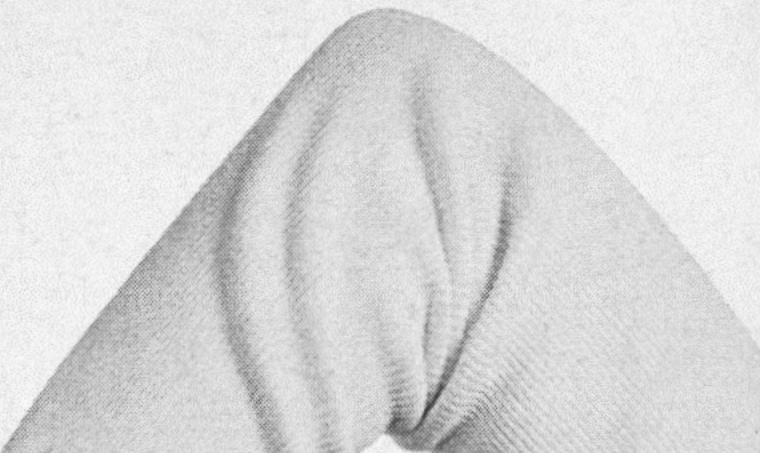
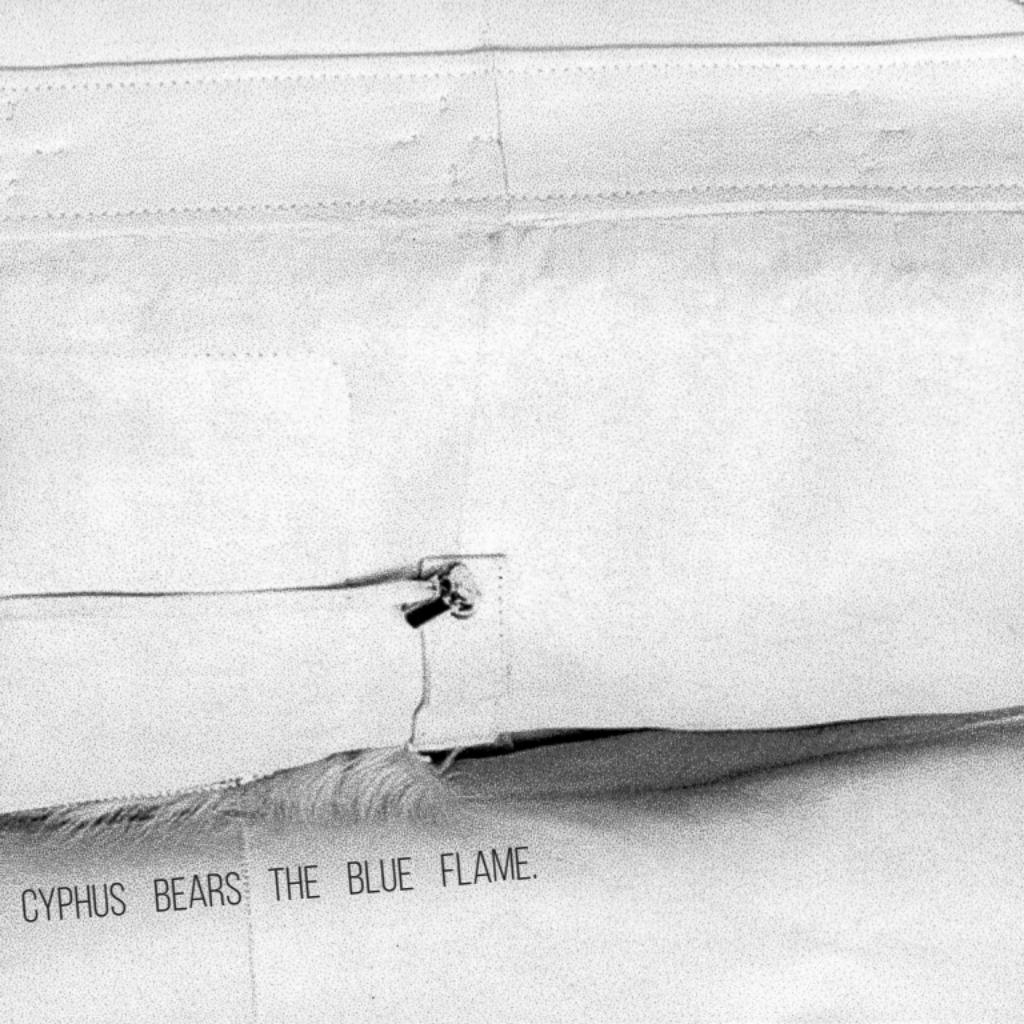


DESCENT TO DARKNESS



A black and white photograph showing a zipper partially unzipped on a light-colored, possibly white, fabric garment. The zipper pull is dark and metallic. The fabric has some texture and slight wear at the bottom edge.

CYPHUS BEARS THE BLUE FLAME.

I couldn't see the draccus, but I could hear the great crunching it made as it rolled in the wreckage of a burning house. I saw a gush of blue flame rise high above the rooftops and heard it roar again. The sound made me sweat. Who knew what was going through its drug-addled mind right now?

There were people everywhere. Some were simply standing, confused, others panicked and ran to the church, hoping to find shelter in the tall stone building or the huge iron wheel that hung there, promising them safety from demons. But the church doors were locked, and they were forced to find shelter elsewhere. Some people watched, horrified and weeping, from their windows, but a surprising number kept their heads and were forming a bucket line from the town's cistern atop the city hall to a nearby burning building.

And just like that I knew what I had to do. It was like I had suddenly stepped onto a stage. Fear and hesita-



STERCUS IS IN THRALL OF IRON.

tion left me. All that remained was for me to play my part.

I jumped to a nearby roof, then made my way across several others until I came to a house near the town square where a scattered piece of bonfire had set the roof burning. I pried up a thick shingle burning along one edge and took off running for the roof of the town hall.

I was only two roofs away when I slipped. Too late I realized I'd jumped to the inn's roof-no wood shingles here, but clay tiles slippery with rain. I held tight to the burning shingle as I fell, unwilling to let it go to brace my fall. I slid nearly to the edge of the roof before I came to a stop, heart pounding.

Breathless, I kicked off my boots as I lay there. Then with the familiar feel of rooftop under my calloused feet I ran, jumped, ran, slid, and jumped again. Finally



FERULE CHILL AND DARK OF EYE.

I swung myself one-handed by an eave-pipe onto the flat stone roof of the town hall.

Still clutching the burning shingle, I made my way up the ladder to the top of the cistern, whispering a breathless thanks to whoever had left it open to the sky.

As I'd sprinted across the rooftops, the flame on the shingle had gone out, leaving a thin line of red ember along the edge. I puffed it carefully back to life and soon it was blazing merrily again. I broke it down the middle and dropped half to the flat roof below.

Turning to survey the town. I made note of the biggest fires. There were six especially bad ones, blazing up into the dark sky. Elxa Dal had always said that all fires are one fire, and all fires are the sympathist's to command. Very well then, all fires were one fire.

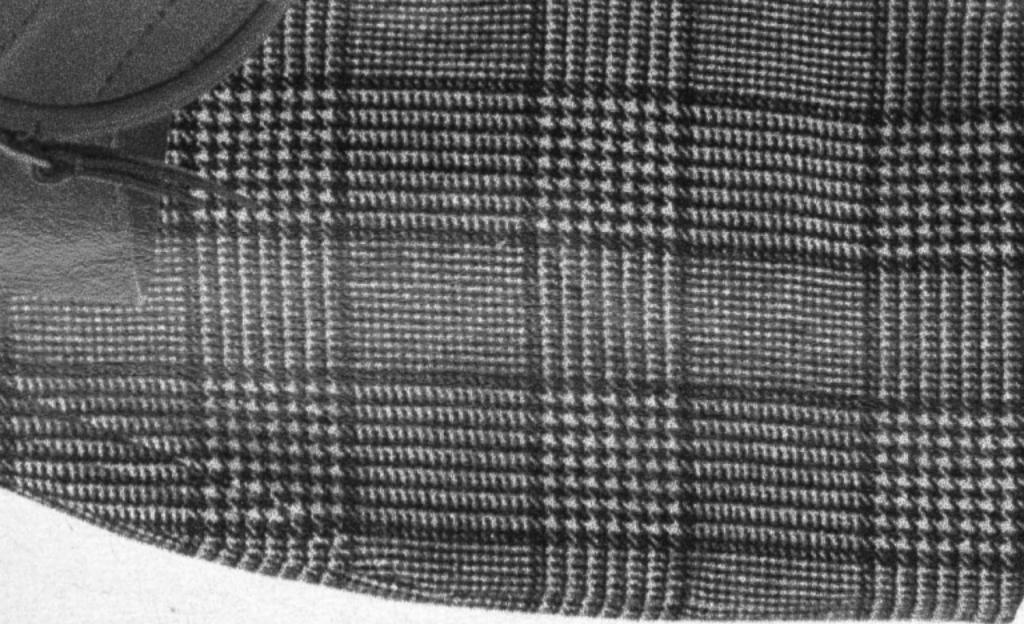


USNEA LIVES IN NOTHING BUT DECAY.

This fire. This piece of burning shingle. I murmured a binding and focused my Alar. I used my thumbnail to scratch a hasty ule rune onto the wood, then doch, then pesin. In the brief moment it took to do that the entire shingle was smoldering and smoking, hot in my hand.

I hooked my foot around the ladder rung and leaned deep into the cistern, quenching the shingle in the water. For a brief moment I felt the cool water surround my hand, then it quickly warmed. Even though the shingle was under water, I could see the faint line of red ember still smoldering along its edge.

I pulled out my pocketknife with my other hand and drove it through the shingle into the wooden wall of the cistern, pinning my makeshift piece of sygaldry under the water. I have no doubt it was the quickest, most slapdash heat-eater ever created.



GREY DALCENTI NEVER SPEAKS.

Pulling myself back onto the ladder, I looked around to a town blessedly dark. The flames had dimmed, and in most places had subsided to sullen coals. I hadn't doused the fires, merely slowed them down enough to give the townsfolk and their buckets a fighting chance.

But my job was only half done. I dropped to the roof and picked up the other half of the still-burning shingle I'd dropped. Then I slid down a drainpipe and legged it away through the dark streets, across the town square to the front of the Tehlin church.

I stopped under the huge oak that stood before the front door, still holding its full array of autumn leaves. Kneeling, I opened my travellsack and brought out the oilskin bag with all the remaining resin. I poured the bottle of brand onto it and set it afire with the burning shingle. It flared up quickly, billowing acrid, sweet-smelling smoke.



PALE ALENTA BRINGS THE BLIGHT.

Then I put the blunt end of the shingle between my teeth, jumped to catch a low branch, and began to climb the tree. It was easier than making my way up the side of a building, and took me high enough to where I could jump to the wide stone window ledge on the church's second floor. I broke off a twig from the oak tree and stuffed it into my pocket.

I edged along the window ledge to where the huge iron wheel hung, bolted to the stone of the wall. Climbing that was quicker than a ladder, though the iron spokes were startlingly cold against my still-wet hands.

I made my way to the top of the wheel, and from there pulled myself onto the flat peak of the highest roof in town. The fires were still dark for the most part, and most of the shouting had died down to sobs and a low murmur of urgent, hurried talk. I took the piece of shingle out of my mouth and blew on it until it was

LAST THERE IS THE LORD OF THE SEVEN:

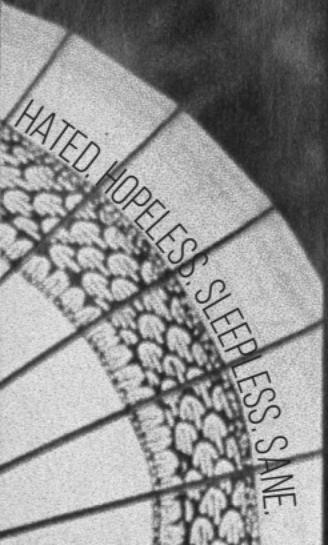
flaming again. Then I concentrated, muttered another binding, and held the oak twig above the flame. I looked out over the town and saw the glimmering coals dim even further.

A moment passed.

The oak tree below burst into sudden, brilliant flame. It flared brighter than a thousand torches as all its leaves caught fire at the same time.

In the sudden light I saw the draccus raise its head two streets away. It bellowed and blew a cloud of blue flame even as it started to run toward the fire. It turned a corner too quickly and caromed wildly into the wall of a shop, smashing through with little resistance.

It slowed as it approached the tree, blowing flame again and again. The leaves flared and faded quickly, leaving nothing but a thousand embers, making the



HATED. HOPELESS. SLEEPLESS. SANE.

tree look like an immense extinguished candelabrum.

In the dim red light, the draccus was hardly more than a shadow. But I could still see the beast's attention wander, now that the bright flames were gone. The massive wedge of a head swayed back and forth, back and forth. I cursed under my breath. It wasn't close enough...

Then the draccus huffed loud enough for me to hear from where I stood a hundred feet above. The head snapped around as it smelled the sweet smoke of the burning resin. It snuffed, grunted, and took another step toward the smoking bag of resin. It didn't show nearly the restraint it had earlier, and practically pounced on it, snapping up the smoldering sack in its great wide mouth.

I took a deep breath and shook my head, trying to clear away some of the sluggishness I felt. I had per-



formed two rather substantial pieces of sympathy in quick succession and was feeling rather thickheaded because of it.

But as they say, third time pays for all. I broke my mind into two pieces, then, with some difficulty, into a third. Nothing less than a triple binding would do for this.

As the draccus worked its jaw, trying to swallow the sticky mass of resin, I fumbled in my travelsack for the heavy black scale, then brought the loden-stone out from my cloak. I spoke my bindings clearly and focused my Alar. I brought the scale and stone up in front of me until I could feel them tugging at each other.

I concentrated, focused.

I let go of the loden-stone. It shot toward the iron



ALAXEL BEARS *THE SHADOW'S HAME.*

scale. Below my feet was an explosion of stone as the great iron wheel tore free from the church wall.

A ton of wrought iron fell. If anyone had been watching, they would have noticed that the wheel fell faster than gravity could account for. They would have noticed that it fell at an angle, almost as if it were drawn to the draccus.



RETURN TO LIGHT