

The Forgotten Gods

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The sword felt wonderfully light in my hands as I leapt into battle. It cut through armor and flesh as easily as it did the air which was soon filled with the screams of dying men. “Succor!” They cried. And, “Mercy!” Yet none dared to lower their weapons, to prostrate themselves before me, and so they died.

When the ground had become soaked with blood, turning the soft earth into a quagmire of slick gore, I slowed. My own armor was dented in several places where a lucky strike had found its way through. A small matter. I found that I had traveled quite a distance across the battlefield, and it took a few minutes to make my way back to the wagons. The bodies of raiders sprawled all around me, mixed occasionally with a Royal Marine or two. I paused to strike down a wounded man in his attempt to crawl away. He deserved it. The bandits had thought the caravan to be easy prey, not knowing that one of the Blood rode in the line. They had not expected me.

True, I was a long ways from home, and far off my usual route, but if one wanted to visit the Ivory Tower there were only a few passages to choose from. Unlucky for the bandits that I had chosen this one.

I used the tunic of a fallen trader to clean my sword before returning it to the sheath. The sound of battle could still be heard ringing on the far side of the wagons, but it was diminishing. The fight was over. I climbed back into the wagon I had been traveling in, pushing aside frightened women. Naraya, my companion, had not moved. She sat as still and as implacable as ever, as if rooted to her spot on the wagon floor.

“Have fun?” she asked sarcastically.

“I always do.” I lowered myself onto my cushions gently. Already the berserker rage was fading, and the pain would soon roll over me like thunder. My temples began to throb as the dull ache crept from its refuge at the base of my skull. “Are you still in contact with the Old One?”

“Yes. The effort becomes less as we approach the Tower.”

I grunted. “Then it is as the Mad Priest suspected.”

“Salomar is a great drunken fool who could no more discern a mantra from a witch’s cackle,” Naraya spat in disgust.

I gave her an appraising stare, one which she tactfully ignored. “So he was right.”

“Yes. Damn him.”

Outside, the gathering night was filled with the sounds of activity. There were many wounded men who would need tending. But I wore the mark of the beast, the warrior’s token, and they would not call on me to help. Naraya moved to carefully conceal her Healer’s badge then returned to her meditative position. I loosened my armor a bit, just enough to ease the growing pain in my side, and allowed myself to slip into a light trance.

The noises of the camp faded away. I could not truly sleep like this, so a doze had to suffice. Time enough to sleep when the job was done. I already looked forward to checking into a nice inn, sleeping on a soft mattress until the ache in my bones faded away and I felt like a man again instead of a soldier. But the next job would be there, beckoning, calling me back to the road and adventure. Such was the fate I was cursed to.

It had not always been this way.

I had been born in the mountains, in the fierce lands to the far North untamed even after all the many centuries my people had occupied it. We had to be just as fierce, a people of war, descended from an ancient people bred by the gods themselves for pure combat. I spent my childhood learning to kill, and my formative years putting that knowledge to good use against the encroaching goblin-like Krell whose vile breed swept regularly down upon us from their warrens in the frozen wastes of the Prithvy Irilian. The Dead Lands. My people were as famous for their prowess as they were for their fearlessness, but I always looked on such notoriety with disdain. When one struggles daily with the rigors of mere existence, clinging to life by dragging it kicking and screaming from the shadows, one has no time for fear. But such a life cannot hold everyone, and I was such a one who thirsted for more than mere existence.

Life in the Lowlands was much different than I had been taught to expect. Even for someone like myself, born of the ancient Blood, whose veins run thick with the cold armor of ingrained battle training, it was not a place to tread arrogantly. And yet, treading too lightly can bring just as much grief. Finding that careful balance between haughty confidence and apparent weakness takes a long time to develop. Luckily, I found a good teacher. Death was my old and constant companion, and He would have had the best of me if not for the kindness of a stranger. I still think fondly of Mirkha, the blacksmith who took me in. Mirkha, whose trapped soul went to join the others at the Tower. We spent so much of our lives in the mountains fighting the demonic Krell that we forgot that there were dark gods behind their creation. A lesson brought home to me when the Necromancer decided he wanted me dead. Mirkha had taken my place in the trap, and I was not going to let his murder go unavenged simply because I had slain the Necromancer.

“I said the meal is ready,” Naraya said into my ear. “You shouldn’t go so deep into those trances.”

My eyes refocused on her face, now inches from my own. I had to resist an urge to kiss her. I knew she would hate me for it. I nodded to let her know I was back in the present and she moved away. The wagon was deserted, and I was unsure how long I had been wandering the avenues of my memories, but it was dark outside. The smell of food drifted in encouraging me to shake off the last of my lethargy.

Naraya left the wagon ahead of me. I could see we were still in the same place where the battle had occurred. It made a stilted sort of sense. There had been dead to bury, rituals to perform, and with the new ghosts lingering about, the superstitious raiders would probably not return to this spot for some time. Garson, one of the Traders, waved to me from where he sat amongst other richly clad, portly men, and I moved to join him.

“Fine piece of work you did today,” he said, beaming jovially at me. He favored his companions with a reproving look. “It seems my hiring your services was justified.” The other men studiously avoided making comment. I accepted the offer of his gesture and sat beside him. There was no cushion for me, however. Still, the food at Garson’s fire was always better, mainly because he had a seemingly infinite supply of pepper. He heaped a portion onto the stew filling my bowl.

“My thanks,” I told him. He grunted in reply.

“I’m told that you Northerners don’t usually like the spice,” one of the men said as he leaned toward me, leering. “All the food you eat is bland and tasteless, is that so?”

I judiciously chewed the mouthful of stew and swallowed before answering. How could I tell them of my home when it had changed so much? The high white walls, the golden pennants snapping crisply in the glacial wind, the streets of red brick where I played as a child, the majestic temple at the city’s center where the priests ritually cast their spells of protective warding and kept the wild at bay. What would these men of the desert lands think of snowghosts, the man-like creatures that roamed the mountain passes and only attacked you if you dared to look upon their misshapen, white fur covered faces? Or of my father, a Captain of the Guard who put a sword in my hand when I was three, starting me on the long road to becoming a true warrior like all the men of my city were?

These men had no sense of what true honor was. To them, a cushion and a spicy bowl of stew marked them as the lords here, in this place. “We made do,” I answered. The men laughed at me, the laughter of those who thought themselves superior to the barbarian.

“Don’t listen to them,” Garson said, laughing just as much as the others. He decided to change the subject. “You’ve never told me what changed your mind. Normally I don’t

like to pry, bad for business and all that, but you seemed very eager to be away from Procopius.”

I considered my answer carefully. It was the second time he had asked about this. I made it clear when I signed on that my purpose was private. To be asking again, now, meant Garson was under some pressure to do so. I looked around the fire at the other Traders, and I couldn't help wondering which would be the first I would kill if it came to that..

“We are going to Troysa,” Naraya said, coming up behind me. “To the Sea Kingdoms. More than that you need not ask.”

She stopped at my shoulder and I looked up at her trying not to look as relieved for her intervention as I felt. I had never been good at tact and was more inclined to tell Garson to stuff it up his fat rear. “What business have you in the Sea Kingdoms?” the Trader pressed, oblivious to his danger. “There is nothing there for...people such as yourselves.”

I hoped the darkness hid the flush of anger I felt. It was a carefully worded insult, aimed mainly at Naraya, but I felt its sting as well. Folk of the mountains had been considered barbarians since long before the Plains had been settled. And Naraya...

The Trader backed off after glancing into her eyes. No magic was needed for that. Naraya could be frightening at times, especially when she chose to be. For a moment, I thought she was going to sit beside me, and I took a quick mental inventory of the weapons I was carrying. Traders were known for their tolerance, but these were mostly Moonsies, worshipers of Vaal from Lha-Mô, a place where women were second-class human beings in all respects. They eyed her warily, but Naraya lay her hand lightly on my shoulder before turning away. The tension around the fire seemed to drain away with her.

I lingered awhile longer, making small talk with the men. No more mention was made of Naraya or our destination, fortunately. The Traders looked upon women as property most of the time, but even they feared the magic of a traveling witch. I was still of mixed emotions concerning the woman, but I felt more kinship to her than these Traders. I think they knew better than to insult her in my presence. Presently the conversation lulled and I was able to excuse myself honorably. The land was dark away from the fire, and chill. Naraya was waiting patiently near our wagon, just at the edge of a group of women who fell silent when they saw me approach. The women, like the men, lived within the walls of their gender. I wondered how baby Traders were made.

“You wanted to talk?” I asked, stepping up to Naraya. She gave the women a curt nod before taking me gently by the arm and leading me away.

“We should take a walk,” she suggested, putting action to words as she led me into the scrub off the side of the road. My eyes took a moment to adjust in the dim light away from the glare of the fires. “Worried about bandits?” she asked, sensing my tension.

“No,” I told her. “Not in the least. I have you here to protect me.” Naraya laughed, something close to a girlish giggle, and I felt myself relax. She was an enigma, this woman from the plains. As a man from the mountains, from one of the Fringe Cities, I had been trained my entire life for combat. Naraya had been trained to catch a husband, to be a good farmer’s wife, and had thrown all that aside to pursue her true love: magic. There was no room in her life for me. Not in the way I might have preferred. But then, I didn’t really have a place for her either. A man of the Blood is devoted to his craft, and there is no room left in his heart for something else. A warrior who allows himself to love is a warrior who is compromised. A perfect warrior must have nothing that an enemy can use against him.

There were times when I wished I had not been born of the Blood.

“It’s spring in the White Mountains,” she said unexpectedly. I glanced at her sharply, but her face belied no trace of ridicule. Then I remembered that she had grown up within sight of the mountains of my homeland.

“Yes,” I responded, for lack of anything better to say. An image of Tulan Qu, my native city, sprang into my mind. It was high in the hills and would still be covered with snow for another month. In the valley below, however, the melting ice would have already filled the streams, and the shepherds would be busy with the flocks and herds. The city’s warriors would be patrolling on their huge brown steeds, their amber pennants flying from their long lances, ever watchful for Krell or whatever new monstrosities they created in their breeding pits to assail us. I would have been among those warriors if I had stayed. I might even have been among one of the hunting parties who ventured out onto the Prithvy Irilian, or among the guards of a trading venture into the Lowlands. Instead, I was here, and at the moment not even nostalgia could make me desire other company than the woman at my side.

Naraya remained silent, respecting my reverie. When I came back to myself, I discovered we had walked quite a distance from the trader’s camp. The night wasn’t as dark as I’d thought it would be. The moon was full and had risen above the distant hills to flood the land with a pale yellow light. The land was broken, as if some great battle had been fought between mighty giants, their struggles pushing up the land in rippling folds as it scoured life from the soil. The road cut through the middle of it all like a snaking river, taking the easiest route over and around the tumbled landscape. It was easy to see why the bandits liked this place.

“We should not be so far from camp,” I advised, remembering the earlier attack. “There may be bandits about.”

“What have we to fear?” she asked sarcastically. “Are you not of the Blood?”

“You say that as though you don’t believe it means something,” I accused. “Must I prove myself to you again?”

“You might at that,” she said, staring into the shadows. I tried to see what she was looking at, but our vision was different. I had the better eyesight, yet Naraya saw into realms unseeable, into the world of spirits where my eyes could not. I felt a light touch float across my skin. I stopped walking, pulling Naraya to a halt as well. She tightened her hold on my arm.

“Yes,” my companion said, sensing my unspoken question. “Ghosts. A great many of them. This is a place of much death.”

“Then we should return to the camp at once,” I said sternly. “I’m quite confident in my martial abilities, but I can’t defend you against the supernatural.”

She turned to look at me. I felt a familiar twisting in my stomach as her dark eyes penetrated mine. The moonlight made her look even more beautiful, and I hated her for it. I hated her for making me feel anything at all for her. Danger floated above my heart like a knife poised to strike a fatal blow.

“I don’t want to lose you,” I said unexpectedly, surprising myself as the worlds tumbled from my lips.

“Is that affection I hear in your voice?” she taunted in an easy voice. There was an edge to her words, something held back. The moonlight reflected brightly from her pale face, glinting from a wetness in her eyes as she gazed at me. It was the kind of moment that sticks in your memory, when you realize that something momentous is about to happen, or could have happened if you hadn’t messed it up by saying something stupid. She was showing herself to me, something she rarely did, and had never done to this level before. That’s when I knew it for absolute certain that I was doomed. The shock of the realization left me cold.

I hadn’t intended to feel this way about her. For that matter, it wasn’t something I would have ever expected. But there it was. And by the look she was giving me I suspected that she felt something akin to the same thing for me. That was another shock, that this woman with all her strength and seemingly impenetrable veneer could have feelings for a person such as me. I was more than a killer, more than a mercenary. I was cursed, and she knew it. Yet there we were, gazing into each other’s eyes in a moment that seemed to stretch out forever, each waiting for the other to speak.

Whatever she might have said next, or whatever blunder I might have made, was lost as a shadow rose up from the ground behind her. It was blacker than black, like a hole in the air that took shape as some beast with thick arms and legs, a sinewy neck topped by a massive head that split apart into a gaping maw. A fetid odor washed over us from its breath. Naraya looked startled as I swept her aside, reaching for my sword. The beast

struck an instant later, thick tendrils of midnight arching out from its indistinct form to strike my chest and send me flying backward. I lost my grip on my sword and it tumbled away into the night.

I hit the ground hard, the impact driving the breath from my lungs. As I struggled dizzily to regain my feet, I could feel the ground trembling beneath my feet. The creature, whatever it was, was coming after me. There was a ringing in my ears, bright spots of color dancing in front of my eyes. The thing was on me before I could recover enough to resist. I was lifted into the air, and where the creature's limbs touched me my body began to tingle fiercely. There was strong magic here, of a kind I'd never encountered before. I pushed futilely at the parts of the thing wrapped around me, but it was like fighting against bands of steel. When I could finally draw enough air into my chest to speak, I shouted to Naraya to run. Better she should flee than meet her end like this.

The foolish woman stood her ground. I saw her lift her hands into the air, and the light that grew between her hands dispelled the dancing spots of shadows from my eyes. It effected the creature as well. It roared, a sound like a thousand agonized screams, and I heard a wet sizzle coming from its back. It released me, letting me fall to the ground as it staggered away attempting to escape its torment. I knew it would orient on Naraya in moments. It would crush her, killing her to stop her spell. I could not let that happen.

It was more than the fact that she was my friend, more than the knowledge that I could only gain entrance to the Tower with her help. That revelation alone was enough to make me stagger, to make my air deprived body twitch and nearly miss taking hold of my fallen sword. I was in love with her. For a man such as myself, admitting that was tantamount to confessing weakness. I was already as good as dead. So I told myself as I leaped at the creature again. My life was spent, and if I was to die it would be here and now, saving Naraya, rather than waiting for my weakness to betray me further down the road. Worse, before it could betray me in the Tower itself.

The blade burst into flame as I crossed the air between Naraya and the beast. That was her doing, I later learned. I had never before seen her perform her craft with such strength, and it was only much later that I realized why. I will be forgiven for the oversight, for I am, after all, only a man, and not such a one as is accustomed to the delicate intricacies of interpersonal relationships. Naraya saw me leaping to my death, squandering what I thought was the last of my vitality, and she acted to save me. My blade would have done nothing to the creature, I knew that before I made the leap. I sought only to distract it, to regain the focus of its attention in order to allow Naraya to escape. She, however, thought otherwise.

The sword sliced into the shadowy flesh with a bite. The jolt of impact sent shivers up my arm and a large piece of the creature came away from the whole. It fluttered into the air, dissipating like vapor until it had been consumed by the night. The howl the creature loosed then was nigh deafening. I swung upward, letting the arc of my sword pass through the creature's center. The roar cut off abruptly. I felt the blade strike something more solid. The metal rang like one of the Mad Priest's bells sending a piercing shock

into my shoulder, threatening to tear the weapon from my hands. I clenched it with all the brute force I could muster, somehow retaining my hold as the creature began to writhe. The blackness of the thing's skin boiled away revealing a deeper ebony hue beneath. Then that too began to dissolve, flying up into the shrouded sky as if drawn by the inhalation of a god.

Naraya appeared by my side. She put her hand over mine where I clung stubbornly to my sword. I felt her power flow through me, channeling through my tendons and into the blade, and thus into the creature's vile heart. The stone heart of the thing burst asunder with a loud crack sending both of us sprawling onto our backs. The creature came apart in a violent whirlwind, a black maelstrom of bitter anger and an anger so great that the heat of it washed over us like a tide from Hell. Then it was gone. The night returned, swamping us in a natural darkness that was cool and unthreatening.

It was some minutes before enough strength returned to my limbs for me to rise. Naraya lay still and pale as a corpse not far to my right, and the sight of her filled me with a dread I had not experienced since I was a child first learning the art of combat at my father's knee. Between those halcyon days and this, I had come to believe I no longer feared death, and in a great measure that was true. I did not fear my own death, only that of another. Only that of her.

I crawled to her side dragging my sword with me. The end of the blade still smoked from the power that had flowed through it, and it was warm to the touch. Naraya, however, was cold. I managed to bring myself up to my knees and hover above her, and I forced my hand to release the sword so that I might shake both her shoulders. "Awaken," I commanded. I had meant for the word to sound firm and imperious, but even I could hear the weak fear laced through the syllables.

"Naraya," I whispered, bending over her. "Please. Resist the call. Don't leave me."

Her eyes fluttered. They opened. She looked at me glassily with unseeing eyes. She inhaled sharply, her back arching with sudden shock. Her flesh became warm under my hands and I pulled her gratefully closer, enfolding her in my arms.

"Kaylik," she whispered, speaking aloud my secret name, the one I thought no one but myself and the Mad Priest knew. Slowly, her arms came up to return my embrace. "Oh, by the gods. The creature...is it gone?"

"We sent it back to the Seven Hells," I agreed. She tried to pull back but I refused to loosen my hold on her. I could not let her see the moisture on my cheek.

She seemed to understand and ceased her effort. She gathered fistfuls of my cloak in her hands and clung to me all the tighter. "I thought you were going to die," she said weakly.

"I thought the same of you," I responded.

She laughed. "But I did," she said. "I did. And I heard a voice calling to me in the darkness, calling me back. It sounded like you, but it wasn't."

I tensed. I pulled back to look into her eyes, no longer caring if she saw the proof of my weakness. "You spoke my secret name," I accused. "How did you know it?"

She released one hand from her desperate hold and touched my face, absently brushing away the wetness. "He told it to me," she said, looking deeply into my eyes. I shivered, feeling that she could see much farther into my soul than I wished.

"Who? Who talked to you from beyond the grave?"

"Not who you think," she answered. "He was so like you, I thought that I had failed, that you had died after all and we were meeting in the Great Hall of Shirva, that we were being passed on into Eternity. But it wasn't you. Oh, Kaylik, I thought that demon was going to kill you. I'm so sorry that I've been so cold to you. It's just..."

"I understand," I said, and I did. She never hoped to have her love for me returned. "It is a dangerous thing, you know, loving one of the Blood. We love once, and once only, and it is forever."

She smiled, and I thought she had never looked more beautiful. "I wouldn't have it any other way," she said.

I looked back toward the encampment. No one had dared come to our aid. Perhaps they hoped we would never return. We saved them from the bandits, and they had no further use for us. It was for the best. They could not witness this moment, for if they did I would have slain them all.

The moon was peeking from behind the clouds on its way to the horizon before we found enough strength to stand. It isn't often that one survives an encounter with one of the Dark Ones and lives to brag about it. Alone, I would have perished, any my quest along with it. Now, my confidence was fortified. Whatever challenges awaited us at the Tower, they would pale in comparison to what we had experienced.

"How long?" she asked as we began to hobble back toward the distant firelight. "How long have you loved me?"

I laughed. "That is not an easy question to answer," I said. "Nor do I think it matters. The lifespan of the moth is not measured by how long it spent within its chrysalis, only from the moment it first spreads its wings and soars."

"How poetic," she teased. Strangely, I was not angered. I pulled her closer, allowing myself to take pleasure in her touch, and she did not rebuke me for my intimate touch. She leaned into me with a sigh.

“Are we still going to the Tower?” she asked a moment later.

“Of course,” I told her, then had a thought and added, “Do you wish for us not to?”

“I think it is more imperative than ever that we do,” she said. “The Old One grows weaker. He needs your sword. We have faced the Dark One, but there are others we shall have to defeat.”

“You don’t sound as pessimistic as you once did,” I observed.

Naraya’s arm snaked around my waist and she stopped walking in order to press her face into my neck. “You never asked who I spoke with,” she said.

I felt a pit open in my stomach. “I assumed it was something you rather preferred not to share.”

“There can be no more secrets between us, Kaylik,” she said gently. “I was ready to die for you, and you were ready to do the same. There is no shame in sharing your heart. You are not in the mountains any longer. Already there are things you have done in your life that your people would have slain you for. Forget those old ways, as I must strive to forget the ways of my past. We face a new road together, my Love. Destiny has great things in store for us.”

“You sound so confident.”

“I am.”

I pulled back so that I could see into her eyes. The moonlight glinted off the surface of those dark orbs giving the illusion of inner light. Only I was not entirely convinced it was an illusion. “Then tell me,” I said to her. “Tell me who you spoke with.”

Her smile warmed my skin. “Our son,” she said, dropping the words quietly and simply upon me.

I did not ask more. The ways of magic and the gods is not the way of the Blood. Ours is a life of combat, of fighting and struggle. We are born so that we might die, and the art of living is something we are taught never to indulge in. But I was very far from home, and Naraya was so much closer. I did not question her confidence again. I thought that loving her would make me weak, but in that moment I realized that I had become much stronger. If I had lost anything in opening my heart, she had filled the space to overflowing, enhancing and embellishing what I was, and what I might become.

If anyone saw us leaning on each other as we returned to our wagon, no one ever spoke of it within my hearing. After all, to them we were just strange barbarians from the distant North, our ways as mysterious to them as the legends of our people were ubiquitously exaggerated. I no longer cared. The Tower, and our destiny, was awaiting

our arrival at the end of the long road ahead of us. For the rest of that night, however, the only destiny I cared for was in my arms, whispering my secret name into my ear like a fervent prayer as we delved into each other's secret essence and explored a world we had thought forbidden to us. And when the dawn came, we faced it unafraid.

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