy paces or less, a Teblor could run alongside a galloping warhorse. His arrival was explosive. One moment, eight warriors and one youth at rest in a clearing, the next, the tops of the heads of two of the standing warriors were cut off in a single horizontal blow. Scalp and bone flew, blood and brain sprayed and spat across the face of the third Rathyd. This man reeled back, and pivoted to his left to see the return swing of Karsa's sword, as it swept under his chin, then was gone from sight. Eyes, still held wide, watched the scene tilt wildly before darkness burgeoned.

Still moving, Karsa leapt high to avoid the warrior's head as it thudded and rolled across the ground.

The Rathyd who had been oiling their swords had already straightened and readied their weapons. They split away from each other and darted forward to take Karsa from either side.

He laughed, twisting around to challenge among the three

warriors whose bloodied hands held but butchering knives. Snapping his sword into a close-quarter guard, he ducked low. Three small blades each found their mark, slicing through leathers, skin and into muscle. Momentum propelled Karsa through the press, and he took those knives with him, spinning to rip his sword through a pair of arms, then up into an armpit, tearing the shoulder away, the scapula coming with it – a curved plate of purple bone latticed in veins attached by a skein of ligaments to a twitching arm that swung in its flight to reach skyward.

A body dived with a snarl to wrap burly arms around Karsa's legs. Still laughing, the Uryd warleader punched down with his sword, the pommel crunching through the top of the warrior's skull. The arms spasmed and fell away.

A sword hissed towards his neck from the right. Still in close-quarter guard, Karsa spun to take the blade with his own, the impact ringing both weapons with a pealing, sonorous sound.

He heard the closing step of the Rathyd behind him, felt the air cleave to the blade swinging in towards his left shoulder, and he pitched instantly down and to his right. Wheeling his own sword around, arms extending as he fell. The edge swept above and past the warrior's savage downstroke, cut through a pair of thick wrists, then tore through abdomen, from belly-button and across, between ribcage and point of hip, then bursting clear.

Still spinning as he toppled, he renewed the swing that had been staggered by bone and flesh, twisting his shoulders to follow the blade as it passed beneath him, then around to the other side. The slash cleared the ground at a level that took the last Rathyd's left leg at the ankle. Then the ground hammered into Karsa's right shoulder. Rolling away, his sword trailing crossways across his own body, deflecting but not quite defeating a downward blow – fire tearing into his right hip – then he was beyond the warrior's reach – and the man was shrieking and stumbling an awkward retreat. **Copyrighted Material**

Karsa's roll brought him upright once more, into a crouch that spurting blood down his right leg, that sent stinging stabs into his left side, his back beneath his right shoulder blade, and his left thigh where the knives were still buried.

He found himself facing the youth.

No more than forty, not yet at his full height, lean of limb as the Unready often were. Eyes filled with horror.

Karsa winked, then wheeled around to close on the one-footed warrior.

His shrieks had grown frenzied, and Karsa saw that Bairoth and Delum had reached him and had joined in the game, their blades taking the other foot and both hands. The Rathyd was on the ground between them, limbs jerking and spurting blood across the trampled grass.

Karsa glanced back to see the youth fleeing towards the woods. The warleader smiled.

Bairoth and Delum began chasing the floundering Rathyd warrior about, chopping pieces from his flailing limbs.

They were angry, Karsa knew. He had left them nothing.

Ignoring his two companions and their brutal torture, he plucked the butchering knife from his thigh. Blood welled but did not spurt, telling him that no major artery or vein had been touched. The knife in his left side had skittered along ribs and lay embedded flat beneath skin and a few layers of muscle. He drew the weapon out and tossed it aside. The last knife, sunk deep into his back, was harder to reach and it took a few attempts before he managed to find a sure clasp of its smeared handle and then pull it out. A longer blade would have reached his heart. As it was, it would probably be the most irritating of the three minor wounds. The sword-cut into his hip and through part of a buttock was slightly more serious. It would have to be carefully sewn, and would make both riding and walking painful for a while.

Loss of blood on a fatal blow had silenced the

dismembered Rathyd, and Karsa heard Bairoth's heavy steps approach. Another scream announced Delum's examination of the other fallen.

'Warleader.' Anger made the voice taut.

Karsa slowly turned. 'Bairoth Gild.'

The heavy warrior's face was dark. 'You let the youth escape. We must hunt him, now, and it will not be easy for these are his lands, not ours.'

'He is meant to escape,' Karsa replied.

Bairoth scowled.

'You're the clever one,' Karsa pointed out, 'why should this baffle you so?'

'He reaches his village.'

'Aye.'

'And tells of the attack. Three Uryd warriors. There is rage and frenzied preparations.' Bairoth allowed himself a small nod as he continued. 'A hunt sets out, seeking three Uryd warriors. Who are on foot. The youth is certain on this. Had the Uryd had horses, they would have used them, of course. Three against eight, to do otherwise is madness. So the hunt confines itself, in what it seeks, in its frame of thought, in all things. Three Uryd warriors, on foot.'

Delum had joined them, and now eyed Karsa without expression.

Karsa said, 'Delum Thord would speak.'

'I would, Warleader. The youth, you have placed an image in his mind. It will harden there, its colours will not fade, but sharpen. The echo of screams will become louder in his skull. Familiar faces, frozen eternal in expressions of pain. This youth, Karsa Orlong, will become an adult. And he will not be content to follow, he will lead. He *must* lead; and none shall challenge his fierceness, the gleaming wood of his will, the oil of his desire. Karsa Orlong, you have made an enemy for the Uryd, an enemy to pale all we have known in the past.'

'One day,' Karsa said, 'that Rathyd warleader shall kneel before me. This, I vow here, on the blood of his kin, I so vow.'

The air was suddenly chill. Silence hung in the glade except for the muted buzz of flies.

Delum's eyes were wide, his expression one of fear.

Bairoth turned away. 'That vow shall destroy you, Karsa Orlong. No Rathyd kneels before an Uryd. Unless you prop his lifeless corpse against a tree stump. You now seek the impossible, and that is a path to madness.'

'One vow among many I have made,' Karsa said. 'And each shall be kept. Witness, if you dare.'

Bairoth paused from studying the grey bear's fur and defleshed skull – the Rathyd trophies – and glanced back at Karsa. 'Do we have a choice?'

'If you still breathe, then the answer is no, Bairoth Gild.'

'Remind me to tell you one day, Karsa Orlong.'

'Tell me of what?'

'What life is like, for those of us in your shadow.'

Delum stepped close to Karsa. 'You have wounds that need mending, Warleader.'

'Aye, but for now, only the sword-cut. We must return to our horses and ride.'

'Like a Lanyd arrow.'

'Aye, just so, Delum Thord.'

Bairoth called out, 'Karsa Orlong, I shall collect for you your trophies.'

'Thank you, Bairoth Gild. We shall take that fur and skull, as well. You and Delum may keep those.'

Delum turned to face Bairoth. 'Take them, brother. The grey bear better suits you than me.'

Bairoth nodded his thanks, then waved towards the dismembered warrior. 'His ears and tongue are yours, Delum Thord.'

'It is so, then.'

Among the Teblor, the Rathyd bred the fewest horses; despite this, there were plenty of wide runs from glade to glade down which Karsa and his companions could ride. In one of the clearings they had come upon an adult and two

youths tending to six destriers. They had ridden them down, blades flashing, pausing only to collect trophies and gather up the horses, each taking two on a lead. An hour before darkness fell, they came to a forking of the trail, rode down the lower of the two for thirty paces, then released the leads and drove the Rathyd horses on. The three Uryd warriors then slipped a single, short rope around the necks of their own mounts, just above the collar bones, and with gentle, alternating tugs walked them backwards until they reached the fork, whereupon they proceeded onto the higher trail. Fifty paces ahead, Delum dismounted and backtracked to obscure their trail.

With the wheel taking shape overhead, they cut away from the rocky path and found a small clearing in which they made camp. Bairoth cut slices from the bear meat and they ate. Delum then rose to attend to the horses, using wet moss to wipe them down. The beasts were tired and left unhobbled to allow them to walk the clearing and stretch their necks.

Examining his wounds, Karsa noted that they had already begun to knit. So it was among the Teblor. Satisfied, he found his flask of blood-oil and set to repairing his weapon. Delum rejoined them and he and Bairoth followed suit.

‘Tomorrow,’ Karsa said, ‘we leave this trail.’

‘Down to the wider, easier ones in the valley?’ Bairoth asked.

‘If we are quick,’ Delum said, ‘we can pass through Rathyd land in a single day.’

‘No, we lead our horses higher, onto the goat and sheep trails,’ Karsa replied. ‘And we reverse our path for the length of the morning. Then we ride down into the valley once more. Bairoth Guild, with the hunt out, who will remain in the village?’

The heavy man drew out his new bear cloak and wrapped it about himself before answering. ‘Youths. Women. The old and the crippled.’

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‘Dogs?’

‘No, the hunt will have taken those. So, Warleader, we attack the village.’

‘Yes. Then we find the hunt’s trail.’

Delum drew a deep breath and was slow in its release. ‘Karsa Orlong, the village of our victims thus far is not the only village. In the first valley alone there are at least three more. Word will go out. Every warrior will ready his sword. Every dog will be unleashed and sent out into the forest. The warriors may not find us, but the dogs will.’

‘And then,’ Bairoth growled, ‘there are three more valleys to cross.’

‘Small ones,’ Karsa pointed out. ‘And we cross them at the south ends, a day or more hard riding from the north mouths and the heart of the Rathyd lands.’

Delum said, ‘There will be such a foment of anger pursuing us, Warleader, that they will follow us into the valleys of the Sunyd.’

Karsa flipped the blade on his thighs to begin work on the other side. ‘So I hope, Delum Thord. Answer me this, when last have the Sunyd seen an Uryd?’

‘Your grandfather,’ Bairoth said.

Karsa nodded. ‘And we well know the Rathyd warcry, do we not?’

‘You would start a war between the Rathyd and Sunyd?’

‘Aye, Bairoth.’

The warrior slowly shook his head. ‘We are not yet done with the Rathyd, Karsa Orlong. You plan too far in advance, Warleader.’

‘Witness what comes, Bairoth Gild.’

Bairoth picked up the bear skull. The lower jaw still hung from it by a single strip of gristle. He snapped it off and tossed it to one side. Then he drew out a spare bundle of leather straps. He began tightly wrapping the cheek bones, leaving long lengths dangling beneath.

Karsa watched these efforts curiously. The skull was too heavy even for Bairoth to wear as a helmet. Moreover, he

would need to break the bone away on the underside, where it was thickest around the hole that the spinal cord made.

Delum rose. 'I shall sleep now,' he announced, moving off.

'Karsa Orlong,' Bairoth said, 'do you have spare straps?'

'You are welcome to them,' Karsa replied, also rising. 'Be sure to sleep this night, Bairoth Gild.'

'I will.'

For the first hour of light they heard dogs in the forested valley floor below. These faded as they backtracked along a high cliffside path. When the sun was directly overhead, Delum found a downward wending trail and they began the descent.

Midway through the afternoon, they came upon stump-crowded clearings and could smell the smoke of the village. Delum dismounted and slipped ahead.

He returned a short while later. 'As you surmised, Warleader. I saw eleven elders, thrice as many women, and thirteen youths – all very young, I imagine the older ones are with the hunt. No horses. No dogs.' He climbed back onto his horse.

The three Uryd warriors readied their swords. They then each drew out their flasks of blood-oil and sprinkled a few drops around the nostrils of their destriers. Heads snapped back, muscles tensed.

'I have the right flank,' Bairoth said.

'And I the centre,' Karsa announced.

'And so I the left,' Delum said, then frowned. 'They will scatter from you, Warleader.'

'I am feeling generous today, Delum Thord. This village shall be to the glory of you and Bairoth. Be sure that no-one escapes on the other side.'

'None shall.'

'And if any woman seeks to fire a house to turn the hunt, slay her.'

'They would not be so foolish,' Bairoth said. 'If they

do not resist they shall have our seed, but they shall live.'

The three removed the reins from their horses and looped them around their waists. They edged further onto their mounts' shoulders and drew their knees up.

Karsa slipped his wrist through the sword's thong and whirled the weapon once through the air to tighten it. The others did the same. Beneath him, Havok trembled.

'Lead us, Warleader,' Delum said.

A slight pressure launched Havok forward, three strides into a canter, slow and almost loping as they crossed the stump-filled glade. A slight shifting to the left led them towards the main path. Reaching it, Karsa lifted his sword into the destrier's range of vision. The beast surged into a gallop.

Seven lengthening strides brought them to the village. Karsa's companions had already split away to either side to come up behind the houses, leaving him the main artery. He saw figures there, directly ahead, heads turning. A scream rang through the air. Children scattered.

Sword lashed out, chopped down easily through young bone. Karsa glanced to his right and Havok shifted direction, hoofs kicking out to gather in and trample an elder. They plunged onward, pursuing, butchering. On the far sides of the houses, beyond the refuse trenches, more screams sounded.

Karsa reached the far end. He saw a single youth racing for the trees and drove after him. The lad carried a practice sword. Hearing the heavy thump of Havok's charge closing fast – and with the safety of the forest still too far in front of him – he wheeled.

Karsa's swing cut through practice sword then neck. A head thrust from Havok sent the youth's decapitated body sprawling.

*I lost a cousin in such a manner. Ridden down by a Rathyd. Ears and tongue taken. Body strung by one foot from a branch. The head propped beneath, smeared in excrement. The deed is answered.* Answered

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Havok slowed, then wheeled.

Karsa looked back upon the village. Bairoth and Delum had done their slaughter and were now herding the women into the clearing surrounding the village hearth.

At a trot, Havok carried him back into the village.

'The chief's own belong to me,' Karsa announced.

Bairoth and Delum nodded, and he could see their heightened spirits, from the ease with which they surrendered the privilege. Bairoth faced the women and gestured with his sword. A middle-aged, handsome woman stepped forward, followed by a younger version – a lass perhaps the same age as Dayliss. Both studied Karsa as carefully as he did them.

'Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord, take your first among the others. I will guard.'

The two warriors grinned, dismounted and plunged among the women to select one each. They vanished into separate houses, leading their prizes by the hand.

Karsa watched with raised brows.

The chief's wife snorted. 'Your warriors were not blind to the eagerness of those two,' she said.

'Their warriors, be they father or mate, will not be pleased with such eagerness,' Karsa commented. *Uryd women would not—*

'They will never know, Warleader,' the chief's wife replied, 'unless you tell them, and what is the likelihood of that? They will spare you no time for taunts before killing you. Ah, but I see now,' she added, stepping closer to stare up at his face. 'You thought to believe that Uryd women are different, and now you realize the lie of that. All men are fools, but now you are perhaps a little less so, as truth steals into your heart. What is your name, Warleader?'

'You talk too much,' Karsa growled, then he drew himself straight. 'I am Karsa Orlong, grandson of Pahlk—'

'Pahlk?'

'Aye.' Karsa grinned. 'I see you recall him.'

'I was a child, but he is well known among us.'

'He lives still, and sleeps calm despite the curses you have laid upon his name.'

She laughed. 'Curses? There are none. Pahlk bowed his head to beg passage through our lands—'

'You lie!'

She studied him, then shrugged. 'As you say.'

One of the women cried out from one of the houses, a cry more pleasure than pain.

The chief's wife turned her head. 'How many of us will take your seed, Warleader?'

Karsa settled back. 'All of you. Eleven each.'

'And how many days will that take? You want us to cook for you as well?'

'Days? You think as an old woman. We are young. And, if need be, we have blood-oil.'

The woman's eyes widened. The others behind her began murmuring and whispering. The chief's wife spun and silenced them with a look, then she faced Karsa once more. 'You have never used blood-oil in this fashion before, have you? It is true, you will know fire in your loins. You will know stiffness for days to come. But, Warleader, you do not know what it will do to each of us women. I do, for I too was young and foolish once. Even my husband's strength could not keep my teeth from his throat, and he carries the scars still. There is more. What for you will last less than a week, haunts us for months.'

'And so,' Karsa replied, 'if we do not kill your husbands, you will upon their return. I am pleased.'

'You three will not survive the night.'

'It will be interesting, do you not think,' Karsa smiled, 'who among Bairoth, Delum and me will find need for it first.' He addressed all the women. 'I suggest to each of you to be eager, so you are not the first to fail us.'

Bairoth appeared, nodded at Karsa.

The chief's wife sighed and waved her daughter forward.

'No,' Karsa said.

The woman stopped suddenly. 'But . . . will

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you not want a child from this? Your first will carry the most seed—'

'Aye, it will. Are you past bearing age?'

After a long moment, she shook her head. 'Karsa Orlong,' she whispered, 'you invite my husband to set upon you a curse – he will burn blood on the stone lips of Imroth herself.'

'Yes, that is likely.' Karsa dismounted and approached her. 'Now, lead me to your house.'

She drew back. 'The house of my husband? Warleader – no, please, let us choose another one—'

'Your husband's house,' Karsa growled. 'I am done talking and so are you.'

An hour before dusk, and Karsa led the last of his prizes towards the house – the chief's daughter. He and Bairoth and Delum had not needed the blood-oil, a testament, Bairoth claimed, to Uryd prowess, though Karsa suspected the true honour belonged to the zeal and desperate creativity of the women of the Rathyd, and even then, the last few for each of the warriors had been peremptory.

As he drew the young woman into the gloomy house with its dying hearth, Karsa swung shut the door and dropped the latch. She turned to face him, a curious tilt to her chin.

'Mother said you were surprisingly gentle.'

He eyed her. *She is as Dayliss, yet not. There is no dark streak within this one. That is . . . a difference.* 'Remove your clothes.'

She quickly climbed out of the one-piece hide tunic. 'Had I been first, Karsa Orlong, I would have made home for your seed. Such is this day in my wheel of time.'

'You would have been proud?'

She paused to give him a startled look, then shook her head. 'You have slain all the children, all the elders. It will be centuries before our village recovers, and indeed it may not, for the anger of the warriors may turn them on each other, and on us women who should you spare.'

'Escape? Lie down, there, where your mother did. Karsa Orlong is not interested in escape.' He moved forward to stand over her. 'Your warriors will not be returning. The life of this village is ended, and within many of you there shall be the seed of the Uryd. Go there, all of you, to live among my people. And you and your mother, go to the village where I was born. Await me. Raise your children, my children, as Uryd.'

'You make bold claims, Karsa Orlong.'

He began removing his leathers.

'More than claims, I see,' she observed. 'No need, then, for blood-oil.'

'We will save the blood-oil, you and I, for my return.'

Her eyes widened and she leaned back as he moved down over her. In a small voice, she asked, 'Do you not wish to know my name?'

'No,' he growled. 'I will call you Dayliss.'

And he saw nothing of the shame that filled her young, beautiful face. Nor did he sense the darkness his words clawed into her soul.

Within her, as within her mother, Karsa Orlong's seed found a home.

A late storm had descended from the mountains, devouring the stars. Treetops thrashed to a wind that made no effort to reach lower, creating a roar of sound overhead and a strange calm among the boles. Lightning flickered, but the thunder's voice was long in coming.

They rode through an hour of darkness, then found an old campsite near the trail the hunt had left. The Rathyd warriors had been careless in their fury, leaving far too many signs of their passage. Delum judged that there were twelve adults and four youths on horseback in this particular party, perhaps a third of the village's entire strength. The dogs had already been set loose to range in packs on their own, and none accompanied the group the Uryd now pursued.

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Karsa was well pleased. The hornets were out of the nest, yet flying blind.

They ate once more of the ageing bear meat, then Bairoth once again unwrapped the bear skull and resumed winding straps, this time around the snout, pulling them taut between the teeth. The ends left dangling were long, an arm and a half in length. Karsa now understood what Bairoth was fashioning. Often, two or three wolf skulls were employed for this particular weapon – only a man of Bairoth’s strength and weight could manage the same with the skull of a grey bear. ‘Bairoth Guild, what you create shall make a bright thread in the legend we are weaving.’

The man grunted. ‘I care nothing for legends, Warleader. But soon, we shall be facing Rathyd on destriers.’

Karsa smiled in the darkness, said nothing.

A soft wind flowed down from upslope.

Delum lifted his head suddenly and rose in silence. ‘I smell wet fur,’ he said.

There had been no rain as yet.

Karsa removed his sword harness and laid the weapon down. ‘Bairoth,’ he whispered, ‘remain here. Delum, take with you your brace of knives – leave your sword.’ He rose and gestured. ‘Lead.’

‘Warleader,’ Delum murmured. ‘It is a pack, driven down from the high ground by the storm. They have no scent of us, yet their ears are sharp.’

‘Do you not think,’ Karsa asked, ‘that they would have set to howling if they had heard us?’

Bairoth snorted. ‘Delum, beneath this roar they have heard nothing.’

But Delum shook his head. ‘There are high sounds and there are low sounds, Bairoth Guild, and they each travel their own stream.’ He swung to Karsa. ‘To your question, Warleader, this answer: possibly not, if they are unsure whether we are Uryd or Rathyd.’

Karsa grinned. ‘Even better. Take me to them, Delum Thord. I have thought long of this matter of Rathyd dogs,

the loosed packs. Take me to them, and keep your throwing knives close to hand.'

Havok and the other two destriers had quietly flanked the warriors during the conversation, and now all faced upslope, ears pricked forward.

After a moment's hesitation, Delum shrugged and, crouching, set off into the woods. Karsa followed.

The slope grew steeper after a score of paces. There was no path, and fallen tree trunks made traverse difficult and slow, though thick swaths of damp moss made the passage of the two Teblor warriors virtually noiseless. They reached a flatter shelf perhaps fifteen paces wide and ten deep, a high crack-riven cliff opposite. A few trees leaned against the rock, grey with death. Delum scanned the cliffside, then made to move towards a narrow, dirt-filled crevasse near the left end of the cliff that served as a game trail, but Karsa restrained him with a hand.

He leaned close. 'How far ahead?'

'Fifty heartbeats. We've still time to make this climb—'

'No. We position ourselves here. Take that ledge to the right and have your knives ready.'

With baffled expression, Delum did as he was told. The ledge was halfway up the cliffside. Within moments he was in place.

Karsa moved towards the game trail. A dead pine had fallen from above, taking the same path in its descent, coming to rest half a pace to the trail's left. Karsa reached it and gave the trunk a nudge. The wood was still sound. He quickly climbed it, then, feet resting on branches, he twisted round until he faced the flat expanse of shelf, the game trail now almost within arm's reach to his left, the bole and cliff at his back.

Then he waited. He could not see Delum from his position unless he leaned forward, which might well pull the tree away from the cliffside, taking him with it in a loud, probably damaging fall. He would have to trust, therefore, that Delum would do as he intended,

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and act accordingly when the time came.

A skitter of stones down the trail.

The dogs had begun the descent.

Karsa drew a slow, deep breath and held it.

The pack's leader would not be the first. Most likely the second, a safe beat or two behind the scout.

The first dog scrambled past Karsa's position in a scatter of stones, twigs and dirt, its momentum taking it a half-dozen paces out onto the flat shelf, where it paused, nose lifting to test the air. Hackles rising, it moved cautiously towards the shelf's edge.

Another dog came down the trail, a larger beast, this one kicking up more detritus than the first. As its scarred head and shoulders came into view, Karsa knew that he had found the pack's leader.

The animal reached the flat.

Just as the scout began swinging his head around.

Karsa leapt.

His hands shot out to take the leader on the neck, driving the beast down, spinning it onto its back, his left hand closing on the throat, his right gripping both flailing, kicking front legs just above the paws.

The dog flew into a frenzy beneath him, but Karsa held firm.

More dogs tumbled in a rush down the trail, then fanned out in sudden alarm and confusion.

The leader's snarls had turned to yelps.

Savage teeth had ripped into Karsa's wrist, until he managed to push his chokehold higher under the dog's jaw. The animal writhed, but it had already lost and they both knew it.

As did the rest of the pack.

Karsa finally glanced up to study the dogs surrounding him. At his lifting of head they all backed away – all but one. A young, burly male, who ducked low as it crept forward.

Two of Delum's eyes glinted in the animal, one in

the throat and the other behind its right shoulder. The dog pitched to the ground with a strangled grunt, then lay still. The others of the pack retreated still further.

The leader had gone motionless beneath Karsa. Baring his teeth, the warrior slowly lowered himself until his cheek lay alongside the dog's jawline. Then he whispered into the animal's ear. 'You heard the deathcry, friend? That was your challenger. This should please you, yes? Now, you and your pack belong to me.' As he spoke, his tone soft and reassuring, he slowly loosened his grip on the dog's throat. A moment later, he leaned back, shifted his weight to one side, withdrawing his arm entirely, then releasing the dog's forelimbs.

The beast scrambled to its feet.

Karsa straightened, stepped close to the dog, smiling to see its tail droop.

Delum climbed down from the ledge. 'Warleader,' he said as he approached, 'I am witness to this.' He retrieved his knives.

'Delum Thord, you are both witness and participant, for I saw your knives and they were well timed.'

'The leader's rival saw his moment.'

'And you understood that.'

'We now have a pack that will fight for us.'

'Aye, Delum Thord.'

'I will go ahead of you back to Bairoth, then. The horses will need calming.'

'We shall give you a few moments.'

At the shelf's edge, Delum paused and glanced back at Karsa. 'I no longer fear the Rathyd, Karsa Orlong. Nor the Sunyd. I now believe that Urugal indeed walks with you on this journey.'

'Then know this, Delum Thord. I am not content to be champion among the Uryd. One day, all the Teblor shall kneel to me. This, our journey to the outlands, is but a scouting of the enemy we shall one day face. Our people have slept for far too long.'

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‘Karsa Orlong, I do not doubt you.’

Karsa’s answering grin was cold. ‘Yet you once did.’

To that, Delum simply shrugged, then he swung about and set off down the slope.

Karsa examined his chewed wrist, then looked down at the dog and laughed. ‘You’ve the taste of my blood in your mouth, beast. Urugal now races to clasp your heart, and so, you and I, we are joined. Come, walk at my side. I name you Gnaw.’

There were eleven adult dogs in the pack and three not quite full-grown. They fell in step behind Karsa and Gnaw, leaving their lone fallen kin unchallenged ruler of the shelf beneath the cliff. Until the flies came.

Towards midday, the three Uryd warriors and their pack descended into the middle of the three small valleys on their southeasterly course across Rathyd lands. The hunt they tracked had clearly been driven to desperation, to have travelled so far in their search. It was also evident that the warriors ahead had avoided contact with other villages in the area. Their lengthening failure had become a shame that haunted them.

Karsa was mildly disappointed in that, but he consoled himself that the tale of their deeds would travel none the less, sufficient to make their return journey across Rathyd territory a deadlier and more interesting task.

Delum judged that the hunt was barely a third of a day ahead. They had slowed their pace, sending outriders to either side in search of a trail that did not yet exist. Karsa would not permit himself a gloat concerning that, however; there were, after all, two other parties from the Rathyd village, these ones probably on foot and moving cautiously, leaving few signs of their stealthy passage. At any time, they might cross the Uryd trail.

The pack of dogs remained close on the upwind side, loping effortlessly alongside the trotting horses. Bairoth had simply shaken his head at hearing Delum’s recount of

Karsa's exploits, though of Karsa's ambitions, Delum curiously said nothing.

They reached the valley floor, a place of tumbled stone amidst birch, black spruce, aspen and alder. The remnants of a river seeped through the moss and rotting stumps, forming black pools that hinted nothing of their depth. Many of these sinkholes were hidden among boulders and treefalls. Their pace slowed as they cautiously worked their way deeper into the forest.

A short while later they came to the first of the mud-packed, wooden walkways the Rathyd of this valley had built long ago and still maintained, if only indifferently. Lush grasses filling the joins attested to this particular one's disuse, but its direction suited the Uryd warriors, and so they dismounted and led their horses up onto the raised track.

It creaked and swayed beneath the combined weight of horses, Teblor and dogs.

'We'd best spread out and stay on foot,' Bairoth said.

Karsa crouched and studied the roughly dressed logs. 'The wood is still sound,' he observed.

'But the stilts are seated in mud, Warleader.'

'Not mud, Bairoth Gild. Peat.'

'Karsa Orlong is right,' Delum said, swinging himself back onto his destrier. 'The way may pitch but the cross-struts underneath will keep it from twisting. We ride down the centre, in single file.'

'There is little point,' Karsa said to Bairoth, 'in taking this path if we then creep along it like snails.'

'The risk, Warleader, is that we become far more visible.'

'Best we move along it quickly, then.'

Bairoth grimaced. 'As you say, Karsa Orlong.'

Delum in the lead, they rode at a slow canter down the centre of the walkway. The pack followed. To either side, the only trees that reached to the eye level of the mounted warriors were dead birch, their leafless, black branches wrapped in the web of caterpillar silks. The living trees –

aspen and alder and elm – reached no higher than chest height with their fluttering canopy of dusty-green leaves. Taller black spruce was visible in the distance. Most of these looked to be dead or dying.

‘The old river is returning,’ Delum commented. ‘This forest slowly drowns.’

Karsa grunted, then said, ‘This valley runs into others that all lead northward, all the way to the Buryd Fissure. Pahlk was among the Teblor elders who gathered there sixty years ago. The river of ice filling the Fissure had died, suddenly, and had begun to melt.’

Behind Karsa, Bairoth spoke. ‘We never learned what the elders of all the tribes discovered up there, nor if they had found whatever it was they were seeking.’

‘I did not know they were seeking anything in particular,’ Delum muttered. ‘The death of the ice river was heard in a hundred valleys, including our own. Did they not travel to the Fissure simply to discover what had happened?’

Karsa shrugged. ‘Pahlk told me of countless beasts that had been frozen within the ice for numberless centuries, becoming visible amidst the shattered blocks. Fur and flesh thawing, the ground and sky alive with crows and mountain vultures. There was ivory, but most of it was too badly crushed to be of any worth. The river had a black heart, or so its death revealed, but whatever lay within that heart was either gone or destroyed. Even so, there were signs of an ancient battle in that place. The bones of children. Weapons of stone, all broken.’

‘This is more than I have ever—’ Bairoth began, then stopped.

The walkway, which had been reverberating to their passage, had suddenly acquired a deeper, syncopating thunder. The walkway ahead made a bend, forty paces distant, to the left, disappearing behind trees.

The pack of dogs began snapping their jaws in voiceless warning. Karsa twisted round, and saw, two hundred paces behind them on the walkway, a dozen

Rathyd warriors on foot. Weapons were lifted in silent promise.

Yet the sound of hoofs – Karsa swung forward again, to see six riders pitch around the bend. Warcries rang in the air.

‘Clear a space!’ Bairoth bellowed, driving his horse past Karsa, and then Delum. The bear skull sprang into the air, snapping as it reached the length of the straps, and Bairoth began whirling the massive, bound skull over his and his horse’s head, using both hands, his knees high on his destrier’s shoulders. The whirling skull made a deep, droning sound. His horse loped forward.

The Rathyd riders were at full charge. They rode two abreast, the edge of the walkway less than half an arm’s length away on either side.

They had closed to within twenty paces of Bairoth when he released the bear skull.

When two or three wolf skulls were used in this fashion, it was to bind or break legs. But Bairoth’s target was higher. The skull struck the destrier on the left with a force that shattered the horse’s chest. Blood sprayed from the animal’s nose and mouth. Crashing down, it fouled the beast beside it – no more than the crack of a single hoof against its shoulder, but sufficient to make it veer wildly, and plunge down off the walkway. Legs snapped. The Rathyd warrior flew over his horse’s head.

The rider of the first horse landed with bone-breaking impact on the walkway, at the very hoofs of Bairoth’s destrier. Those hoofs punched down on the man’s head in quick succession, leaving a shattered mess.

The charge floundered. Another horse went down, stumbling with a scream over the wildly kicking beast that now blocked the walkway.

Loosing the Uryd warcry, Bairoth drove his mount forward. A surging leap carried them over the first downed destrier. The Rathyd warrior from the other fallen horse was just coming clear and had time to look up

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to see Bairoth's sword-blade reach the bridge of his nose.

Delum was suddenly behind his comrade. Two knives darted through the air, passing Bairoth on his right. There was a sharp report as a Rathyd's heavy sword-blade slashed across to block one of the knives, then a wet gasp as the second knife found the man's throat.

Two of the enemy remained, one each for Delum and Bairoth, and so the duels could begin.

Karsa, after watching the effect of Bairoth's initial attack, had wheeled his mount round. Sword in his hands, blade flashing into Havok's vision, and they were charging back down the walkway towards the pursuing band.

The dog pack split to either side to avoid the thundering hoofs, then raced after rider and horse.

Ahead, eight adults and four youths.

A barked order sent the youths to either side of the walkway, then down. The adults wanted room, and, seeing their obvious confidence as they formed an inverted V spanning the walkway, weapons ready, Karsa laughed.

They wanted him to ride down into the centre of that inverted V – a tactic that, while it maintained Havok's fierce speed, also exposed horse and rider to flanking attacks. Speed counted for much in the engagement to come. The Rathyd's expectations fit neatly into the attacker's intent – had that attacker been someone other than Karsa Orlong. 'Urugal!' he bellowed, lifting himself high on Havok's shoulders. 'Witness!' He held his sword, point forward, over his destrier's head, and fixed his gaze on the Rathyd warrior on the V's extreme left.

Havok sensed the shift in attention and angled his charge just moments before contact, hoofs pounding along the very edge of the walkway.

The Rathyd directly before them managed a single backward step, swinging a two-handed overhead chop at Havok's snout as he went.

Karsa took that blade on his own, even as he twisted and threw his right leg forward, his left back. Havok turned

beneath him, surged in towards the centre of the walkway.

The V had collapsed, and every Rathyd warrior was on Karsa's left.

Havok carried him diagonally across the walkway. Keening his delight, Karsa slashed and chopped repeatedly, his blade finding flesh and bone as often as weapon. Havok pitched around before reaching the opposite edge, and lashed out his hind legs. At least one connected, flinging a shattered body from the bridge.

The pack then arrived. Snarling bodies hurling onto the Rathyd warriors – most of whom had turned when engaging Karsa, and so presented exposed backs to the frenzied dogs. Shrieks filled the air.

Karsa spun Havok round. They plunged back into the savage press. Two Rathyd had managed to fight clear of the dogs, blood spraying from their blades as they backed up the walkway.

Bellowing a challenge, Karsa drove towards them.

And was shocked to see them both leap from the walkway.

'Bloodless cowards! I witness! Your youths witness! These damned dogs witness!'

He saw them reappear, weapons gone, scrambling and stumbling across the bog.

Delum and Bairoth arrived, dismounting to add their swords to the maniacal frenzy of the surviving dogs as they tore unceasing at fallen Rathyd.

Karsa drew Havok to one side, eyes still on the fleeing warriors, who had been joined now by the four youths. 'I witness! Urugal witnesses!'

Gnaw, black and grey hide barely visible beneath splashes of gore, panted up to stand beside Havok, his muscles twitching but no wounds showing. Karsa glanced back and saw that four more dogs remained, whilst a fifth had lost a foreleg and limped a red circle off to one side.

'Delum, bind that one's leg – we will see it anon.'

‘What use a three-legged hunting dog, Warleader?’ Bairoth asked, breathing heavy.

‘Even a three-legged dog has ears and a nose, Bairoth Gild. One day, she will lie grey-nosed and fat before my hearth, this I swear. Now, is either of you wounded?’

‘Scratches.’ Bairoth shrugged, turning away.

‘I have lost a finger,’ Delum said as he drew out a leather strap and approached the wounded dog, ‘but not an important one.’

Karsa looked once more at the retreating Rathyd. They had almost reached a stand of black spruce. The warleader sent them a final sneer, then laid a hand on Havok’s brow. ‘My father spoke true, Havok. I have never ridden such a horse as you.’

An ear had cocked at his words. Karsa leaned forward and set his lips to the beast’s brow. ‘We become, you and I,’ he whispered, ‘legend. Legend, Havok.’ Straightening, he studied the sprawl of corpses on the walkway, and smiled. ‘It is time for trophies, my brothers. Bairoth, did your bear skull survive?’

‘I believe so, Warleader.’

‘Your deed was our victory, Bairoth Gild.’

The heavy man turned, studied Karsa through slitted eyes. ‘You ever surprise me, Karsa Orlong.’

‘As your strength does me, Bairoth Gild.’

The man hesitated, then nodded. ‘I am content to follow you, Warleader.’

*You ever were, Bairoth Gild, and that is the difference between us.*

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## CHAPTER TWO

There are hints, if one scans the ground with a clear and sharp eye, that this ancient Jaghut war, which for the Kron T'lan Imass was either their seventeenth or eighteenth, went terribly awry. The Adept who accompanied our expedition evinced no doubt whatsoever that a Jaghut remained alive within the Laederon glacier. Terribly wounded, yet possessing formidable sorcery still. Well beyond the ice river's reach (a reach which has been diminishing over time), there are shattered remains of T'lan Imass, the bones strangely malformed, and on them the flavour of fierce and deadly Omtose Phellack lingering to this day.

Of the ensorcelled stone weapons of the Kron, only those that were broken in the conflict remained, leading one to assume that either looters have been this way, or the T'lan Imass survivors (assuming there were any) took them with them . . .

*The Nathii Expedition of 1012*  
Kenemass Trybanos, Chronicler

'I believe,' Delum said as they led their horses down from the walkway, 'that the last group of the hunt has turned back.'

'The plague of cowardice ever spreads,' Karsa growled.

'They surmised at the very first,' Bairoth rumbled, 'that we were crossing their lands. That our first attack was not simply a raid. So, they will await our return,

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and will likely call upon the warriors of other villages.'

'That does not concern me, Bairoth Guild.'

'I know that, Karsa Orlong, for what part of this journey have you not already anticipated? Even so, two more Rathyd valleys lie before us. I would know. There will be villages – do we ride around them or do we collect still more trophies?'

'We shall be burdened with too many trophies when we reach the lands of the lowlanders at Silver Lake,' Delum commented.

Karsa laughed, then considered. 'Bairoth Guild, we shall slip through these valleys like snakes in the night, until the very last village. I would still draw hunters after us, into the lands of the Sunyd.'

Delum had found a trail leading up the valley side.

Karsa checked on the dog limping in their wake. Gnaw walked alongside it, and it occurred to Karsa that the three-legged beast might well be its mate. He was pleased with his decision to not slay the wounded creature.

There was a chill in the air that confirmed their gradual climb to higher elevations. The Sunyd territory was higher still, leading to the eastern edge of the escarpment. Pahlk had told Karsa that but a single pass cut through the escarpment, marked by a torrential waterfall that fed into Silver Lake. The climb down was treacherous. Pahlk had named it Bone Pass.

The trail began to wind sinuously among winter-cracked boulders and treefalls. They could now see the summit, six hundred steep paces upward.

The warriors dismounted. Karsa strode back and lifted the three-legged dog into his arms. He set it down across Havok's broad back and strapped it in place. The animal voiced no protest. Gnaw moved up to flank the destrier.

They resumed their journey.

The sun was bathing the slope in brilliant gold light by the time they had descended in hurried paces of the

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summit, reaching a broad ledge that seemed – through a sparse forest of straggly, wind-twisted oaks – to run the length of the valley side. Scanning the terrace's sweep to his right, Delum voiced a grunt, then said, 'I see a cave. There,' he pointed, 'behind those fallen trees, where the shelf bulges.'

Bairoth nodded and said, 'It looks big enough to hold our horses. Karsa Orlong, if we are to begin riding at night . . .'

'Agreed,' Karsa said.

Delum led the way along the terrace. Gnaw scrambled past him, slowing upon nearing the cave mouth, then crouching down and edging forward.

The Uryd warriors paused, waiting to see if the dog's hackles rose, thus signalling the presence of a grey bear or some other denizen. After a long moment, with Gnaw motionless and lying almost flat before the cave entrance, the beast finally rose and glanced back at the party, then trotted into the cave.

The fallen trees had provided a natural screen, hiding the cave from the valley below. There had been an overhang, but it had collapsed, perhaps beneath the weight of the trees, leaving a rough pile of rubble partially blocking the entrance.

Bairoth began clearing a path to lead the horses through. Delum and Karsa took Gnaw's route into the cave.

Beyond the mound of tumbled stones and sand, the floor levelled out beneath a scatter of dried leaves. The setting sun's light painted the back wall in patches of yellow, revealing an almost solid mass of carved glyphs. A small cairn of piled stones sat in the domed chamber's centre.

Gnaw was nowhere to be seen, but the dog's tracks crossed the floor and vanished into an area of gloom near the back.

Delum stepped forward, his eyes on a single, oversized glyph directly opposite the entrance. 'That Bloodsign is neither Rathyo's nor Suuyod's. It is a

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‘But the words beneath it are Teblor,’ Karsa asserted.

‘The style is very . . .’ Delum frowned, ‘ornate.’

Karsa began reading aloud, “*I led the families that survived. Down from the high lands. Through the broken veins that bled beneath the sun . . .*” Broken veins?”

‘Ice,’ Delum said.

‘Bleeding beneath the sun, aye. *“We were so few. Our blood was cloudy and would grow cloudier still. I saw the need to shatter what remained. For the T’lan Imass were still close and much agitated and inclined to continue their indiscriminate slaughter.”*’ Karsa scowled. ‘T’lan Imass? I do not know those two words.’

‘Nor I,’ Delum replied. ‘A rival tribe, perhaps. Read on, Karsa Orlong. Your eye is quicker than mine.’

“*And so I sundered husband from wife. Child from parent. Brother from sister. I fashioned new families and then sent them away. Each to a different place. I proclaimed the Laws of Isolation, as given us by Icarium whom we had once sheltered and whose heart grew vast with grief upon seeing what had become of us. The Laws of Isolation would be our salvation, clearing the blood and strengthening our children. To all who follow and to all who shall read these words, this is my justification—*”

‘These words trouble me, Karsa Orlong.’

Karsa glanced back at Delum. ‘Why? They signify nothing of us. They are an elder’s ravings. Too many words – to have carved all these letters would have taken years, and only a madman would do such a thing. A madman, who was buried here, alone, driven out by his people—’

Delum’s gaze sharpened on Karsa. ‘Driven out? Yes, I believe you are correct, Warleader. Read more – let us hear his justification, and so judge for ourselves.’

Shrugging, Karsa returned his attention to the stone wall. “*To survive, we must forget. So Icarium told us. Those things that we had come to, those things that softened us. We must abandon them. We must dismantle our . . .*” I know not that word, “and ~~shatter each and every one, leaving no~~

evidence of what we had been. We must burn our . . .” another word I do not know, “and leave naught but ash. We must forget our history and seek only our most ancient of legends. Legends that told of a time when we lived simply. In the forests. Hunting, culling fish from the rivers, raising horses. When our laws were those of the raider, the slayer, when all was measured by the sweep of a sword. Legends that spoke of feuds, of murders and rapes. We must return to those terrible times. To isolate our streams of blood, to weave new, smaller nets of kinship. New threads must be born of rape, for only with violence would they remain rare occurrences, and random. To cleanse our blood, we must forget all that we were, yet find what we had once been—”

‘Down here,’ Delum said, squatting. ‘Lower down. I recognize words. Read here, Karsa Orlong.’

‘It’s dark, Delum Thord, but I shall try. Ah, yes. These are . . . names. “I have given these new tribes names, the names given by my father for his sons.” And then a list. “Baryd, Sanyd, Phalyd, Urad, Gelad, Manyd, Rathyd and Lanyd. These, then, shall be the new tribes . . .” It grows too dark to read on, Delum Thord, nor,’ he added, fighting a sudden chill, ‘do I desire to. These thoughts are spider-bitten. Fever-twisted into lies.’

‘Phalyd and Lanyd are—’

Karsa straightened. ‘No more, Delum Thord.’

‘The name of Icarium has lived on in our—’

‘Enough!’ Karsa growled. ‘There is nothing of meaning here in these words!’

‘As you say, Karsa Orlong.’

Gnaw emerged from the gloom, where a darker fissure was now evident to the two Teblor warriors.

Delum nodded towards it. ‘The carver’s body lies within.’

‘Where he no doubt crawled to die,’ Karsa sneered. ‘Let us return to Bairoth. The horses can be sheltered here. We shall sleep outside.’

Both warriors turned and strode back to the cave mouth. Behind them, Gnaw stood beside the cairn a moment

longer. The sun had left the wall, filling the cave with shadows. In the darkness, the dog's eyes flickered.

Two nights later, they sat on their horses and looked down into the valley of the Sunyd. The plan to draw Rathyd pursuers after them had failed, for the last two villages they had come across had been long abandoned. The surrounding trails had been overgrown and rains had taken the charcoal from the firepits, leaving only red-rimmed black stains in the earth.

And now, across the entire breadth and length of the Sunyd valley, they could see no fires.

'They have fled,' Bairoth muttered.

'But not from us,' Delum replied, 'if the Sunyd villages prove to be the same as those Rathyd ones. This is a flight long past.'

Bairoth grunted. 'Where, then, have they gone?'

Shrugging, Karsa said, 'There are Sunyd valleys north of this one. A dozen or more. And some to the south as well. Perhaps there has been a schism. It matters little to us, except that we shall gather no more trophies until we reach Silver Lake.'

Bairoth rolled his shoulders. 'Warleader, when we reach Silver Lake, will our raid be beneath the wheel or the sun? With the valley before us empty, we could camp at night. These trails are unfamiliar, forcing us to go slowly in the dark.'

'You speak the truth, Bairoth Gild. Our raid will be in daylight. Let us make our way down to the valley floor, then, and find us a place to camp.'

The wheel of stars had travelled a fourth of its journey by the time the Uryd warriors reached level ground and found a suitable campsite. Delum had, with the aid of the dogs, killed a half-dozen rock hares during the descent, which he now skinned and spit while Bairoth built a small fire.

Karsa saw to the horses, then joined his two companions

at the hearth. They sat, waiting in silence for the meat to cook, the sweet smell and sizzle strangely unfamiliar after so many meals of raw food. Karsa felt a lassitude settle into his muscles, and only now realized how weary he had become.

The hares were ready. The three warriors ate in silence.

‘Delum has spoken,’ Bairoth said when they were done, ‘of the words written in the cave.’

Karsa shot Delum a glare. ‘Delum Thord spoke when he should not have. Within the cave, a madman’s ravings, nothing more.’

‘I have considered them,’ Bairoth persisted, ‘and I believe there is truth hidden within those ravings, Karsa Orlong.’

‘Pointless belief, Bairoth Gild.’

‘I think not, Warleader. The names of the tribes – I agree with Delum when he says there are, among them, the names of our tribes. “Urad” is far too close to Uryd to be accidental, especially when three of the other names are unchanged. Granted, one of those tribes has since vanished, but even our own legends whisper of a time when there were more tribes than there are now. And those two words that you did not know, Karsa Orlong. “Great villages” and “yellow bark”—’

‘Those were not the words!’

‘True enough, but that is the closest Delum could come to. Karsa Orlong, the hand that inscribed those words was from a place and time of sophistication, a place and a time where the Teblor language was, if anything, more complex than it is now.’

Karsa spat into the fire. ‘Bairoth Gild, if these be truths as you and Delum say, I still must ask: what value do they hold for us now? Are we a fallen people? That is not a revelation. Our legends all speak of an age of glory, long past, when a hundred heroes strode among the Teblor, heroes that would make even my own grandfather, Pahlk, seem but a child among them—’

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Delum's face in the firelight was deeply frowning as he cut in, 'And this is what troubles me, Karsa Orlong. Those legends and their tales of glory – they describe an age little different from our own. Aye, more heroes, greater deeds, but essentially the same, in the manner of how we lived. Indeed, it often seems that the very point of those tales is one of instruction, a code of behaviour, the proper way of being a Teblor.'

Bairoth nodded. 'And there, in those carved words in the cave, we are offered the explanation.'

'A description of how we would be,' Delum added. 'No, of how we *are*.'

'None of it matters,' Karsa growled.

'We were a defeated people,' Delum continued, as if he hadn't heard. 'Reduced to a broken handful.' He looked up, met Karsa's eyes across the fire. 'How many of our brothers and sisters who are given to the Faces in the Rock – how many of them were born flawed in some way? Too many fingers and toes, mouths with no palates, faces with no eyes. We've seen the same among our dogs and horses, Warleader. Defects come of inbreeding. That is a truth. The elder in the cave, he knew what threatened our people, so he fashioned a means of separating us, of slowly clearing our cloudy blood – and he was cast out as a betrayer of the Teblor. We were witness, in that cave, to an ancient crime—'

'We are fallen,' Bairoth said, then laughed.

Delum's gaze snapped to him. 'And what is it that you find so funny, Bairoth Gild?'

'If I must needs explain, Delum Thord, then there is no point.'

Bairoth's laughter had chilled Karsa. 'You have both failed to grasp the true meaning of all this—'

Bairoth grunted, 'The meaning you said did not exist, Karsa Orlong?'

'The fallen know but one challenge,' Karsa resumed. 'And that is to rise once more. The Teblor were once few,

once defeated. So be it. We are no longer few. Nor have we known defeat since that time. Who from the lowlands dares venture into our territories? The time has come, I now say, to face that challenge. The Teblor must rise once more.'

Bairoth sneered, 'And who will lead us? Who will unite the tribes? I wonder.'

'Hold,' Delum rumbled, eyes glittering. 'Bairoth Guild, from you I now hear unseemly envy. With what we three have done, with what our warleader has already achieved – tell me, Bairoth Guild, do the shadows of the ancient heroes still devour us whole? I say they do not. Karsa Orlong now walks among those heroes, and we walk with him.'

Bairoth slowly leaned back, stretching his legs out beside the hearth. 'As you say, Delum Thord.' The flickering light revealed a broad smile that seemed directed into the flames. "'Who from the lowlands dares venture into our territories?'" Karsa Orlong, we travel an empty valley. Empty of Teblor, aye. But what has driven them away? It may be that defeat stalks the formidable Teblor once more.'

There was a long moment when none of the three spoke, then Delum added another stick to the fire. 'It may be,' he said in a low voice, 'that there are no heroes among the Sunyd.'

Bairoth laughed. 'True. Among all the Teblor, there are but three heroes. Will that be enough, do you think?'

'Three is better than two,' Karsa snapped, 'but if need be, two will suffice.'

'I pray to the Seven, Karsa Orlong, that your mind ever remain free of doubt.'

Karsa realized that his hands had closed on the grip of his sword. 'Ah, that's your thought, then. The son of the father. Am I being accused of Synyg's weakness?'

Bairoth studied Karsa, then slowly shook his head. 'Your father is not weak, Karsa Orlong. If there are doubts to speak of here and now, they concern Pahlk and his heroic raid to Silver Lake.'

Karsa was on his feet, the sword in his hands.

Bairoth made no move. 'You do not see what I see,' he said quietly. 'There is the potential within you, Karsa Orlong, to be your father's son. I lied earlier when I said I prayed that you would remain free of doubt. I pray for the very opposite, Warleader. I pray that doubt comes to you, that it tempers you with its wisdom. Those heroes in our legends, Karsa Orlong, they were terrible, they were monsters, for they were strangers to uncertainty.'

'Stand before me, Bairoth Gild, for I will not kill you whilst your sword remains at your side.'

'I will not, Karsa Orlong. The straw is on my back, and you are not my enemy.'

Delum moved forward with his hands full of earth, which he dropped onto the fire between the two other men. 'It is late,' he muttered, 'and it may be as Bairoth suggests, that we are not as alone in this valley as we believe ourselves to be. At the very least, there may be watchers on the other side. Warleader, there have been only words this night. Let us leave the spilling of blood for our true enemies.'

Karsa remained standing, glaring down at Bairoth Gild. 'Words,' he growled. 'Yes, and for the words he has spoken, Bairoth Gild must apologize.'

'I, Bairoth Gild, beg forgiveness for my words. Now, Karsa Orlong, will you put away your sword?'

'You are warned,' Karsa said, 'I will not be so easily appeased next time.'

'I am warned.'

Grasses and saplings had reclaimed the Sunyd village. The trails leading to and from it had almost vanished beneath brambles, but here and there, among the stone foundations of the circular houses, the signs of fire and violence could be seen.

Delum dismounted and began poking about the ruins. It was only a few moments before he found the first bones.

Bairoth grunted. 'A raiding party. One that left no survivors.'

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Delum straightened with a splintered arrow shaft in his hands. 'Lowlanders. The Sunyd keep few dogs, else they would not have been so unprepared.'

'We now take upon ourselves,' Karsa said, 'not a raid, but a war. We journey to Silver Lake not as Uryd, but as Teblor. And we shall deliver vengeance.' He dismounted and removed from the saddle pack four hard leather sheaths, which he began strapping onto Havok's legs to protect the horse from the brambles. The other two warriors followed suit.

'Lead us, Warleader,' Delum said when he was done, swinging himself onto his destrier's back.

Karsa collected the three-legged dog and laid it down once more behind Havok's withers. He regained his seat and looked to Bairoth.

The burly warrior also remounted. His eyes were hooded as he met Karsa's gaze. 'Lead us, Warleader.'

'We shall ride as fast as the land allows,' Karsa said, drawing the three-legged dog onto his thighs. 'Once beyond this valley, we head northward, then east once more. By tomorrow night we shall be close to Bone Pass, the southward wend that will take us to Silver Lake.'

'And if we come across lowlanders on the way?'

'Then, Bairoth Gild, we shall begin gathering trophies. But none must be allowed to escape, for our attack on the farm must come as a complete surprise, lest the children flee.'

They skirted the village until they came to a trail that led them into the forest. Beneath the trees there was less undergrowth, allowing them to ride at a slow canter. Before long, the trail began climbing the valley side. By dusk, they reached the summit. Horses steaming beneath them, the three warriors reined in.

They had come to the edge of the escarpment. To the north and east and still bathed in golden sunlight, the horizon was a jagged line of mountains, their peaks capped in snow. Warriors of whatever tribe were pushing down their

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flanks. Directly before them, after a sheer drop of three hundred or more paces, lay a vast, forested basin.

'I see no fires,' Delum said, scanning the shadow-draped valley.

'We must now skirt this edge, northward,' Karsa said. 'There are no trails breaking the cliffside here.'

'The horses need rest,' Delum said. 'But we are highly visible here, Warleader.'

'We shall walk them on, then,' Karsa said, dismounting. When he set the three-legged dog onto the ground, Gnaw moved up alongside her. Karsa collected Havok's single rein. A game trail followed the ridgeline along the top for another thirty paces before dropping slightly, sufficient to remove the silhouette they made against the sky.

They continued on until the wheel of stars had completed a fifth of its passage, whereupon they found a high-walled cul de sac just off the trail in which to make camp. Delum began preparing the meal while Bairoth rubbed down the horses.

Taking Gnaw and his mate with him, Karsa scouted the path ahead. Thus far, the only tracks they had seen were those from mountain goats and wild sheep. The ridge had begun a slow, broken descent, and he knew that, somewhere ahead, there would be a river carrying the run-off from the north range of mountains, and a waterfall cutting a notch into the escarpment's cliffside.

Both dogs shied suddenly in the gloom, bumping into Karsa's legs as they backed away from another dead-end to the left. Laying a hand down to calm Gnaw, he found the beast trembling. Karsa drew his sword. He sniffed the air, but could smell nothing awry, nor was there any sound from the dark-shrouded dead-end and Karsa was close enough to hear breathing had there been anyone hiding in it.

He edged forward.

A massive flat slab dominated the stone floor, leaving only a forearm's space on the three sides where rose the rock walls. The surface of the slab was unadorned, but a

faint grey light seemed to emanate from the stone itself. Karsa moved closer, then slowly crouched down before the lone, motionless hand jutting from the slab's nearest edge. It was gaunt, yet whole, the skin a milky blue-green, the nails chipped and ragged, the fingers patched in white dust.

Every space within reach of that hand was etched in grooves, cut deep into the stone floor – as deep as the fingers could reach – in a chaotic, cross-hatched pattern.

The hand, Karsa could see, was neither Teblor nor lowlander, but in size somewhere in between, the bones prominent, the fingers narrow and overlong and seeming to bear far too many joints.

Something of Karsa's presence – his breath perhaps as he leaned close in his study – was sensed, for the hand spasmed suddenly, jerking down to lie flat, fingers spread, on the rock. And Karsa now saw the unmistakable signs that animals had attacked that hand in the past – mountain wolves and creatures yet fiercer. It had been chewed, clawed and gnawed at, though, it seemed, never broken. Motionless once more, it lay pressed against the ground.

Hearing footsteps behind him, Karsa rose and turned. Delum and Bairoth, weapons out, made their way up the trail. Karsa strode to meet them.

Bairoth rumbled, 'Your two dogs came skulking back to us.'

'What have you found, Warleader?' Delum asked in a whisper.

'A demon,' he replied. 'Pinned for eternity beneath that stone. It lives, still.'

'The Forkassal.'

'Even so. There is much truth in our legends, it seems.'

Bairoth moved past and approached the slab. He crouched down before the hand and studied it long in the gloom, then he straightened and strode back. 'The Forkassal. The demon of the mountains, the One Who Sought Peace'

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‘In the time of the Spirit Wars, when our old gods were young,’ Delum said. ‘What, Karsa Orlong, do you recall of that tale? It was so brief, nothing more than torn pieces. The elders themselves admitted that most of it had been lost long ago, before the Seven awoke.’

‘Pieces,’ Karsa agreed. ‘The Spirit Wars were two, perhaps three invasions, and had little to do with the Teblor. Foreign gods and demons. Their battles shook the mountains, and then but one force remained—’

‘In those tales,’ Delum interjected, ‘are the only mention of Icarium. Karsa Orlong, it may be that the T’lan Imass – spoken of in that elder’s cave – belonged to the Spirit Wars, and that they were the victors, who then left never to return. It may be that it was the Spirit Wars that shattered our people.’

Bairoth’s gaze remained on the slab. Now he spoke. ‘The demon must be freed.’

Both Karsa and Delum turned to him, struck silent by the pronouncement.

‘Say nothing,’ Bairoth continued, ‘until I have finished. The Forkassal was said to have come to the place of the Spirit Wars, seeking to make peace between the contestants. That is one of the torn pieces of the tale. For the demon’s effort it was destroyed. That is another piece. Icarium too sought to end the war, but he arrived too late, and the victors knew they could not defeat him so they did not even try. A third piece. Delum Thord, the words in the cave also spoke of Icarium, yes?’

‘They did, Bairoth Gild. Icarium gave the Teblor the Laws that ensured our survival.’

‘Yet, were they able, the T’lan Imass would have laid a stone on him as well.’ After these words, Bairoth fell silent.

Karsa swung about and walked to the slab. Its luminescence was fitful in places, hinting of the sorcery’s antiquity, a slow dissolution of the power invested in it. Teblor elders worked magic, but only rarely. Since the awakening of the Forkassal, the Book of Sorcery arrived as a

visitation, locked within the confines of sleep or trance. The old legends spoke of vicious displays of overt magic, of dread weapons tempered with curses, but Karsa suspected these were but elaborate inventions to weave bold colours into the tales. He scowled. 'I have no understanding of this magic,' he said.

Bairoth and Delum joined him.

The hand still lay flat, motionless.

'I wonder if the demon can hear our words,' Delum said.

Bairoth grunted. 'Even if it could, why would it understand them? The lowlanders speak a different tongue. Demons must also have their own.'

'Yet he came to make peace—'

'He cannot hear us,' Karsa asserted. 'He can do no more than sense the presence of someone . . . of something.'

Shrugging, Bairoth crouched down beside the slab. He reached out, hesitated, then settled his palm against the stone. 'It is neither hot nor cold. Its magic is not for us.'

'It is not meant to ward, then, only hold,' Delum suggested.

'The three of us should be able to lift it.'

Karsa studied Bairoth. 'What do you wish to awaken here, Bairoth Gild?'

The huge warrior looked up, eyes narrowing. Then his brows rose and he smiled. 'A bringer of peace?'

'There is no value in peace.'

'There must be peace among the Teblor, or they shall never be united.'

Karsa cocked his head, considering Bairoth's words.

'This demon may have gone mad,' Delum muttered. 'How long, trapped beneath this rock?'

'There are three of us,' Bairoth said.

'Yet this demon is from a time when we had been defeated, and if it was these T'lan Imass who imprisoned this demon, they did so because they could not kill him. Bairoth Gild, we three would be as nothing to this creature.'

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‘We will have earned its gratitude.’

‘The fever of madness knows no friends.’

Both warriors looked to Karsa. ‘We cannot know the mind of a demon,’ he said. ‘But we can see one thing, and that is how it still seeks to protect itself. This lone hand has fended off all sorts of beasts. In that, I see a holding on to purpose.’

‘The patience of an immortal.’ Bairoth nodded. ‘I see the same as you, Karsa Orlong.’

Karsa faced Delum. ‘Delum Thord, do you still possess doubts?’

‘I do, Warleader, yet I will give your effort my strength, for I see the decision in your eyes. So be it.’

Without another word the three Uryd positioned themselves along one side of the stone slab. They squatted, hands reaching down to grip the edge.

‘With the fourth breath,’ Karsa instructed.

The stone lifted with a grinding, grating sound, a sifting of dust. A concerted heave sent it over, to crack against the rock wall.

The figure had been pinned on its side. The immense weight of the slab must have dislocated bones and crushed muscle, but it had not been enough to defeat the demon, for it had, over millennia, gouged out a rough, uneven pit for half the length of its narrow, strangely elongated body. The hand trapped beneath that body had clawed out a space for itself first, then had slowly worked grooves for hip and shoulder. Both feet, which were bare, had managed something similar. Spider webs and the dust of ground stone covered the figure like a dull grey shroud, and the stale air that rose from the space visibly swirled in its languid escape, heavy with a peculiar, insect-like stench.

The three warriors stood looking down on the demon.

It had yet to move, but they could see its strangeness even so. Elongated limbs, extra-jointed, the skin stretched taut and pallid as moonlight. A mass of blue-black hair spread out from the face down head like fine roots,

forming a latticework across the stone floor. The demon was naked, and female.

The limbs spasmed.

Bairoth edged closer and spoke in a low, soothing tone. 'You are freed, Demon. We are Teblor, of the Uryd tribe. If you will, we would help you. Tell us what you require.'

The limbs had ceased their spasming, and now but trembled. Slowly, the demon lifted her head. The hand that had known an eternity of darkness slipped free from under her body, probed out over the flat stone floor. The fingertips cut across strands of hair and those strands fell to dust. The hand settled in a way that matched its opposite. Muscles tautened along the arms, neck and shoulders, and the demon rose, in jagged, shaking increments. She shed hair in black sheets of dust until her pate was revealed, smooth and white.

Bairoth moved to take her weight but Karsa snapped a hand out to restrain him. 'No, Bairoth Gild, she has known enough pressure that was not her own. I do not think she would be touched, not for a long time, perhaps never again.'

Bairoth's hooded gaze fixed on Karsa for a long moment, then he sighed and said, 'Karsa Orlong, I hear wisdom in your words. Again and again, you surprise me – no, I did not mean to insult. I am dragged towards admiration – leave me my edged words.'

Karsa shrugged, eyes returning once more to the demon. 'We can only wait, now. Does a demon know thirst? Hunger? Hers is a throat that has not known water for generations, a stomach that has forgotten its purpose, lungs that have not drawn a full breath since the slab first settled. Fortunate it is night, too, for the sun might be as fire to her eyes—' He stopped then, for the demon, on hands and knees, had raised her head and they could see her face for the first time.

Skin like polished marble, devoid of flaws, a broad brow over enormous, bright eyes that seemed dry and flat, like

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onyx beneath a layer of dust. High, flaring cheekbones, a wide mouth withered and crusted with fine crystals.

'There is no water within her,' Delum said. 'None.' He backed away, then set off for their camp.

The woman slowly sat back onto her haunches, then struggled to stand.

It was difficult to just watch, but both warriors held back, tensed to catch her should she fall.

It seemed she noticed that, and one side of her mouth curled upward a fraction.

That one twitch transformed her face, and, in response, Karsa felt a hammerblow in his chest. *She mocks her own sorry condition. This, her first emotion upon being freed. Embarrassment, yet finding the humour within it. Hear me, Urugal the Woven, I will make the ones who imprisoned her regret their deed, should they or their descendants still live. These T'lan Imass – they have made of me an enemy. I, Karsa Orlong, so vow.*

Delum returned with a waterskin, his steps slowing upon seeing her standing upright.

She was gaunt, her body a collection of planes and angles. Her breasts were high and far apart, her sternum prominent between them. She seemed to possess far too many ribs. In height, she was as a Teblor child.

She saw the waterskin in Delum's hands, but made no gesture towards it. Instead, she turned to settle her gaze on the place where she had lain.

Karsa could see the rise and fall of her breath, but she was otherwise motionless.

Bairoth spoke. 'Are you the Forkassal?'

She looked over at him and half-smiled once more.

'We are Teblor,' Bairoth continued, at which her smile broadened slightly in what was to Karsa clear recognition, though strangely flavoured with amusement.

'She understands you,' Karsa observed.

Delum approached with the waterskin. She glanced at him and shook her head. He stopped.

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Karsa now saw that some of the dustiness was gone from her eyes, and that her lips were now slightly fuller. 'She recovers,' he said.

'Freedom was all she needed,' Bairoth said.

'In the manner that sun-hardened lichen softens in the night,' Karsa said. 'Her thirst is quenched by the air itself—'

She faced him suddenly, her body stiffening.

'If I have given cause for offence—'

Before Karsa drew another breath she was upon him. Five concussive blows to his body and he found himself lying on his back, the hard stone floor stinging as if he was lying on a nest of fire-ants. There was no air in his lungs. Agony thundered through him. He could not move.

He heard Delum's warcry – cut off with a strangled grunt – then the sound of another body striking the ground.

Bairoth cried out from one side, 'Forkassal! Hold! Leave him—'

Karsa blinked up through tear-filled eyes as her face hovered above his. It moved closer, the eyes gleaming now like black pools, the lips full and almost purple in the starlight.

In a rasping voice she whispered to him in the language of the Teblor, 'They will not leave you, will they? These once enemies of mine. It seems shattering their bones was not enough.' Something in her eyes softened slightly. 'Your kind deserve better.' The face slowly withdrew. 'I believe I must needs wait. Wait and see what comes of you, before I decide whether I shall deliver unto you, Warrior, my eternal peace.'

Bairoth's voice from a dozen paces away: 'Forkassal!'

She straightened and turned with extraordinary fluidity. 'You have fallen far, to so twist the name of my kind, not to mention your own. I am Forkrul Assail, young warrior – not a demon. I am named Calm, a Bringer of Peace, and I warn you, the desire to deliver it is very strong in me at the moment, so remove your hand from that weapon.'

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‘But we have freed you!’ Bairoth cried. ‘Yet you have struck Karsa and Delum down!’

She laughed. ‘And Icarium and those damned T’lan Imass will not be pleased that you undid their work. Then again, it is likely Icarium has no memory of having done so, and the T’lan Imass are far away. Well, I shall not give them a second chance. But I do know gratitude, Warrior, and so I give you this. The one named Karsa has been chosen. If I was to tell you even the little that I sense of his ultimate purpose, you would seek to kill him. But I tell you there would be no value in that, for the ones using him will simply select another. No. Watch this friend of yours. Guard him. There will come a time when he stands poised to change the world. And when that time comes, I shall be there. For I bring peace. When that moment arrives, cease guarding him. Step back, as you have done now.’

Karsa dragged a sobbing breath into his racked lungs. At a wave of nausea he twisted onto his side and vomited onto the gritty stone floor. Between his gasping and coughing, he heard the Forkrul Assail – the woman named Calm – stride away.

A moment later Bairoth knelt beside Karsa. ‘Delum is badly hurt, Warleader,’ he said. ‘There is liquid leaking from a crack in his head. Karsa Orlong, I regret freeing this . . . this creature. Delum had doubts. Yet he—’

Karsa coughed and spat, then, fighting waves of pain from his battered chest, he climbed to his feet. ‘You could not know, Bairoth Guild,’ he muttered, wiping the tears from his eyes.

‘Warleader, I did not draw my weapon. I did not seek to protect you as did Delum Thord—’

‘Which leaves one of us healthy,’ Karsa growled, staggering over to where Delum lay across the trail. He had been thrown some distance, by what looked to be a single blow. Slanting crossways across his forehead were four deep impressions, the skin split, yellowy liquid oozing from the punched-through bone underneath. Copying Delum’s eyes were wide, yet

cloudy with confusion. Whole sections of his face had gone slack, as if no underlying thought could hold them to an expression.

Bairoth joined him. 'See, the fluid is clear. It is thought-blood. Delum Thord will not come all the way back with such an injury.'

'No,' Karsa murmured, 'he will not. None who lose thought-blood ever do.'

'It is my fault.'

'No, Delum made a mistake, Bairoth Gild. Am I killed? The Forkassal chose not to slay me. Delum should have done as you did – nothing.'

Bairoth winced. 'She spoke to you, Karsa Orlong. I heard her whispering. What did she say?'

'Little I could understand, except that the peace she brings is death.'

'Our legends have twisted with time.'

'They have, Bairoth Gild. Come, we must wrap Delum's wounds. The thought-blood will gather in the bandages and dry, and so clot the holes. Perhaps it will not leak so much then and he will come some of the way back to us.'

The two warriors set off for their camp. When they arrived they found the dogs huddled together, racked with shivering. Through the centre of the clearing ran the tracks of Calm's feet. Heading south.

A crisp, chill wind howled along the edge of the escarpment. Karsa Orlong sat with his back against the rock wall, watching Delum Thord move about on his hands and knees among the dogs. Reaching out and gathering the beasts close, to stroke and nuzzle. Soft, crooning sounds issued from Delum Thord, the smile never leaving the half of his face that still worked.

The dogs were hunters. They suffered the manhandling with miserable expressions that occasionally became fierce, low growls punctuated with warning snaps of their jaws – to which Delum

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Gnaw, lying at Karsa's feet, tracked with sleepy eyes Delum's random crawling about through the pack.

It had taken most of a day for Delum Thord to return to them, a journey that had left much of the warrior behind. Another day had passed whilst Karsa and Bairoth waited to see if more would come, enough to send light into his eyes, enough to gift Delum Thord with the ability to once more look upon his companions. But there had been no change. He did not see them at all. Only the dogs.

Bairoth had left earlier to hunt, but Karsa sensed, as the day stretched on, that Bairoth Gild had chosen to avoid the camp for other reasons. Freeing the demon had taken Delum from them, and it had been Bairoth's words that had yielded a most bitter reward. Karsa had little understanding of such feelings, this need to self-inflict some sort of punishment. The error had belonged to Delum, drawing his blade against the demon. Karsa's sore ribs attested to the Forkrul Assail's martial prowess – she had attacked with impressive speed, faster than anything Karsa had seen before, much less faced. The three Teblor were as children before her. Delum should have seen that, instantly, should have stayed his hand as Bairoth had done.

Instead, the warrior had been foolish, and now he crawled among the dogs. The Faces in the Rock held no pity for foolish warriors, so why should Karsa Orlong? Bairoth Gild was indulging himself, making regret and pity and castigation into sweet nectars, leaving him to wander like a tortured drunk.

Karsa was fast running out of patience. The journey must be resumed. If anything could return Delum Thord to himself, then it would be battle, the blood's fierce rage searing the soul awake.

Footsteps from uptrail. Gnaw's head turned, but the distraction was only momentary.

Bairoth Gild strode into view, the carcass of a wild goat draped over one shoulder, the paws

Thord, then let the goat drop in a crunch and clatter of hoofs. He drew his butchering knife and knelt down beside it.

‘We have lost another day,’ Karsa said.

‘Game is scarce,’ Bairoth replied, slicing open the goat’s belly.

The dogs moved into an expectant half-circle, Delum following to take his place among them. Bairoth cut through connecting tissues and began flinging blood-soaked organs to the beasts. None made a move.

Karsa tapped Gnaw on the flank and the beast rose and moved forward, trailed by its three-legged mate. Gnaw sniffed at the offerings, each in turn, and settled on the goat’s liver, while its mate chose the heart. They each trotted away with their prizes. The remaining dogs then closed in on what remained, snapping and bickering. Delum pounced forward to wrest a lung from the jaws of one of the dogs, baring his own teeth in challenge. He scrambled off to one side, hunching down over his prize.

Karsa watched as Gnaw rose and trotted towards Delum. Thord, watching as Delum, whimpering, dropped the lung then crouched flat, head down, while Gnaw licked the pooling blood around the organ for a few moments, then padded back to its own meal.

Grunting, Karsa said, ‘Gnaw’s pack has grown by one.’ There was no reply and he glanced over to see Bairoth staring at Delum in horror. ‘See his smile, Bairoth Gild? Delum Thord has found happiness, and this tells us that he will come back no further, for why would he?’

Bairoth stared down at his bloodied hands, at the butchering knife gleaming red in the dying light. ‘Know you no grief, Warleader?’ he asked in a whisper.

‘No. He is not dead.’

‘Better he were!’ Bairoth snapped.

‘Then kill him.’

Raw hatred flared in Bairoth’s eyes. ‘Karsa Orlong, what did she say to you?’

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Karsa frowned at the unexpected question, then shrugged. ‘She damned me for my ignorance. Words that could not wound me, for I was indifferent to all that she uttered.’

Bairoth’s eyes narrowed. ‘You make of what has happened a jest? Warleader, you no longer lead me. I shall not guard your flank in this cursed war of yours. We have lost too much—’

‘There is weakness in you, Bairoth Gild. I have known that all along. For years, I have known that. You are no different from what Delum has become, and it is this truth that now haunts you so. Did you truly believe we would all return from this journey without scars? Did you think us immune to our enemies?’

‘So *you* think—’

Karsa’s laugh was harsh. ‘You are a fool, Bairoth Gild. How did we come this far? Through Rathyd and Sunyd lands? Through the battles we have fought? Our victory was no gift of the Seven. Success was carved by our skill with swords, and by my leadership. Yet all you saw in me was bravado, as would come from a youth fresh to the ways of the warrior. You deluded yourself, and it gave you comfort. You are not my superior, Bairoth Gild, not in anything.’

Bairoth Gild stared, his eyes wide, his crimson hands trembling.

‘And now,’ Karsa growled, ‘if you would survive. Survive this journey. Survive *me*, then I suggest you teach yourself anew the value of following. Your life is in your leader’s hands. Follow me to victory, Bairoth Gild, or fall to the wayside. Either way, I will tell the tale with true words. Thus, how would you have it?’

Emotions flitted like wildfire across Bairoth’s broad, suddenly pale face. He drew a half-dozen tortured breaths.

‘I lead this pack,’ Karsa said quietly, ‘and none other. Do you challenge me?’

Bairoth slowly settled back on his haunches, shifting the grip on the butchering knife, his gaze seeming level now on