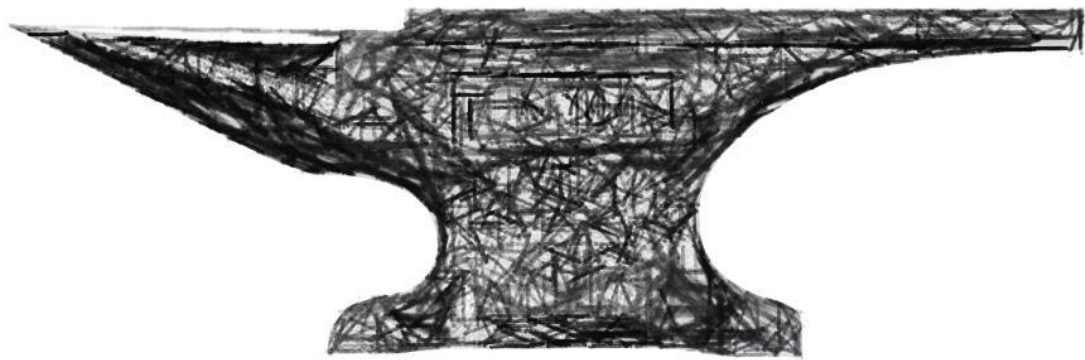


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The boy who decided not to die



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Robert Bishop



Let me tell you about the boy who decided not to die.

His name was Theden, and he worked as an apprentice for the old blacksmith in Umbret, a small town in the Shivering. If you haven't heard of the town, I can't really blame you, for not many have. It's a speck of dust on the map, so small you'd be forgiven to think it was a mishap with the quill.

Theden spent much of his life in the shop, polishing hafts and sharpening metal. He'd never used a sword against another man and he never intended to, but he liked making them. All things considered, Theden made a decent living working for the blacksmith, and his life was uncomplicated for the most part.

So – what could possibly prompt a man like Theden to make such a decision? Who was he to challenge the gods, both old ones and new. Even the god above them all, Noman himself, died so new life could blossom. Why couldn't Theden?

Because of *her*; of course . . .

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Part I

Theden hissed and spat, swinging furiously as drops of sweat formed on his forehead. He wasn't a warrior, that much was clear, but he was committed now. He was committed to murdering this poor fool, and he'd have to see it through.

"For her!"

"I don't understand!" The blacksmith cried, barely ducking under Theden's mace. His old bones made it hard to dodge, his knees buckling as he went down, breath catching in his throat. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm sorry, Wright!" Theden wheezed. "Blood on the anvil . . . it's the only way!" He tried an overhand blow, the mace crashing against the rocks around the furnace.

A shower of sparks rained over the old man's head. "Theden, please! There has to be some way to—"

One of Theden's blows finally connected, but it was a weak one. The mace hit the blacksmith's shoulder on the backswing, knocking him to the floor.

"Please, stop!" Wright was crying now. Piss was leaking from his pants and onto the wooden floor. "Don't kill me, Theden! Oh dear Noman, I don't want to die!"

Theden hesitated for a second, wondering who he was, and what he'd become. The old man's words echoed in his head, again and again.

Forged from the blood of a friend . . . used against a sworn enemy. This task will require blood on the anvil, son – are you man enough to do what it takes?

"I'm going to live forever," Theden said, smiling at Wright.

The poor blacksmith was writhing and crying on the floor, no fight left in him. "He's corrupted your mind, Theden! You sought help from a demon!"

"There are no demons, Wright – there's only us!" *Thinking about the old alchemist and his pale eye and burnt face, Theden wasn't sure that was true.* He leaned closer, smelling the man's fear, sweat and piss. "And we're all rotten to the core!" That much was true, at least.

"What's happened to you? You used to be such a bright, young boy!"

"I became a man, Wright! And I learned how betrayal felt – how it felt to be abandoned and left for dead. Well I'll tell you one thing," he raised his mace over his head. "I'm never going to die, as long as they still roam this world. I'm going to live until they all die, and I'm going to do whatever it takes to accomplish that!"

“I have something for you!” The old blacksmith was completely unintelligible; snot, tears and spit bubbling from his mouth. “I have something for you,” he repeated, barely a whisper.

“What?” Theden lowered the mace.

“In the woodwork shop, next to the vice . . .”

“You’re prolonging your fate by increments, Wright . . . this won’t change what’s going to happen.”

Wright hid his face in his hands, wailing now. “I know, Theden, I know.” His voice was a howl of sorrow and pain. “Do whatever you have to, Theden. Just know that you’ll have to live with it . . .”

“Forever,” Theden whispered as he raised his mace again.

Wright stood up, clamoring to the anvil. His knees were bent and shaking, his arms barely able to clutch the thing.

Theden wasn’t a strong man, that much was true, but the weight of the weapon did most of the work for him. He bashed in the old man’s temple, his eyeglasses shattering instantly, glass crunching into his left eye as his skull was forced against the anvil. There was a sickening crunch as Wright’s teeth cracked against the metal, some of them falling to the floor, others going into his mouth.

Theden felt a sudden spell of compassion – a frightful fit of worry that Wright would somehow still be alive. Glass in his eye, teeth crushed and temple bashed in. He closed his eyes and hurriedly struck another blow, this one at the base of the old blacksmith’s neck. There was no sound other than the wet crunch he’d heard earlier, the mace’s spikes burrowing into Wrights neck and skull.

The body slumped down on the ground, while teeth and shattered eyeglasses remained on the anvil. There was a distinct spatter of blood covering the metal, but no bone fragments or brain matter. Theden had greatly underestimated the power of his weapon.

That, or he’d heard one too many fictionalized tales concerning the glory of battle.

In any case, Theden’s oldest friend was dead. His blood was spattered across the anvil and pooling on the floor. Not feeling much of anything, Theden walked carefully into the other room, finding a wrapped parcel in the corner next to the square.

He quickly unwrapped it, falling back on the nearest chair in shock and bitter surprise as he did so. It was a beautiful painting of him and his betrothed; laughing and rejoicing in each other’s company. They were sitting at a lavish table, far richer than anything Theden had ever seen. Everything apart from Liss and Theden themselves was exaggerated. Wright wanted them to look like king and queen.

“My beautiful queen . . .” A tear escaped his eye, falling onto the paint. It landed on his face, making it strange and twisted through the salt water.

What’s happened to you? Wright whispered in his mind.

“*She* happened to me.” His fingers traced across the paint, caressing her beautiful face. “She happened . . .” Another tear fell.

Theden slowly walked back to Wright's corpse, throwing the painting into the furnace. "Thank you, Wright." He grabbed an axe from the wall and knelt down next to the body. "Your sacrifice will not be forgotten, I promise you that."

He raised the axe above his head. *Forged from the blood of a friend . . . used against a sworn enemy.* "I'm man enough to do what it takes!"

The axe fell again and again.

A most blessed union

“And then there was . . . let’s see . . . the count!” The old blacksmith laughed, stepping on the bellows.

The glowing embers gave a low hum as they brightened, the warmth coming in waves against Theden’s face. “Oh dear, yes! I remember him! The one with the unique-”

“The ‘unique preferences’ yeah!”

“He thought he was a damn vampire, that one, I’m sure of it!” Theden dunked the worked iron in the slack tub, the water frothing angrily. “What was it he wanted again?”

“Silver battleaxes!” The old blacksmith roared. “He looked like a damn vampire too! He was a scary fool, he was!” He wiped some sweat from his brow and spat into the flames. “You’re doing some good work there, son! You make a fine apprentice.”

“Thank you,” Theden looked away, a tingle in his spine. Ever since his father vanished and his mother died, the old blacksmith, Wright, had been like family to him. Hearing this from him was more praise than he’d ever gotten from his old man. *Angry old fucker, he was.* He closed his eyes. “This means a lot to me, you know that, right?”

“Aw, come on, now. Don’t make me regret sayin’ it, huh?” Wright smiled and patted Theden on the back. “Maybe I’ll make you some silver axes later, to show my appreciation.”

“That would actually be pretty swell, Wright. You see, I need to murder some undead later, and I could use a weapon for the cause.”

“Hah! With a face like that count fellow’s, I bet you could’ve scared ‘em to death!”

“True enough,” Theden retrieved the metal he was working on. It would eventually become a sword, and a damn fine one, he thought. “A lot of warriors and fighters asking for good steel, huh?”

Wright nodded. “Aye, most of ‘em.”

“What’s the scariest customer you’ve ever had?”

“Scariest?” Wright produced a mallet and pounded the metal he’d been heating. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he worked. “Hmm, I ain’t had too many scary ones.”

There was no finer blacksmith in Umbret, Theden knew. Mostly because there was no other blacksmith in Umbret at all. Still, Theden reckoned Wright was the finest blacksmith in the entire Shivering. *Close to a thousand isles, probably hundreds of blacksmiths – none able to produce a blade like Wright.* Theden was sure of it.

“You met him as well, I think . . . a fellow with a burned face, almost completely hidden by a hood. He wanted some ceremonial knives, and a whole slew of flasks and containers. I believe he

was doing some sort of alchemy, from the looks of it. Never gave me his name . . . I just referred to him as Scar, given the burns on his face.”

“Yeah . . . I think I remember him. He wasn’t so bad, was he?”

“There was something in the way he talked. The whole world seemed to quiet as he spoke. Nothin’ more than a murmur, as if there wasn’t a heart beating in his chest. And that horrible dead eye of his. Icy blue, staring straight through your very soul.” Wright gave a shudder.

“Sounds like some children’s tale.”

“Aye, and I wish it was.” Wright looked towards the door, as if he was scared the man would be standing there. “Lived all by himself in the middle of nowhere . . . gave me the chills, that one.”

Theden smiled and patted Wright on the back. “And one day I’ll tell my children about him. ‘The scarred alchemist, who gave even the hardest blacksmith in the north a proper scare.’”

“Hah! You keep prattlin’ on about those damn kids of yours. You need to find yourself a proper woman first, and stop being one yourself!”

“Being what? A woman or a kid?”

Wright smiled wide. “Yes.”

Theden raised the axe again, splitting the log as it fell. His feet were wide and his knees bent, just as Wright had showed him. *Where is that old bastard anyway?*

Sweat was dripping from his brow, falling on what would eventually become the haft of a spear or another axe. *We need shovels more, though.*

He grabbed the largest piece he’d split from the wood and carried it inside. “Large enough to provide strength, slim enough to feel good in your hands.” He mumbled to no one in particular. Inside, he peeled off what bark was left and started carving the piece to give it the right shape and size. *Wouldn’t want to get splinters using it . . .*

After a few minutes, he stopped what he was doing, sure he heard a sound somewhere.

“Hello? Is anyone here?” A female voice crept around the corner, soft and inquisitive.

Theden soaked the wood in water and took ten strides to his left. His heard stopped in his chest as he peered around the corner.

“Hi!” A tall and slender woman was standing there. “You must be Wright.” She thrust her hand out, causing Theden to jump back.

“I . . . umm . . .” Theden was speechless, his blue eyes fixed on hers, the sky reflected in the ocean.

“You look a little young, if I’m not too forward.” She raised her eyebrows, and they promptly vanished behind her black fringe.

Theden didn’t answer. He was now transfixed on her hair. Raven black and pulled back in a tail, the fringe covering her forehead like a protective wing. Her sapphire eyes glowed underneath, the corners pulled up in a friendly smile. He’d heard tales of his people’s gods and goddesses, but he’d never believed . . . not until now.

“Should I come back?”

“Yes!” He blurted out, fiddling with his apron. *Every day until the end comes.*

“Okay, then.” Her smile widened by a fraction, and her eyes gleamed even more as she turned towards the sunshine coming through the door. “I’ll come back tomorrow.”

“No!”

She turned back, her mouth finally levelling and her eyebrows reappearing. “Not a good time?”

“No . . . yes . . . I meant that you shouldn’t leave.” He took a firm step towards her, swallowing hard. “I’m Theden, the blacksmith’s apprentice.” He gave her his best smile, which wasn’t very good. Not compared to hers, at least.

“But you said I should come back . . .” A puzzled look crept over her flawless face, one brow vanishing.

“Those ain’t the same thing.” He looked down again, looking at his brown, worn-out shoes.

“Right . . . so can you help me, or should I come back?”

“How about I help you, and then you come back? For . . . dinner?” Theden was startled to hear the words creep out of his mouth. A warmth rushed up from behind his calves, all the way up to his neck. It was mid-winter, but he could feel beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

Her perfect mouth formed a circle, her lips pursed. “Excuse me?”

“I’m . . . oh dear.” He forced himself to look at her. “Could I advise you to forget everything that happened in your life since you walked in that door – or would that be entirely too much to ask of you?”

Her mouth resumed its normal shape, and she turned on her heel, saying nothing.

Wright’s going to kill me for this, Theden thought as the woman promptly marched out the door. Her scabbard rustled against the doorframe and her black hair gave one last wave as she vanished, her heavy boots clacking on the steps outside. *I just lost a potential customer . . .*

There hadn’t been much fighting or even hunting in these parts lately. ‘The savage north’ was becoming more of a misunderstood and wrong term every day. This meant few customers for a blacksmith and his apprentice, and even less silver.

As the last sliver of light vanished and the door clicked in place, Theden plopped down on the closest chair. *Screw the customers and screw the silvers! I just lost the love of my life . . . maybe.* He rested his head in his hands. *Probably . . .*

Then the door opened, and the sun came bursting through again, like a ray of hope.

Theden’s heart stopped as he looked up.

“Hi!” The woman stepped inside, sapphire eyes radiating. “You must be Wright.” She thrust her hand out.

“No, I’m his apprentice.” Theden clasped his hand around hers. “My name is Theden.”

“Ah; I thought you looked a little young, if that’s not too forward.” She smiled an impossible smile. “My name is Liss, and I need some work done.”

*

"I don't know about this," Liss said, smiling an awkward smile.

Oh, crap! She don't like this. Theden sighed. *Of course she don't . . . who the hell would?* He looked at the awkward flute player; a few more sour notes escaping his tiny instruments. At least the man playing the harpsicord in the background hit most of his notes. Theden was quite passionately taken by music, but there wasn't much of it in a small backwater town like Umbret. Even the beggars and the vermin knew better than to pick up an instrument in the cold. "I'm sorry," he said, looking at her.

"Sorry for what?"

"Bringing you here. . ." His eyes drifted to the kettledrums scattered next to the harpsicord. *War drums . . . about the only instrument northerners have ever used.*

"Don't be silly," she mumbled, leaning away from him.

Shit . . . now she's shying away! Theden needed to take action, but he didn't know what to do. They were both out of drinks, but if he ordered more mead now, he'd just get dizzy as hell, and she'd be out of there for good. He was actually quite the instrumentalist himself, but he wouldn't play in front of another human being to save his life. Small wonder; his father had almost broken a lute across his head one day he'd found him playing. "Music is for fucking degenerates!" He'd said, grazing the orange hairs on Theden's head as he swung the instrument into the wall.

He snapped out of it as Liss leaned back towards him, placing a hand on his arm. "Do you want another round?"

Theden nodded without knowing why. "Sure!" He smiled.

Liss stood up and Theden's mouth went slack. "Wait . . ." He whimpered so low he couldn't even hear it himself. "I'm supposed to buy the . . ." He trailed off, resting his elbows on the table. "I'm a man," he muttered. *And you're rotting at the bottom of the icy sea, father.*

Liss returned shortly after. Apparently, it took much less time for a beautiful, raven-haired woman to get a round of drinks than it did a short, redheaded boy.

Red hair was generally seen as a sign of strength and fury with the more traditional northerners, but Theden had never felt much of either. *My father got it all . . . I guess I should be thankful.* Once the rage was on his father, there was no stopping it. Lacking strength was a small sacrifice, Theden figured, if it kept the anger away as well.

"Are you all right?" Liss asked.

"Yeah! I'm fine . . . I'm just sorry these two idiots weren't better at playing." He nervously gulped down some mead.

Liss looked at him for a long time. "You could play circles around them, couldn't you?"

Theden almost spat up his mead. "Who told you that?" It wasn't that Theden was shy – he knew that he was excellent at what he did – he just didn't want to bring it up on his own.

"Wright did."

“That old bastard!” He took another gulp, the alcohol already having an effect.

“So you don’t want to play?”

Theden looked at her mesmerizing sapphire eyes, then at the tiny stage. His mind was swimming, and Liss’ beautiful smile and perfect little mouth was all he could think of. “Only if you’ll sing,” he said, grinning.

Theden could still not believe this was happening. He’d dreamed and wished and even prayed for it; but not even once did he believe it would happen.

Not like this, at least.

Liss was naked on top of him, moaning hard as she rocked back and forth. Her firm, perfect breasts gave a tiny bounce each time he sank deep into her.

He couldn’t think. He could barely breathe. He watched helplessly as the divine shape squirmed in pleasure atop him.

She was in charge, but Theden didn’t mind that at all. During the last few weeks, he’d learned a lot about her and her background. She was way too good for him, of course, coming from a life of excitement and adventure. She’d been a hired sword for many years, eventually rising to the rank of captain. She didn’t much like to talk about it though, and Theden didn’t ask. He didn’t want to know what it was like to be a beautiful woman trapped on a boat for weeks at a time, surrounded by men.

She’d never been touched unwillingly, she’d assured him – but her blade had tasted more than just the blood of her enemies. That’s all she had to say about it.

None of this mattered now, though. She was Theden’s, and Theden was hers. His eyes widened as she rocked harder and faster. He was holding on for dear life, clawing at the sheets. He wouldn’t be able to contain it much longer.

Her eyes opened; sapphire radiating from beneath the fringe of black hair. His eyes met hers and they came together; falling into the sheets afterwards, spent and satisfied.

Theden rolled over on his side and looked at her body. Her back was glistening with sweat, the cool firelight from the stove dancing in the sheen. Her muscles rose and sank into her skin, every dimple cast in deep shadow. Theden let his fingers trace across her skin, the sweat parting. *Like a statue . . . like a perfectly cast statue of a goddess.* He kissed her between the shoulder blades, her body wet and salty against his lips. Theden hadn’t bedded a lot of women in his years, but he reckoned this was as good as it got. Nothing else could be this flawless. He kissed her neck, and felt himself grow again.

Liss smiled and opened her eyes. “Hungry for more?” She asked, wiggling her rear.

Theden closed his eyes, a whispering moan escaping his lips as she ground against him. “Always.”

She arched her back and lured her hand between their bodies, guiding him into her again. “Then what are you waiting for?”

“Let’s . . . let’s have a child together,” he whimpered as he slid inside again.

“You don’t miss it one bit?”

“Being stuck on a man-o-war in the middle of the Shivering? Surrounded by pigs who’d watch me sleep, waiting for their chance to strike . . . or worse?” Liss laughed. “No, I don’t miss it one bit.”

“Are men really that bad?” Theden frowned.

“You’re one of the good ones, Theden, you really are.” She sighed. “Yes and no . . .” She paused for a few seconds. “Northerners have a certain . . . code, I suppose. They generally treat each other with at least some measure of respect. Being a woman amongst a bunch of warriors messes with their pride more than anything else.” She shrugged. “Sometimes I think it’s easier here in the cold north, because most of these fucks don’t know how to treat a proper lady anyway.” She smiled at Theden. “And I ain’t one, so that suits me just fine. Then, of course, you have those who can’t handle being ordered around by someone with breasts-”

“Perfect breasts . . .”

Liss laughed. “Someone with perfect breasts; so they wait for you to screw up . . . or they try to slit your throat while you sleep.”

“Mercenaries are loyal to gold, and not their people or their heritage. Be wary when near them, ‘cause they can smell the gold on you, as well as the lack thereof. And a mercenary will always chose the path of least resistance, for he has no personal stake in the conflict. Be wary, for he is not your friend, nor your ally – he is a rabid dog, and your gold the chain. Do not let it break.”

Liss stared blankly at him for a few seconds. “That’s . . . both poetic and frighteningly accurate. Did you write that?”

Theden laughed. “Me?! I’m a blacksmith’s apprentice, not a poet.”

“You have the soul of one.”

“Meaning I’m weak?” Theden looked down.

“What? No, that’s not what I meant at all! Why would you even think that?”

“My father . . .” Theden looked at her again. “He was a mercenary as well. Heart of rock and soul of bile.”

“See, soul of a poet.” Liss kissed him.

“My uncle used to tell me stories about him. Stories belonging in a children’s book more ‘n real life.” He shrugged, trying to blink away a tear shaping in the corner of his eye. “I started finding books of my own, detailing various mercenary companies in and around the Shivering.” He nodded to the left, as if the past was right there next to him. “What I said earlier was written by Thomas Steepe, the lone survivor of the Harding . . . my father’s ship.”

“I’m sorry . . .” Liss embraced him.

Theden looked her straight in the eye, cold and level. "I'm sorry he was ever alive, not that he's dead.."

"What about your mother?"

"Died giving birth to me."

"That's rough . . ."

Theden shrugged. "It is what it is . . ." The whole thing had made him fiercely independent. He felt that way, at least. And besides, Wright had taken him under his wing when his father was away. "What about your parents?"

Liss fell quiet for a long time.

Well, that's almost never good . . .

"Actually, I've been meaning to talk to you about something . . ." She smiled. "I'm with child."

Theden's heart stopped, He couldn't feel a thing.

"Are you all right?"

It was all Theden had wanted for years now, but the weight of it all fell on him like a boulder. "Yes . . . I think so . . ." He smiled back.

"We could leave all of this behind, Theden! We could leave for Crown and never see this piece of shit island again!"

"Leave . . ." Theden thought about Wright. The shop was in bad enough shape as it was,

"I can't stay here, Theden . . . I just can't!"

There was something she wasn't telling him, that much was clear. Still, Theden couldn't live without her, that much was clearer. "Let's get the hell out of here, then." He smiled.

"For crying out loud, son, you're in your seventeenth year!" Wright dipped the handle in the oil again, the mahogany glistening in the light from the furnace.

"I love her, Wright. That's all there is to it!" Theden gently fanned the flames, the coals glowing angry as they sent a wave of heat across his face. "I have since I first laid eyes on her."

"And I can respect that!" The blacksmith shrugged. "Hell, I was with Agnes up until the day she died, and we met when I was in my seventh year. I didn't know what was up or down on a girl back then, nor was I interested . . . but we grew up together, and--"

"Wright!" Theden interrupted. "Please stop sharing."

The old blacksmith laughed. "My point is that I understand what you're going through, son. And you should spend as much time as you can with this girl, no question about it. But in asking her to join you in blessed union and following her to Crown, you're throwing your life away!" He held the handle up against the light from a lamp nearby, nodding quietly to himself. "Who's going to take over this shop when I die?"

“This shop will die with you, if not sooner!” Harsh words, but they were true. Without hunters needing bows, arrows and knives, without soldiers needing armor and swords and without cavalry needing horseshoes and lances, their work wasn’t needed.

Wright sat down, covering his head in his hands. “Damn it, Theden!”

They’d taken to making fine blades with beautiful ornaments and colorful shafts; using materials from what they could find in and around the town. At first, the business had boomed. No one wanted a simple sword for killing, but everyone suddenly *needed* a unique sword on their wall – oft with their names emblazoned upon the hilt. But those with money to spare had already used them, and not many wanted a second blade.

“I’m sorry, Wright . . . I wish there was something I could do.”

“I’m an old man . . . it’s pretty much over for me anyway.” He looked at Theden, his brown eyes sad. “I should be encouraging you, not holding you back.”

Theden sighed. “We’re having a child together . . .”

Wright was quiet for a long time. “I don’t know, Theden,” he finally said. “I’m too old for children. Besides, wouldn’t growing up with two fathers make it a little-”

“Would you stop?!” Theden couldn’t help laughing at the old man, though.

Wright gave a burly laugh of his own. “It’s been almost a year since that pretty little woman of yours trod into this shop.” He smiled wide. “I suppose it’s high time you make her yours.” He stood up and patted Theden on the shoulder. “I just don’t want you to leave Umbret,” he sighed. “Not just Umbret, but the Shivering altogether. You’re going to be so far away, son.”

“Don’t worry, Wright – you’ll be invited to the union!”

“You gotta ask her first, though. Chances are she’ll say no once she sees that pale ugly face in the sunlight!”

“Hey! She’s already carrying my child. Of course she’s gonna say yes!”

Wright laughed. “You truly are blessed, Theden! Just be careful with that skin. There’s much more daylight further west, even though the weather’s just as shitty. You know how pink your skin gets.”

“You worry about yourself, Wright, and I’ll worry about me.” He gave Wright a long and warm hug. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

Wright tried to hide a few tears. “I can’t believe my little apprentice is all grown up . . .”

“It had to happen sooner or later . . .”

Stay true, Theden . . . stay true! He wiped a few beads of sweat from his forehead. “I wasn’t gonna to do this just yet.”

“Do what?” Liss looked worried. “You’re sweating and shaking, Theden. I can see something is wrong! Won’t you feel better if you just tell me what it is?”

Not if you say no . . .

The cart bumped and rocked as it rolled down the stony road. Umbret was inland on the Shivering's third biggest isle, and they would have to journey a few hours south to Umbret harbor in order to board a ship. Trees and frozen landscape passed them on both sides. It was cold, but beautiful to look at.

Theden fiddled with the box in his pocket, hoping Liss would let it go if he just kept quiet.

"Fine, be a man about it, then!" Liss finally said.

Soon after, they passed a broken house close to the road. The door was missing, and a vile black smoke rose from the chimney. Theden suddenly felt a sense of dread. "Harold lives here . . ." He mumbled. "Made him a sword last—"

The horses whinnied and the driver halted. "Bandits . . ." He muttered.

Shit, shit, shit! Theden had held more blades than most during his years, but he couldn't wield one to save his life. "What do we do?!" He whispered.

Liss leaned out of the carriage and looked forward. "Nothing . . . they're gone."

Theden carefully strode outside, one shaky hand on the knife in his belt. He and Liss walked past the coach and the horses on separate sides, eyes forward.

A body sprawled just outside the door, sword buried through its skull. Theden recognized the blade instantly.

"Is that him?" Liss asked coldly.

Theden shook his head, white smoke rising from his lips. "He always had a good sword arm. He must've been attacked, then defended himself."

Liss' eyes went from the corpse to the missing door. "Theden—"

He ran inside, ignoring Liss.

The room had a special kind of feel to it, and a special kind of light. It was sort of beyond darkness, Theden felt. The light entered through windows and doors, but everything was grey and pale, as if he'd stepped into another world. The air was thick and heavy, and there was this ambient noise, like his head was under water.

There was a staircase leading up to the floor above, its steps smeared with blood, the banister shattered by a heavy weapon. "A mace . . ." Theden could see it on the floor, next to another corpse. He knelt down and placed his hand around the weapon, the weight and balance familiar in his hands. *Far too heavy for someone like me.*

The body next to it belonged to Harold. His face was badly beaten, caved in several places, skull and teeth crushed and maimed. Theden wanted to vomit, but couldn't. He felt the blood drain from his face as he remembered Harold as he used to be. As he was in the shop a few short weeks ago.

"Well, well, well!" An unfamiliar voice came.

Theden stood and spun, facing the staircase.

A long, slender man with brown hair and eyes came down the steps, slowly. "You're a hard woman to find, Lena." The man's eyes glanced over Theden, and Liss quickly moved in front of him.

"What are you doing here?" She asked.

“What are *you* doing here? You still owe years to the brotherhood. Or have you forgotten?”
Liss shook her head. “I’m done! I’m done with all your fucking pillaging and butchering!”
The man’s cool demeanor cracked in a heartbeat. “You’re done when I fucking say you’re done!”
He screamed from the top of his lungs.

Theden cringed and took a step backwards. “Please,” he said. “I’m sure there’s been some kind of misunderstanding-”

“Who the fuck is this?” The man interrupted, looking at Liss.

“He’s nobody! He’s the driver from the-”

“The driver is fucking dead!” The man turned towards the door. “Isn’t he?!”

Another man came into the house, holding a severed head in his hand. “He sure is.”

“So who the fuck is he?” The man pointed at Theden.

Theden closed his eyes. *This can’t be happening. Noman please! Anyone!*

The man shrugged and smiled. “Fine, then. If you want to play it that way, Lena, then that’s the way we’ll play it.” The man nodded towards the corner behind Theden, and before he could even react, he had a hand on his shoulder. He could feel his knife ripped free from its sheath on his back, then a sharp pain as it pierced his skin one, two, three times.

He looked down, his mouth open. *What? What?! I can’t . . .* It was a big knife, he noticed now; the blade protruding from his chest. *No . . . what?* He looked at Liss, the world growing black.

Then he hit the floor.

A woman screamed from the top of her lungs. There was a sound, like metal against metal. In his hand was a mace. Was he the one swinging?

Am I fighting?

Voices now, cold and distant. “. . . Change your name and enter the blessed union . . . think we wouldn’t find you?”

The union . . . Liss! He fiddled with the box in his pocket, wondering if the bracelet would fit *Liss . . . Lena . . . Liss. I’m not . . . I don’t have pockets.*

“Dead men don’t need no pockets!” Something pulled away.

“What? I didn’t know he would . . .”

“Now he’s dead because of you! The poor fool!” Metal rang again.

“Go to hell, you fucking bastards!”

“Not without you, Lena!” A scream.

There was that name again, Lena . . . who was she?

Liss . . . Please, no! She’s witch child! She’s going to have my baby . . .

Everything fell deathly quiet. Theden couldn’t see or feel anything. *I . . . just let me die . . . please.*
Without her – whatever her name – what was the point, anyway?

Darkness.

You see, Liss was a special kind of flower.

She smelled nice, looked nice, and gave Theden a smile that stopped his heart. The only problem was, the poor boy couldn't get it to start again.

Theden almost died that day. Heaven knows; he wanted to. More than one time afterwards, he'd wish he'd died that day too. Deeper than any knife could cut, was the betrayal Liss had subjected him to. Had she really just used him as a decoy, to get out of her contract with the mercenary company? What about the child? *His* child!

As the darkness consumed Theden, he found himself cold and uncaring. He only wanted relief from the pain, both from the knife and from deceit. But fate is a fickle mistress, not often prone to manipulation.

You see, that fateful day, fate wanted Theden to carry on – and see that love transcends all . . . even death itself.

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Part II

The blood hissed, spat and gurgled as it met the melted silver. *Silver and blood; that's how it works.*

Theden had been at it for hours now, carefully smelting, decapitating, bleeding and forging. He'd melted Wright's glasses into the silver as an homage of sorts, paying tribute to the life lost for Theden's cause. *The first of eleven.* He felt a tiny flicker of doubt as he poured the rest of the blood across the anvil, but quickly shrugged it off.

He'd taken his time to make this blade unique; thicker near the hilt and a little more stunted than a regular short sword. It would still be possible to swing, but it would resemble a large ceremonial dagger more than a sword. It only seemed appropriate . . .

Theden dunked the hot metal in the slack tube, white smoke rising. He suddenly started craving a cigarette, or alcohol . . . anything, really. He swallowed hard and went into Wright's room, upending the bed. Underneath was a case of blank spirits, no doubt distilled by a local. That was also one of the reasons the smithy had gone belly up; Wright kept accepting payments that weren't actual money. *And now I've used what silver was left to make this blade.*

He took a large swig from one of the flasks and forced the contents down. After repeating the process a few times, he went back to the forge. He took a deep breath and grabbed Wright's head. He was done with the smelting process, so he threw the head into the hearth. Thankfully, there was a damper he could pull so the old blacksmith wouldn't be able to give him one last disappointing look. Theden could still hear the eyes pop, though, and the teeth after a while. He forced down another swill and closed his ears.

He kept on working through the night, making sure the blade was properly sharp and functional. Every so often, he'd take another one of Wright's body parts and stow them in the hearth. He stepped on the bellows; the heat crackling and hissing as the last pieces of the blacksmith were reduced to ash.

Finally, as the sun peered above the horizon, bathing the tiny shop in a cold, orange gloom, Theden washed all the blood away from the floor and the anvil. The blade sat finished on the large wooden table by the door, ominous and dark. It seemed blacker than a normal silver blade, and with streaks of red. The blood should've evaporated and been diluted by the silver, Theden knew, but the blade still seemed colored by it, somehow.

He took one final swill as the last layer of blood vanished from the floor, then grabbed the sword and swung it through the air a few times. It felt good in his hands, and the shape was perfect. “Sjeletyv,” he mumbled. He didn’t know much of the old language, but from what the old man known as Eld had taught him, it meant something along the lines of ‘soul taker’. *A fitting name*, Theden thought.

Tired, bloodied and broken, Theden gathered the ashes from the hearth and closed the shop for the last time. He walked out of the little town, heading north-east; opposite from where they went that fateful day. He crossed the snowy dunes, leaving tired trails behind him as he ploughed forward. It was a clear and sunny day, so he’d be able to follow the same trails back – *if* he was headed back . . . he wasn’t quite sure yet.

After hours of walking, Theden finally arrived at the obelisk. It was a large pagan structure erected thousands of years ago, its purpose and symbolism long lost. Many believed it was a tribute to the old northern gods and goddesses and a celebration of a free and spirited life. Looking up, Theden could do little but agree. There were various animals depicted on all sides; some domesticated, others wild. There were warriors fighting, babies crying and women engaged in various sexual activities.

More importantly, this was Wright’s favorite place on the island.

Theden followed the steps winding around the giant, square pillar until he reached the lowest platform. It was about one quarter of the way up. Another, narrower stair led up until the halfway mark, but it would’ve been so windy up there, Theden would end up scattering the ashes all over himself.

He took a deep breath and turned the box with the ashes on its head. “Goodbye, Wright . . . may you succeed in bringing me my vengeance, and may your afterlife be long and prosperous.”

Theden barely made it home afterwards, the wet blood making him shiver, the stiff blade gnawing at his back through the sheath. He stumbled through the door and undressed until he was naked. Then he threw the bloody clothes into his hearth and collapsed on the bed.

Eleven lords of Bergen, thirsty for souls. Theden carefully drew his blade. *Gatece is the first, the lord of the hunt.* Theden had never hunted before in his life, but he’d seen his father take down a slew of beasts in his day. *If that mean old drunk could do it, then so can I!* He had the rage now, after all . . . maybe the strength would follow.

He almost held his breath as he waited in the tree, Sjeletyv resting comfortably across his knees. He pulled another slice of meat out of his pack and dropped it on the ground. A few minutes later, a low growl sounded from behind a few trees further away.

The absurdity of the situation didn’t cross his mind even once. He was committed now, and there was no stopping. If he wanted his revenge, this was how he’d do it – he’d need to become

something more in order to fight those who attacked Liss and tried to kill them. Besides, he'd already done the hardest part; he'd already bloodied the anvil and murdered his best friend.

A purple shape slinked forward, edging past the trees. "Shit!" Theden whispered to himself. It was a rover, quite a bit larger than the average wolf. He swallowed hard as the animal lurked closer, the purple sheen reflected in the light from the two moons up above.

Rovers reminded Theden of humans, given that they never stayed in one place for long. They were wanderers, as the name suggested; roaming from place to place, looking for food. They could sustain themselves on grass and greens as well, he'd read, but they preferred meat. Another thing they had in common with humans was that they couldn't hide very well. They shared most of their physique with felines; most closely resembling panthers. Their fur was often speckled with purple, though, so they were easy to spot.

Which is why they were also alpha predators.

I have to please Gatece, Theden thought, closing his eyes for a few seconds. He opened them slowly, holding his breath until the animal was directly underneath him. "For her!" He screamed just as he dismounted, clutching Sjeletyv in his hands.

He landed directly on the animal, but his blade cut awkwardly, a tuft of purple fur fluttering away in the breeze.

The rover reeled and turned against him, snapping with razor-sharp teeth. It hadn't gotten its bearings yet, so the claws stayed in the ground.

Theden rolled over, flailing his weapon. He nicked the animal across the face a few times, causing it to back away. If anything, he'd verified the craftsmanship, at least.

The rover came at him again, aiming for his jugular. He let out a squeal as he stumbled back, the heavy beast landing on top of him.

And on top of his blade.

He wheezed and panted as the animal bleed out on top of him, the thick red liquid covering his blade, arms and chest.

Ten to go . . .

BLOOD ON THE ANVIL

Blood on the anvil

Where am I? Theden opened his eyes but saw nothing.

His back was hurting like hell, and his lips and throat were completely dry. He tried speaking, but not a sound came out.

Liss! There was a flash across his eyes and the pain increased. He let out a little yelp of pain and twisted in the bed.

“Did you really think you could hide from us?” A voice came. “Did you think it would help, changing your name and enter the blessed union with this piece of shit?”

“What . . . no! I don’t even know this man! He’s just a simple blacksmith’s apprentice, going the same way as me.”

“No, he ain’t, ‘cause he’s going to the afterlife, and you’re coming with us!”

“Go to hell, you fucking bastards!”

“Not without you, Lena!”

Theden screamed.

“Theden, you’re awake! Bless the gods!”

Theden could feel tears streaming down his face and a warm cloth on his forehead. The room was warm and damp, making it difficult to breathe.

“Let me die . . .” He gasped, more tears flowing from his eyes. “I can’t! I don’t . . . it’s no use without her.” The pain was unbearable.

“Here, drink this.” The voice belonged to Wright.

“No, I-”

He was cut off as a vile smelling liquid went into his mouth and down his throat.

“It will make you feel better, I swear.”

Nothing will make me feel better . . .

“Sleep well, Theden.” He heard heavy footsteps leaving the room. “We’ll have you back to health in no time.” A door opened and then closed again.

Theden could barely hear his voice through the wall. “Can’t have you faffing about looking for that lying shrew, she’s the one that got you into this mess . . .” The voice trailed off.

She’s alive, then! “I will . . .” He whispered, the concoction taking him away. “I’ll find her . . . she’s going to be the mother of my-”

He was gone again.

*

“Are you familiar with the eleven lords of Bergen?”

“Never heard of 'em.”

“I suspected as much. Not many have.”

“Isn't Bergen a flower?”

“It's a tree.”

“Right . . .”

“It was believed to have mystical properties, like healing wounds and soothing burns. But it's mostly known for something else entirely . . .”

Theden frowned. “What's that?”

The old man looked straight at Theden, his different-colored eyes twinkling in the firelight. “It makes you shit your fucking pants,” he snorted. “Mystical indeed.”

“Does it at least heal?”

The man shook his head. “Bergen sap is a very potent laxative with a strong taste, and not much else, I'm afraid.” He paused, warming his hands on the brazier. “Common sense dictates ailments need to leave your body before you start healing . . .” He shrugged. “I'm sure you can piece the rest together yourself.”

“So if it has no healing properties – why are you telling me all this?” Theden was feeling impatient. He knew what needed to be done. Why couldn't the old man just get to it?

“These days they use Bergen sap to make liquorish, but in the olden days they would drink it, following a very specific ritual.”

Theden perked up again.

“You see, in the old northern tongue, Bergen means ‘save one’. That sounds like a pretty shitty prayer, so I'm assuming you can translate it to ‘save I’, or ‘save me’.”

“So, the eleven lords of Bergen–”

“Could mean the eleven lords of saving . . . or rescue.” He drew half a circle in the snow in front of the fire. “If you want a less jarring term – you could call them the eleven saviors.”

Theden shook his head. “I never learned any of this!”

The man whipped his drawing stick across the brazier, the metal pan clanging in the night. “Yes you did!” He shouted through a shower of sparks.

Theden took a step back. “I–”

“You weren't paying attention!” He spat. “None of you do! Not anymore!” He pointed west. “Those fucking heathens have taken everything from us, and we let them keep at it!”

“Heathens? Do you mean the–”

“Yes, I fucking mean those cretins from Hale and Steadwic!” He spat into the fire. “Steadwic . . .” He mumbled again, rolling his eyes. “That was *our* continent, hundreds of years ago. It was called the Crown, and it was spectacular.”

“But we lost it all in the winter war,” Theden said.

“So you have been paying attention,” The old man smiled, revealing two gaps in his mouth.

“To history, yes. Not religion.”

“Religion is important, son. Entire wars have been fought because of it.” The man stepped closer to the fire, but somehow it only made his face darker. “Entire wars *will* be fought because of it . . .” His brown eye was black above the flames, his blue one flickering white and orange.

Theden cleared his throat. “So . . . this ritual-”

“Oh, yes!” The man seemed to snap back into his clumsy old self. “Let me ask you something, son. Why do you think the northerners of old accepted Noman as their one true god?”

Theden shrugged. “Because they were forced?”

The man shook his head. “They were forced to surrender the Crown and lay down their arms. They were forced into the society and culture of the victors, which, as it turned out, wasn’t so different from their own.” He leaned closer. “No one ever forced them to give up their gods.”

Theden didn’t want to get scolded again, so he kept his mouth shut. He knew some things about the old gods, but not nearly enough, apparently.

“They had a change of faith, because the god of their enemies actually showed up.”

Theden opened his eyes, finally seeing the room. The pain wasn’t as bad as last time, but it was still there. *And Liss is still gone . . . but alive.*

He was in a room he’d never seen before. It must’ve been some sort of infirmary, he quickly deduced. With wounds as severe as his, they couldn’t really take him anywhere else. It was strange, how he’d gotten through all of those years as a blacksmith’s apprentice, and not once hurt himself.

Maybe it spoke of his talents . . .

He had no idea what he would do now. Up until this point, he’d just wanted to die, but now that he knew Liss was alive, that wasn’t an option anymore.

He stared at the ceiling for hours, his thoughts wandering back and forth and finally blanking out. He slept some more and woke up some more, the pain coming and going like waves on a beach. *Not these beaches though, they’re all frozen solid . . .*

He took a deep breath, his back burning from the effort. He’d no idea how many times he’d been stabbed or where, he just remembered the knife going in. He felt a flare of anger inside.

So what do I know? His eyes drifted to a mace by the side of the bed. It was caked with dried blood and hair. “That blood is most likely Harold’s,” he mumbled, his voice every bit as cracked and dry as before. He remembered entering the house and finding Harold dead on the ground. He also remembered the man coming down the stairs. “He said your name was Lena . . . not Liss.”

Then he was stabbed in the back, literally and figuratively. “You lied to me . . .” She’d changed her name to get away from some contract with a brotherhood of some sort. *Regardless of her feelings towards me, that part is most likely true, at least.* That’s where he’d start, then. He needed to figure out who these people were, so he could find them again. “Find them and kill them,” his father’s voice whispered.

The door opened, and in trod Wright again.

"You're not putting me to sleep this time!" Theden hissed, voice barely a whisper.

"Wasn't planning on it." Wright smiled and sat down next to the bed.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like death."

Wright nodded woefully. "Well, that's to be expected, after what you've been through.

"What the hell happened?"

"Someone found a carriage led by a headless man. After a lot of bickering and worry, they entered the house, where they found you and Harold, both dead, it seemed."

Theden nodded, blinking the image out of his eyes. "He was in bad shape . . ."

"And so were you! It took weeks before we could even start hoping.."

"Weeks?"

Wright nodded. "You've been out of it for almost two months."

"Wait . . . what?!" Theden frowned.

"You told me you'd been paying attention to history!" The old man spat.

"Yes, but I also told you that—"

"When an entire battlefield freezes over, and stays frozen for hundreds and hundreds of years; that's just as much history as it is religion!"

"The freeze, of course." Theden knew of it. After the final battle between the Crown and Steadwic, the battlefield had plunged into never-ending winter. There were enough rumors about that event to fill a thousand books, but no one knew what really happened. Most people believed it to be a product of the Wrath – a terrible tempest sweeping across the entirety of Noman, erasing whole cities from the maps and plunging mountain ranges and forests into the sea. Noman still hadn't fully recovered, and many cities, though growing again, lay isolated and forlorn. Smaller settlements had just begun appearing again, as most people stayed in the big cities, in fear of another wrath.

"The wrath of Noman," the old man continued. "The god-dragon himself, coming down from his throne to punish us all for our petty grievances."

"You almost sound like you believe that."

"Yes, I believe it." His dark eye seemed to gleam with fire for a second. "But just because their god showed up first, that doesn't mean ours don't exist."

Theden dared a smile. "Are you saying they showed up late?"

The man gave a roaring laugh, slapping his thigh. "Just like the northerners to be tardy, isn't it?" His laugh turned into a violent cough, and he sat back on his bench, covering his mouth.

"So these lords of Bergen . . ." Theden looked straight at the man, three eyes blue and one as black as the sky around them.

The man nodded. "They're just as real – or unreal – as Noman." He pointed towards the sky, a knot of northern lights untangling above them, as if heeding his command. "But they're not perched up there, waiting to judge us."

Theden kept looking at the emerald streaks of light as they fluttered across the sky. "So where are they?"

"Close!"

Theden almost fell on his rear. The old man was standing right next to him, his eyes gleaming yellow. "Who are you?!" Theden asked, voice quivering.

"People around here know me as Eld, but that's not my given name."

"What is?"

"That, I'm afraid, you'll have to find out on your own."

Another streak of green shot across the sky as Theden stood up, warming his hands on the fire. "I asked you about immortality . . . so far you've only taught me about religion and tried to stop my heart."

"On the contrary, son! That wild beating you're feeling in your chest right now, that's your heart working overtime. It's earning it's keep within that scrawny chest of yours." The man revealed the gaps in his teeth again. "The will to live is nothing without a strong heart."

Theden frowned. "So you're going to scare me so hard I'll live forever?"

"No . . . I'm going to frighten you so you'll no longer want to."

"And if I still want to?"

There was something in the flames. It was barely visible, but Theden could sense it like an itch on his back. The flames reached for the black sky, aching to join the northern lights above, flickering in the wind. Within them, something stirred. *Someone* stirred.

"Then I'll help you . . ."

Walking was slightly uncomfortable, but Theden muscled on. Wright wasn't happy he'd left the bed so quick, but he damn sure wasn't going to let these fuckers get away with what they'd done. Clearly, Liss had lied to him, but his child was in her belly, and that was more than enough motivation for him.

He closed his coat against the biting cold and pulled it close. Damn, but he hated this place something fierce. He needed to find Liss, quickly. He wasn't sure how these things generally went, but he was fairly certain Liss wouldn't be of much use to a bunch of mercenaries once they saw she was with child. *Or long before that, if she doesn't want to fight anymore . . .*

He closed his eyes, a tear escaping. How the hell would he stop them? He couldn't fight worth a damn, and after two months, they could've been hiding out anywhere. The scars on his back burned with impatience, his stomach forming a knot. He needed her, now.

He hissed and breathed through gritted teeth, as if anger and willpower would somehow magically transport him to them. *Magic!* His eyes suddenly snapped open. *That's it!*

Theden didn't really believe in magical beings and fairy tales. He'd heard enough stories around the campfire to know that people were generally just full of shit. But one time, three years back, he'd forged a weapon for someone who'd scared his mentor half to death, with tales of flames, darkness and death. He'd described both the old gods and the new, in such a way that Theden almost believed he knew them himself.

He had no idea what the man's name was, but if luck would treat him kindly just this once; he might live at the same place. Now that Theden thought about it, he didn't seem like the type who moved around a lot. *Or at all* . . . "Go to him!" His father said. "Collect your vengeance!"

It took him close to two hours of wandering to find the old house. It was right by a palisade wall a couple of miles north of town. There was nothing but frozen marshlands and dead trees for as long as Theden could see, but he supposed that was the way this crazy old man liked it. Far away from everything . . . Theden swallowed his doubts and stepped through the gap in the wall. He almost jumped as he saw a hooded character kneeling by a brazier in the middle of the yard.

"H-H-hello," Theden stuttered, suddenly nervous.

The man peered up, cold eyes gleaming underneath the hood. One of them was pale blue, the other one brown.

"I don't know if you remember me . . . I made some daggers for you, a while back."

Nothing.

"As well as some . . . umm . . . flasks and containers."

The man held Theden's eyes. "What do you want?"

As the flames tossed and flickered the man's face was illuminated for a few short moments. It was badly scarred, skin cracked and burnt around his pale blue eye. Theden felt really, really cold, the stinging wind biting at his wounds. "I want you to help me track someone down . . . and kill them."

"It will require blood," the old man said. And lots of it.

Theden swallowed hard. "Blood . . ." He repeated.

"Are you really that surprised?" The old man smiled. "Surely, you're familiar with *some* of the old fables? They all include blood and darkness and sacrifice."

"Yes, but I never believed any of them . . ."

"So why do you believe this one?"

Theden's mouth flicked upwards. It wasn't a smile, just a small smirk. "Because you generally seem like a trustworthy kind of man."

The man let out a burly laugh again. "I like you, kid . . . I really do!" He leaned towards the flames, and Theden could see his face more clearly. He'd been badly burned, there was no doubt

about it. The skin looked hard and cracked, and there were no eyebrows or eyelashes on his blue eye.

Maybe it's dead . . . maybe that's why it's another color. Theden cleared his throat, his back stinging, "My blood, or someone else's blood?" He finally asked?

The man smiled again. "Yes."

"So both, then?"

The man nodded. "Eleven lords of Bergen, thirsty for souls!" He said, raising his arms. "Gatece is the first, the lord of the hunt! He'll help you track down, and kill this cunt!"

The flames seemed to rise, so Theden took a step backwards. "Is that the actual—"

"No, of course not you fool! But it sounds better when it rhymes, doesn't it?" He stood up, arms still raised. "Joneva is the second, the lord of strength . . . got no rhyme for that, really."

"Hunt and strength . . ." Theden repeated. "These are familiar titles."

Eld nodded. "These are old names for even older gods. For thousands of years, people have copied and mimicked the religion of others. There used to be hundreds of them. Before you northerners succumbed to Noman, you had your gods and your goddesses. Before that, you had your lords of this and lords of that. Before that again . . . who knows?"

"So, who's next?"

"Letuth is the third, lord of earth and nature. Then there's Nauder, Zomalp and Woihob." He took a deep breath, the flames calming again. "Then you have Stygax and Adrane, the most important ones. They're the lords of life and death, respectively."

Another streak of northern lights danced above; dark green against the starry sky. The red and the white moon was out; one half and one whole. Still, it was as if the world inside the light from Eld's brazier was all that existed.

Theden felt the doubts gnawing at the back of his skull again. "Do whatever it takes!" His father said. "Stop being so fucking weak!"

"The final three are Roefur, Naiaoi and Levked, lords of air, water and fire."

Fire . . . "Eld means fire, doesn't it? Did you get the name because of what happened to you?"

The old man looked at Theden, pulling his hood down. He had blonde or white hair on half his head. The other side was badly burned, not just on top, but down his face as well. He was dressed against the cold, but Theden would've guessed the burns went down his body as well.

"What exactly *did* happen?" Theden did his best to hold his gaze.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"I messed with the business end of a dragon." He held his hand up. "Before you say anything – yes, the business end is the mouth."

Theden raised his eyebrows. "Is that so?" *Ain't no dragons in this world . . .* the man was clearly full of shit.

“Yes . . . or, well, someone killed it, and it crashed right into me and barrels full of gunpowder. So, you know, it’s a pretty standard story . . . as far as these things go,”

Theden couldn’t help laughing a little. “Okay . . . so what do I do with these lords, in order to find the people I’m looking for, and keep myself from being killed by them?”

“Well . . . when it comes to the eleven lords, it’s really all or nothing. You need to please all of them if you want to get anywhere.”

“And this is where the blood comes in?”

The man nodded. “Before you begin, you need a tool.”

“A tool?”

The man nodded. “Forged from the blood of a friend . . . used against a sworn enemy.”

Theden felt cold. Colder than he’d ever felt. He thought about Liss and her perfect smile. About the baby in her belly, condemned to a fate worse than death. *I’d be saving two lives . . .* “And getting your damn vengeance! You could kill these cunts, and show ‘em your fury ain’t to be trifled with!” His father roared.

Theden looked the old man straight in the eyes. “Who do I need to kill?”

And just like that, the dream of vengeance had clouded Theden's mind.

Theden never once considered the whole thing was too easy. He was a rash boy like that; always wanting things right away, unwilling to wait. He'd felt the cold sting of both betrayal and murder, but he wasn't about to lay down and die.

Theden's child was within Liss, and he would die a thousand deaths before he allowed anything to happen to his beloved and their legacy. Without the strength to fight and the experience to track these people, however – Theden was forced to turn to black alchemy. After finding the old man known as Eld, Theden found the answers he sought, and feared.

He could truly become invincible.

Theden immediately set out, doing everything the old man told him, the rage burning in his veins. It seemed he was his fathers' son after all. He murdered his oldest friend in cold blood, and forged a blade from blood and silver. With only this blade at his side, he sated the eleven lords of Bergen through blood, pain and sacrifice.

Only so he could have his beloved Liss back.



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Part III

Theden felt the power coursing in his veins as he approached the docks. He'd spent close to a week getting here, and he was going to savor every second of his vengeance. All the things he'd done to acquire these new powers were pushed to the very back of his mind. He couldn't afford to be weak now; he needed to find Liss and get her back.

He'd sated Gatece, by hunting down a rover and cutting out its heart. He'd pleased Letuth, god of nature and proved his strength, by surviving naked in the cold for close to two days. According to Eld, those were the two that had lead him here. Theden had no idea how it worked. The old man had been up all night behind closed doors, working, mixing and synthesizing. This was the location he'd given Theden afterwards.

Theden closed his eyes, an image of Wright's mutilated corpse burned forever in his corneas. After that first blow, there was no way back, he knew that. *It will all be worth it when you return to me, my love.*

There was, of course, the nagging possibility Liss wouldn't want to return with him. She wasn't who she claimed to be, after all. Theden put that thought away as well, taking another decisive step towards the docks.

The snow fell heavy around him, the wind picking up. He frowned and kept moving forward, confident in his newfound strength and abilities. He couldn't see much in front of him, but that meant they wouldn't see him coming either.

He found his first enemy right next to a door on the first house. Without hesitation he drew Sjeletyv and leapt forward. He pushed the man back against the wall with one arm, the blade soon following with the other.

"What the-"

The blade went straight into the man's mouth, pinning him to the wall. He gargled and shook, a river of blood flowing from his mouth, painting the snow red. Theden leaned forward, breathing hard through gritted teeth. "This is for Liss, you piece of shit!" He yanked the blade out, using his new strength, then he swung it true, decapitating the man in one clean swing.

These people were with a mercenary company called the Brotherhood of blades, Eld had told him. It was neither a particularly old company, nor among the best. They had a knack for getting the job done, though, and most of them were highly skilled killers. A woman named Lena had been one of the top mercenaries in their ranks.

Once you signed a contract with the Brotherhood, you did so in blood. And you would only be released upon your death. This also meant everything you had to your name belonged to the Brotherhood.

Including children . . .

The head rolled away into the white, leaving a trail of blood in the snow. Theden kicked in the door and raised his blade again, roaring from the top of his lungs.

Eight faces turned to greet him.

He'd stumbled right into the lion's den, mercenaries scattered all around him. Some of them were holding bottles, others decks of cards. A few of them stood up immediately, but most remained seated.

Theden swallowed hard. Even with his new powers, he didn't know whether or not he'd be able to defeat everyone here. He took a deep breath and gripped his blade tight. He'd start with-

"Theden . . . ?"

He turned towards the voice. It came from someone sitting in the corner, polishing their blade. It was a woman with short, black hair and a tired, haggard face. Her eyes were beautiful though, shining like sapphires. "Liss?!"

One of the men closest to Theden frowned and turned towards her. "Who the bloody hell's Liss?" He turned back towards Theden. "And what should we put on your grave?"

A few others stood up, drawing closer to Theden.

"It's all right, guys. He's with me."

"He's with *you*? What the fuck does that mean? You can't just bring whoever you like in here!" The man smiled a horrible smile, facial tattoos crumpling and deforming on his large face. "Or have you forgotten all about what happened last time?"

"I remember, Mathis, trust me." She stood up, pointing her blade at Theden. "Nevertheless, that man's my business, so I'll clean it up!"

"Alright then." The man reluctantly sat down, and slowly the rest returned to their cards and booze.

Liss grabbed Theden's arm and pulled him outside. She walked a few steps away from the building, frowning at the headless corpse soon buried in the snow. "What the hell are you doing, Theden?"

Theden felt his heart sink. He felt all the determination and anger turn to ashes in his mouth. Everything he'd worked so hard for, everything he'd done. *Wright* . . . All for this? A cold "what the hell are you doing here?" He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"What the hell do you think?"

Liss was shaking. "I lied to you, Theden . . . and it cost . . ." She fell to her knees in the snow, tears streaming from her eyes. "Well, I thought it cost you your life!"

Theden stayed where he was. "Shouldn't you be happy to see me, then?"

She nodded. "Of course I'm happy to see you, I just wish I hadn't lied to you . . . I just thought it would be easier if you didn't know."

"Know what? That your name is something slightly different? That you were one of the finest mercenaries in this piece of shit company?"

"Among other things, yeah . . ."

"It wouldn't have made me love you any less."

"And I know that now!"

"So come with me! We'll leave, for real this time. We'll get so fucking far away they'll never find us. It will just be you, me and the baby – a complete fresh start!" All the anger Theden had felt washed away. It was replaced by an indescribable happiness. He wouldn't have to kill anyone again; he could just take Liss and leave. His father's voice seemed to fade from his mind as he sheathed his weapon. Hell, he wouldn't even need his new-

"Theden . . ." Liss looked at him, tears streaming down her face. Her body was shaking violently.

Theden wrapped himself around her, holding her close. "I'll keep you safe, Liss, I promise!"

"It's not that," she cried. "The baby . . . *our* baby . . . it didn't . . ." She squeezed him so hard he couldn't breathe. "It didn't make it."

Theden said nothing. Something broke inside his mind, and the world turned red. There was his father again. "Kill them all!"

Λ ԵՄԺԵՅԱՇԵ Vengeance

“Well, I’ll be damned! You did everything . . .” The old man smiled, his pale eye flickering awkwardly.

“Of course I did . . . did you think I would lose my nerve halfway through?” Theden drew his blade. “After forging this?! After murdering-”

“Yes, yes . . . yes.” Eld raised his left hand. “There’s no need to be crass, young warrior. “I was merely stating the severity of the tasks.”

“I’m well aware of that – I’ve done them, remember?”

Eld looked upon Theden’s offerings with greedy eyes. “I can see that!” He pointed at the heart from the rover Theden had killed. “You did slay it yourself, right? This isn’t some shit you picked up at the market?”

Theden said nothing. He was too sick and tired and too angry to be offended.

“All right, good!” He looked around, the wind picking up outside Eld’s palisade walls. White fog swirled outside the little sanctum, the throws howling eerily against the wooden poles. It was getting cold, but Theden could no longer feel it against his skin. He wouldn’t feel either cold or warmth until she was back with him. She, and his child. “How long will this take?”

Eld looked at him and smiled, his teeth white in the darkness of the hood. “You’ve come back to me a changed man, Theden.” He gestured for Theden to sit by the fire.

Theden reluctantly sat in the same spot as when he first came to this man for help, bloodied and beaten. “Really?” He found it best to just humor the old sod.

“Oh, yes. You came to me burning with pain and anger. Someone you loved had been ripped violently away from you, and I could see the hole she left from miles away.”

Theden shifted in the snow, saying nothing.

“Vengeance was all that was on your mind, but you didn’t know how to exact any revenge. You didn’t know how to fight, and even if you had, you wouldn’t know where to find your foes.” He took a deep breath, his pale eye narrowing against the flames. “I’ve been in the same position, and it nearly killed me a dozen times over.”

“Is that so?” Theden didn’t believe him. Theden didn’t believe anyone’s pain would ever measure up.

The old man nodded. “I knew where my enemies were, but there was no use in fighting them.” For the first time since Theden met him, Eld showed some signs of humanity. “There was no way to

get my prince back . . ." He looked at Theden, a tear escaping his one dark eye. "You see, people don't get to return from the dead . . . no matter how badly you want them to."

The wind seemed to pick up, and Theden felt a shiver despite the hot anger surging through him. He nodded slowly. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Don't be." Eld looked at the offerings Theden had brought again. "Like I said; you came back a changed man. You know what you need to do now, and you know how." He took a vial of blood and a lock of hair from the blanket and mixed them in a kettle. He hung it over the fire and added some dry leaves and a whole tulip; pale blue in the firelight.

"Life, grown tall by the sweat of my brow and the tears of my vanquished." Theden mumbled.

"Good!" Eld said. "You've got quite the talent for this."

"Talent for what? Memorizing bullshit sequences?"

The old man gave the kettle a little jolt, and the flames from the brazier turned green. "No," he said, looking up, his face a sickly green from the fire. "For alchemy." He smiled and took the kettle away, limping towards the house. "This could take a while," he mumbled.

"I ain't going anywhere . . ." Theden looked at the flames, the color slowly fading back to the regular red and oranges.

Eld nodded slowly. "By all means, stay. There's some tea scattered around here, and the flame will keep true through the night." He held up the kettle. "Come sunup I should have some answers for you."

Theden frowned, pulling his gaze away from the fire. "Answers?"

"Where your beloved is . . . and your child."

I never told him she was carrying my child . . . there was that chill again. A crow flew by overhead, cawing and complaining, willing the cold away. "What about my immortality?"

Eld put the kettle right inside the door and stepped back towards the blanket. He collected all the items and carried them inside. "The lords have been sated," he said. "Fall on your sword if you need proof."

Theden held out his arms. "So why am I still here?"

Eld grabbed the door and smiled. "Because the lords speak through me, not you." He closed it, and the world fell deathly quiet.

Theden looked at his blade for a long time. *How does this work, exactly?* Was he immune to wounds? Did they just grow faster? Could he heal from any injury? If he died, would he just wake up somewhere else? He certainly didn't feel all-powerful. He felt numb and apathetic, untouched by the world at large. But not powerful.

In the end, he put the blade away and waited for Eld. He'd come this far, there was no point in backing away now.

Besides . . . the deeds are all done. All eleven of them.

*

Theden kicked in the door again, but this time he didn't give the mercenaries inside time to react. With rage burning in his veins, he hacked and slashed the closest two to pieces, his blade singing as their blood covered the walls and the floor.

The remaining ones quickly threw their cards and bottles away and stumbled to their feet. One of them chucked his half-drunk bottle of whiskey straight at Theden, but fuelled by anger and adrenaline, he managed to duck underneath it.

One of the mercenaries came at Theden with a sword in one hand and a knife by his side. He spun, trying to knock Theden of balance, but the room was crowded with people and furniture, and a wayward chair blocked his approach. Theden kicked the chair towards the man, causing him to stumble. He caught his blow with his blade and rammed his fist into his chest. The man fell backwards, hitting his head against one of the tables, blood, cards and booze tumbling this way and that.

Theden stepped over his twitching body and swung his blade at the one of the others. The man deftly blocked and countered with a swift strike of his own. Theden barely managed to swerve around it stumbling across another chair.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" One of the men hissed.

Theden kicked the chair out of the way and flipped the closest table over, giving him some leg-room. "Me?!" Theden spat back. "There's nothing wrong with me! You cunts stole my love from me and killed my child! I've been to hell and back to make sure you fuckers pay!"

The man looked at the corpses of his three comrades, the last one still twitching and gargling. "You're fucking crazy, you are! Ain't none of us been killing or stealing anyone!" He grabbed his sword with both hands and started carefully circling around Theden.

The other four nodded in agreement and fanned out, slowly surrounding him.

Theden swallowed hard, the initial rage wearing off. His knuckles turned white from gripping his blade so hard. *I've forged this weapon myself . . . from the blood of my oldest friend. It will strike true!* He roared from the top of his lungs and leapt forward. He lunged with the blade, aiming the point straight at the chest of the closest mercenary.

The man stumbled awkwardly away over some scattered furniture. The blade nicked him, but otherwise he was unharmed.

"You're dead!" He screamed, hacking at Theden, barely missing his shoulder and taking a piece of one of the tables with him.

"Wrong!" Theden hissed, rolling between the scattered chairs, taking him in the leg.

The man howled in pain, dropping his weapon as he instinctively pulled away from Theden's blade, eventually backing into the wall. Before he could get his bearings, Theden came up in front of him, blade first, piercing his stomach and pinning him to the wall.

He tried to speak, but as he opened his mouth, only blood came pouring out. He shook and shivered, blood pooling on the ground around his feet. Theden grabbed his blade and pulled on it, trying to ready himself for the four mercenaries coming up behind him.

He realized in horror that it was stuck in the wall.

“You fucking amateur!” One of the approaching men said.

“Can you believe this piece of fucking shit managed to murder four of us?”

The third man shook his head. “You’ve just condemned yourself to a damn eternity of pain, you little cunt!” He sheathed his blade and picked up a bottle from the closest table, taking a swig before breaking it. “If you know what’s best for you, you’ll kill yourself right now, before any of us get our hands on you.”

The four of them kept swarming closer, tossing tables and chairs aside. They all sheathed their swords as Theden fumbled with his own, trying to yank it out, pulling knives and daggers instead. The man currently holding Theden’s blade with his belly had died, but his mouth was forced upwards in a sinister smile. *Fuck you, too*, Theden thought, giving his blade one more violent pull.

Nothing.

Theden’s blue eyes desperately scanned the room, looking for any salvation he could find. There were windows on three of the walls; one next to the door on the far wall, and two on each of the other ones. There was, of course, no one on the wall Theden currently had his back pressed up against. *No way out but through . . .*

Struggling against the panic, Theden’s mind counted sixteen round tables with four chairs around each; now scattered all across the square room. He might be able to push one of the men over one of those chairs, but the rest would have their knives in him before he could even react.

Suddenly, Theden smiled. *And what the fuck kind of difference does that make?! I have fucking Stygax and Adrane on my side!* He jumped up on the only table remaining between him and the others. “Levked will burn your ugly faces off!” He screamed, kicking at the closest one. His foot barely connected, giving the man a start.

“Fucking hell! This boy is completely batshit!”

“Naiaoi drown you!” Theden spat jumping off the table, slamming his elbow into the shoulder of another.

The man reeled, but quickly grabbed Theden’s throat and forced him back against the table.

A fist found Theden’s face. He’d been stabbed before, but never punched in the face. It was a completely different experience, altogether. The pain was secondary to the extreme confusion, and the blood rushing into his nose and mouth. He felt another fist, then another.

The fourth one hit him square in the gut, and another in the shoulder. They weren’t beating him, they were wailing on him, powered by the same rage he’d felt earlier. He’d taken what was theirs from them.

Then he heard a sharp stabbing sound, and his blood froze.

Someone screamed in the haze, cursing and flailing. A blade swung right above Theden’s head, nearly taking his nose off.

His arms came free, and he grabbed his face, rolling to the side. It felt wet and swollen, the pain flaring up as he rolled off the table and down to the floor. He came face to face with a dead

mercenary – the one he'd tried to take out with his elbow. *Why is he dead?* Another man dropped behind him, missing his head and one arm.

Panicked, Theden managed to grab the fallen mercenary's sword and get to his feet. His face hurt, and he could barely keep his eyes open, but he managed to see a beautiful raven-haired woman through the blood mist. She had locked blades with the last of the men, hissing and struggling, his muscles outweighing hers.

"Hey, asshole!" Theden said, the man's eyes fluttering slightly. Theden didn't wait for a response, he just stepped forward and drove the sword straight through his chest.

The man's arms gave away, and his own blade was forced across his face by Liss' sword. He fell backwards without a sound, crashing to the floor with a limp thud. Just like that, Theden had killed five more in his quest for revenge.

He felt nothing.

"Noman be merciful, Theden! Have you completely lost your mind?"

Theden was hunched forward, breathing through his mouth as blood dripped from his nose. He pointed at the grisly scene surrounding them. "He ain't here!"

"What?"

"The man who took you away from me . . . he ain't here!" He looked at the dead men, his breath wheezing and groaning in his throat. "What about the one who stabbed me? Is he here?" He found one still alive, and promptly stepped down hard on his chest, a sickening pop emerging as his body stopped rising and falling.

"Theden, you're scaring me!" Liss took one step away from him, dropping her blade.

"Why? I thought this was a usual occurrence for you."

She shook her head. "This isn't *you*, Theden!"

"Is he here or not!" Theden screamed.

She shook her head again. "He's the second in command. He never leaves our . . . *their* leader's side."

Theden nodded and retrieved his blade from the dead man's gut. He finally got it out by pulling on the corpse pinned to the wall, carefully stepping aside so it didn't fall on top of him. "Where are they?"

"In the smaller house just by the water." Liss shook her head. "They're both better with a blade than any of these men. You won't stand a chance against them, Theden . . . let's just go home!"

"No!" Theden was frightened by the voice he heard. Loud and angry, but dark and calm. It didn't sound like his at all. "That man–"

"Mathias . . . his name is Mathias."

"I don't give a shit! He's going to be dead soon, and I ain't planning on putting him in a grave . . . a corpse, that's all he is now!" It was his father's voice, Theden realized.

Liss tried to speak, but Theden interrupted her.

“That man took my family from me! His second in command took my life from me.” Theden leaned closer. “Literally!” He looked Liss in the eyes, but she squirmed and looked away.

“I thought you were dead, Theden . . . I don’t want to lose you again.” Liss’ voice was barely a whisper.

He shook his head. “You’re not going to. I made sure of that! I made sure none of these assholes could kill me.”

“How?”

Theden stepped out of the room and into the fresh winter air, saying nothing.

“Was that what you were yelling about earlier?”

He took a few steps towards the water, the snow crunching underneath his boots. “I’m going to say hello to Mathias . . . are you coming with me or not?”

Liss looked down, shivering in the cold.

“You don’t *want* me to kill him, do you?” Theden felt betrayed once again. He’d forgiven Liss for going with them that day – hell, she wouldn’t have been able to save him anyway – and he’d forgiven her for losing the baby. At least he thought he had. At the very least, he expected her to want revenge. “Why?”

“We were an item . . . many years ago.”

Theden nodded, his world shifting yet again. “Had to be something like that.” His breath misted in front of him. Narrow white clouds rising towards the sky.

The sun hung low, glowing warm. The howling wind had stopped dead and there wasn’t a cloud in sight. Theden had picked the worst possible time for attacking an outpost like this. Hopelessly outnumbered and blinded by vengeance, with faith in Eld and the eleven lords, he’d stomped right through the front door . . . and won.

It didn’t feel like it anymore, though.

“That isn’t why I went with them, Theden! You know that!”

“The more I get to know, the less I find that I understand . . .”

“No!” Liss stepped closer, taking his hands in hers. “It *was* the start of something beautiful, Theden . . . but it still is.” She picked up the headless man’s blade and walked towards the water. “I left during a skirmish. A dangerous one. I was all but certain they would perish, so I could be free.”

Theden followed her. “Where are you going?”

“To finish the job with you!” She pointed her sword at a small building nearby. “I’ve felt like shit ever since I left them for dead . . . because I didn’t have the guts to do it myself.” She kissed him. “It nearly cost you your life.”

Theden nodded. “Liss . . . I have some things I need to confess as well.”

Liss shook her head. “Do it after.”

*

Theden slowly pushed on the door and took a step back. It opened slow and steady, creaking as it fell towards the wall, thudding gently against a bookcase.

The room was crowded with books, papers, weapons and furniture, a big desk awkwardly placed in its center, overflowing with documents.

The room was also completely devoid of people.

“Where are they?” Theden sheathed his weapon.

Liss shrugged. “That’s anyone’s guess . . .”

“Your guess holds more weight, though.”

Liss tilted her head back and forth a few times. “If they were out on a mission there wouldn’t have been so many soldiers here. My best guess would be the nearest town. They’re probably out drinking or whoring . . . or both.”

Theden walked into the room, looking at the papers and the books scattered all around. “Looks like they could use someone to help crunch their numbers.”

Liss nodded. “Yeah, Mathias always was an idiot.”

Theden looked at her and smiled. “Maybe they’ll take me on as a financial advisor.”

Liss’ mouth didn’t move an inch. “*Now* you find your sense of humor?”

Theden shrugged. He didn’t really know what he was doing anymore. There was a void in his heart whenever he looked at Liss, and he’d done unspeakable things to get to this point. The longer he stayed, the more meaningless everything seemed. *Maybe I should just leave with her before they come back . . .* “They *all* need to die,” his father said.

How good could these people be, anyway? They wouldn’t be able to track them across the world either way, would they? *We could go to the Great Dry and taste the coffee there, maybe even work a plantation. Or we could go to Hale or Steadwic; they wouldn’t find us there if we changed names.* He needed to forget everything that had happened since he almost died. He needed to start fresh, or he wouldn’t be able to live with himself.

“Hey . . .” He mumbled, walking towards Liss.

“What-”

He kissed her passionately, almost doubling her over backwards. “Fuck Mathias!” He said, kissing her again. “And that other piece of shit.” He smiled, tears streaming down his face, all the feelings he’d buried coming back to him. “Let’s just leave.” Theden was better than his father. And he was about to prove it.

Liss nodded nervously, her blue eyes like two plates in her face. She dared a smile. “I’d . . . I’d go with you anywhere, Theden. I love you!”

“I love you, too!” Tears fell in the fresh snow, making neat little holes between them. “I can’t live without you . . . not even for a second!”

“Well, you’re gonna have to, you piece of shit!” A man’s voice came.

Theden released Liss and spun around. A tall, slender man was standing by the entrance, leaning against the doorframe. He had a fishing pole in one of his hands and a net full of fish in the other.

“Mathias . . .” Liss said, doing a curtsy. She leaned slightly to the left, as if peering around the corner of the house. “And Erik! So nice to see you both.”

A shorter, more heavysset man came trudging around the corner, carrying a small boat over his head. His muscles were strained from the effort, veins bulging from his neck and exposed upper arms. He gave a short bark as an answer.

Theden swallowed hard. *The final showdown . . . I guess it's still happening, then.* It seemed a proper punishment for thinking he could just walk away from this. *Adrane and Stygax . . . all of you lords; I could really use some help here.* Both of these men could easily beat Theden into a pulp with their bare hands, he would have to fight smart if he was going to win.

“How many did you kill?” Mathias asked.

Theden gave him a puzzled look. *They've been out on the water; how the hell did-*

“Your blade, asshole! You're such a fucking amateur you didn't even clean it afterwards.” He pointed at Theden's sword, still slick with blood. “It's a nice weapon, though, I'll give you that.”

Theden nodded. “I made it myself, with you in mind.” He pointed it backwards, towards where he came from. “Nine,” he said.

Mathias laughed. “Shit! That's not bad for a measly cunt such as yourself.”

Theden noticed his hand was shaking, the tip of the blade vibrating. He could feel the redness rushing past his ears, the blood boiling in his veins. These two were the creeps responsible for his wounds, physically and mentally. There was no question about it; they'd die, or he'd die trying to end them.

Liss drew her own blade, sensing Theden's unease. “It didn't have to go down like this, Mathias.” She shrugged. “Hell, it still doesn't! You can just walk away from all of this, and we'll be on our way.”

Mathias smiled, dropping the fish. “*He won't!*” He said, lunging forward.

The fishing pole caught Theden's hands before he could react. He reeled backwards, stumbling in the snow. Thankfully, he retained his blade. *Shit!*

Liss sprung forward, slashing at Mathias in a wide arc, trying to split his abdomen open. He managed to stop her momentum with his fishing pole, slicing it in two in the process. He ducked down underneath the now weak swing and drew a knife from his belt.

Theden screamed as Mathias rolled towards Liss. He stepped forward and raised his blade, ready to take Mathias in the back with an overhand blow. Before he got that far, though, Erik threw a knife at him. Theden closed his eyes and spun away, the knife frozen on his vision.

An eternity seemed to pass before he realized he was still alive. He opened his eyes and looked up again. Erik was coming full speed towards him with a broadsword, and Liss was sitting on the ground, the snow red around her legs. Mathias had sustained some wounds as well. He was clutching his shoulder, bent over a couple of paces away.

Theden quickly looked behind, to make sure no one else was approaching. He could see the knife pinned in the trunk of the closest tree. *It was headed straight for me . . .*

He turned back towards Erik and gave his most evil grin. "The eleven lords guide my hand!" He said, raising his weapon.

Erik came at him too hard, flailing his heavy weapon in anger. Theden had no problem seeing where the blade would come from. He hadn't anticipated the man's sheer strength though, and blocking it nearly broke his arm.

Erik roared and pulled back, swinging the blade low.

Theden gritted his teeth from the pain and stabbed at the man. It stopped Erik's swing, but he deftly sidestepped Theden's thrust. Like any amateur would, Theden now stumbled forward, effectively putting a man with a broadsword behind himself. *Roll away!* He thought, diving head first towards the ground, doing his best to pull his body with him. The roll was clumsy, but he effectively dodged the sword coming for him. He also managed to stand back up facing his foe, so he wasted no time. He lunged forward, thrusting again, but keeping his balance this time.

Predictably enough, Erik did the same thing, sidestepping the thrust.

Theden was prepared this time, moving his feet and swinging sideways. It was an awkward and weak blow, but it caught Erik in the arm and made him step back.

"Fucking kid!" Erik hissed, raising his blade to counter Theden's next blow. The swords rang out in the cold winter air, none of the fighters giving ground.

Theden needed to be swift, or Erik would get the upper hand again. He was stronger, faster and more skilled; the cut on his arm was a temporary setback, nothing more. *Time to test this whole immortality thing.* Theden stepped forward, Erik's blade pushing his own away. It fell on his shoulder, hard, making him cry out in pain. *No help there, at least.*

Erik clumsily tried to pull his blade back to strike again, but Theden was too close. Erik desperately tried to spin away, but Theden stepped even closer, tripping him up.

Erik fell sideways, almost stabbing himself as he rolled in the snow. Theden didn't waste a second, slashing at the man's torso as he tried to get up. It wasn't a fatal blow, but it connected hard, making Erik howl in pain. Feeling merciful, Theden changed his grip and stabbed the man through the eye, swift and silent.

For a few seconds, the world was still, and Theden avenged. A slight rustle whisked a few grains of tingling snow across Theden's face. It melted immediately underneath the burning sun.

"Theden!"

Liss! Theden spun and ran back towards Mathias and Liss. His shoulder ached and burned, blood flowing down his side with every pang of pain. He wouldn't endure another fight, not by a longshot.

Mathias was bleeding from several shallow cuts now, barely standing on his feet. The snow was more red than white around him and Liss, and they'd both scored many hits. Liss was in the snow, face down, blade a few feet away, at the end of a red trail. She was shivering badly, holding her wrist. Her arm might've been cut off; Theden couldn't quite see it.

“Do you see?” Mathias said, taking a few heavy steps towards Liss. “Do you see what comes of vengeance?”

“Wasn’t it vengeance that brought her back in the first place?” Theden cried. “When you stabbed me and left me for dead . . .” He pointed his sword at Liss. “When our child perished . . . wasn’t that because of your vengeance?!” He could feel the rage burning inside. The rage he’d inherited from his father after all. But it was only embers now. The fury leaked out with his blood, dripping onto the snow. He wanted Mathias to suffer more than anything, but at this rate, he’d be lucky enough if he managed to kill him.

“She signed a fucking contract!” Mathias replied, his voice sincere. “Does that mean nothing to you people?”

“You’re a sick man!” Liss mumbled from the snow. “I had to get away from you.”

“I loved you, Lena!” He took another step. “And you ran away!”

Theden moved as fast as his feet would carry him. “I fucking love her as well, Mathias!” He roared. “And you took her from me!” There was something, deep inside. “And you took our *child!*” The embers started glowing again, the warmth returning.

“I never knew she was with child! She never told me!” Mathias was standing over her now. Raising his sword. “I’m sorry . . .”

“You fucking better be!” The fire blossomed again, flames roaring inside. Theden jumped forward and swung with all of his might, taking Mathias’ head clean off. He had way too much momentum to stop, though, so he crashed into the headless corpse and fell with it to the ground. Blades clattered this way and that, finally coming to rest in the bloody snow.

It was over.

Theden just wanted to close his eyes and be done with all of it. He just wanted to fall asleep right there in the snow, with the sun on his face. *I’ll probably freeze to death or bleed to death, though. And there’s probably more mercenaries around here somewhere . . .* He couldn’t believe he’d actually found Liss, and killed both Mathias and Erik. *I need to send Eld some flowers or something.* He didn’t know how much the eleven lords had watched over him in the end, but he was certain he wouldn’t be able to do this without help.

“Liss . . . there’s something I need to tell you.” Theden mumbled, grabbing two fistfuls of snow.

There was no answer.

“Liss . . .” She needed to know. He loved her too much to lie to her.

Still no answer.

Theden propped himself up on his elbows, his body weighing a ton. The hammering pain in his shoulder started up again, but he fought through it. “Liss-”

Liss was still face down in the snow, not moving. He could see a few cuts on her side, and one across her back. Mathias’ blade also jutted out from her lower back.

“No!” He rolled over on his belly and crawled towards her, swimming across the snow. He couldn’t feel the cold powder going down his chest and underneath his arms, couldn’t feel the rough ground against his fingers. He couldn’t feel anything. “Don’t do this to me, Liss!”

He grabbed her thigh and pulled himself towards her, trying not to move her around too much. He could hear her breath now, ragged and slow, her back rising and sinking. The sword pierced her coat, pinning it to the ground. “Oh, thank the fucking lords! Thank each and every one of you!” He looked to the heavens with tears in his eyes. “They’re not judging from above,” Eld had said. Still, it felt like the natural place to direct his gratitude.

“Theden . . .” Liss’ voice barely cut through the snow.

“Yes!” A few more tears fell on her backside. “What is it, my love?”

“Get. The fuck. Off. Me.”

“Oh, right away!” He rolled to the side, and wormed himself up towards her face. “I’m so sorry,” he mumbled.

“Don’t worry about it, you rolled off.”

“No, not that! I’m sorry for . . .” He looked towards Mathias’ headless corpse. “Everything. For letting you see me like this.”

“You became an animal . . .”

“Yes, and I-”

Liss shushed him. “You *became* an animal . . .to protect me. Mathias was one from the start.” She pulled back and got up on her knees, spitting a glob of red phlegm in the snow. “Whatever you did to get here . . . I forgive you.”

Theden rolled over on his back again, tears streaming from his face. “I love you . . . Lena.”

“I love you, too.” She stood up on shaky legs. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Theden nodded and gave her his good arm. He threw it around her as she helped him up, and they trod slowly away from the cluster of houses, every other footprint red in the snow.

“Lena . . . that was the old me. You can keep calling me Liss, if you want to.”

Theden smiled and turned towards her. “I like Lena better.”

Even after everything, Theden got his happy ending.

By murdering his way through the mercenaries' ranks, Theden was able to liberate Liss once again. It came at a terrible cost, though. The child had perished inside Liss' womb, unable to handle the stress. Theden and Liss would shed many tears for their unborn child, but the fates wasn't done with them.

It would only take a year underneath the burning sun of Aevon in the Great Dry, and Liss' wound would bear fruit again..

It was true after all; Liss and Theden's love knew no bounds. None at all.

Theden would have to live with himself and the things he'd done, though. In the end, he never told Liss about Wright, instead choosing to erase it from his mind.

Maybe it was for the best. Maybe his father's rage wouldn't surface again. Maybe it never had in the first place.

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Epilogue

“Are you cold Theresa?” Theden asked for the seventh time since they entered the carriage.

“No!” Theresa replied for the seventh time since they entered the carriage. “I’m just like you and mommy! I’m a northerner!”

Theden laughed, looking at Lena. “That might be true, my sweet, but you’ve grown up in the Great Dry! There’s not a whole lot of winter down there.” He looked back at his daughter. “This is the *Shivering* . . . do you hear how cold that sounds?”

Theresa had inherited her mother’s raven hair, but her eyes were dark hazel. All told, she would’ve looked native to Aevon, the city she’d grown up in, if she hadn’t also inherited her father’s complexion. She wasn’t pale, per se, but she got more pink than tan underneath the burning sun. After the last summer heat, Theden was sure they’d looked like two stray pigs.

“I don’t care how it sounds, daddy! I’m not cold!” She defiantly crossed her arms.

Theden smiled and pinched her cheek. “That’s my girl!”

Lena rested her hands on her giant, pregnant belly and leaned back. “I’ve actually missed this place.” She looked out of the window. “Hey, do you think Wright is still running his shop?”

Theden swallowed hard. *I’d be very, very surprised*. He shook his head. “The shop was barely holding up eight years ago, and if Wright is still alive, he’ll be in his eighty-second year.” He paused for a long time. “Are you sure about this, Lena?”

Lena nodded and smiled. “I like Aevon, I really do! But I want our little Bear to be born where his mother and father’s from.”

Theden smiled. “We must be the only people in Noman who actually want to have a baby in Umbret.”

“Oh, don’t be silly! It’s a charming little town.” She paused, looking at the scenery. “It’s a charming little cluster of houses, at least.”

The carriage reached its destination, and the two of them jumped out, helping little Theresa down, even though she wanted to do it all by herself. *Can’t wait to be an adult, that one*.

Theden paid the driver handsomely, shivering when he thought back to the one Mathias had beheaded eight years prior. *Curse this place to bits* . . . He didn’t want to go back here. He didn’t want the memories or the smells or the sights. Even if the Brotherhood was gone, buried or under new leadership, and their little family safe, Umbret was still a cold little slice of hell, hidden among nine hundred other slices of hell. Wright was dead, and Theden had no connections here anymore.

“Don’t look so glum!” Lena smiled. “We’re finally here! Now we can look forward to some proper northern cuisine and a warm hearth.”

Theden nodded. “It’s all right, but I wouldn’t use the word ‘cuisine’ though.”

Lena leaned closer. “I’ve been shitting liquid for close to eight years, Theden. Anything without those fucking spices is ‘cuisine’ to me.”

Theden couldn’t help laughing. “I love you, Lena.”

“I love you, too, Theden! It’ll be nice to get you out of the sun for a while.”

“Prefer snowmen to pigs, do you?”

Lena laughed and nodded. “I do!”

Theden motioned towards the house they’d acquired. “Warm hearth sounds excellent.” He turned towards his daughter. “Are you cold, Theresa?”

It was beautiful here in the north, Theden could only agree with that. The sun was high in the sky, and summer had managed to stretch all the way to Umbret and its surroundings. Soon, the rest of the snow would melt, and grass, trees and flowers would find new life. *I’ve actually missed this place*, he realized. By escaping to Aevon, Theden and Lena had traded one extreme for another. Instead of winter three fourths of the year, they had summer. Instead of freezing their asses off, they melted. *We’ll stay until Bear finds his feet, then we’re moving to Crown or Steadwic.*

He sighed against the sun and kept walking, brushing his hand against the stonework on the obelisk as he passed it. “I got her back, Wright.” He took a deep breath, swallowing the tears building up. “I actually did it!” Theden still had no idea whether or not Wright’s sacrifice had anything to do with it. He didn’t feel immortal, or strong, or even more capable. Eld had given him the location of both Lena and the Brotherhood, though.

He walked up the steps for the second time in his life. There wasn’t as much wind now, and the day was clear. He sat down on the first ledge, feet over the edge, peering out across his homeland. “Thank you, Wright. For giving me a chance to become someone in this world. Thank you for teaching me your trade, and for taking me on as an apprentice.” Tears were falling steady from his chin, vanishing beneath the yellow grass by the obelisk’s base. “I wanted to bring the kids here to see you . . . but of course, they don’t know much about you. Lena talks about you all the time, but not how . . .” he trailed off. “I’m sorry . . .” he finally concluded, wiping away his tears.

He walked away from the obelisk, unsure of where he was headed. Lena had given him the day, so there was no rush heading back towards the house. His thoughts blurred into one another and drove him onwards in the sunlight. He kept placing one foot in front of the other, dreaming wide about where he’d been and where he was going. He’d been way more fortunate than he’d ever deserved to be; getting out of Umbret, entering the blessed union with Lena, getting away with quite a few murders . . .

And still he was the same person, wasn't he? He was still the kind, fire-haired blacksmith's apprentice. Careful and precise, clever but not bragging about it. He didn't feel like a murderer at all . . .

Theden looked up, escaping his trance for a few seconds. He suddenly noticed a palisade wall in the distance. *Back to where it all begun, huh?*

He had no idea how old Eld had been back then. His burned face had made it hard to tell and his clothes had made it impossible to see anything else. And that pale, dead eye of his had discouraged too much staring anyway. *Maybe in his sixtieth or seventieth?* Either way, he could still be very much alive, and maybe have some answers. *I must've ended up here for a reason . . .* Theden pressed on.

"Hello?" The palisade walls looked lower and less threatening in the sunlight. "Eld, are you here?" Theden walked through the gap and into the empty garden. It looked just like that day eight years ago, the brazier still suspended from a tripod in the middle, surrounded by stumps and other improvised lawn chairs. There was no fire, though. And no other signs of life, either.

"Anyone here?" Theden approached the house, suddenly realizing he'd never set foot in it before. The door was slightly ajar, so he pushed on it, sending it squeaking into the house. He immediately recognized a few hemp bags on the floor inside. *Beans from the Great Dry . . . how the hell did he get them all the way up here?* He'd have to take some back to Lena afterwards; there was no better coffee to be had.

He stepped into the house and carefully looked around. There were beakers and flasks everywhere, and he found a few of the containers Wright had made for him years before. There were leaves and herbs scattered everywhere; spices and powders, rocks and dust. And animal corpses. On a desk near the corner was a stack of papers, filled with various diagrams and symbols. Theden leaned past a stack of boxes, looking at a black, leather-bound tome.

A rattle suddenly sounded behind him.

Theden spun, heart hammering in his chest. "Eld!" He exclaimed. "I didn't mean to—"

There was no one there.

What the fuck?

The rattle came again.

Theden almost shivered from the adrenaline burst. "Who's there?"

Nothing.

Theden suddenly found himself wishing he'd brought his blade. Or any weapon. The house seemed to darken as the wind picked up inside.

Another rattle came, and Theden saw movement in the corner of his eye. "I'm sorry, Eld. I didn't mean to trespass, I just need to talk to you." He took another step forward, noticing a rattling tin box on a table. *What's this?*

He picked the box up, vibrating and shaking in his hands. He swallowed hard, fumbling the lid. Whatever was inside, it was alive – but the box limited the possible size, so Theden felt relatively safe removing the lid.

He shouldn't have.

There was a hiss, and Theden threw the box away, stumbling backwards over the desk, taking a stack of books and papers with him. He quickly propped himself up on his elbows, trying to see the creature. It was a black snake with a big orange mark on his head. The frightened serpent slithered out of the half-open door and into the snow outside.

Another thing native to the Great Dry . . . has he been following us? Theden slowly stood up and dusted himself off, his heart slowly stabilizing in his chest. He bent down to pick up the papers and noticed a few familiar names. Levked, Stygax and Adrane.

He frowned and closed the door, lest the snake entered again and bit him on the heel. Afterwards, he sat down next to the desk, looking at the papers. There was a lot of unfamiliar symbols and writing, but the names of the eleven lords kept repeating. There was another symbol as well; a serpent eating its own tail. Theden turned to make sure the snake wasn't in there with him. He knew extremely little about both mythology and alchemy, but he knew the 'tail devourer' was a symbol of rebirth.

Looking at the papers and a few of the half-open books scattered around, Theden quickly deduced the names of the lords were synonymous with ingredients. There were a few drawings as well, of various animal and human anatomy. Theden shivered as he recalled his quest to sate the lords . . . he'd collected each and every one of these items. *And for what? So he could attempt to resurrect someone?* The eleven lords weren't mentioned even once, but the names kept repeating, next to increasingly complex charts and diagrams. A heart and a body were pictured next to each other, encircled by the serpent. "Get him back!" Was written crudely underneath. Theden remembered the old man's hungry eyes as he saw the items. "You did slay it yourself, right? This isn't some shit you picked up at the market?"

Theden felt cold, colder than he'd ever felt in his life.

A few parting words, while you're still here . . .

This story is a tribute to my best friend, and to his best friend again. Their names are not Theden and Liss, but close enough. (They haven't killed anyone, though. To my knowledge, at least.)

It started as a joke on a refrigerator and quickly grew into another slice of Noman. Now I dedicate it to you two, because you're an important slice of my world.

This story tells the epic tale of two people in love - because *your* tale is epic! (And also, you're in love.)

This story is from me to you. You know who you are! (Don't ever be someone else.)

Sincerely - Bishop

