

The Broken Pieces

The Paladins, Book 4

DAVID DALGLISH

BOOKS BY DAVID DALGLISH

THE HALF-ORC SERIES

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The Cost of Betrayal
The Death of Promises
The Shadows of Grace
A Sliver of Redemption

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A Dance of Cloaks
A Dance of Blades
A Dance of Death

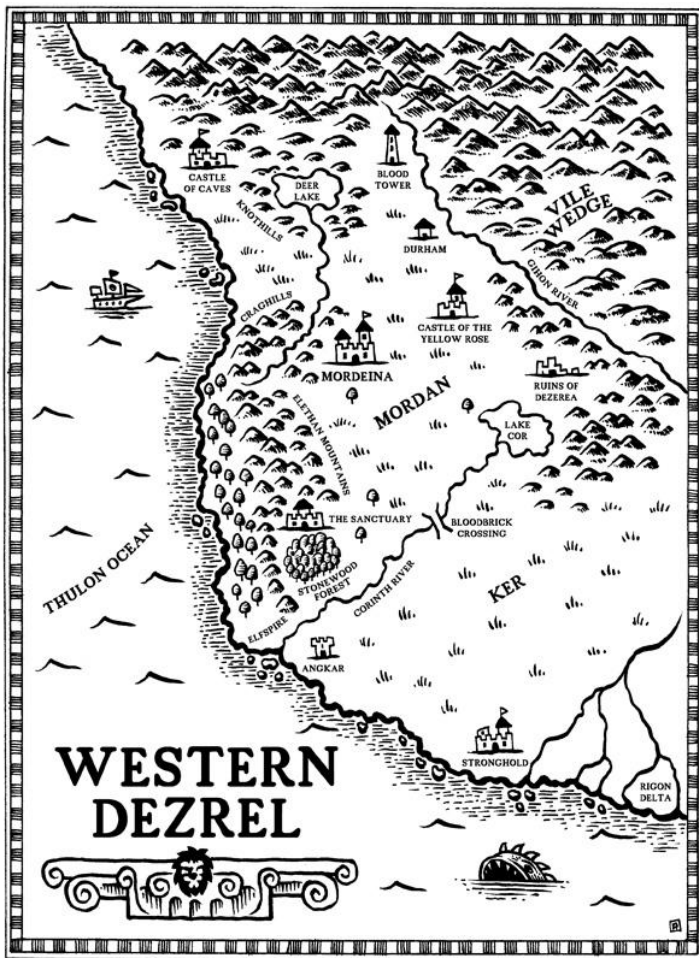
WATCHER'S BLADE TRILOGY

Blood of the Underworld
Blood of the Father (coming late 2012)

THE PALADINS

Night of Wolves
Clash of Faiths
The Old Ways
The Broken Pieces

The Broken Pieces



1



In the Castle of the Yellow Rose, Lord Sebastian Hemman stood staring at his throne. Upon the wood of the chair he'd handsomely paid an artist to stencil in various lions, all roaring and clawing with sharpened teeth and claws. The cushions were red, and sewn in golden colors were two symbols. One was of the rose, his banner, the other another lion. His entire seat of power, the representation of his divine right to rule, was nothing but a declaration of his faith in Karak.

Except he felt no faith, only fury. His thin hand dug into the cloth as he entertained thoughts of tearing off the stitching with his bare fingers.

"Milord?" said a guard, stepping through the doors into the grand hall.

"Have they finally arrived?" Sebastian asked, not bothering to turn around.

"The priest has, if that is who you mean."

"Who else would I mean? Leave me, and send the bastard in. Just him, and no others."

Sebastian sighed and settled into the throne. It felt like the carved lions bit at his hands, and the stitching growled at his back. The guard hurried away, as if afraid of his master's ire. Not that Sebastian blamed him. He'd hanged two men the day before, peasants stupid enough to be overheard speaking ill of him. It'd done nothing to improve his mood. Nothing would. Karak had betrayed him. Despite his loyalty, his devotion, and most importantly, his

The Broken Pieces

exorbitant tithes, the god of Order had sealed his doom in his war against his rebellious brother, Arthur.

The doors opened again, and in stepped the elderly priest, Luther. They'd met several times before, though never for long. Something about his manner made Sebastian feel like a child waiting to be exposed for the lies he'd told. Luther slowly approached, walking between the many empty tables. There'd be no feasting, not for several years. Most of the men who'd raised cups to Sebastian's name were now dead, crushed by Luther's army of mercenaries and paladins.

"I know I should greet you, Luther, but I fear I do not know how," Sebastian said, standing. "Are you my friend, my enemy, or my conqueror?"

"I am none," Luther said. "I come as your priest."

"Then you are all three."

Luther smiled.

"Your wit is sharp as ever. That is good. I expect you to listen well, and keep your pride in check as I speak."

There'd been no spoken threat, but Sebastian felt it keenly, like a sudden chill sweeping through his hall. Taking a deep breath, he choked down his anger. Now was not the time, not when Luther's army outnumbered his own two to one.

"Before you speak, I would ask two questions," he said. "If you'll permit them."

"It is your hall, and I am but a guest," Luther said. "Ask."

"Is it true what I've heard? Did you attack my army when it was on the verge of crushing my brother in his Castle of Caves?"

Luther stood before the throne and crossed his arms. The directness of the question didn't seem to bother him any. If anything, he looked bored.

“I did,” he said.

The words shoved a spike into Sebastian’s gut. His self-control was stretched to its limit as he asked his second question.

“Then pray tell me, why? I have loyally served you for years. It is my brother who speaks out against Karak, denouncing the mandatory services my people attend on the seventh. I have sent a fortune in tithes south, and yet when I fight a common enemy...”

“Silence,” Luther ordered, and Sebastian obeyed. The priest’s apathy was gone, if it had ever been. Instead he saw a terrible rage only barely contained. Sebastian tried to rise above it, to stand to his full height and deny a meddling priest, but could not, so great was that fury.

“The North is in shambles,” Luther said. “And the blame lies on your shoulders. In my travels I have talked to the people, and I have heard their faith. It is nothing, Sebastian, an idiot’s faith at best. There is no love for Karak in your lands. No devotion. You put faith as a yoke around their necks, then rip gold from their hands far beyond what we ask.”

“But...but I have done things this way for years, and your order...”

“Is full of men who thought you caused no wrong, and might foster a better way,” Luther said, disgust dripping from every word. “But we judge a farmer by the harvest, and this harvest is poor. Rebellion stirs in their hearts, and not just against you. The Citadel is crushed, and Ashhur’s paladins are nearly extinct. There is a chance to accomplish something here in the North, something great, but it will not be with you as its lord.”

Sebastian felt his blood pounding in his ears. So this was it? The priesthood would try to overthrow him at last? Years ago, when he first took rule of the North, Karak’s

The Broken Pieces

priests had come to him, whispering careful words about remaining respectful of their faith. Sebastian had known what it meant, and been a careful follower ever since.

“If you take any action against me, all of Mordan will war against you,” Sebastian said. “No lord or lady will risk losing their throne because of the whims of a priest.”

“That has been happening since the dawn of time, Sebastian. But no, I will not take action against you. I only present you a choice, one you will either accept or refuse. The consequences will then be yours, however you decide.”

So this was it, then. At last he’d hear the true reason for the betrayal.

“Speak it, then,” Sebastian said, leaning back in his chair. “Waste no more of my time.”

“Your army is crushed,” Luther began.

“And whose fault is that, I wonder?”

“Please,” Luther said. “Do not waste my time, either.”

Sebastian waved for him to continue.

“Regardless the reason, you are defeated,” said the priest. “Your brother marches this way, the rebel Kaide at his side. Together they have gathered men, more than enough to surround your castle and starve you out. The North knows of your defeat, and the seeds of rebellion are sprouting. Your only hope, other than surrendering, is to accept our aid.”

“Aid?” Sebastian asked. He could hardly believe what he was hearing. “You crush my army, then offer me aid? What nonsense is this?”

“Not nonsense,” Luther said. “Just the plain truth.”

“You would blackmail me,” Sebastian said, realizing what was going on. “By the gods, you have the stones to do it, too.”

“One god,” Luther said. “And I will do all he desires, regardless of my...stones. As for you, you have no wife,

and no heir, something your people have grumbled behind your back about for some time. Not that you've cared, selfish as you are. You have never worried about succession, or ensuring peace after your death. I will end that, now. With my aid, you'll sign a will donating all of your lands, and the lands of your brother after his defeat, to the temple of Karak."

Sebastian blinked, hardly able to believe his ears.

"All of it?" he asked.

Luther nodded.

Sebastian rubbed his eyes, then stood from his throne. For once, he felt a fire brewing in him, and he would cover no longer.

"You ask for land that has been in my family for generations!" he cried. "You ask that I crush my brother, and then in death hand over the entire North to your temple? And how long, pray tell, until I die in my sleep? A year? Two? You're a patient one, Luther, but I have a feeling you'll want this to happen in your lifetime. This is...this is...this is unacceptable. You have overstepped every bound imaginable. I will send word to Mordeina. When the King hears of how you attacked my army, how you blackmailed me..."

"The King will hear what we tell him!" Luther roared back, his voice shockingly powerful for his age. It was as if Karak's fury thundered out of his throat. "If you do not agree, then we'll reveal the fleecing of your people in our name. We will tell him you waged war with the claim of our approval, and even used the faith of our god to recruit and fund this brothers' squabble. Do you know who King Baedan's advisors are, Sebastian? They're priests, and not of Ashhur. What do you think they'll whisper in his ears? They'll say we did what was just, for how could we ignore a lord insulting and profaning Karak in such a way?"

The Broken Pieces

Sebastian didn't want to believe it, couldn't believe it, but he knew it was true. Common knowledge throughout Mordan was of how the priests of Karak guided the King's every move. Just yet another reason why Sebastian had tried to side so publicly with the Lion.

"Why?" he asked, slumping in his throne. "Why have you turned against me so? Why such hatred?"

Luther pulled his robe tighter about his shoulders and turned to the door.

"I do it because there is no faith in your heart," he said. "Just a shallow lie that has damaged our cause greatly. Dress yourself head to toe with the mark of the Lion, but you still hide nothing, not from me. Think on my offer. If you refuse, you'll have to fend off Arthur on your own. But we both know how that will go, don't we?"

Sebastian's hands shook as he clutched the sides of his chair. His mind whirled, trying to make sense of it all, to think of some way to save himself from his predicament.

"Give me a week to decide," he said at last.

"No," Luther said, walking away. "You have three days. Use them well, Sebastian."

The guards opened the doors so he might leave, and the noise of them shutting thundered throughout the suddenly quiet hall.

Sebastian rubbed his eyes, felt them tearing up with frustration and panic. He wouldn't lose this war. He couldn't. Arthur would hand him over to that rebel, Kaide the Cannibal. What the man would do to him... would he even kill him?

"Damn you, Luther," Sebastian said, though he had no clue what god might be left to do it. Karak would not damn his own, and as for Ashhur...

Ashhur was dead, his paladins gone, his priests too weak to stop it. There was no one left. No one left at all.

2



Jerico awoke with a start, crying out while hardly aware he was doing so. Sweat poured down his face, and it felt cool against his skin in the chill night air. He'd flung off his bedroll, no doubt from flailing about in the night. Clouds hid most of the stars, but the moon shone through one of the scattered gaps, and in its light Jerico stared at his hands. They were shaking.

"Just dreams," the paladin said, steadying his breathing in an attempt to slow down his heart. "Dreams, that's all, nothing more."

He lay back down and closed his eyes. Though he was on the outskirts of Robert's camp, he was still close enough to hear the snores and shuffling. From all around thrummed the cicadas, plentiful in the tall grass in the Knothills where they camped. To some it would have seemed dreadfully loud, but to Jerico it was nothing compared with Sandra's echoing screams in his head.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw it. The battle at the Castle of Caves was at its end, Sebastian's siege crushed by the unexpected aid of Luther's army. Sandra had come running, leaping into his arms, oblivious to the gore and death all around them in the gates of the castle where Jerico had helmed the defense. She'd been his first love, his only love, and night after night he re-lived that moment where Luther came, pointed his finger, and blasted her heart to pieces with a bolt of lightning that had shimmered black.

Now do you understand, Jerico? Luther had said as Jerico held Sandra's corpse in his arms. You are

The Broken Pieces

insignificant, just a puppet to my desires. Go off into the wilderness and die. There is no longer a place for you in this world.

Such calculated cruelty. It made him shiver still. Luther had meant every word, and spoken them as if to a child or troublesome animal. Jerico, covered in the blood of dozens of soldiers, had been nothing but a tool. But for what reason? As he closed his eyes and tried to fall back asleep, he pondered on that, wishing his mind to remain on things other than the life vanishing from Sandra's eyes. Why had Luther wanted Jerico to keep Lord Arthur alive? What purpose? Everything he knew about Lord Sebastian implied he was an ardent supporter of Karak.

...just a puppet...

That's how Jerico felt. A clueless puppet. How did one fight against the strings when ignorant of the direction they pulled?

"Forget it," Jerico muttered, slowly rising to his feet. His mind was too awake.

Walking away from the camp, he hoped to put his mind at ease, to let the sounds of the night and rhythm of his steps drown away the lingering fears. Just south of the camp was a larger hill, and Jerico climbed it, the motion stretching the muscles of his legs in a satisfying way. He'd thought to overlook the encampment alone, but was surprised to find another. Jerico's first instinct was to reach for his mace, but Ashhur cried no warning in his mind. Besides, he'd left his mace and shield next to his bedroll, a rather stupid act in hindsight.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?" the other man asked. He sat facing the camp, a long dirk in hand. When he looked up to speak, the faint light shone across his face, revealing his gray hair tied in a long ponytail.

"I could ask you the same thing, Kaide," Jerico said.

Kaide met his gaze, and for several long seconds he showed no reaction. Then he looked away, back down to his dirk.

“I think we both know the answer,” the bandit lord said.

Jerico did, of course. Six days ago they’d buried Sandra along with the rest of the dead. If anyone felt the pain keener than Jerico, it’d be Kaide.

“Mind if I sit?” Jerico asked. “If neither of us can sleep, we might as well talk.”

“Why not?” Kaide said. “You do tend to help one fall asleep.”

“That’s what the people in Durham used to say after my sermons,” Jerico said, forcing an unreturned smile. Shaking his head, Jerico sat beside the man, and together they overlooked the tents. On one side were Lord Arthur’s men, about five hundred in number. On the other side were those belonging to Kaide. Most slept below the open sky instead of in tents, having little more than the clothes on their backs and a desire for vengeance in their hearts.

“What is it you see?” Jerico asked when Kaide continued to stare at the camp.

“I see my men outnumbering Arthur’s,” Kaide said. “Yet we will receive no honor at Sebastian’s defeat. We’ll earn no lands, and be given no credit. It’ll all belong to Arthur.”

“I thought he promised to give you back Ashvale,” Jerico said.

Kaide let out a chuckle.

“I’m not sure I want it anymore. Enough blood on my hands.” He fell silent for a moment, and Jerico could tell he was struggling for words. “She told me, you know,” he said after a time. “That bastard, Luther, he gave her warning. Said I was to stay away, me and my men. I laughed at her.

The Broken Pieces

Laughed. And now look at what's happened. Here I am, Kaide the Cannibal, marching south to have my revenge, and all I can think of is how I wish I'd let you and Arthur rot in that castle."

"It's not your fault," Jerico said.

"It's not?" Kaide asked, shooting him a glare. "Then whose is it? Luther's? Arthur's? Yours? Tell me, Jerico. Tell me, so I can shove this blade up their ass and rip it out their throat."

Jerico waited to respond, letting Kaide calm first. In truth, he wasn't sure what he had to offer in answer, but he had to try. He'd felt distance growing between him and Kaide for a while, and when Sandra died it'd turned into a massive chasm.

"Revenge isn't how you should honor her," he began.

"Bullshit!" Kaide shouted, stabbing his dirk into the dirt. "Bullshit. Revenge is all I have left. It's what's gotten me this far. It's what has rallied these men to fight on my side to overthrow Sebastian. All I had beyond revenge was my sister and daughter, and now I've lost one."

"She's not lost, not..."

"No," Kaide said, glaring. "No, don't you dare tell me that. I don't want to hear about the hereafter. I don't want to hear about golden streets and rows of angels. My sister is dead, gods dammit! Dead, gone, lost, and for what reason? Because I pissed off a priest? Because I was stupid enough to think I could accomplish something in this miserable fucking world?"

"Luther killed Sandra to hurt me," Jerico said, the words like acid in his throat. "That's why she died."

"To hurt you?" Kaide said. "That's all? To think she died for so noble a purpose. Why are you so special? If he wanted to hurt you, he should have just hurt you. Not my sister. Not my little..."

He was crying, and he jammed the dirk into the dirt again and again. His upper body trembled with the action.

“What good are you, Jerico?” he asked at last. “Sandra loved you. I know she did. And you couldn’t protect her, not even her. I sit here, and you have no comfort to offer other than petty dreams of gold you desperately pretend are real. You’re an excellent killer, I’ll give you that. An excellent killer in a world that’s gotten so very fucking good at that lately.”

Kaide stood, dirk in hand, and paused. His back was to Jerico, as if he were waiting, giving Jerico one last chance to refute the words. Jerico wanted to. He wanted to say something profound, something meaningful. A dozen responses he’d learned at the Citadel came to mind, things he’d been trained to say at such questioning. But they felt prepared. They felt dishonest. If he and Darius were wiped out, what did the world of Dezrel lose? What did he have to offer?

“Hope,” Jerico said. “I offer hope.”

“Hope?” Kaide asked, looking over his shoulder. “I don’t see any hope in your eyes. I don’t hear any hope in your voice. You’re living a lie, Jerico, and I want no part of it. Luther was right. You should go off into the wilderness and die. There’s no hope left in this world, just a lot of tears and blood.”

Kaide descended the hill. Jerico watched him go, his gut wrenched into a knot. More than ever he wished he could say something, offer something, cleanse away the man’s anguish for his sister with a simple prayer. But instead he heard the words, the accusations, and as the clouds passed over the moon, darkening the land, Jerico dared wonder.

The Broken Pieces

When the sun rose, and the army below stirred in preparations for another day's march, Jerico remained upon the hill, still awake, still in doubt.



Grevus stepped into the tent, then waited at the entrance with his hands clasped behind his back. His dark armor was polished to a fine gleam, the lion on his breastplate intricately detailed so that it seemed its fur blew in an unseen wind. Sheathed at his side was his well-worn blade. For twenty years he'd served as a paladin of Karak, and in those twenty years, he'd never met a priest more frightening than Luther.

"You called for me?" he asked when Luther turned from his candlelit desk. A parchment lay before him, an inkwell beside it. Luther put away the quill he held, then gestured to what he'd written.

"I have a message for you to deliver," the priest said. "One that, given the circumstances, might put your life in peril."

"My life belongs to Karak," Grevus said. "I shall do whatever he commands without fear or doubt."

"Fear itself is irrelevant," Luther said, turning back to the parchment and scanning over it. "It's how you act upon it that matters. Doubt, however, is poison. I say this only to ensure you are careful, and remain guarded. This is a most delicate task, more than just delivering a message."

Grevus hated the cryptic words but knew better than to demand a proper explanation. If Luther wished to give him one, he'd do so on his own terms.

"I will do as I must," Grevus said. "Where am I to go?"

"To the Blood Tower," Luther said, letting out a sigh. Grevus swallowed, everything clicking in place.

"To Cyric," he said.

“Yes, to Cyric,” Luther said. “This must be handled delicately. I’ve already sent a missive to Mordeina, requesting the full force of our might to come north under my command. So far none of them know of Cyric’s claims to be Karak made flesh, and I’d like this settled without them ever knowing.”

“You fear they’ll condemn him, and risk war amongst ourselves?”

“Condemn? No, Grevus, I fear that my brethren will believe him. The only thing worse than a madman is a madman with followers.”

Grevus felt his body stiffen. Luther was the most faithful, intelligent priest he’d ever known, hence why he feared him so. He knew Karak’s every desire, and when he spoke, it was with the voice of the Lion. If he was afraid of Cyric’s claim, and the damage it might cause...

“So you don’t believe him then?” Grevus asked.

Luther shot him a look.

“Believe him? Of course I don’t believe him. That you have to ask makes me reconsider sending you as bearer of my message.”

“Forgive me,” Grevus said, bowing low. His mind scrambled for the right words. He thought back to his days at the Stronghold, particularly the weeks spent reading over prophecy before returning to the physical training and prayers. “But every child of Karak has been told there will be a day when our god walks the world as he once did. When the sun rises, we pray today is that day, so our hearts may be ready, and our faith strong enough to kneel in his presence without shame.”

“Grevus, I trust you above all others,” Luther said, and the worried look on his face made Grevus uneasy. “You are a simple man, faithful, practical. If you are uncertain about

The Broken Pieces

Cyric's claim, then I fear all the more how the rest of our brethren will react."

"You misunderstand me," Grevus said. "I believe that Karak might one day walk this world. What I do doubt, however, is that he's Cyric."

"You speak of doubt yet again. Be certain, or admit you know nothing. Never doubt."

The ink dry, Luther rolled up the message, then began melting wax so he might form a seal. Grevus watched, the tent feeling incredibly cramped despite its large size. The air was suffocating, he realized, though he was unsure why. Maybe it was Luther's worry that infected him. Grevus felt best walking into a conflict with his sword drawn and his armor shining. That was his home, on the battlefield, the heathens and the blasphemous dying upon his blade. Philosophy? Prophecy? They appealed to him, but only as a curiosity. Debating them, on the other hand, made him feel like he was on a different battlefield, naked and fighting with his bare fists.

"He was a good disciple," Luther said, interrupting his thoughts. "Good, but there was a flaw in him, one I tried to repair. But some flaws are too deep. Some flaws define who we really are."

"And what might that be?" asked Grevus as the wax dripped upon the message he was to bring north. "What was Cyric's flaw?"

Luther smiled sadly and shook his head.

"He hated the priesthood."

Grevus's mouth dropped open. That was a flaw? That sounded more like a massive contradiction for a young man determined to be a priest.

"I'm...not sure I understand."

Drip, drip went the wax.

“It’s not that hard,” Luther said, carefully watching it collect. “A subtle thing, really. But the priesthood, its laws, its restrictions, all of its members...he saw them as beneath him. He saw them as failing to live up to Karak’s standard. Whenever he failed, he’d blame not himself but the priestly order. It was we who taught him weakness, was it not? No, he always looked to the old ways. That was his excuse, his reason for the flaws he saw in all of us. We didn’t sacrifice sinners like we used to. We tolerated too much. We weren’t as strict, weren’t as demanding. So much easier for him to yearn for a past that was better, more full of faith and wisdom.”

Grevus tried to think like that, to understand, but could not. The past was the past, nothing better, nothing worse.

“In all times, there are men who are faithful, and men who are weak,” he said. “Cyric is a fool to think it wasn’t always this way.”

Luther smiled as he put down the candle and wax.

“So true, paladin. Thank you for reminding me why I chose you.”

He pressed his ring into the wax, placing his seal upon it.

“Ride alone to the Blood Tower,” Luther said, offering the missive to him from his seat. Grevus accepted it, hoping the priest didn’t notice his nervousness. Even through his gauntlets, it felt like the paper shocked his skin. “If Cyric is not there, he might be at a nearby village named Willshire. When he is alone, break the seal and read him my message.”

“Shall he not read it himself?” Grevus asked.

“No, no. From your lips, Grevus. I want there to be no doubt, no confusion. I trust you to believe what I say, and to know what to do after the message is delivered. Act

The Broken Pieces

with faith, and do not hesitate. There is more at stake here than you know.”

“And what is that?” Grevus dared ask, even if it revealed him to be lacking in wisdom.

Luther leaned back into his chair, and his eyes glazed over as his thoughts traveled inward.

“A man who yearns for the past now claims to be Karak,” he said. “A man who would make things as they once were. His faith is strong, and his words will be seductive. He’ll speak of power, of conquest and subjugation. He’ll speak of enforcing faith throughout the land, denying people even the illusion of choice. And if given the chance he’ll crush every last remnant of our order, which he views with such contempt, all to remake a world that never existed except in his foolish dreams.”

“The words I carry, they are the words of Karak?” Grevus asked, looking at the parchment.

“They are,” Luther said, his eyes refocusing. “And if they are not, they should be. Prepare your things quickly, and ride out before the dawn.”

Grevus bowed low, but had one last question before he left.

“Luther,” he said. “I must ask. I must. If Cyric claims he is Karak made flesh when he is not, then he speaks blasphemy of the highest order. You know our law. You know what I am called to do.”

Luther stood from his chair and walked over, putting his hands on his shoulders.

“Read the message,” he said. “And then act with the wisdom and faith I know you have.”

Grevus’s insides hardened, and despite all his training, he felt fear and uncertainty facing such a task. To judge the life and faith of a priest, knowing that blood must be spilled should he not deny the blasphemy...

“I will do my best,” he said, standing up straighter.

“I know you will. Now go.”

As Grevus went to leave, Luther gave him one last command.

“Oh, and while you’re up there,” he said, his old eyes sparkling, “should you find out where Darius is hiding, hunt him down and kill him. An embarrassment like that to our order has no right to live.”

“Of course,” Grevus said, bowing low. He felt a smile pull at his lips. Everything else might worry him, especially being caught between two powerful priests of Karak, but in this, he knew there was no debate.

Darius, the traitor paladin, deserved to die.

3



The people of Willshire rose with the sun, for there was work to do. For them, it meant dealing with the fields, their homes, with baking bread and dirty clothes. For Darius, it was an execution.

The paladin strode from his tent toward the town square, the new day sun shining off his polished armor. Where once had been the sigil of Karak was now a golden mountain. It'd taken many meticulous hours scraping away at it with a dagger to clear off the original paint, and his drawing, while careful, was still crude. Skill in art had always eluded Darius growing up, not that he'd had much practice beyond a few doodles made while learning his letters in the Stronghold. But he was proud of it nonetheless, though it now worried him greatly. He bore the symbol of Ashhur on his chest, but on his face he would wear the hood of the executioner.

An older man, Brute, saw him along the path through town and strode to join him.

"It doesn't have to be you," Brute said.

Darius shook his head.

"You know it does."

They continued on, neither speaking. After the defense of Willshire and the arrival of Daniel Coldmine's soldiers, they'd remained in town. They'd fortified the outer roads and built up some barricades, but not with any real expectation of defense. In truth, they'd not known what else to do. Daniel himself was lost, presumed dead after a failed attack on the Blood Tower. Once casualties were

counted and done, Brute had assumed leadership, though only in name. Darius had become their leader after that battle. He'd defeated Cyric and sent him running, and it was his sword that had killed the demon lion, Kayne. They looked to him, expecting a miracle that Darius simply did not have to offer.

"It shouldn't be you," Brute said, finally breaking the silence as the square came into view. "This man is one of mine. Crimes committed by soldiers should be tried, judged, and punished by other soldiers."

Darius heard the words, and a large part of him wanted to accept. Brute had quickly become a good companion, offering advice earned from many long years of battle. His gray hair and numerous scars weren't needed to convince Darius that his wisdom was more often correct than not. But this, he had to do.

"Who gave the order that the people of Willshire were to be untouched?" Darius asked.

"You did, but..."

"And," Darius continued, "who warned Conn that if he forced himself on another woman, he'd have a choice, his prick or his life?"

Brute shook his head.

"You did, but you had no authority to make those orders, or those threats. You spoke them, but I made them law. Let me swing the blade. It's not your fault."

"I know it's not mine," Darius said. "It's Conn's. Who'd have thought the fool would rather lose the head on his shoulders than the one down below?"

To this, Brute could only shrug.

In the center of town was a great pit of ash. It was there Cyric had constructed his altar, where he'd planned to sacrifice many in the name of Karak. Once the mad priest had been defeated, Darius made sure every bit of wood and

The Broken Pieces

nail had been burned to the ground. Later they'd burned the bodies of the dead upon it, for they had little spare wood for the purpose, and the fire was already blazing. That the law required Conn's execution to be held in the public square, on that same spot he'd fought and killed to prevent similar beheadings, felt bitterly ironic.

Conn waited on his knees in the center of the pit, hands bound behind his back. Two soldiers stood at either side of him, their hands on the hilts of their swords. At their arrival Conn looked up, then spat at Darius's feet.

"Figured you'd be here," he said. "Plan on using that big ass sword of yours?"

Conn was a fine looking man, but his heart was ugly. Twice Darius had caught him pressuring the young girls of the village to lie with him, implying harm might come to them otherwise. He'd been given warnings, but little else. Then one drunken night, not three days after they'd stopped Cyric's sacrifices, Conn had flung a barmaid against a wall and tried to take her by force. Again Darius had stopped him, and then told Brute to declare the law. Trying to live by the forgiveness Jerico had taught him, Darius gave Conn more warnings, and every bit of hard labor he could think of around the town to keep him busy. It'd not been enough.

This time, Darius had not been there to stop him. They'd learned only from the girl's furious father.

"You can change your mind," Brute told Conn. "It's not too late."

Conn spat at his feet.

"You want me to live as half a man? That ain't living. I'll die whole, not like that."

"You won't die whole," Darius said, pulling his greatsword off his back. Blue-white light shone across the blade, soft and subtle. It was the material manifestation of

Darius's faith, and by how weakly it flickered he could see how much his confusion had shaken him.

Conn sneered.

"Whole enough. Go ahead, unless you're too much of a coward."

Darius swallowed, and he tried to bury his frustration, his anger and hatred. Stepping closer to Conn, he knelt down so they could stare eye to eye. No matter what Conn was, he was not a coward, and he met Darius's gaze without flinching for fear of what was to come.

"Don't do this," Darius said. His voice dropped low, as if it were just the two of them alone in the world. "There's still a chance for you to change. There's still a way you can make this right."

"You want to make this right?" Conn asked. He leaned closer, his arms still bound behind his back. "Then let me go. I didn't do nothing, and you've got no right mutilating me. What you said, it's sick. Only have yourself to blame."

Forgiveness and compassion, thought Darius. He saw neither, not in those eyes. He stood, then beckoned the guards to step away. Conn sat on his haunches instead of presenting his neck.

"I ain't making it easy for you," he said to the paladin. "And you," he said, glaring at Brute. "We fought to keep that Cyric bastard from taking us over. What's the point if we just let one god replace the other?"

"Conn Graham, you have broken the king's law, and chosen a sentence of death," Darius said, ignoring Conn's snicker at the word king. "May you find peace in the hereafter."

"Maybe I'll find justice, too," Conn said.

Down came the blade in a sweeping angle, chopping through Conn's neck side to side. His head rolled, and Darius turned away, not wanting to see. The two guards

The Broken Pieces

reached for the body, and the paladin trusted them to clean up the mess. Wiping down his sword, he placed it on his back and marched away. Brute stepped in line, following.

“We get all kinds of men for our towers,” Brute said. “Most we hammer and beat into something worthwhile, something a man can be proud of. But sometimes...sometimes we’re trying to make armor out of mud. Can’t change what a man’s made of, only improve what’s there.”

“So you’re saying Conn was mud?”

“I’m saying if you gave him a hundred chances, he’d break every one.”

Darius shook his head, troubled but not wanting to reveal why, not even to Brute.

“Then perhaps I should have given him a hundred and one.”

Brute grabbed his arm, forcing Darius to stop and look at him.

“You son of a bitch, you really are bothered by this,” he said. “I told you to let me swing the damn sword. Next time maybe you’ll listen.”

Darius opened his mouth to retort back, but then just sighed.

“Fine,” he said. “And pass your own laws, too. I’m clearly terrible at it.”

“Not so bad as you think.”

They stopped, for down the street rushed one of their men, clearly excited about something.

“He’s back,” the man said, out of breath from the run.

“Who’s back?” asked Darius as Brute raised an eyebrow.

“Daniel,” said the soldier. “Daniel Coldmine’s back from the Wedge!”



They gathered in Darius's tent, the largest and most private in the camp. Daniel sat on the cot, a blanket wrapped about his upper body. He held several slices of buttered bread, wolfing them down and pausing only to speak. A cup of ale rested between his knees, half-empty. A small boy stood in the corner of the tent, attending him should he need more to eat or drink.

"Best thing I've ever tasted," Daniel said, finishing his third slice. "After eating bugs for a week, you'd be surprised how close to tears a sliver of butter will bring you."

Darius chuckled, sitting in a rickety chair opposite the cot. Beside him stood Brute, arms crossed and patiently waiting for his returned commander to tell his tale.

"We assumed everyone lost," Darius said. "Did anyone else survive? What of Sir Robert?"

Daniel stopped eating, and the bread trembled in his hands.

"No," he said. It was as if he were suddenly an inch from breaking down. "No, no one lived, especially not Sir Robert."

He glanced up, and Darius realized it wasn't tears that made Daniel tremble. It was seething rage.

"That bastard, Cyric, he turned Robert into an abomination. His throat was cut, yet somehow he still lived. Still moved. They kept him chained in the tower, writing letters south, telling people that Cyric's takeover of the Blood Tower was all a lie, and that the priest was only advising him. I... I cut off his head. It was his order, his last order. Gods help him find peace."

"What happened then?" Brute asked.

Daniel gestured to the dirty child in the corner.

"Not sure I wish to say more with the lad here."

Darius tried to reveal nothing with his gaze, and shrugged off the comment.

The Broken Pieces

“That lad’s my helper, and he’ll hold his tongue. Tell us, what happened at the tower?”

“The rest of my men gathered at the door of Robert’s tower, sacrificing themselves so I could escape out a window. Nearly died even then. One of those abyssal lions spotted me. If you’d care to look, you can see the scars he left on my back with his breath.”

“Her,” Darius said. “It was a her, by the name of Lilah.”

“How the fuck do you know?” Daniel asked.

“Because I killed Kayne, the other.”

Daniel shook his head in disbelief.

“If you faced one of them down, you have greater stones than I do. Only way I escaped was by crossing the river. Fled into the Vile Wedge, and lived among the monsters. Shouldn’t have had problems staying hidden, but something’s amiss in there. Too many wolf-men, and not enough of anything else. You’d think they’d have learned after we slaughtered them at Durham.”

The man drank down the rest of his ale, then tossed the cup to the floor.

“Are you two really the ones in charge?” They nodded. “Shit.”

“We stopped Cyric’s plans here,” Darius said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. “His soldiers were killed, and his sacrifices halted. Cyric lived, though. Ran before I could shove my sword through his belly. After all that, we weren’t sure what else to do. Our numbers are too few to recapture the Blood Tower, and the town lacks the supplies for any lengthy travel. The only way to reach civilization would be to sail down the river, right past the Blood Tower. The garrison there would crush us if we tried. So we’ve stayed here.”

“Hoping for the best?” Daniel asked. “That’s your plan?”

“Put simply, yes,” Brute said. “You disagree?”

Daniel shook his head.

“Cyric will be returning to the Blood Tower. With Robert gone, their ploy will fail if they can’t tie up all the loose ends. That’s what we are, one giant loose end. He’ll come, and then we’ll die.”

“I saw what Darius could do on his own,” Brute said. “Get some food and drink in your belly, then sleep away the day. You do us a disservice as you are. None of us have any plans of dying.”

“You misunderstand me,” Daniel said, putting aside his plate and standing. “I didn’t survive all that just to play the coward or the fool. Sir Robert was a great man, a good man, and what Cyric did...I can’t forgive it. I won’t. We’ll find that madman and make him pay. And the first step to that is retaking Robert’s tower.”

“Robert’s dead,” Darius said. “It’s not his tower anymore.”

“Then we’ll take back my goddamn tower,” Daniel said. “We’ll fling those mercenaries into the river, and maybe you can kill yourself another of those forsaken lions. How does that sound?”

“It sounds impossible,” Darius said, even though he smiled. “But I’ve been doing the impossible lately. What’s one more attempt at it among friends?”

“Not quite impossible,” Brute said. “We do have that woman of yours.”

Daniel leaned back in his chair, setting aside the last of his meal and drink.

“Woman?” he asked. “What woman do we have that can make the impossible possible? Because I’d be glad to meet her.”

The Broken Pieces

“You already have,” said the boy in the corner. He stood up straighter, and suddenly looked so much taller than before. His build thickened, and his hair turned red, growing longer so that it curled about his neck. No longer a boy but a woman with breasts beneath her sleek black tunic, which matched the leather of her pants. Brute frowned, clearly unhappy with the display, while Daniel tensed as if expecting some sort of attack.

“Always one for the dramatic,” Darius said, shaking his head. “Daniel, I’d like you to meet Valessa, formerly a gray sister of Karak, and my current guest.”

“Who...” Daniel said, then paused to swallow. “No, what are you?”

“I was one of Karak’s most faithful,” Valessa said. Even now, Darius could hear the pain in her voice. “And now I am accursed and abandoned. Cyric stripped everything from me, betraying me to excuse his own failures. I am shadow, I am death, and I will have my revenge upon him, same as you.”

“There must be something stronger in my drink than I thought,” Daniel said, standing. Darius met his gaze, which had hardened tenfold. “Are you a madman, paladin? You invite a creature of Karak into our tent because she claims a desire for revenge? How do you know she doesn’t report our every move to Cyric? How do you know she won’t kill us all in our sleep?”

“I don’t,” Darius said. “But I trust her.”

“You trust her?” Daniel said. “That’s great. But can you guard her?”

Darius looked to Valessa, trying to read her. It was nearly an impossible task, her very image that of an illusion, an exquisite mask to hide the shadows. In her eyes, he thought he saw anger, perhaps wounded pride.

“I do not fear pain,” she said to him. “If you must, show Daniel the manacles you hold over me, if he needs such a display to sleep at night.”

It didn’t feel right. It felt akin to when he drew his sword to cut off Conn’s head, but he would not refuse Valessa’s request. He pulled his sword off his back and held it with both hands. The blade shimmered with light, and even though it did not seem bright in the tent, it immediately began to burn Valessa’s flesh. Her pale skin flaked away inch by inch, and her body trembled as whatever held it together steadily broke. Daniel watched, his mouth open. Darius pulled his blade back to sheath it, but Valessa stepped closer, grabbing his wrist. She stared into his eyes as the light burned her deeper, until even her face was lost in shadow and darkness.

“Enough!” Daniel cried. Valessa’s hand released his wrist, and he quickly sheathed the sword onto his back. The light faded away. Now a mass of darkness on her knees, Valessa slowly regained her strength, her form solidifying with each passing moment.

“Satisfied?” Darius asked Daniel, feeling irate.

“Not even close,” Daniel said, watching the skin reappear on Valessa’s hands and face. “I think you’ve only disturbed me further.”

“We’ve kept her presence hidden from the others,” Brute said, putting a hand on Daniel’s shoulder. “So far she’s done nothing suspicious, nor threatened harm upon anyone other than Cyric.”

“So be it,” Daniel said, pointing at Darius. “If you can control her, then she stays in your tent. I take it she’s been going out in the disguise of a boy?”

“She has,” Darius said. “We call him Vale.”

“Cute.” Daniel grabbed the blanket off his chair and wrapped it about his shoulders. “If she wants to kill Cyric,

The Broken Pieces

she can get in line. We don't need tricks and charlatans to retake the Blood Tower. We need men, able-bodied killers."

"There are fewer killers finer than I," Valessa said.

"My comfort only grows in your presence," Daniel said.

Darius tried to keep his temper down. He knew Daniel had little patience or tact when frustrated, but this felt unfair. Valessa had come to him willingly, offering aid.

"She knows where Cyric is," Darius said as he put a hand on Valessa's shoulder. It felt cold to his touch, but he gently squeezed anyway. "At all times, she knows. We can use her, Daniel, track Cyric no matter where he goes, evade any ambush while planning our own."

"A good trick," Daniel said, settling back into his chair. "Can she do that with anyone, or just Cyric?"

"Only two," Valessa said, her voice soft, eloquent. She'd adopted the habits and persona of a highborn lady, and Darius knew she did it to seem superior to the soldier. "Men who have wronged me greatly, and who by my very creation I am called to kill. Cyric is one."

"And the other?"

Valessa smiled, and then she was the boy, Vale. Without a word she left the tent. Darius smirked at Daniel, and he found himself needing to talk to Valessa, to apologize for the agony his blade had inflicted upon her.

"The other's me," he told the lieutenant. "Good night, gentlemen. Rest well. We're going to need it if we're to overthrow the Blood Tower."

4



Cyric stood in the center of the bones, unafraid of the hundreds of wolf-men gathered around him, snarling and howling amid a fit of rage. Redclaw had repeatedly warned him of such a reaction.

“They will never lower their heads to a human and call him pack leader. Not unless you are a man of miracles.”

The moon shone high above, its light illuminating the near four hundred wolf-men. They were in a circle surrounding him, and gathered together in various packs. If the wolf was to be believed, Redclaw had once united them all and declared himself Wolf King. His attack on the village of Durham had been disastrous, the defeat stripping him of any claim to such a title. Cyric had promised him he’d have it back, earning a mocking chuckle from the gigantic beast.

“You insult us all, Redclaw,” said a hulking wolf-man with red fur pocked with scars. He was known as Many-Bruises, and was leader of the largest tribe at the Gathering, nearly two hundred strong. Redclaw’s pack was the only one sworn to Cyric, and therefore sworn to Karak. At last count, that number was barely more than fifty. Cyric looked to Redclaw, curious how he’d react. The wolf-man was not as big as Many-Bruises, but he was quicker, more agile. He was also stronger, Cyric knew, despite his size. Karak must have blessed Redclaw at birth, Cyric decided. The creature was destined to be his champion here in the beginning of the end times.

The Broken Pieces

“This human speaks of our past,” Redclaw said, his voice carrying through the wild hills of the Vile Wedge. “He speaks of gods, the gods we worshipped before we bowed to the moon. He is strong, stronger than any wolf, and promises us we will be even stronger.”

Curses filtered through the crowd from the various pack shamans, all insulted that one would dare claim they had once worshipped something other than the moon.

“I would rather follow the weakest wolf than the strongest human,” Many-Bruises snarled. “For even the weakest wolf is stronger than the greatest human.”

“Such impeccable logic,” Cyric said, chuckling at the stupid thing. “Would you care to prove it, Many-Bruises? Or would you rather let Redclaw tear open your throat instead? I’d hate for you to die at the hands of anything other than a wolf.”

“Let me be the one to spill his blood,” shouted another pack leader, this one an ugly creature with one eye by the name of Gutdancer. He was the only one with a pack as small as Redclaw’s. Cyric turned on him and lifted a hand.

“I have heard of you from Redclaw,” Cyric said. “You are stupid, and always eager for blood. Would you fight me, young wolf?”

Gutdancer howled, but another stepped in his way, blocking him. It was a wolf-man with golden fur, and his red eyes shone with intelligence that rivaled Redclaw’s. His name was Warfang, and above all others, Cyric had been warned that he would be the one to fear most.

“No,” said Warfang, hurling Gutdancer back toward his pack. The wolf-man spun to face Redclaw, even though his eyes remained on Cyric. “What you say is blasphemy. You speak against our mother in the sky. You speak against the shamans. Now you want us to kneel, and worship a

human? We will not, Redclaw. You know this. Why have you come to the Gathering with lies on your tongue?"

Redclaw and Cyric stood in the center of the Gathering, on a small mound of bones brought by the various packs. Some were old, some were fresh, and piled together they formed a place of religious importance. Should any pack leader step onto the bones, they'd battle, most likely to the death. Whoever remained standing on the bones afterward would be declared the stronger. Cyric knew he could best any of them, but Redclaw was his champion, and Redclaw was right. None of them would swear allegiance to a human. At least, not yet.

"The moon is not your mother," Cyric shouted, using magic to enhance his voice so it was heard by all. "You were not born of its light. You were made for war, in an age long past. Two gods battled, and my god, Karak, was the one who gave you life. He gave you legs to walk upon, and minds to lift you up beyond those of your four-legged brethren. You have strength, and bloodlust, all born not from the moon but from Karak. You have moved away from him now, turning to the blasphemy of your shamans. I offer you a chance to return to Karak's embrace, to worship the Lion in the way you were always meant to worship: in servitude."

They looked ready to bury him in a wave of claw and fur, but against their rage, he smiled. It was the flailing of children, angry at their parent for a scolding. They would come to know his wisdom, one way or another. As much as it pained him to rely on Redclaw, he would have to let the beast prove the truth of his words. Many times before the Gathering he'd coached Redclaw on what to say and when to say it, and this was that moment. Cyric tensed, eager to see how his champion reacted.

The Broken Pieces

“I am strong,” Redclaw roared to the rest of his race. “But I will be made stronger still. The moon is false. We bow to the Lion now. Come, any of you. Face me upon the bones, and I will show you my strength!”

Mostly right, though he should have said ‘Karak’s strength’, not ‘my strength’. The priest took a step back, to the far edge of the bones, so that Redclaw stood at the top, towering over them all. This was it. Cyric had thought long on this, and knew exactly what he desired. Karak had already blessed him with the arrival of the two lions, Kayne and Lilah. Pulling two creatures of the Abyss into the world of the living was a tremendous boon, but it was not enough. The world needed cleansing. He didn’t need two lions. He needed an army.

And so he would make it, for he was Karak made flesh, was he not?

“I will not be denied the pleasure of a blasphemer’s blood on my tongue!” Gutdancer cried, leaping past Warfang before the other could react. Redclaw crouched low, and when Gutdancer came lunging in, he rose up. In a sudden display of speed and strength, he caught Gutdancer by the throat, twisted him in the air, and then flung him on his back amid the pile of bones.

The wolf-men were howling, the Gathering reaching a frenzy as Redclaw licked blood from his claws. Now was the time. Cyric lifted his arms, calling forth all his power. The world of Dezrel needed a cleansing flood, a purging force of claws and muscle to tear away the life of the faithless.

“Be my champion,” Cyric whispered. “Be my blade.”

High above, where there had once been clear sky, a dozen thick clouds rumbled with lightning. It struck the pile of bones once, twice, the power of its thunder rattling teeth and sending wolf-men to the ground. Fire burned,

swarming over Redclaw, the lightning having set his fur aflame. Redclaw let out a cry of immense pain, but it meant little to Cyric, for he could see the transformation had already begun.

As the wolf-men regained their senses, their eyes recovering from the sudden blinding flashes, they looked upon the changed Redclaw. His fur glowed a deep crimson, as if he were made of living embers. From his claws dripped molten rock, sizzling upon the bones beneath him. When he took a step forward, his footprints trailed fire. He sucked air deep into his belly, and then his roar breathed red in the dark night.

“Demonflesh!” cried Many-Bruises. Cyric had been told that wolf-men knew no fear, and he saw the proof of it then. Many-Bruises flung himself onto the pile of bones, accusing Redclaw again and again of being demonflesh. Redclaw did not even bother to block the claws that swiped at his skin. When they pierced his flesh, liquid flame poured across Many-Bruises paws, and he let out a pained scream. Redclaw slashed open his throat, then ripped off the head to hold it up to the stars. In his grip, the head shriveled black as it burned.

Cyric climbed the pile of bones, standing beside his champion.

“You are beautiful,” he told Redclaw, who glanced his way.

“I am strength,” Redclaw said. “I am fire. Give me something to kill.”

Cyric gestured to the hundreds gathered about.

“Those who do not bow,” he said. “Those you may slaughter.”

“Wolf must not kill wolf. It is law.”

“Who’s law, Redclaw?” Cyric asked. “Yours? The pack’s? You follow Karak’s law now, and the unfaithful

The Broken Pieces

must be punished.” He turned to the crowd and lifted his arms. “Kneel!” he shouted to them, using magic to enhance his voice. “Kneel, and accept your true god. Either Karak is your master, or Death. By your choice, one or the other will claim you this night.”

All at once Redclaw’s tribe dropped to the ground, their nuzzles pressed to the dirt. Within the rest of the crowd bowed various wolf-men. Some were mocked, others even assaulted, but not for long. With a smile on his face, Cyric watched his champion leap into the crowd, a wave of fire in his wake. His molten claws tore through their ranks, and his howl was louder than all others. Within moments the meeting was in chaos, and Cyric reveled at its center.

Redclaw spun and fought in the largest group, his long arms leaving afterimages of red with each slash. Each kill, each step, some leapt to attack Redclaw, while many more fell to their knees and shoved their noses to the dirt. But not all focused on him. Many-Bruises’ pack rushed Redclaw’s, and with them bowed face to the dirt, Redclaw’s faithful would die in seconds. Cyric shook his head, knowing he should not be surprised by the pitiful creatures’ stupidity and stubbornness. It was like trying to teach a child a complicated truth. There’d always be a few who’d never believe, no matter how intelligently explained.

“You defy a god!” Cyric yelled to Many-Bruises’ pack, lifting his arms to the sky. Cracks split the earth, and they belched fire as the wolf-men leapt over. Dozens burned, and others yelped and fled. About a third continued on, clawing and biting at the bowed members of Redclaw’s tribe. Others rushed through their ranks, their target solely Cyric, who smirked at their approach. A handful of wolf-men sought to take down Karak’s physical manifestation?

They'd have better hope of ripping the moon out of the sky with their claws.

Cyric crossed his arms over his chest, summoning his magic, but was given no chance to use it. Another pack of wolf-men struck from behind, overcoming them with impressive speed. In moments the entirety of the Gathering either knelt in submission or lay bleeding. From the ranks of Redclaw's tribe emerged Warfang, who dipped his head low before Cyric.

"I see the strength given to Redclaw," he said. "I would have that blessing."

"What of Karak?" Cyric asked him. "What of your faith to the moon?"

"The moon would let us die this night," Warfang said, glancing upward. "The moon has never blessed my claws with fire. I trust what I see. I will bow to Karak."

"You?" asked one of the dying wolf-men that lay near Warfang's feet, his intestines piled in his paws. "You would bow to a human?"

"I bow to no human," Warfang said, his eyes meeting Cyric's. "I bow to a god."

Careful with this one, thought Cyric. He knew Redclaw intelligent for his kind, but this one might be even wiser. Still, he'd slain his attackers, and professed faith. Such things should not go unrewarded.

"Kneel," he told Warfang. The wolf-man did so as Redclaw returned to his side, the gore on his fur sizzling. Cyric put a hand on Warfang's head, and he bestowed a fraction of the strength given to Redclaw. Warfang breathed in deep, and when he flexed his claws, they flared red, like embers being blown upon.

"To all of you who kneel," Cyric cried, taking a step back. "To all of you shoving your snouts into the dirt, professing faith to a name you have never known before,

The Broken Pieces

know this! Your faith is weak, your knowledge pitiful. But you will still be blessed! You will learn of the god you serve. You will gain wisdom and power beyond anything your kind has possessed since the day the gods waved their hands and bade you to stand. You were made for war, and I will bring you that war again. The humans beyond the river, they are weak, and tremble at the thought of you crossing into their lands. But you will cross the rivers, you will tear down towers, and you will surround their villages and farms. Those who do not bow, as you have bowed, must know death. Bring it to them!”

“We are one tribe now,” Redclaw said as Cyric fell silent, and the hundreds of wolf-men rose to their feet. “Not Warfang, not Many-Bruises, not Gutdancer. One tribe, Karak’s tribe, and Redclaw is his champion!”

Chants filled the clearing as the burning wolf-man climbed the bones and let his full strength flare.

Redclaw! Redclaw!

Cyric frowned, even though he knew he’d blessed Redclaw for such a reason. Beside him, Warfang stood with his mouth open, chest shaking, a gesture he recognized as laughter.

“Careful,” Cyric whispered to him.

“Glory to Karak’s champion,” Warfang growled before resuming laughing. “All the glory...”



Later that night, Cyric sat before an enormous bonfire. It was the pile of bones, used by the wolf-men in their heathen ceremonies. With a wave of his hand, Cyric had set it to burning, commanding the dead and dying to be thrown into its flames. Not all of them, of course. His wolf-men were hungry. A few had grumbled seeing their sacred bones destroyed, but not many, not after the display they’d

just witnessed. Not when they could count the dead being tossed into the fire.

Redclaw hunched down beside Cyric, a large slab of meat in his left hand.

“Am I to be like this even when asleep?” the wolf-man asked, the grass where he sat shriveling black from the heat. “Can I not touch a mate without burning her fur?”

“The power is yours to control,” Cyric told him. “So control it.”

Redclaw growled but did as commanded. He closed his eyes, brow furrowing from concentration. Slowly the red glow faded from his fur, the tips of his claws becoming the deep brown they once were. When Redclaw opened his eyes, his lips pulled back in a macabre smile.

“Better,” he said. “But I am still not pleased. You blessed Warfang. Why?”

Cyric stood so he could step closer to the fire, feel its heat against his skin.

“You dare to question a god?” he asked.

“When a god does stupid things, I question, yes.”

Cyric shook his head.

“You are not the only wolf I may use for my ends, Redclaw. Remember that the next time you would insult me. Warfang was faithful, and with his aid the disjointed tribes will be far more loyal. Nearly four hundred wolf-men, all blessed in some way for when we cross the river. With your speed, your strength, we can swarm the North and crush armies ten times your number. But your faith must be strong. Karak’s name must be on their lips...not Redclaw’s.”

“I am fire,” Redclaw said. “I am their champion. Why not let them cry my name?”

In answer, Cyric stepped into the bonfire. Bones crushed beneath his feet, and the flames licked at his robes.

The Broken Pieces

The fire swirled across his skin, like sand blowing across a desert, and not a hair on his body was burned. Cyric turned about, let Redclaw see.

“Because I cannot be burned with fire,” Cyric said, pleased to see the wolf-man intelligent enough to fall to his knees. “I am of the Abyss, Redclaw, and your strength is my strength, and mine alone. Send out runners, and gather every wolf-man scattered about the Wedge. I want them here, all part of a single, unified army. And when we march into the first village, one of very many, I assure you, I want to know that it will be my name my army cries out in worship.”

“They will worship Karak,” Redclaw said. “I promise.”

“No,” Cyric said, shaking his head. “Not Karak. Karak made flesh. Cyric.”

“As you wish,” Redclaw said, the tips of his fur glowing. “Forgive me, I must go see that my pups are well fed.”

“You are a father?” Cyric asked, honestly surprised. He thought the brute would be a solitary creature for some reason.

“Two pups,” Redclaw said. “They are not old enough for names. But they will have them soon.”

“Do you know what you’ll call them?”

Redclaw hesitated, then nodded.

“I do,” he said. “But only if you are who you say. Only if we conquer. Manslayer and Manfeaster, they will be called.”

“Names to be feared throughout the North,” Cyric said, and he smiled. “Though if we conquer, perhaps you should name them after the god that has led them to such glory.”

“Perhaps,” Redclaw said, and left without saying more.