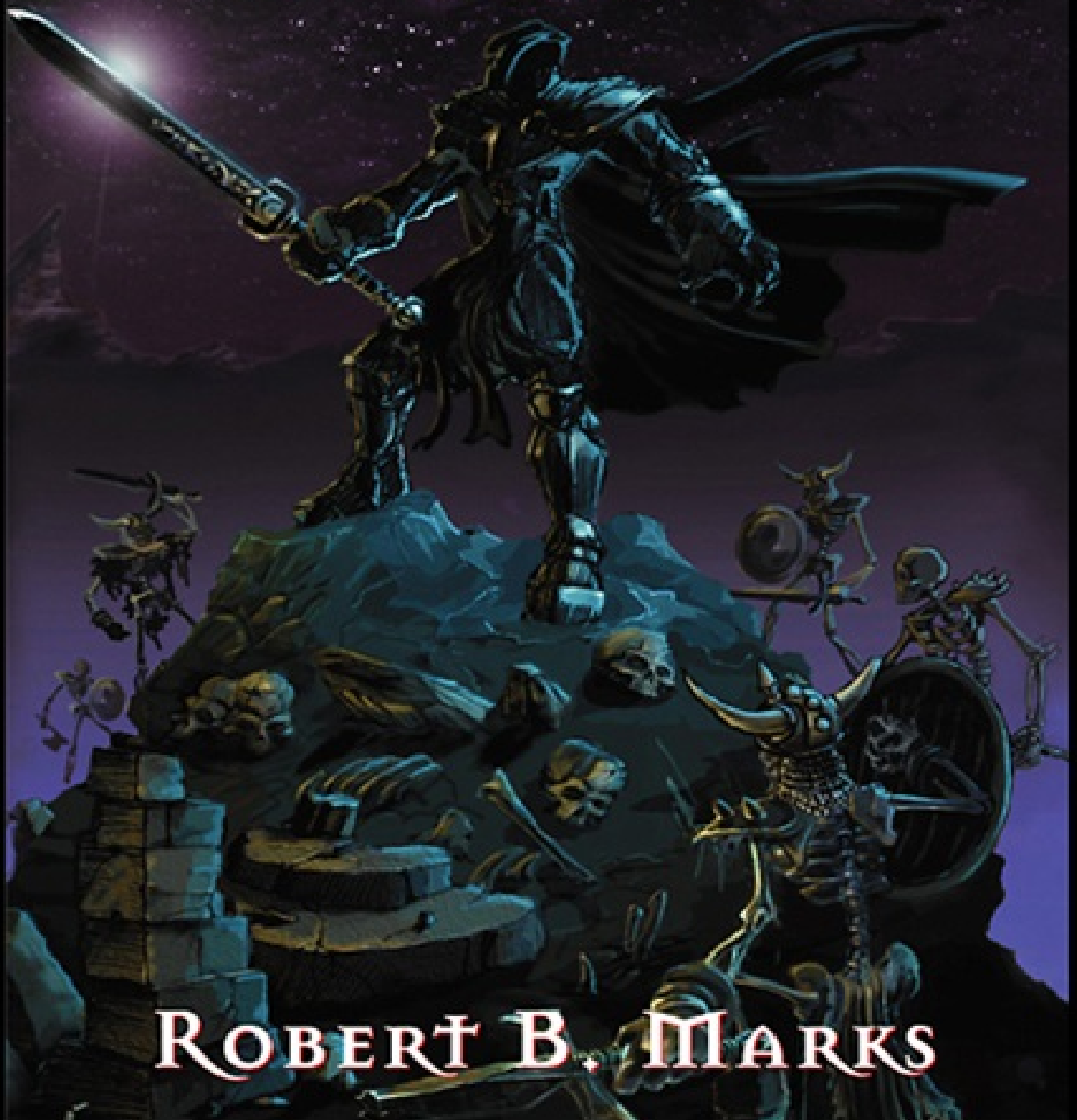


"Readers of *Demonsbane* are in for a helluva ride."

—Dennis L. McKiernan, author of
Silver Wolf, Black Falcon

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ДЕМОПСВАПЕ



ROBERT B. MARKS

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

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1

THE NIGHT OF SOULS



And the hosts of Hell looked upon man, and swore vengeance for their defeat by the Vizjerei. “No more will these creatures deny us,” swore the Prime Evils, “for we are greater than they.” And thus began the Sin War.

—The Holy Scriptures of Zakarum

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

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

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

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

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

Taking stock of his gear, he noticed his sword was rather more notched than the last time he had remembered, and his leather jerkin and trousers were ragged but intact. Where his coat of mail had

gotten to, he had no idea. His wide shield was also missing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Thunderclouds scudded above, lightning arcing between them, followed by blasts of thunder. "It looks like it's going to rain," old Banagar muttered. Siggard grimaced at the elder man, running his eyes over the gray stubble surrounding a faint mustache on the wrinkled face. Siggard mouthed a silent prayer that the rain wouldn't turn the ground into a slick wasteland.

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

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

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

None of them were even remotely human.

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

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



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

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

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

Siggard shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

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

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

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

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

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

Siggard shuddered. “It is unnatural.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Siggard.”

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

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

Siggard shrugged. “I wish I knew.”

Tyrael raised an eyebrow. “I don’t understand.”

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

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

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

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

“I have to know what happened.”

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

Siggard nodded. “I will consider your advice.”

Tyrael smiled kindly. “That is all one could ask.”

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

ENCOUNTERS



*Alas, mourn for the open road!
For where there was once wonder and mystery,
Now there is mistrust and death.*

—Jiltarian of Khanduras, *Lamentations*

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

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

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

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

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

Siggard blinked. Perhaps it was the concern he had for his friends in the army, he thought

Regardless, with virtually no food and nothing to hunt with, it was a blessing. Still, in some ways the hunger pangs would have been a blessing; the roads were known to be dangerous, and he could use the edge in staying alert.

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



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

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

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

"Barrage!" the lookout shouted.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm going to have to get out of here," Siggard muttered uneasily, picking up the pace. As before

the path twisted and turned as he walked, but always bore northwards.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A wizard?" Siggard asked.

Sarnakyle grinned. "Definitely not a shoemaker."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Siggard raised an eyebrow.

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

Siggard grunted. "We will see."

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

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

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

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



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

then settle down to sleep.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It could be very dangerous," Siggard warned.

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

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

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

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

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

REVELATIONS AND SORROW



*Do not embrace hatred, for it can breed only destruction.
Embrace love instead, for those who love can change the world itself.*

—Gesinius of Kehjistan, *Tenets of Zakarum*

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

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

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

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

"Are you feeling well?" the wizard asked. "You've barely eaten anything these last couple of days." Siggard shook his head. "How could I be hungry when my family might be in dire danger?" Sarnakyle nodded. "I understand."

They bedded down for the night, Sarnakyle first setting his wards with an abrupt series of gestures and then taking first watch. Siggard tried to sleep, but his dreams were filled with the screams of the dying and horrible visions of Emilye being tormented. Finally, Sarnakyle woke him up, and Siggard

gladly took the watch. The minutes stretched into hours, and Siggard tried to think of anything but the terrors that could be occurring to those he loved.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sarnakyle smiled. "To Brennor we go!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is there anything nearby?" Sarnakyle asked.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

“Could Bartuc be behind this?” Siggard asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Bear’s Hill?”

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

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

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

“Quite a woman.”

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BETRAYALS



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

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

—Velinon the Archmage, *The Words of Horazon*

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

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

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

Siggard swallowed and stood unsteadily. "Demons?"

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

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

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

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

The wizard shook his head. "This does not feel right."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

“And that is where you met the Spirit Mage?”

Siggard nodded, sipping some ale.

“A strange tale,” Tylwulf muttered.

“How many survived here?” Siggard asked.

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

“Have you sent warning to Brennor?”

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

bedrooms, her tattered dress falling around her legs.

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

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

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

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

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

"That will be fine," Sarnakyle answered quickly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Siggard shrugged.

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

A chill went down Siggard's spine. "What do you suggest we do?"

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

Siggard nodded, and they silently stuffed their pillows under the blankets. As quietly as he could, Siggard drew his sword and snuffed the candle. He took position at one side of the door, while Sarnakyle stood at the other.

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

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

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

With a shout of anger, Siggard leapt forward, followed by Sarnakyle. Tylwulf gasped in shock and

dropped his blade as Siggard's sword came to meet his throat. There was a startled cry from Camylle and Siggard looked to see Sarnakyle holding her tightly by the waist, a dagger of his own at her neck.

"Talk," Siggard demanded.

"They'll kill me," Tylwulf said.

"So will I."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I've done something monstrous, haven't I?" Siggard asked weakly.

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

"I feel so hollow," Siggard mumbled.

"This kind of killing does that," the wizard said. "You were not in the middle of battle, you were slaughtering those you might consider defenseless. But they were clutched by evil, and could not turn

back. You probably did their souls a favor.

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

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

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

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

“What do you mean?”

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

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

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

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

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

PLANS AND JOURNEYS



*Arkaine spoke, opened his word-hoard,
“Fate will always aid when one’s bravery holds,
and when one’s cause is great and just.”*

—The Lay of Arkaine

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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