

The Eternal Sword of Q'forr

An Exercise in Montage

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Init

You are a dwarf, feeling for the first time the heat of the double suns on your calcified arms, or you are a halfling, treacherous and dark, or you are an elf (and what is your name?), or you are a man from the south, robust and from the south, and the cruel sorcerer St!an has burned your family alive, the cruel sorcerer St!an has torched your village and burned your family alive, the cruel sorcerer St!an has become a dragon and burned your village down, your family, in the last throes of life, thrusting their arms into the smoky sky. You will kill the cruel sorcerer St!an with the Eternal Sword of Q'forr.

You will not kill the cruel sorcerer who is a dragon because he plunged his dark talons into the dark loam and blew fire into the dark sky, each house, their straw roofs, their wooden beams, even the stone themselves glowing red and glowing white and cracking and crackling and the whole dark sky growing darker and hard to breathe and mother and mother and mother, but for the elf princess Ssssss, the elf princess Ssssss who the cruel sorcerer took for himself, the elf princess Ssssss who has come to you in your dreams.

Dream

You continue to dream, the fires never quite going out. The elf princess Ssssss has drawn you in closer, has held with her soft fingers the roughest parts of your fur (you are a kobold, morose and lonely), and she has begun to kiss you with the face of your father. In the space provided, draw the face of your father.

You cannot stay sleeping; in the space provided you have drawn all four faces of your father and can no longer tell which one is rubbing its tongue up your cheek. You will now wake up.

Wake

You are awake, all three suns bright above, it must be at least the second midday. Your back aches, your face is covered with soot and cheeks still raw from crying. Perhaps you are far enough away to be safe. The jays seem to think so, whistling something jolly. Or perhaps they are bluebirds, you never listened to what Adze used to tell you; you wish you had. He's dead now, almost certainly. And mother. And dad. *If you do not push yourself out of this grass this moment, you will never get up.*

And so you do, a vague commitment to living overcoming whatever sense you had. You push yourself up and, in a sudden rush of blood, remember your dream. Checking your inventory, you do not find any swords of Q'forr, eternal or otherwise. You do find

- ▶ two silver and five copper pieces,
- ▶ a loaf of bread, and
- ▶ a lock of rich, black hair.

Perhaps you should write this down. You should leave. There is nothing more for you here

South

There is nothing more for you here, either.

- ▶ Go north.

Dead End

Convention dictates that when you are permitted to press a link, you must press a link. The sky is full of ashes and you are thinking of home. You will start crying in a moment if you do not stop yourself — you cannot make a house of bones. Recognizing the sensibility of this advice, the sky is full of ravens and you are poised to begin making progress. You must make a sign of it: the sky is full of ravens and the dueling suns imbue everything with an unvoicable urgency. Perhaps you can just get back on with it, no need to make a big to do, a brief detour at most and now onwards ho! This will not work, a sacrifice must be made. You reach into your inventory.

Release the hair to the wind. Forget someone dear to you.

Yes.

► *Go north.*

Yes.

North

There are three bandits on the road through the woods, each one a worshipper of a different sun. They look at you with a vague hunger; it is clear you have nothing worth taking, but that may not stop them. The largest one, a troll, grey and naked is leaning up against a fir. His ritual scars are fresh and, as he rubs his body against the bark, begin to bleed. You are a troll, too, and not having a good time of it: you know in any other circumstance one of you would kill the other.

But perhaps this is one of those circumstances. The one who may be a man, wrapped in red and pink robes, introduces themselves between you, "Easy there." But his voice betrays neither certainty nor eagerness, indeed perhaps just an edge of malice, and the orc woman just sharpening her mace.

He is already half bloody; you can almost taste the salt. The third sun is beginning to set.

- ▶ Calm down. Just talk.
- ▶ You can almost taste the salt

Conversation

You throw your shoulders down and mumble out an apology. The orc sidles up to you; this is the end, you think. A cold steel, touch on your back — this is the end, you think. But the metal just stays, slowly warming to something tolerable and you realize she has half embraced you. “Tell me where you’re from,” she says. You gesture towards the fire and she understands; she has always understood you — it is said that orcs can read each other’s thoughts.

You hear the mace clatter to the ground as she pulls you into her shoulder. After a few moments you realize that you are crying. She lowers you to the ground and the other two gather on logs around you. You start explaining what happened. “And the princess,” the man in the robes asks, “have you seen her?”

You insist you have not. The troll lowers his head to the ground. “What about your dreams?”

“Yes,” you say. “Yes.”

And he replies, “We’ve all had those.”

Killing

They were weaker than you thought. All of the troll's scars have opened up and the ground has turned purple. The orc woman is impaled on the hilt of her own mace and the robes have been torn away from the man's face. Everything has gone quiet — the birds now avoid this place.

In the melee, someone dropped a friendship pin (*perhaps you*) that is now covered with blood. *Pick it up. Remember what you have done.*

- ▶ Keep going north.

Ferry

The ferry-docks are empty. A fairy standing against the wall to the ferry-hut eyes you, caught up in the design of your *Trauggge and the Thorne Maidens* tattoo. He is not hard to read.

"The other refugees came and left this morning. I don't expect I'll see one of my boats till nighttime, if any of them make it back at all."

You nod at him, but pause for a moment, your legs grown heavy. But you cannot stop; there is a town behind you that is a smoldering ember and a dragon ahead. He is still watching you, a little closer than you might like. "If you want, you could come inside until they come back."

You approach slowly, with a nervousness you cannot quite explain. He is young, though you cannot quite place it; as you close in he puts a finger to your chest. "Cool, mate," he smiles, "I went to see them in the capital with my, with a friend."

You manage to return the smile. The grey circles beneath his eyes,

Inside

The house goes right down to the river and is bright inside, each window open to a different sun. “I’m afraid the earlier group basically clean house. I cannot imagine what we’re going to do when the next group arrives. When my uncle left today — he owns the place, I’m just here for the season — some of the rafts were so weighted down. I’d be surprised. Well, I don’t like to think about it.” You can hear his voice from another room. “I did manage to find a spot of honey for the tea.”

If you want, share your bread with him. Write his response in the blank space.

Things keep coming back to you in flashes, but clutching the tea you are for a moment calm. You study him as he sits down, his embroidered shirt that cloaks the wings and gauges through his ears speak to his time in the city, but his pose, arms thrown over the back of the chair, reveal him as a easterner like yourself. “You travelled alone?” He tenses up as he asks this, sure that he is hitting

The Fire and the Boats

[T]here we shall see men that by the world were cut in pieces, burnt in flames, eaten of beasts, drowned in the seas, for the love that they bare to the Lord of the place.

You start to more fire, more screaming. You grip the bed to check that you have indeed woken. Smoke is again filling the room, but lightly; it does not seem that the house is on fire. You dash outside. It is night, and the forest sways, dark and menacing, under a heavy wind. You turn: the river is on fire. Or rather, the river is filled with boats, and the boats are on fire.

They are far off, a quarter mile perhaps, but the yells resound across the water. Your eyes sting; the wind is wild and in a moment blows the other way and you can barely hear the passengers. You see the vague shadow of the fairy running along the shore towards the ships.

And then no human sound halts both of you in your stride. The dragon emerges from the elms, shrieking and the beating of its great wings silencing all else. It soars over the river and then doubles back, plumes of flame bellowing from its wide mouth as it beats a spiral, the night lit by falling fire in its wake. The wind blows from the south,

Hopeless Aid

He fastens himself to you a moment. “Come on,” you say, “someone might have survived that.” You are a man from the south, steadfast and robust.

He nods and follows you north along the curve of the river. You cannot even see the boats until you draw close. And they are not boats even anymore, but a broad field of flotsam. There may be bodies among the wreckage. The fairy pulls off his shirt and flies out over the water.

If you can swim, do so. It will not help, there are no survivors.

Eventually, he pulls a few corpses to shore. They are mangled and burnt, but he recognizes one as his uncle. You bury it; there is nothing to do for the others. You return to the house. He spends hours looking out at the river, his expression unchanging. He shivers occasionally, the night air against his bare chest. Eventually, though, he does rise.

“Those men were from the eastern militia,” he says, “Someone will

The River

*Hedgerow and stream and banks I see
Like gold thread shines each wooded height;*

The river goes west for miles. It is still early afternoon, but you do not know how long you will have to follow it downstream. You have never left your village. You do not know where the river leads, only that rivers lead somewhere.

The River

The river goes west for miles. You keep yourself from thinking as you follow it.

- ▶ Phase out.

The River (a single hurt colour)

goes west for miles.

- ▶ Phase out.

The River (rid of a cover)

goes west for miles.

- ▶ Phase out.

The River (and not copper)

goes west for miles.

- ▶ Phase out.

The River (is silver cloister)

Going west for miles, when California was burning I was not yet present, and the bright light flooded through all the red fire, and the red fire through all the bright light, and the bright light and red fire shone together, but the kettle had been left on the stove for too long and all the water boiled away. Going west for miles, the birds are all named after each other. An ox dead amid the cacti and a desert flower, *counting*. counting what?

Going west for miles, I mean adding. *Counting*, you go zero, one-two-three. *Adding*, you go zero, two-four-six. Going west for miles, I mean, and the world is full of fires and strangely deserts do not burn with the best of them. By going west for miles, I mean that the world is full of fires; I mean Dresden, the hazelnuts bouncing off Cuna's tin roof at night. Can someone tell you the German word for mother? In Virginia a train following a river, going west for miles, derailed during a flood and still has not been dragged out; what I mean is that the world is full of fires. Going west for miles, everything that you mean is the word "defeat."

The River (a stubborn bloom)

goes west for miles. If sand should choke up the mouth
of the river, if sand should choke up
the mouth of the river, if sand
should choke up the mouth of the river, yours
is the earth. Somewhere in Paris, it is
raining, and the sewerman has just left
for London.

► Phase out.

The River (which goes west for miles)

goes west for miles.

Village

At last you come to a village at the edge of the river. The suns have set and the village is unlit. It is defined by an eerie silence. Still, it promises something.

End

Credits

- ▶ The Fire and the Boats
 - ▶ PILGRIMS PROGRESS, John Bunyan.
 - ▶ KJV. Psalm 4:20.
- ▶ The River
 - ▶ PEARL, Unknown, *trans.* Bill Stanton.
 - ▶ TENDER BUTTONS, Gertrude Stein.
- ▶ The River (is silver cloister)
 - ▶ THE TRINITY, SCIVIAS II 2., Hildegard of Bingen, *trans.* Mark Atherton.
 - ▶ SENTENCES, Robert Grenier.
 - ▶ "I Mean," Kate Colby.
- ▶ The River (a stubborn bloom)
 - ▶ SYSTEM OF LOGIC, John Stuart Mill.
 - ▶ "If," Rudyard Kipling.