

A T A L E O F

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T H E E N D L A N D S

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IT WAS THE BLADE of Ngrehim, forged by Dugaam in the name of Janasaath, Bladelord of the Carbáin, slayer of Moiriar, destroyer of Sollyra, destined ruler of all the world. Or at least that's what it said to Hjorn when he brushed up against it in the back of Garna's wagon.

I can grant thee the power thou seekest... the axe whispered.

Hjorn blinked.

Garna was the best wagon trader between Jandich and Cunoch on the great river, and no matter how often you looked through his overflowing wares, you were bound to find something you'd never seen before. But even within the carefully racked stacks of Gorbeyna pottery, cast-off Ilvani leather, oil-polished armor shards, and bones of questionable vintage, a talking axe that promised you the power you seek was unusual.

Hjorn blinked his black eyes again, stroking the russet beard that ran nearly to his knees, hanging as long braids set with links of silver chain.

"That's unusual," he said.

At the head of the wagon, Garna looked up from the ledger he was poring over. He furrowed his brow, pocked skin the grey-green of a dangerously overripe cheese. From his dismissive glare, it was clear that the trader hadn't heard the axe talking.

"That's quite unusual," Hjorn said. Garna's pair of withered mountain ponies glanced back where they cropped the short scrub

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grass that clung to the trail.

Hjorn had the wagon to himself. He was Garna's only regular client on this isolated stretch of switchback, but his coin was good and the Gorbeyna had made his two-season stop on this high pass between the mountain villages for years. Hjorn had the pass to himself, had the mountain to himself. He liked the solitude. He liked the peace that carried in the empty echo of his sky. Still, when that silence pressed down as it did sometimes in the night, Hjorn had more than once found himself thinking that it would be nice to have someone to talk to.

He talked to Garna twice a year when the cart came, but the wizened Gorbeyna met most attempts at conversation with only the sullen silence and the poison glare well known among his kind.

"How much?" Hjorn asked him now, because it was one of the few phrases the trader did respond to.

He hefted the axe, holding it high so that the sun gleamed along the bright steel filigree that traced its way along the leather of the haft. It was a weapon of war, double bladed and razor sharp, though the style of its casting was old. Hjorn swung it once, twice, the weapon's weight growing quickly familiar to his hands.

He felt a guilty thrill as a story slipped within his mind.

With the axe in hand, he was his grandfather suddenly, at the battle the clan-singers called Fignarmald. In the depths of the burning mountain Rodangrim, he stood alone against a horde of Darkfolk and dragons, his family's battle flag flying proudly above him. Then Hjorn felt a twinge in his shoulder where his gout was still acting up with the slow fading of winter.

The story went away with the sudden pain. The Gorbeyna appraised the axe where Hjorn set it back down, wincing.

"Could get a pretty price for it in Galindo. Ninety argryns."

"Galindo is dirt farmers and woodcutters that couldn't scrape up that much silver if the old gods came collecting."

"Jandich, then," Garna said dismissively. "The city."

"They'll string you up in Jandich to find out who you stole it from."

Garna scowled. "Found it on a dead guy in the Helexia hill woods. Nice and legal."

"Five chrysans." Hjorn's coin was the old gold favored by his

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people, and the offer was more than Garna would earn in any of the villages on either side of the pass.

“Six.”

Thou wilt rule the world... the axe said.

Hjorn shrugged as he paid.

It was a long walk back to the small stone house that Hjorn had raised above the narrow cut of a river that had no name. As he made his way, he swung the axe jauntily over his shoulder, letting his hand rest casually on the haft as he had seen the warriors do when he was a boy. In the clanholds of the Duncamb, the young and the old, the crafters and miners and hearth keepers all turned out to line the wide, dark boulevard before the gates, watching the guards of the Rohizum heading off to their dangerous patrols of the darkness.

When he was young, Hjorn dreamed of making that march himself. However, hammer and handbow had never felt as right in his grasp as did pick and shovel. From the time he was apprenticed to the master diggers of the anthracite seams that rooted their way deep, deep into the mountains, he forgot about that dream. But today, with the axe in his hand, he felt it fresh in his mind as he hadn't for a long while.

He walked in silence, suddenly awkward as he thought about what a person should say to a talking axe. Living alone on his mountain, he was sadly out of practice.

“Do you like stories?” he asked finally.

I will tell thee stories of greatness, the axe replied, which wasn't really what Hjorn had asked. However, he said nothing as the weapon's voice in his head began to speak.

In the white fire of Andolin was I forged, the axe began. Then it went on for a long, long time. And though Hjorn was interested at first, and then just listened politely for a while, his attention began to flag after the first thousand years or so of the axe's long and bloody history. From the strength of its haft and the edge on its steel, he wouldn't have thought the blade to be that old, nor to have undertaken the number of battles it claimed.

For the first time ever, Hjorn found himself wishing that the long walk back to the small stone house was quicker.

At the midpoint of the climb, a rise of rock offered up a view of

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his distant front porch, from which he could look out upon the edge of the bluff where the nameless river tumbled out over rocks to drop to the foot of the narrow ravine below. In the spring and fall, the sun would set there, dropping down behind the cloud of spray and turning the sky the color of bright copper. Within the ravine, the river disappeared into a whirlpool that plunged down into the unseen depths of the mountains. He liked its howling sound, which reminded him of the wind in the high peaks but which wasn't as cold.

In his head, the axe had killed another in a long line of kings and been passed to yet another's hero's hand, but all the names began to sound the same to him. It was a complicated tale that the axe told him, and not for the first time, Hjorn wished that his own story was more interesting than it was.

Hjorn loved his ravine, his river, his sky because he was different than his kin. Since he was a boy, he had loved the scree slopes in a way that marked him as odd by most of his folk, their hearts held enraptured by the mountains' depths but not their heights. Even before he left his parents' house, Hjorn always used his leave time from the mines to follow the trade trails out toward the Duncamb Pass that bore his people's name, where he would sit to while the day away watching the sun and sky.

For all his young life, Hjorn had worked and saved away the coin he earned, and kept safe what his parents left him. And when he had enough, he bade his folk goodbye and left the caverns. He made his own walk down the dark boulevard before the gates, a well-stuffed pack and his tools strapped to his back. Only his close kin were there to see him off, but their shouts of well-wishing had a hollow quality as he passed through the darkness that last time.

Thou wilt name me, the axe said as Hjorn made the final turn that led to the great wooden staircase he had built along the side of the bluff. This was a great out-thrust horn of stone, studded with jack pine and juniper that clung tenaciously to the rock. When the wind blew, the trees whistled an off-key tune that Hjorn liked to hum along to.

"Excuse me?" he said.

Thou wilt name me, the axe said again. *When I was carried in the Duranholds of Dugaam, I was Rasilnar the Deathcleaver, but I have claimed and forgotten five score names besides. In Galgaila, I was Immaru, the Blade of*

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Gods. In Liryan, I was the Sbrike, the Butcher Blade, before I was lost to the ages and mortal sight and found again by thy hand.

The axe didn't speak in words. Not really. Rather, it seemed to Hjorn that he heard the axe's feelings and such in his head, and that his head was turning those feelings into words. If other people heard the same feelings, no doubt their heads would speak them differently, he thought.

Hjorn stared, uncertain. He was anxious suddenly. He had never needed to name anything before.

"Deathcleaver is nice," he said awkwardly.

Thou must name me...

Hjorn hadn't even named his house, though the way of his folk was to christen their great underground estates. He hadn't named the river that wasn't on any map that he had ever seen, nor had he named the bluff or the mountain or anything else.

Name me!

"Steelblade!"

The axe was silent a long moment. Where it rested on his shoulder, Hjorn thought he could feel its disappointment.

"Killer Steelblade," he added. "The Terrible. That's a good name."

He swung the axe off his shoulder, slashing it from side to side in what he thought was a threatening way. He felt the twinge of the gout again.

The axe said nothing more as Hjorn climbed the steep stairs, their log planks painstakingly cut and planed over the long months when he first found his bluff and its sunset sky. He was as skilled at rock climbing as all his kin, but he liked stairs. He liked their straight edges and their smooth lines, and the fact that they were a thing he had built with his own hands. He was proud of the things he could build. He was proud of his house and his view of the sunset through the mist of the river where it boiled away into the caves below.

On the stone porch, Hjorn sat beneath the twilight sky. These were frontier lands, the stony wilderness of the northern slopes of those mountains the Tallfolk called the Shieldcrest, but which were Tharseen, the Great Peaks, to Hjorn's folk. These territories showed up on the maps of the Tallfolk but were all but unclaimed by the distant dukes of Gracia, only a few tenacious villages marking the

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track that wound its way between the great mountain passes of Duncamb and Olmades. These were Dwarven lands and Gorbeyna, the frequently warring clans of both peoples living in their ancient warrens deep, deep in the darkness.

Hjorn's house was far from that darkness, set upon its isolated granite shelf and looking out over the steep slopes below. Far south and east were his own folk, who he turned away from in order to dwell beneath the sun. He loved the sun, though it burned his skin sometimes when the weather was hot. He wore a straw cap on such days to keep his eyes shaded, but the sun was cool today.

That long first summer when his wanderings had led him here, Hjorn built the house with his own hands, cutting and laying the stones in carefully squared lines. He built a guest room, because he always imagined that someone would visit him some day. But through all the long years that he had retired to this place and watched the sky from his porch each night, no one ever came.

Because the axe was still silent, Hjorn talked to it now. Tentatively, he told it some of his stories, the favorite tales of the clan-singers and the hearth-rites that were the memory of his mother's sweet voice in the darkness. Hjorn knew the old stories because he told them to himself in the quiet evenings as the fire burned low. He told them to himself because he had no one else to tell them to anymore.

While he lived in the mountain halls of his kin, he told stories to his grandfather and he listened to those his grandfather told. Those were real tales, he knew. Stories of far-off war with the Gorbeyna of Kiengiraka, and of legendary heroes delving deep beneath the mountains of the Shieldcrest, pursuing great wealth and even greater danger in the darkness.

The stories Hjorn told only to himself were often tales of history and lore and his people's long travails within the earth. However, more and more often since he had come to his bluff and built his house above the river that had no name, Hjorn's stories were those he made up himself. Tales and songs of the mountain slopes, and of the wide world under the sun that he had first heard of in his grandfather's songs but explored now each day in his imagination and his dreams.

He liked to remember the old days, before his grandfather died.

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He had so few reasons to remember now.

He told the axe the story of the sleeping curse that claimed the life of the Ilvani princess Lealyan, but it seemed unimpressed.

Hjorn spoke of pirates on the wide waters of the Leagin Sea that he had heard of but never seen, and he told of the twelve Kings of Death who challenged the great hero Hjorna for whom he was named. He told how they had been defeated one after the other by bravery and great cunning.

As he sat at the top of the stairs beneath the spray of stars that slowly revealed themselves to streak the cloudless sky, the axe spoke again to tell him another story of its own. This was the story of a great battle between the kings of three races and the dark sorcerer who stood against them. The dark sorcerer's warrior-slaves fought with great blades of power whose magic transcended the greatest powers of the gods and titans of old. The axe talked of the endless battle that had laid waste to whole nations, leaving them burned and blackened and leached of life.

"Do you know any happy stories?" Hjorn asked uneasily.

I will grant thee the power thou seekest, the axe whispered in a voice like winter wind. I will grant thee all thy heart's desires...

Hjorn was confused, and because he didn't know what to say, he stood. His back was stiff from sitting, so he stretched beneath the stars, scanning the sky above and the bluff below and his house with its shuttered windows and stone walls carefully scrubbed each spring, pale now in the starlight.

I will grant thee all thy heart's desires, the axe whispered again.

Hjorn shrugged. "I have all I need," he said. And then because he felt a sudden smoldering darkness in the axe's silence, he added, "We should go in now."

Inside the small house, the hearth fire he had left blazing that morning was down to coals and ready to be rekindled. Hjorn soon had the stone firepit burning cheerily with a carefully stacked pyramid of well-dried pine that he cut himself from the slopes of a close-growing grove a half-day's walk away. Hjorn liked the walk. He made the journey down every other day, cutting deadfall to fill the leather-and-wattle shoulder basket he made himself.

When he walked to the grove in spring and fall, Hjorn also set

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snare for grouse in the narrow vales of the wood. He ate them fresh-cooked when he could and salted through the winter. When the weather was nice, he caught fish in the small streams that cut their way through the rough scree slopes of the foothills. It was grouse he cooked tonight, along with sweet snowroot that grew wild in the soft loam of the lower slopes. He ate it with a glass of last season's best wild honey wine, which he decanted himself into bottles bought from Garna, then stored in a hidden cellar tucked into the bluff on the far side of the porch.

It would be good, Hjorn thought as he ate, to have someone to talk to. But though the axe hadn't warmed to his stories, Hjorn was sure it was going to like the surprise he hadn't yet talked about. It was an idea that came to his mind at his first sight of the axe in the back of Garna's wagon.

Hjorn's house was three rooms set in a row. There was the main room that was kitchen and hearth and a place to sit, with Hjorn's room to one side and the guest room on the other. Opposite the hearth in the main room was a rough plaster wall. Set into it were hundreds of gleaming crystal agates, collected from the banks of Hjorn's fishing streams over the first year that he lived here. The wall had been the last part of the house to be completed.

The stones were water-green and sky-blue, red like glowing coals and gold like the winter sunrise, shining and polished smooth by the scouring water. He had prepared the wall carefully, plastering it over with white mud he made from river stone crushed in a rock mill he built himself. Into this, he set the brightly colored stones with a careful hand. At night, when the fire was burning bright, the stone wall would gleam and flicker like a rainbow sunset. He would sit and watch it. It made him smile.

At the head of the shining wall, Hjorn had built a mantle on which he set a constantly changing collection of interestingly shaped rocks, and abandoned birds' nests he found along the autumn woodland trails, and abstract wood sculptures that he carved himself on the porch on warm summer nights.

Carefully, he set aside the current collection, which included a blue-glass prism he bought from Garna the last time the trader passed by, and which Hjorn thought was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Until now, at least.

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Carefully, he lifted the axe to the mantle and set it there. He used one of his wood carvings to raise the end of the haft so that it sat almost straight. He stepped back and smiled. The blade of the axe gleamed majestic in the firelight, throwing its shadow against the subtle shift of summer-flower colors across the wall behind it, and Hjorn thought of how impressive it would look if only someone came to visit.

“You look good up there,” he said, and he was happy for the axe as he turned to take the kettle from the hearth.

A curse on all thy line, caitiff fool, and blessings of power on all those who will shed thy craven blood in the end...

Hjorn turned back. He stared for a moment.

“Did you say something?” he asked, but the axe was quiet.

It stayed quiet until morning, when Hjorn awoke and ate a small breakfast of dried sausage and pine nuts at his carefully polished stone table, sitting and looking at the axe all fine on the mantle where it belonged.

I can help thee, the axe said.

Hjorn considered this as he scrubbed dishes at his small stone sink. “I’m fine,” he said.

I can grant thee all thy wants and needs, came the voice in his mind, but he thought he heard a subtle tone of anger this time.

“I have all I need,” Hjorn said again, and he heard the axe laugh darkly.

Seize me, and I will show thee magic...

Hjorn had seen magic once or twice and found it not to his taste. He didn’t really need to see it again, but he was worried that he had hurt the axe’s feelings somehow when he turned down the offer of his desires and needs. When he finished the dishes, he walked over to the mantle. He carefully grasped the axe, its weight comfortable in both hands.

Now, the voice said. Think of some other place, a place thou knowest. A place to which thou hast a yearning most zealous to go.

Hjorn didn’t know what a yearning most zealous was, so he felt awkward suddenly. As a result, the only place he could think of was his front porch, but even as he thought it, his vision blurred out to streaks of grey like rain against the rippled glass of the windows.

He felt the chill of the morning air and the damp against his bare

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feet. The wind was twisting the branches of the closest trees, its hiss drowned out by the steady roar of the dark whirlpool below.

“That’s unusual,” Hjorn said.

By thinking it, he jumped back to the main room, then jumped again twice more between the house and the porch. He sensed a subtle thrill of power flaring within the axe as he did.

Thou seest what I can do for thee? the voice said. Hjorn nodded, most thoughtful as he set the axe carefully back on the mantle.

What dost thou?

“Going out to the pine grove for firewood,” Hjorn said. He laced up his boots, found his good walking jacket.

I can take thee there in the blink of an eye, the axe said. I can take thee to the top of the highest peaks, and to both ends of the world!

Hjorn was confused. “There’s plenty of deadfall just down in the grove,” he said.

I mean thou hast no need to walk, impudent fool!

“But I like to walk,” Hjorn said.

The axe said nothing more, so he left. It was likewise silent when he returned that afternoon with his basket full of firewood. Hjorn thought he might have hurt its feelings, so he took the axe in hand and jaunted a half-dozen times from the house to the bottom of the stairs and back again.

“Oh, I hate taking these stairs,” he said loudly, to make sure the axe was listening. “I am so happy to have this magic.”

That night, as Hjorn baked biscuits he made with ground snowroot from an old recipe of his mother’s, he told the axe the story of the Dancing Daughters of the Ilvanking, and of how they were stolen away deep into Khimerean realms and rescued by the Shieldsons of the first Dwarf Queen. The axe in turn told him the story of the fall of Sollyra. It talked of great mountain citadels rising as tiers of white walls, and of the unliving forces of the Bladelord crashing against them as a never-ending wave, breaking bone and stone alike and slaying all who fell before them until the mountain slopes ran red with blood.

“Do you know any stories that don’t have so many people dying in them?” Hjorn asked when the axe was done.

There are no other stories, the axe said coldly.

It went on like that for a long week, Hjorn making his regular

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trip to the pine grove and the axe lying on the mantelpiece and filling the room with the unseen shroud of its disappointment. Hjorn could feel the blade's dark thoughts, and by the fire each night, he told his happiest stories in an attempt to cheer it up. Nothing seemed to work, however, and the stories the axe told him each night got darker as a matter of course.

At the same time, Hjorn couldn't help but notice that strange things were beginning to happen. Gorbeyna bandits attacked the house just before lunch on the third day, and while it wasn't the first time, these bandits were particularly tenacious. As he always did, Hjorn simply locked his doors and stone shutters and let them rail away on the porch for as long as it took to appreciate how well he built his house, and that he hadn't left anything on the outside of it worth stealing.

On the fifth day, he got back from his journey to the pine grove to find that his porch had become a nest for a giant bird. It saw him as he approached the bottom of the stairs, shrieking a warning as it rose up on great taloned feet and clacked a beak large enough to snap a spar in two. Hjorn spent the night outside, waiting for the bird to budge, then finally drove it off by lighting a green-branch smoke fire at the foot of the stairs.

The seventh day, a plague of bark beetles came down the chimney to swarm in his kitchen, and as he spent the rest of the day and night swatting and sweeping them out, Hjorn began to grow suspicious.

He spent the better part of the following day carving and staining a proper stand for the haft and blade, but even that didn't improve the axe's foul mood. Then as he was sitting and watching the firelight play across the shining wall and listening to the axe tell him the story of the month-long, limb-by-limb execution of the traitor Moiriar in excruciating detail, Hjorn had a wonderful idea.

"I have a wonderful idea," he said. "I know what will make you happy."

Thou wilt enter the nearest city and slay its champions like dogs! the axe called with dark enthusiasm. Thou wilt exsanguinate their virgin women at the height of rapture, and all will bow down before us and despair!

Hjorn was silent a moment. "I have a different wonderful idea," he said, and he tried to ignore the axe's bitter disappointment as he

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stoked the fire and went to bed.

The next morning, Hjorn ate quickly and left the dishes standing to dry. The axe was silent, but he felt its expectation, its dark will seeking out his thoughts. He did his best to hide those thoughts, wanting to keep his special plan a secret. He took the axe carefully from the mantle, swung it over his shoulder as he headed out.

The pine grove was still cool, faint trails of mist rising as the heat of the sun worked its slow way down through the trees. Hjorn could sense the anticipation in the axe, even as he felt it silently willing him to break from the trail and run screaming through the dark woods in hopeful search of something to kill.

He stopped instead at the black tangle of a deadfall snag he had been working around for the better part of the previous week. Its brittle branches were picked clean, cracked and snapped and carted back up to the house. However, the main bole of the ancient pine was thick and gnarled, and had resisted all Hjorn's attempts to break or cut it.

"Here we go," he said.

He swung fast. The blade was sharper than anything he had ever seen, chopping through the sun-kilned hardness of the snag like it might be a sheaf of dry grass. He felt a quick rush as he swung again and again, and he imagined himself suddenly as the wood-ranger Dyssa, who had been the protector of the Mosstwood and slayer of the dread war-trolls of the Bone Fens. Only he and his trusty axe would slay deadfall instead. No stand of firewood would be safe.

He stopped suddenly. Where his hands gripped the axe, he felt a kind of buzzing.

A silent horror twisted through the blade, the voice in Hjorn's mind speaking not in words suddenly but in raw emotion that made his head ache. His heart was pounding. His hands shook, and he had to squeeze them tight to keep the axe from slipping from his grasp.

"I thought you might like something to do," Hjorn stammered. "Always lots of firewood to chop." He suddenly had the feeling that this might not have been as wonderful an idea as he first thought.

Thou wilt die the death of body, spirit, and mind, the axe said on the walk back home, and only the worms that feast on thee will remember thy passing in the end. It said nothing else after that.

The axe drew the first foes to him the next day. These were real

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threats, not just the dark distractions of the previous week, which Hjorn belatedly realized must have been attracted by whatever dark magic had been kindled by the axe's even darker mood. These were warriors, Gorbeyna from the closest tribes to start. Hjorn recognized them by their livery, shields and faces war-painted with a dark red X. As he had with the bandits, Hjorn was content to let the first two waves batter themselves senseless against the great stone door, and finally to turn against each other as their level of frustration rose.

The axe still wasn't talking to him, but he could hear it darkly muttering that night from its place on the mantle. It was a language he didn't understand, but he sensed the rage that underlay the unknown words all the same.

Three more Gorbeyna warbands came the following day, but Hjorn was ready for them this time. Before dawn, he toted three barrels from the cellar and set them out and open on the front porch. The first group threw themselves at the wine with unbridled enthusiasm, drinking themselves into a stupor and collapsing in a snoring, sodden heap. The second group drank what left. The third turned on the first two when they found the barrels dry.

They left six dead on the porch before they fled back to the forest, Hjorn sadly rolling the bodies over the edge of the cliff as a fourth group, newly arrived, burst from the tree line at a run. He waited until they were halfway up the steep stairs. Then he rolled the empty barrels down one after the other, the shrieking Gorbeyna bowled over to tumble back down in an undignified and badly bruised heap.

Hjorn watched them slink off, but he stayed out past the rise of the Clearmoon on the porch, watching carefully for any further movement along the narrow paths below. The night passed quietly, except that over the hiss of wind and the roar of the river below and even in the short stretches when he could sleep, Hjorn could hear the voice of the axe faint and dark in the back of his mind.

The Hogorba arrived shortly after dawn, great hairy brutes that were twice the size of their Gorbeyna kin and proportionally unpleasant. Torches and guttural war chants heralded their movement up the switchback paths. Hjorn watched them from the porch and lost count of their number. He saw the mark of a white dagger on their shields and breastplates, the sign of a tribe he didn't

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know. He also saw the steel-spiked battering ram they carried as they eyed his front door.

He went inside to retrieve the axe, its hilt strangely cold in his hands. The tight-wrapped black leather had taken on an oily texture that made his skin crawl, but he held it firmly as he strode to the edge of the porch, raised the blade above the horde advancing now with shields up. Then he carefully chopped away the supports that held the stairs in place, the closest Hogorba only halfway up as the long flight of steps collapsed beneath them and sent them screaming to the ground below.

There will be more, the axe whispered unhappily. Hjorn only shrugged. He dug out his knife and hatchet and filled a small pack with rope. Then he held the axe tight and thought about the edge of the ravine where the trail squeezed through a gloomy grove of close-growing willow, and suddenly he was there.

There was no one else around, but he thought he heard distant shouts from farther down the mountainside. He was wary as he worked, but no one showed up for the better part of the afternoon as he carefully laid a series of tripwire snares along the path. They were of a design he had shaped himself over long years of hunting, and of convincing the mountain cats to take their own hunting away from his house and his ravine. Each was anchored with a thick-twisted trunk, bent low to the ground and holding enough spring strength to stun a horse in its tracks. He hid each loop of rope with a mulch of mold and broad blue-weed leaves when he was done.

With the axe's magic, Hjorn jaunted back to the porch and waited the time it took for the first screams to be heard over the river's echoing roar. He saw the trees shake where whoever was coming for him was tossed left and right. Hjorn hoped it would make them think twice about another assault. They came again at dawn to tell him he was wrong.

For four days, he watched as the Gorbeyna and the Hogorba and their huge reeking Birgard barbarian-cousins of the western mountains threw themselves at the cliff face but were turned back. On the fifth day, he heard shrieks and the clash of swords before dawn, and the horde gave ground to mud-streaked Tallfolk of the hills, who howled and fired a hail of heavy stone-tipped arrows at the porch for the better part of the afternoon.

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The next morning, individual warriors sent ropes and steel hooks up to the porch, which Hjorn dutifully cut free with the axe as he protected himself from arrows by sliding beneath his kitchen table like it was a turtle's shell. The day after that, the mountain tribes squabbled with a mercenary band of hulking Tallfolk and the more graceful Ilvani for the right to assault Hjorn's house. Two stealthy rogues clambered up the cliff face but were driven back with hails of arrowheads that Hjorn collected from the scores sent against him the days before. He had no way to shoot them, but carefully dropped from the top of the tall cliff in clusters, they picked up a healthy amount of momentum by the time they hit.

He was dozing the following dawn, when a two-score strong force of Tallfolk warriors in full armor and on horseback announced their presence with trumpets and sent the mercenaries scattering. How they made it up the switchback trail, Hjorn was afraid to even guess. They charged from the tree line with lances at the ready, but then circled around aimlessly when they saw the bluff rising before them.

Hjorn was getting angry now. It had been a long while since he slept more than a few fitful winks at a time, forced to stay on his guard through night and day. The faintly heard voice of the axe was a constant dark droning in his mind.

"Go home and leave me alone!" he yelled to the riders circling threateningly below him, but a hail of arrows and insults drove him off the porch and inside. He grabbed the axe from the mantle, ignoring its vicious curses as he jaunted into a poplar bluff a day's walk down the trail. He jaunted back a short while later with an enormous hornets' nest in hand that he pitched off the edge of the porch. The vicious insects had no time to notice that they had even been moved until they smashed into the riders and their mounts at high speed.

For another week, they came. For another week, Hjorn carried out hit and run attacks on the growing number of warriors and mercenaries amassing below his front door. Using the power of the axe, he shifted between his home and the wilderness around the bluff in search of increasingly ingenious ammunition.

When the Ilvani war-mages came, they blasted his porch and front door with fire and lightning, but the stones that Hjorn had laid

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using the ancient craft of his people held fast. In response, he collected boulders from the shattered rockslide wall that was as close as anyone could come to the dark chasm where the river disappeared. He dropped them from the edge of the porch, sending them down the bluff with a sound louder than the spells that had scorched his walls.

He jaunted into the camps of some sort of doglike creatures that walked on two legs, leaving with them a brace of skunks he plucked from their twilight dens in a distant meadow. Over long days and sleepless nights, he countered the fury of the horde below him with his best ideas, but Hjorn's ideas were beginning to run out. The axe's voice was growing more and more erratic in his mind. It had moved beyond threats aimed at him and was shrieking about how it wanted to kill everyone, everywhere, just because.

Or were those his own thoughts he was hearing? Hjorn wondered suddenly. It was getting hard to tell.

One morning, there was a great battle in the camps below, various factions laying into each other with fire and steel as if the horrific vengeance that the axe screamed for had overwhelmed them. When it was done, the day was passing and the woods were in flames. Bodies littered the foot of the bluff, the Tallfolk and the Gorbeyna and Hogorba and Ilvani and Doglings slinking away into the twilight shadows of the trees.

Two figures stood alone, both of the Tallfolk. One was an armored warrior, pale of face and dark of eye, his gore-flecked black mail glowering crimson in the light of the setting sun. The other appeared to be some sort of squire or page by Hjorn's view. He carried an oversized pack on his back. A battle standard showing a white horse rampant on a field of blue fluttered atop a long pole leaning on his shoulder.

With calm determination, the warrior walked to the foot of the bluff. Slowly, methodically, he began to ascend, the greatsword that was near as tall as he was slung to a back scabbard. Despite the weight of weapon and armor, he clambered up the cliff like a shadowed spider. His squire stayed below, watching with wide eyes and gamely waving the knight's banner aloft to catch the twisting breeze.

Over the previous weeks, Hjorn had learned a hundred different

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ways by which he might have dispatched this new threat. But as he heard the axe's voice murmuring dark benedictions in its unknown tongues, he understood something suddenly. A thing he silently cursed himself for not having realized before.

Though he still couldn't understand the axe's words, he knew their meaning now. The blade was calling for a new master. One worthy of its dark ambition. All the fighting, all the bloodshed, and he could have ended it at any time if he had only known it sooner.

Hjorn was no hero. He wasn't his grandfather, standing in the firestorm of Fignarmald like a resolute wall of sinew and steel.

He was tired. He stood and watched the warrior climb.

As the armored figure clambered over the ledge where the stairs were once attached, he drew the greatsword in a fluid motion. He swung it one-handed in a wide circle before he let it come to rest before him, tip down as he clutched grip and pommel to his armored chest. He pulled his helm off, tossing it aside as he shook his head, a thick mane of black hair rippling like dark cloud against the sunset. He appraised Hjorn with glaring eyes.

"You are an unclean scion of a darkling race," the knight said in a commanding voice, and Hjorn's eyes narrowed because he wasn't entirely sure what 'scion' meant. "You have sullied a great blade of power with your touch, and you will pay."

In the words, Hjorn heard a thread of nobility and grace, all but lost now within the dark voice that twisted through his mind and the warrior's alike.

Kill him, the axe whispered.

"Your life is forfeit," the warrior said.

Vengeance left sleeping cold for over five thousand years is thine, and in the name of Immaru and Rasilnar which is the Shrike which is the Butcher Blade, thou wilt rule the world!

"I will rule the world..."

"Great," Hjorn said. "Here."

He took a single step forward. He spun the axe so that the haft was held out toward the warrior. He sensed a moment's uncertainty in the knight and the axe alike.

"Take it," Hjorn growled. "I don't care anymore. Rule whatever you want."

Kill him! the axe screamed, and its voice was a dark pain rooting

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deep in Hjorn's skull. *Thou wilt kill him for ignorance and impudence and leave his bloated corpse for the crows!*

"Treachery!" the warrior screamed, but his hand shot out to grasp the black leather of the haft. Hjorn felt the strength in that grip as he was yanked forward, stumbling to one knee as the knight hefted the axe high with his free hand.

Thou art the chosen one! Thou art the master of blades and the heir to Janasaath, and the power of ages dwells in this steel!

"I am the chosen one!" the warrior screamed, and his voice was the axe's voice suddenly, twisted through with an evil whose darkness echoed down an endless well of years and longing.

"So just take it then. Go!"

But the knight only flung the greatsword aside as if it weighed nothing, letting it clang to the stones of the porch as he raised the axe above Hjorn's head in preparation for a killing stroke. Hjorn stared, wide-eyed. Where the blade caught the last light of the sun, its edge gleamed red like the madness in the dark knight's eyes.

"I am the master of blades and keeper of the Shrike, and its power is mine!"

"Suit yourself," Hjorn said.

Still on one knee, he shot up a heavy-fingered hand to slow the axe's descent. Not enough to stop it, but in his instant of contact with the haft where it joined the blade, Hjorn thought of a place he knew well. It was a place he saw each morning when he stepped onto his porch to breathe in the cool air of the early dawn, and that he saw each night as he watched the sun set through the haze of mist.

He concentrated on that place even as the descending axe twisted from his grip. With the blade a finger's breadth from his face, he felt the beginning of the quick lurch as the weapon jaunted. A sensation as familiar to Hjorn now as sight and touch after weeks of sending himself hither and yon across the mountains. At his direction, the axe carried the warrior out a hundred paces into empty air, high above the whirlpool where the river coursed away beneath the mountain and into shadow.

The dark knight screamed all the long way down, but his was the only voice Hjorn heard.

He stood in the familiar roar of the river for a long while. Along the edge of the woods below, he saw the last straggling camps of

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those who were defeated by the dark warrior pack up and leave. In the touch of the wind, where he had heard the axe's dark voice for long days now, there was only silence.

Carefully, Hjorn kicked the helmet, then the greatsword to the edge of the porch and over, watching as they tumbled noisily down the cliff and disappeared into the dark below. He hadn't heard the sword talk, but he wasn't taking any chances.

He turned back to the house, more tired and sad than he had ever been. Then he stopped.

Hjorn stepped to the edge of the porch again. Below him, alone in the twilight, the young squire stood at what would have been the perfect location to watch the white knight drop to his death. The standard had fallen at his side.

Hjorn made his way carefully down the cliff with a lantern, dropping the last short distance and dusting himself off. He walked over to the squire, stopping awkwardly a few strides away. The boy was young. Still a few years from the start of a beard, or what passed for one among the Tallfolk. He continued to stare out where the rising mist was lost now to darkness, bright eyes pale with fear.

"Sorry," Hjorn said after a few moments, but the squire was silent. "You bound to the black-haired guy?"

The boy nodded.

"He your kin?"

The boy shook his head.

"Friend?"

No.

"You're not working for him anymore. You got someplace to go?"

Another shake of the head.

"Any family?"

Hjorn saw tears welling. He tugged at his beard, perplexed for a moment.

"Do you like stories?"

Slowly, the boy looked up. He held Hjorn's gaze for a long while. Hjorn felt a point of bright pride welling up inside him. He stood tall.

"I have a guest room," he said.

In the ruins of the attackers' camps, Hjorn found a brace of

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grouse fresh killed, cleaned, and left behind. He washed them with clear water from the oversized pack of the squire's, then slung that pack on his belt. He lifted the boy to his shoulders, felt him cling tightly as he climbed.

He got the fire going with the last of the wood and a couple of bundles of broken arrows for kindling. He had been stuck on the porch for too long, would walk down to the pine grove tomorrow. Also, he had stairs to fix.

Hjorn cooked grouse for dinner and he told the story of the trickster-warrior Roinara. She had walked alone into the Fane of Last Light, bargaining with the dead heroes who dwelt there for the mortal life of Prince Glinus the Forgotten.

The boy clapped and clapped when Hjorn was done.

As he went to sleep that night, the young squire comfortable in the guest room, Hjorn realized for the first time that he was wrong before when he talked to the axe. When it offered him its dark pact the first time and all the times thereafter. Now, Hjorn thought. Only now, he had everything he needed.

When he finally seized the sword, Morghan felt the power again, spiking in a sensation like the emptiness of unspoken words. A bloodless rage twisted through him just as the voice had twisted through him before, and in that instant, in a heartbeat, in the rawness of memory where it clawed at him from the dark dreams that the day tried to push away, he knew that anything was possible.

Too many things still to be done.

So many debts to repay.

"Avenge them..."



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A Tale of the Endlands

From the Anthology
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and Other Tales

by
Scott Fitzgerald Gray

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