

FIRST KING OF SHANNARA

TERRY BROOKS



BALLANTINE BOOKS

A Skull Bearer gave orders and crooked-limb monsters ascended the stairs in a knot of teeth and claws and weapons. The small band of Druid Guard repulsed the rush. The monsters came again, and again the Guard threw them back. But by then half the defenders were dead or injured. And no more had arrived to replace them.

Caerid Lock looked around in despair. Where were the Druids? Why didn't they respond?

The monsters attacked a third time, a bristling mass of thrashing bodies and windmilling limbs, shrieks and cries rising out of gaping throats. The Druid Guard counterattacked, beating them back down the stairway, leaving half their number sprawled lifeless on the blood-slicked steps.

Grabbing a Guard by the tunic, Caerid whispered desperately, "Find the Druids and tell them to flee while there is still time! Tell them Paranor is lost! Then flee yourself!"

Seconds later, the creatures of the Warlock Lord surged up the stairway once more. Caerid and his men braced to meet them.

But this time the monsters were too many ...

"Stunning ... Brooks incorporates all the elements of good fantasy."

—Magazine (Baton Rouge, LA)

FIRST KING OF SHANNARA

Terry Brooks



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**The
Fall
of
*Paranor***

The old man just appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. The Borderman was watching for him, sitting well back within the concealing shadows of a spreading hardwood high on a hillside overlooking the whole of the Streleheim and the trails leading out of it, everything clearly visible in the light of a full moon for at least ten miles, and he still didn't see him. It was unnerving and vaguely embarrassing, and the fact that it happened this way every time didn't make it any more palatable. How did the old man do it? The Borderman had spent almost the whole of his life in this country, kept alive by his wits and experience. He saw things that others did not even know were there. He could read the movements of animals from their passage through tall grass. He could tell you how far ahead of him they were and how fast they were traveling. But he could not spy out the old man on the clearest night on the broadest plain, even when he knew to look for him.

It did not help matters that the old man easily found him. Moving quite deliberately off the trail, he came toward the Borderman with slow, measured strides, head lowered slightly, eyes tilted up out of the shadow of his cowl. He wore black, like all the Druids, cloaked and hooded, wrapped darker than the shadows he passed through. He was not a big man, neither tall nor well muscled, but he gave the impression of being hard and fixed of purpose. His eyes, when visible, were vaguely green. But at times they seemed as white as bone, too—now, especially, when night stole away colors and reduced all things to shades of gray. The light gleamed like an animal's caught in a fragment of light—feral, piercing, hypnotic. Light illuminated the old man's face as well, carving out the deep lines that creased it from forehead to chin, playing across the ridges and valleys of the ancient skin. The old man's hair and beard were gray going fast toward white, the strands wispy and thin like tangled spiderwebs.

The Borderman gave it up and climbed slowly to his feet. He was tall, rangy, and broad shouldered, his dark hair worn long and tied back, his brown eyes sharp and steady, his lean face all planes and angles, but handsome in a rough sort of way.

A smile crossed the old man's face as he came up. "How are you, Kinson?" he greeted.

The familiar sound of his voice swept away Kinson Ravenlock's irritation as if it were dust on the wind. "I am well, Bremen," he answered, and held out his hand in response.

The old man took it and clasped it firmly in his own. The skin was dry and rough with age, but the hand beneath was strong. "How long have you been waiting?"

"Three weeks. Not as long as I had expected. I am surprised. But then I am always surprised by you."

Bremen laughed. He had left the Borderman six months earlier with instructions to meet him again on the first full moon of the quarter season directly north of Paranor where the forests gave way to the Plains of Streleheim. The time and place of the meeting were set, but hardly written in stone. Both appreciated the uncertainties the old man faced. Bremen had gone north into forbidden country. The time and place of his return would be dictated by

events not yet known to either of them. It was nothing to Kinson that he had been forced to wait three weeks. It could just as easily have been three months.

The Druid looked at him with those piercing eyes, white now in the moonlight, drained of any other color. "Have you learned much in my absence? Have you put your time to good use?"

The Borderman shrugged. "Some of it. Sit down with me and rest. Have you eaten?"

He gave the old man some bread and ale, and they sat hunched close together in the darkness, staring out across the broad sweep of the plains. It was silent out there, empty and depthless and vast beneath the night's moonlit dome. The old man chewed absently, taking his time. The Borderman had built no fire that night or on any other since he had begun his vigil. A fire was too dangerous to chance.

"The Trolls move east," Kinson offered after a moment. "Thousands of them, more than I could count accurately, though I went down into their camp on the new moon several weeks back when they were closer to where we sit. Their numbers grow as others are sent to serve. They control everything from the Streleheim north as far as I can determine." He paused. "Have you discovered otherwise?"

The Druid shook his head. He had pushed back his cowl, and his gray head was etched in the moonlight. "No, all of it belongs now to him."

Kinson gave him a sharp look. "Then ..."

"What else have you seen?" the old man urged, ignoring him.

The Borderman took the aleskin and drank from it. "The leaders of the army stay close away in their tents. No one sees them. The Trolls are afraid even to speak their names. That should not be. Nothing frightens Rock Trolls. Except this, it seems."

He looked at the other. "But at night, sometimes, at watch for you, I see strange shadows flit across the sky in the light of moon and stars. Winged black things sweep across the void, hunting or scouting or simply surveying what they have taken—I can't tell and don't want to know. I feel them, though. Even now. They are out there, circling. I feel their presence like an itch. No, not like an itch—like a shiver, the sort that comes to you when you feel eyes watching and the owner of those eyes has bad intentions. My skin crawls. They do not seek me; I know if they did I would be dead."

Bremen nodded. "Skull Bearers, bound in service to him."

"So he is alive?" Kinson could not help himself. "You know it to be so? You have made certain?"

The Druid put aside the ale and bread and faced him squarely. The eyes were distant and filled with dark memories.

"He is alive, Kinson. As alive as you and I. I tracked him to his lair, deep in the shadow of the Knife Edge, where the Skull Kingdom puts down its roots. I was not sure at first, as you know. I suspected it, believed it to be so, but lacked evidence that could stand as proof. So I traveled north as we had planned, across the plains and into the mountains. I saw the winged hunters as I went, emerging only at night, great birds of prey that patrolled and kept watch for living things. I made myself as invisible as the air through which they flew. They saw me and saw nothing. I kept myself shrouded in magic, but not of such significance that they would notice it in the presence of their own. I passed west of the Trolls, but found the whoops of their land subdued. All who resisted have been put to death. All who could manage to c

so have fled. The rest now serve him.”

Kinson nodded. It had been six months since the Troll marauders had swept down out of the Charnals east and begun a systematic subjugation of their people. Their army was vast and swift, and in less than three months all resistance was crushed. The Northland was placed under rule of the conquering army's mysterious and still unknown leader. There were rumors concerning his identity, but they remained unconfirmed. In truth, few even knew he existed. No word of this army and its leader had penetrated farther south than the border settlements of Varfleet and Tyrsis, fledgling outposts for the Race of Man, though it had spread east and west to the Dwarves and Elves. But the Dwarves and Elves were tied more closely to the Trolls. Man was the outcast race, the more recent enemy of the others. Memories of the First War of the Races still lingered, three hundred and fifty years later. Man lived apart in his distant Southland cities, the rabbit sent scurrying to earth, timid and toothless and of no consequence in the greater scheme of things, food for predators and little more.

But not me, Kinson thought darkly. Never me. I am no rabbit. I have escaped that fate. I have become one of the hunters.

Bremen stirred, shifting his weight to make himself more comfortable. “I went deep into the mountains, searching,” he continued, lost again in his tale. “The farther I went, the more convinced I became. The Skull Bearers were everywhere. There were other beings as well, creatures summoned out of the spirit world, dead things brought to life, evil given form. I kept clear of them all, watchful and cautious. I knew that if I was discovered my magic would probably not be enough to save me. The darkness of this region was overwhelming. It was oppressive and tainted with the smell and taste of death. I went into Skull Mountain finally—one brief visit, for that was all I could chance. I supped into the passageways and found what I had been searching for.”

He paused, his brow wrinkling. “And more, Kinson. Much more, and none of it good.”

“But he was there?” Kinson pressed anxiously, his hunter's face intense, his eyes glittering.

“He was there,” affirmed the Druid quietly. “Shrouded by his magic, kept alive by his use of the Druid Sleep. He does not use it wisely, Kinson. He thinks himself beyond the laws of nature. He does not see that for all, however strong, there is a price to be paid for what is usurped and enslaved. Or perhaps he simply doesn't care. He has fallen under the sway of the Ildatch and cannot free himself in any case.”

“The book of magic he stole out of Paranor?”

“Four hundred years ago. When he was simply Brona, a Druid, one of us, and not yet the Warlock Lord.”

Kinson Ravenlock knew the story. Bremen himself had told it to him, though the history was familiar enough among the Races that he had already heard it a hundred times. Galaphile, an Elf, had called together the First Council of Druids five hundred years earlier, a thousand years following the devastation of the Great Wars. The Council had met at Paranor, a gathering of the wisest men and women of all the Races, those who had memories of the old world, those who retained a few tattered, crumbling books, those whose learning had survived the barbarism of a thousand years. The Council had gathered in a last, desperate effort to bring the Races out of the savagery that had consumed them and into a new and better civilization. Working together, the Druids had begun the laborious task of assembling their combined knowledge, of piecing together all that remained so that it might be employed

for a common good. The goal of the Druids was to work for the betterment of all people regardless of anything that had gone before. They were Men, Gnomes, Dwarves, Elves, Trolls, and a smattering of others, the best and wisest of the new Races risen from the ashes of the old. If some small wisdom could be gleaned from the knowledge they carried, there was a chance for everyone.

But the task proved a long and difficult one, and some among the Druids grew restless. One was called Brona. Brilliant, ambitious, but careless of his own safety, he began to experiment with magic. There had been little in the old world, almost none since the decline of faerie and the rise of Man. But Brona believed that it must be recovered and brought back. The old sciences had failed, the destruction of the old world was the direct result of that failure, and the Great Wars were a lesson that the Druids seemed determined to ignore. Magic offered a new approach, and the books that taught it were older and more tried than those of science. Chief among those books was the Ildatch, a monstrous, deadly tome that had survived every cataclysm since the dawn of civilization, protected by dark spells, driven by secret needs. Brona saw within its ancient pages the answers he had been seeking, the solutions to the problems the Druids sought to solve. He resolved to have them. His course of action was set.

Others among the Druids warned him of the dangers, others not so impetuous, not so heedless of the lessons history had taught. For there had never been a form of power that did not evoke multiple consequences. There had never been a sword that did not cut more than one way. Be careful, they warned. Do not be reckless. But Brona and those few followers who had attached themselves to him would not be dissuaded, and in the end they broke with the Council. They disappeared, taking with them the Ildatch, their map of the new world, their key to the doors they would unlock.

In the end, it led only to their subversion. They fell sway to its power and became forever changed. They came to desire power for its own sake and for their personal use. All else was forgotten, all other goals abandoned. The First War of the Races was the direct result. The Race of Man was the tool they employed, made submissive to their will by the magic, shaped to become their weapon of attack. But their effort failed in the face of the Druid Council and the combined might of the other Races. The aggressors were defeated, and the Race of Man was driven south into exile and isolation. Brona and his followers disappeared. It was said they had been destroyed by the magic.

“Such a fool,” Bremen said suddenly. “The Druid Sleep kept him alive, but it stole away his heart and soul and left him a shell. All those years, we believed him dead. And dead he was in a sense. But the part that survived was the evil over which the magic had gained dominance. It was the part that sought still to claim the whole of the world and the things that lived within it. It was the part that craved power over all. What matter the price the reckless use of the Sleep demanded? What difference the changes exacted for the extension of a life already wasted? Brona had evolved into the Warlock Lord, and the Warlock Lord would survive at all costs.”

Kinson said nothing. It bothered him that Bremen could condemn so easily Brona's use of the Druid Sleep without questioning at the same time his own. For Bremen used the Sleep well. He would argue that he used it in a more balanced, controlled way, that he was cautious of its demands on his body. He would argue that it was necessary to employ the Sleep, that he did it so that he would be there for the Warlock Lord's inevitable return. B

for all that he might try to draw distinctions, the fact remained that the ultimate consequences of the use were the same, whether you were Warlock Lord or Druid.

One day, it would catch up with him.

“Did you see him, then?” the Borderman asked, anxious to move on. “Did you see his face?”

The old man smiled. “He has no face or body left, Kinson. He is a presence wrapped in a hooded cloak. Like myself, I sometimes think, for I am little more these days.”

“That isn’t so,” Kinson said at once.

“No,” the other quickly agreed, “it isn’t. I keep some sense of right and wrong about me and I am not yet a slave to the magic. Though that is what you fear I will become, isn’t it?”

Kinson did not answer. “Tell me how you managed to get so close. How was it that you were not discovered?”

Bremen’s eyes looked away, focusing on some distant place and time. “It was not easy,” he replied softly. “The cost was high.”

He reached again for the aleskin and drank deeply, the weariness mirrored in his face so heavy it might have been formed of iron links dragging against his skin. “I was forced to make myself appear one of them,” he said after a moment. “I was required to shroud myself in their thoughts and impulses, in the evil rooted within their souls. I was cloaked in invisibility, so that my physical presence did not register, and I was left only with my spirit and myself. That I cloaked in the darkness that marks their own spirits, reaching deep within myself for the blackest part of who I am. Oh, I see you question that this was possible. Believe me, Kinson, the potential for evil lodges deep in every man, myself included. We restrain it, better, keep it buried deeper, but it lives within us. I was forced to bring it out into concealment in order to protect myself. The feel of it, the rub of it against me, so close, so eager, was terrible. But it served its purpose. It kept the Warlock Lord and his minions from discovering me.”

Kinson frowned. “But you were damaged.”

“For a time. The walk back gave me a chance to heal.” The old man smiled anew, a brief twist of his thin lips. “The trouble is that once brought so far out of its cage, a man’s evil is reluctant thereafter to be contained. It presses against the bars. It is more anxious to escape. More prepared. And having lived in such close proximity to it, I am more vulnerable to the possibility of that escape.”

He shook his head. “We are always being tested in life, aren’t we? This is just one more instance.”

There was a long moment of silence as the two men stared at one another. The moon had moved across the sky to the southern edge of the horizon and was sinking from view. The stars were brightening with its passing, the sky clear of clouds, a brilliant black velvet in the vast, unbroken silence.

Kinson cleared his throat. “As you said, you did what was required of you. It was necessary that you get close enough to determine if your suspicions were correct. Now we know.” He paused. “Tell me. Did you see the book as well? The Ildatch?”

“There, in his hands, out of my reach, or I would surely have taken it and destroyed it even at the cost of my own life.”

The Warlock Lord and the Ildatch, there in the Skull Kingdom, as real as life, not rumo

not legend. Kinson Ravenlock rocked back slightly and shook his head. Everything true, just as Bremen had feared. As they had both feared. And now this army of Trolls come down on the Northland to subdue the Races. It was history repeating itself. It was the First War of the Races beginning all over again. Only this time there might not be anyone to bring it to an end.

“Well, well,” he said sadly.

“There is more,” the Druid observed, lifting his eyes to the Borderman. “You must hear all. There is an Elfstone they search for, the winged ones. A Black Elfstone. The Warlock Lord learned of it from the Ildatch. Somewhere within the pages of that wretched book, there is mention of this stone. It is not an ordinary Elfstone like the others we have heard about. It is not one of three, one each for the heart, mind, and body of the user, their magic to be joined when summoned. This stone’s magic is capable of great evil. There is some mystery about the reason for its creation, about the use it was intended to serve. All that has been lost in the passing of time. But the Ildatch makes deliberate and purposeful reference to its capabilities, it seems. I was fortunate to learn of it. While I clung to the shadows of the wall in the great chamber where the winged ones gather and their Master directs, I heard mention of it.”

He leaned close to the Borderman. “It is hidden somewhere in the Westland, Kinson—deep within an ancient stronghold, protected in ways that you or I could not begin to imagine. It has lain concealed since the time of faerie, lost to history, as forgotten as the magic and the people who once wielded it. Now it waits to be discovered and brought back into use.”

“And what is that use?” Kinson pressed.

“It has the power to subvert other magic, whatever its form, and convert it to the holder’s use. No matter how powerful or intricate another’s magic might be, if you hold the Black Elfstone, you can master your adversary. His magic will be leached from him and made yours. He will be helpless against you.”

Kinson shook his head despairingly. “How can anyone stand against such a thing?”

The old man laughed softly. “Now, now, Kinson, it isn’t really that simple, is it? You remember our lessons, don’t you? Every use of magic exacts a price. There are always consequences, and the more powerful the magic, the greater that consequence will be. But let’s leave that argument for another time. The point is that the Warlock Lord must not be allowed to possess the Black Elfstone because consequences matter not at all to him. He is beyond the point where reason will hold sway. So we must find the Elfstone before he does, and we must find it quickly.”

“And how are we to do that?”

The Druid yawned and stretched wearily, black robes rising and falling in a soft rustle of cloth. “I haven’t the answer to that question, Kinson. Besides, we have other business to attend to first.”

“You will go to Paranor and the Druid Council?”

“I must.”

“But why bother? They won’t listen to you. They mistrust you. Some even fear you.”

The old man nodded. “Some, but not all. There are a few who will listen. In any case, you must try. They are in great danger. The Warlock Lord remembers all too well how they brought about his downfall in the First War of the Races. He will not chance their intervention a second time—even if they no longer seem a real threat to him.”

Kinson looked off into the distance. "They are foolish to ignore you, but ignore you they will, Bremen. They have lost all touch with reality behind their sheltering walls. They have not ventured out into the world for so long that they no longer are able to take a true measure of things. They have lost their identity. They have forgotten their purpose."

"Hush, now." Bremen placed a firm hand on the tall man's shoulder. "There is no point repeating to ourselves what we already know. We will do what we can and then be on our way." He squeezed gently. "I am very tired. Would you keep watch for a few hours while I sleep? We can leave after that."

The Borderman nodded. "I'll keep watch."

The old man rose and moved deeper into the shadows beneath the wide-boughed trees where he settled down comfortably within his robes on a soft patch of grass. Within minutes he was asleep, his breathing deep and regular. Kinson stared down at him. Even then, his eyes were not quite closed. From behind narrow slits, there was a glimmer of light.

Like a cat, thought Kinson, looking away quickly. Like a dangerous cat.

Time passed, and the night lengthened. Midnight came and went. The moon dropped below the horizon, and the stars spun in vast, kaleidoscopic patterns across the black. Silence lay heavy and absolute over the Streleheim, and on the emptiness of the plains nothing moved. Even within the trees where Kinson Ravenlock kept watch, there was only the sound of the old man's breathing.

The Borderman glanced down at his companion. Bremen, as much an outcast as himself alone in his beliefs, exiled for truths that only he could accept.

They were alike in that regard, he thought. He was reminded of their first meeting. The old man had come to him at an inn in Varfleet, seeking his services. Kinson Ravenlock had been a scout, Tracker, explorer, and adventurer for the better part of twenty years, since the time he was fifteen. He had been raised in Callahorn, a part of its frontier life, a member of one of the handful of families who had remained in the Borderlands when everyone else had gone much farther south, distancing themselves from their past. After the conclusion of the First War of the Races, when the Druids had partitioned the Four Lands and left Paranor at the crux, Man had determined to leave a buffer between itself and the other Races. So while the Southland reached as far north as the Dragon's Teeth, Man had abandoned almost everything above the Rainbow Lake. Only a few Southland families had stayed on, believing that this was their home, finding themselves unwilling to move to the more populated areas of their assigned land. The Ravenlocks had been one of these.

So Kinson had grown up as a Borderman, living on the edge of civilization, but comfortable with Elves, Dwarves, Gnomes, and Trolls as with Men. He had traveled the lands and learned their customs. He had mastered their tongues. He was a student of history, and he had heard it told from enough different points of view that he thought he had gleaned the most important of the truths that it had to offer. Bremen was a student of history as well, and right from the beginning they had shared some common beliefs. One of these was that the Races could succeed in their efforts to maintain peace only by strengthening their ties to one another, not by distancing themselves. A second was that the greatest obstacle to their success in doing so was the Warlock Lord.

Even then, even five years earlier, the rumors were already being passed around. The

was something evil living in the Skull Kingdom, a collection of beasts and creatures like nothing ever seen before. There were reports of flying things, winged monsters scouring the land by night in search of mortal victims. There were stories of men going north and never being seen again. The Trolls stayed away from the Knife Edge and the Malg. They did not attempt to cross the Kierlak. When they traveled in proximity to the Skull Kingdom, they banded together in large, heavily armed groups. Nothing would grow in this part of the Northland. Nothing would take root. As time passed, the whole of that devastated region became shrouded in clouds and mist. It became arid and barren. It turned to dust and rock. Nothing could live there, it was said. Nothing that was really alive.

Most dismissed the stories. Many ignored the matter entirely. This was a remote and unfriendly part of the world in any case. What difference did it make what lived or didn't live there? But Kinson had gone into the Northland to see for himself. He had barely escaped with his life. The winged things had tracked him for five days after they had caught him prowling at the edge of their domain. Only his great skill and more than a little luck had saved him.

So when Bremen approached him, he had already made up his mind that what the Dru was saying was true. The Warlock Lord was real. Brona and his followers lived north in the Skull Kingdom. The threat to the Four Lands was not imagined. Something unpleasant was slowly taking shape.

He had agreed to accompany the old man on his journeys, to serve as a second pair of eyes when needed, to act as courier and scout, and to watch the other's back when danger threatened. Kinson had done so for a number of reasons, but none so compelling as the fact that for the first time in his life it gave him a sense of purpose. He was tired of drifting, of living for no better reason than to see again what he had already seen before and to be paid for the privilege. He was bored and directionless. He wanted a challenge.

Bremen had certainly given him that.

He shook his head wonderingly. It surprised him how far they had come together and how close they had grown. It surprised him how much both of those things mattered to him.

A flicker of movement far out on the empty stretches of the Streleheim caught his eye. He blinked and stared fixedly into the dark, seeing nothing. Then the movement came again, a small flutter of blackness in the shadow of a long ravine. It was so distant that he could not be certain what he was seeing, but already he suspected. A cold knot tightened in his stomach. He had seen movement like this before, always at night, always in the emptiness of some desolate place along the borders of the Northland.

He remained motionless, watching, hoping he was wrong. The movement came again, closer this time. Something lifted from the earth, hung suspended against the dark patchwork of the night plains, then dipped downward once more. It might have been a great winged bird in search of food, but it wasn't.

It was one of the Skull Bearers.

Still Kinson waited, determined to make certain of the creature's path. Again the shadow lifted away from the earth and soared into the starlight, angling along the ravine for a distance before moving away, coming steadily closer to where the Borderman and the Dru were concealed. Again it dipped downward and disappeared into the blackness of the earth.

Kinson realized with a sinking feeling what the Skull Bearer was doing. It was tracking someone.

Bremen.

He turned quickly now, but the old man was already beside him, staring past him into the night. "I was just about to ..."

"Wake me," the other finished. "Yes, I know."

Kinson looked back across the plains. Nothing moved. "Did you see?" he asked softly.

"Yes." Bremen's voice was alert, but calm. "One of them tracks me."

"You are certain? It follows your trail, not another's?"

"Somehow I was careless in my passage out." Bremen's eyes glittered. "It knows I have passed this way and seeks to find where I have gone. I wasn't seen within the Skull Kingdom so this is a chance discovery. I should have used more caution crossing the plains, but I thought myself safe."

They watched as the Skull Bearer reappeared, lifting skyward momentarily, gliding soundlessly across the landscape, then lowering into shadow once more.

"There is time yet before it reaches us," Bremen whispered. "I think we should be on our way. We will disguise our tracks to confuse it should it choose to follow us further. Parano and the Druids await. Come, Kinson."

Together they rose and slipped back through the shadows and down the far side of the hill into the trees. They went soundlessly, their movements smooth and practiced, their forms seeming to glide across the earth.

In seconds they had disappeared from view.

They walked the remainder of the night through the sheltering forest, Kinson leading Bremen a shadow following in his footsteps. Neither spoke, comfortable with the silence and each other. They did not see the Skull Bearer again. Bremen used magic to hide their tracks, just enough to conceal their passing without calling attention to it. But it seemed the winged hunter had chosen not to go below the Streleheim in its search, for had it done so they would have sensed its presence. As it was, they sensed only the creatures who lived there and no others. For the moment at least, they were safe.

Kinson Ravenlock's stride was tireless, its fluid movement honed and shaped from dozens of years of travel afoot through the Four Lands. The Borderman was big and strong, a man in the prime of his life, still able to rely on reflex and speed when the need arose. Bremen watched him admiringly, remembering his own youth, thinking how far down the path of his life he had traveled. The Druid Sleep had given him a longer life than most—a longer one than he was entitled to by nature's law—but still it was not enough. He could feel his strength leaking from his body almost daily. He could still keep up with the Borderman when they traveled, but it was no longer possible to do so without the aid of his magic. He supplemented himself at almost every turn these days, and he knew that the time left to him in this world was growing short.

Still, he was confident in himself. He had always been so, and that more than anything had kept him strong and alive. He had come to the Druids as a young man, his training and skills in the fields of history and ancient tongues. Times had been much different then, the Druids still active in the evolution and development of the Races, still working to bring the Races together in the pursuit of common goals. It was only later, less than seventy years ago, that they had begun to withdraw from their involvement in favor of private study. Bremen had come to Paranor to learn, and he had never stopped wanting and needing to do so. But learning required more than closeted study and meditation. It required travel and interaction with others, discussions on subjects of mutual interest, an awareness of the tide of change in life that could only come from observance, and a willingness to accept that the old ways might not offer all the answers.

So it was that early on he accepted that magic might prove a more manageable and durable form of power than the sciences of the world before the Great Wars. All the knowledge gleaned from memories and books from the time of Galaphile forward had failed to produce what was needed of science. It was too fragmented, too removed in time from the civilization it was needed to serve, too obscure in its purpose to provide the keys to unlock the doors of understanding. But magic was another matter. Magic was older than science and more readily accessible. The Elves, who had come from that time, had knowledge of it. Though they had lived in hiding and isolation for many years, they possessed books and writings far more decipherable in their purpose than those of the old-world sciences. True, much was still missing, and the great magics of faerie were gone and would not be easily recovered. But

there was better hope for these than for the sciences over which the Druid Council continued to struggle.

But the Council remembered what evocation of magic had cost them in the First War of the Races, what had befallen Brona and his followers, and they were not about to unlock the door again. Study of magic was permissible, but discouraged. It was treated as a curiosity with few usable tools, the practice in general not to be embraced as a doorway to the future under any circumstances. Bremen had argued the point endlessly and without success. The majority of the Druids at Paranor were hidebound and not open to the possibility of change. Learn from your mistakes, they intoned. Do not forget how dangerous the practice of magic can be. Best to forget your momentary interests in place of serious study. Bremen would not, of course—could not, in fact. It went counter to his nature to discard a possibility simply because it had failed once. Failed because of blatant misuse, he would remind them—something that did not necessarily have to happen a second time. A few agreed with him. But in the end, when his persistence grew intolerable and he was banished from the Council, he departed alone.

He traveled then to the Westland and lived with the Elves for many years, studying their lore, poring over their writings, trying to recover some of what they had lost when the creatures of faerie gave way to mortal men. A few things he brought with him. The secret of the Druid Sleep was already his, though still in its rudimentary form. Mastery of its intricacies and acceptance of its consequences took time, and it did not serve as a useful tool until he was already quite old. The Elves embraced Bremen as a kindred spirit and gave him access to their store of small magics and all but forgotten writings. In time, he discovered treasures amid the discards. He went out into the other lands, discovering bits of magic there as well, though not so highly developed and in many instances foreign even to the people whom they served.

All the while he worked steadily to confirm his growing conviction that the rumors of the Warlock Lord and his Skull Bearers were true, that these were the rebel Druids who had fled Paranor all those years ago, that these were the creatures who had been defeated in the First War of the Races. But the proof had been like the scent of flowers carried on the wind, there one moment and gone the next. He had tracked it relentlessly, across borders and kingdoms through villages near and far, from one tale to the next. In the end, he had tracked it to the Skull Kingdom itself, to the heart of the Warlock Lord's domain, there in the catacombs where he had concealed himself with the dark one's minions, waiting out events that would allow him to escape with his truth. Had he been stronger, he might have gotten to that truth sooner. But it had taken him years to develop the skills necessary to survive a journey north. It had taken years of study and exploration. It might have taken less time had the Council supported him, had they put aside their superstitions and fears and embraced the possibility as he had, but that had never happened.

He sighed, remembering it now. Thinking of it made him sad. So much time wasted. So many opportunities missed. Perhaps it was already too late for those at Paranor. What could he say now to convince them of the danger they faced? Would they even believe him when he told them what he had discovered? It had been more than two years since he had visited the Keep. Some probably thought him dead. Some might even wish him so. It would not be easy to convince them that they had been wrong in their assumptions about the Warlock

Lord, that they must rethink their commitment to the Races, and, most important, that they must reconsider their refusal to use magic.

They passed out of the deep forest as dawn broke, the light brightening from silver to gold as the sun crept over the rim of the Dragon's Teeth and poured down through breaks in the trees to warm the damp earth. The trees thinned before them, reduced to small groves and solitary sentinels. Ahead, Paranor rose out of the misty light. The fortress of the Druids was a massive stone citadel seated on a foundation of rock that jutted from the earth like a fist. The walls of the fortress rose skyward hundreds of feet to form towers and battlements bleached to a vivid white. Pennants flew at every turn, some honoring the separate insignia of the High Druids who had served, some marking the houses of the rulers of the Four Lands. Mist clung to the high reaches and swathed the darker shadows at the castle base where the sun had not yet burned away the night. It was an impressive sight, Bremen thought. Even now, even for him who was outcast.

Kinson glanced inquiringly over his shoulder, but Bremen nodded for him to go on. There was nothing to be gained by delay. Still, the very size of the fortress gave him pause. The weight of its stone seemed to settle down across his shoulders, a burden he could not overcome. Such a massive, implacable force, he thought, mirroring in some sense the stubborn resolve of those who dwelled within. He wished it might be otherwise. He knew he must try to make it so.

They passed out of the trees, where the sunlight was still an intruder amid the shadows, and walked clear of the fading night down the roadway to approach the main gates. Already there were a handful of armed men emerging to meet them, part of the multi-national force that served the Council as the Druid Guard. All were dressed in gray uniforms with a torc emblem embroidered in red on their left breast. Bremen looked for a recognizable face and found none. Well, he had been gone two years, after all. At least these were Elves set to watch, and Elves might hear him out.

Kinson moved aside deferentially and let him step to the fore. He straightened himself, calling on the magic to give him added presence, to disguise the weariness he felt, to hide any weakness or doubt. He moved up to the gates determinedly, black robes billowing out behind him, Kinson a dark presence on his right. The guards waited, flat-faced and expressionless.

When he reached them, feeling them wilt just a bit with his approach, he said simply, "Good morning to all."

"Good morning to you, Bremen," replied one, stepping forward, offering a short bow.

"You know me then?"

The other nodded. "I know of you. I am sorry, but you are not allowed to enter."

His eyes shifted to include Kinson. He was polite, but firm. No outcast Druids allowed. No members of the Race of Man either. Discussion not advised.

Bremen glanced upward to the parapets as if considering the matter. "Who is Captain of the Guard?" he asked.

"Caerid Lock," the other answered.

"Will you ask him to come down and speak with me?"

The Elf hesitated, pondering the request. Finally, he nodded. "Please wait here."

He disappeared through a side door into the Keep. Bremen and Kinson stood facing the remaining guards in the shadow of the fortress wall. It would have been an easy matter to go

by them, to leave them standing there looking at nothing more than empty images, but Bremen had determined not to use magic to gain entry. His mission was too important to risk incurring the anger of the Council by circumventing their security and making them look foolish. They would not appreciate tricks. They might respect directness. It was a gamble he was willing to take.

Bremen turned and looked back at the forest. Sunlight probed its deep recesses now chasing back the shadows, brightening the fragile stands of wildflowers. It was spring, he realized with a start. He had lost track of time on his journey north and back again, consumed with his search. He breathed the air, taking in a hint of the fragrance it bore from the woods. It had been a long time since he had thought about flowers.

There was movement in the doorway behind him, and he turned. The guard who had left reappeared and with him was Caerid Lock.

“Bremen,” the Elf greeted solemnly, and came up to offer his hand.

Caerid Lock was a slight, dark-complected man with intense eyes and a careworn face. His Elven features marked him distinctly, his brows slanted upward, his ears pointed, his face so narrow he seemed gaunt. He wore gray like the others, but the torch on his breast was gripped in a fist and there were crimson bars on both shoulders. His hair and beard were cut short and both were shot through with gray. He was one of a few who had remained friendly with Bremen when the Druid was dismissed from the Council. He had been Captain of the Druid Guard for more than fifteen years, and there was not a better man anywhere for the job. An Elven Hunter with a lifetime of service, Caerid Lock was a thorough professional. The Druids had chosen well in determining who would protect them. More to the point, for Bremen’s purpose, he was a man they might listen to if a request was proffered.

“Caerid, well met,” the Druid replied, accepting the other’s hand. “Are you well?”

“As well as some I know. You’ve aged a few years since leaving us. The lines are in your face.”

“You see the mirror of your own, I’d guess.”

“Perhaps. Still traveling the world, are you?”

“In the good company of my friend, Kinson Ravenlock,” he introduced the other.

The Elf took the Borderman’s hand and measure by equal turns, but said nothing. Kinson was equally remote.

“I need your help, Caerid,” Bremen advised, turning solemn. “I must speak with Athabasca and the Council.”

Athabasca was High Druid, an imposing man of firm belief and unyielding opinion who had never much cared for Bremen. He was a member of the Council when the old man was dismissed, though he was not yet High Druid. That had come later, and then only through the complex workings of internal politics that Bremen so hated. Still, Athabasca was leader, for better or worse, and any chance of success in breaching these walls would necessarily hinge on him.

Caerid Lock smiled ruefully. “Why not ask me for something difficult? You know that Paranor and the Council both are forbidden to you. You cannot even enter these walls, let alone speak with the High Druid.”

“I can if he orders it,” Bremen said simply.

The other nodded. Sharp eyes narrowed. “I see. You want me to speak to him on your

behalf.”

Bremen nodded. Caerid’s tight smile disappeared. “He doesn’t like you,” he pointed out quietly. “That hasn’t changed in your absence.”

“He doesn’t have to like me to talk with me. What I have to tell him is more important than personal feelings. I will be brief. Once he has heard me out, I will be on my way again.” He paused. “I don’t think I am asking too much, do you?”

Caerid Lock shook his head. “No.” He glanced at Kinson. “I will do what I can.”

He went back inside, leaving the old man and the Borderman to contemplate the walls and gates of the Keep. Their warders stood firmly in place, barring all entry. Bremen regarded them solemnly for a moment, then glanced toward the sun. The day was beginning to grow warm already. He looked at Kinson, then walked over to where the shadows provided a greater measure of shade and sat down on a stone outcropping. Kinson followed, but refused to sit. There was an impatient look in his dark eyes. He wanted this matter to be finished. He was ready to move on. Bremen smiled inwardly. How like his friend. Kinson’s solution to everything was to move on. He had lived his whole life that way. It was only now, since they had met, that he had begun to see that nothing is ever solved if it isn’t faced. It wasn’t that Kinson wasn’t capable of standing up to life. He simply dealt with unpleasantness by leaving it behind, by outdistancing it, and it was true that things could be handled that way. It was just that there was never any permanent resolution.

Yes, Kinson had grown since those early days. He was a stronger man in ways that could not be readily measured. But Bremen knew that old habits died hard, and for Kinson and Ravenlock the urge to walk away from the unpleasant and the difficult was always there.

“This is a waste of our time,” the Borderman muttered, as if to give credence to his thoughts.

“Patience, Kinson,” Bremen counseled softly.

“Patience? Why? They won’t let you in. And if they do, they won’t listen to you. They don’t want to hear what you have to say. These are not the Druids of old, Bremen.”

Bremen nodded. Kinson was right in that. But there was no help for it. The Druids of today were the only Druids there were, and some of them were not so bad. Some would still make worthy allies. Kinson would prefer they deal with matters on their own, but the enemy they faced was too formidable to be overcome without help. The Druids were needed. While they had abandoned their practice of direct involvement in the affairs of the Races, they were still regarded with a certain deference and respect. That would prove useful in uniting the Four Lands against their common enemy.

The morning wore on toward midday. Caerid Lock did not reappear. Kinson paced for some time, then finally sat down next to Bremen, frustration mirrored on his lean face. He sat wrapped in silence, wearing his darkest look.

Bremen sighed inwardly. Kinson had been with him a long time. Bremen had handpicked him from among a number of candidates for the task of ferreting out the truth about the Warlock Lord. Kinson had been the right choice. He was the best Tracker the old man had ever known. He was smart and brave and clever. He was never reckless, always reasonable. They had grown so close that Kinson was like a son to him. He was certainly his closest friend.

But he could not be the one thing Bremen needed him to be. He could not be the Druid

successor. Bremen was old and failing, though he hid it well enough from those who might suspect. When he was gone, there would be no one left to continue his work. There would be no one to advance the study of magic so necessary to the evolution of the Races, no one to prod the recalcitrant Druids of Paranor into reconsidering their involvement with the Four Lands, and no one to stand against the Warlock Lord. Once, he had hoped that Kinson Ravenlock might be that man. The Borderman might still be, he supposed, but it did not seem likely. Kinson lacked the necessary patience. He disdained any pretense of diplomacy. He had no time for those who could not grasp truths he felt were obvious. Experience was the only teacher he had ever respected. He was an iconoclast and a persistent loner. None of these characteristics would serve him well as a Druid, but it seemed impossible that he could ever be any different from the way he was.

Bremen glanced over at his friend, suddenly unhappy with his analysis. It was not fair to judge Kinson so. It was enough that the Borderman was as devoted as he was, enough that he would stand with him to the death if it was required. Kinson was the best of friends and allies, and it was wrong to expect more of him.

It was just that his need for a successor was so desperate! He was old, and time was slipping away too quickly.

He took his eyes from Kinson and looked off into the distant trees as if to measure what little remained.

It was past midday when Caerid Lock finally reappeared. He stalked out of the shadows of the doorway with barely a glance at the guards or Kinson and came directly to Bremen. The Druid climbed to his feet to greet him, his joints and his muscles cramped.

“Athasca will speak with you,” the Captain of the Druid Guard advised, grim-faced.

Bremen nodded. “You must have worked hard to persuade him. I am in your debt, Caerid.”

The Elf grunted noncommittally. “I would not be so sure. Athasca has his own reasons for agreeing to this meeting, I think.” He turned to Kinson. “I am sorry, but I could not gain entrance for you.”

Kinson straightened and shrugged. “I will be happier waiting here, I expect.”

“I expect,” agreed the other. “I will send you out some food and fresh water. Bremen, are you ready?”

The Druid looked at Kinson and smiled faintly. “I will be back as soon as I can.”

“Good luck to you,” his friend offered quietly.

Then Bremen was following Caerid Lock through the entry of the Keep and into the shadows beyond.

They walked down cavernous hallways and winding, narrow corridors in cool, dark silence, their footsteps echoing off the heavy stone. They encountered no one. It was as if Paranor were deserted, and Bremen knew that was not so. Several times, he thought he caught a whisper of conversation or a hint of movement somewhere distant from where they walked, but he could never be certain. Caerid was taking him down the back passageways, the ones seldom used, the ones kept solely for private comings and goings. It seemed understandable. Athasca did not want the other Druids to know he was permitting this meeting until after he had decided if it was worth having. Bremen would be given a private audience and a brief opportunity to state his case, and then he would be either summarily dismissed or summoned

to address the Council. Either way, the decision would be made quickly.

They began to climb a series of stairs toward the upper chambers of the Keep. Athabasca's offices were well up in the tower, and it was likely that he intended to see Bremen there. The old man pondered Caerid Lock's words as they proceeded. Athabasca would have his reasons for agreeing to this meeting, and they would not necessarily be immediately apparent. The High Druid was a politician first, an administrator second, and a functionary above all. That was not to demean him; it was simply to categorize the nature of his thinking. His primary focus would be one of cause and effect—that is, if one thing happened, how would it impact on another. That was the way his mind worked. He was able and organized, but he was calculating as well. Bremen would have to be careful in choosing his words.

They were almost to the end of a connecting corridor when a black-robed figure suddenly stepped out of the shadows to confront them. Caerid Lock instinctively reached for his short sword, but the other's hands were already gripping the Elf's arms and pinning them to his sides. With so little effort that it seemed to be an afterthought, the robed figure lifted Caerid from the floor and set him to one side like a minor impediment.

"There, there, Captain," a rough voice soothed. "No need for weapons among friends. I'll talk after a quick word with your charge, and then I'll be out of your way."

"Risca!" Bremen greeted in surprise. "Well met, old friend!"

"I'll thank you to remove your hands, Risca," snapped Caerid Lock irritably. "I wouldn't be reaching for my weapons if you didn't jump at me without announcing yourself!"

"Apologies, Captain," the other purred. He took his hands away and held them up defensively. Then he looked at Bremen. "Welcome home, Bremen of Paranor."

Risca came forward then into the light and embraced the old man. He was a bearded, blue-faced Dwarf with tremendous shoulders, his compact body stocky and broad and heavily muscled. Arms like tree trunks crushed briefly and released, replaced by hands that were gnarled and callused. Risca was like a deeply rooted tree stump that nothing could dislodge, weathered by time and the seasons, impervious to age. He was a warrior Druid, the last who remained of that breed, skilled in the use of weapons and warfare, steeped in the lore of the great battles fought since the new Races had emerged. Bremen had trained him personally until his banishment from the Keep more than ten years ago. Through all that had happened, Risca had stayed his friend.

"Not of Paranor any longer, Risca," Bremen demurred. "But it feels like home still. How have you been?"

"Well. But bored. There is little use for my talents behind these walls. Few of the new Druids have any interest in battle arts. I stay sharp practicing with the Guard. Caerid tests me daily."

The Elf snorted. "You have me for breakfast daily, you mean. What are you doing here? How did you know to find us?"

Risca released Bremen and looked about mysteriously. "These walls have ears, for those who know how to listen."

Caerid Lock laughed in spite of himself. "Spying—another finely honed art in the arsenal of warrior skills!"

Bremen smiled at the Dwarf. "You know why I've come?"

"I know you are to speak with Athabasca. But I wanted to speak with you first. No, Caerid

You may remain for this. I have no secrets I cannot reveal to you.” The Dwarf’s countenance turned serious. “There can be only one reason for your return, Bremen. And no news that can be welcome. So be it. But you will need allies in this, and I am one. Count on me to be your voice when it matters. I have seniority in the Council that few others who support you can offer. You need to know how matters stand, and they do not favor your return.”

“I hope to persuade Athabasca that our common need requires us to set aside our differences.” Bremen furrowed his brow thoughtfully. “It cannot be so difficult to accept this.”

Risca shook his head. “It can and it will. Be strong, Bremen. Do not defer to him. He dislikes what you represent—a challenge to his authority. Nothing you say or do will transcend that. Fear is a weapon that will serve you better than reason. Let him understand the danger.” He looked suddenly at Caerid. “Would you advise differently?”

The Elf hesitated, then shook his head. “No.”

Risca reached forward to grip Bremen’s hands once more. “I will speak with you later.”

He wheeled down the corridor and disappeared back into the shadows. Bremen smiled in spite of himself. Strong in body and mind, unyielding in all things. That was Risca. He would never change.

They continued on once more, the Elf Captain and the old man, navigating the dimly lit corridors and stairways, winding deeper into the Keep, until finally they came to a landing at the top of a flight of stairs that fronted a small, narrow, ironbound door. Bremen had seen this door more than a few times in his years at the castle. It was the back entry to the office of the High Druid. Athabasca would be waiting within to receive him. He took a deep breath.

Caerid Lock tapped on the door three times, paused, then tapped once more. From within a familiar voice rumbled, “Enter.”

The Captain of the Druid Guard pushed the narrow door open, then stepped aside. “I have been asked to wait here,” he advised softly.

Bremen nodded, amused by the solemnity he found in the other’s face. “I understand,” he said. “Thank you again, Caerid.”

Then he stooped to clear the low entry and moved inside.

The room was a familiar one. It was the exclusive chamber of the High Druid, a private retreat and meeting place for the Council’s leader. It was a large room with a high ceiling, tall windows of leaded glass, bookcases filled with papers, artifacts, diaries, files, and a scattering of books. Massive, ironbound double doors were centered on the front wall, across from where he stood. A huge desk rested at the chamber’s center, swept clean for the moment of everything, the wood surface burnished and shining in the candlelight.

Athabasca stood behind the desk, waiting. He was a big, heavysset, imperious man with a shock of flowing white hair and cold blue eyes set deep in a florid face. He wore the dark blue robes of the High Druid, which were belted at the waist and free of any insignia. Instead, he wore about his neck the Eilt Druin, the medallion of office of High Druids since the time of Galaphile. The Eilt Druin was forged of gold and a small mix of strengthening metals and laced with silver trappings. It was molded in the shape of a hand holding forth a burning torch. The hand and the torch had been the symbol of the Druids since the time of their inception. The medallion was said to be magic, though no one had ever seen the magic used. The words “Eilt Druin” were Elven and meant literally “Through Knowledge, Power.”

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