

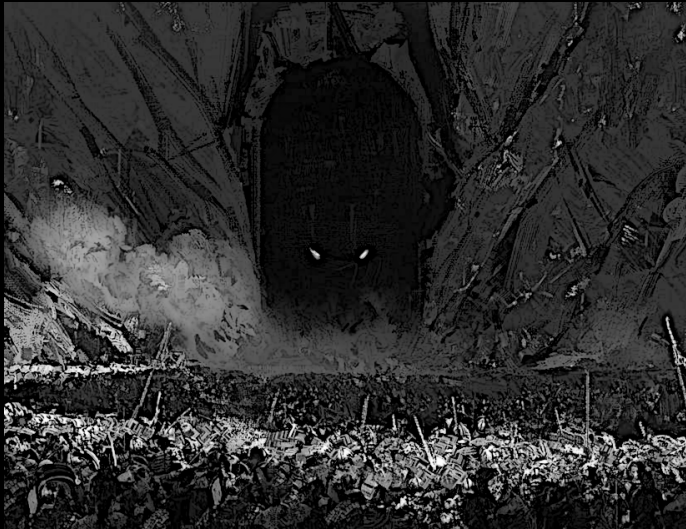
THE DARKNESS

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—TALES OF THE AWAKENED DEAD—

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01

RIVERRUN

THE skies above the fortress darkened and blotted out the last of the sunlight. At this sight the legion of bones began to chatter, working themselves into a frenzy. The last bastion of the living was ahead of them. The living heroes sent bursts of powerful and holy light that sought their way into the shadows of the legion but were snuffed out by the overwhelming shadows of Abraham and Lim Vithara.

As the Kalmic legions reached the gates of the fortress the great oak doors swung open. Brilliant, blinding light poured forth from the fortress and charged into the plain of battle. The undead soldiers of Kalma crumbled to dust as the light collided with their ranks. The dust fled from

the light, streaming in every direction away from the source of the brilliance. Armor, weapons, and bones all turned to ash. For an instant, Abraham and Lim Vithara reeled in astonishment. In that instant the heroes of the living found them in the shadows.

The legion's empty skulls swung to watch as two of the mightiest living heroes fought their great general. Shadows lashed out from Lim Vithara but they did nothing as a great phoenix rose again and again. It was impossible for the dark general to win against his foes. With a sky-shattering crash the gate of Lim Vithara was closed and the shadows surrounding him fell to the ground and dissipated. The undead legion turned towards Abraham, the un-living and un-dying shadow figure. But as they rallied to him he was cut down by the great emolument of the living.

With the death of the last great leader of the Kalmic legions, the gates of the fortress opened and the living forces poured onto the field. The legion of bones turned to flee down the valley but were swept up in the charge of the living. One undead soldier turned to look behind him and saw a horse and its rider closing in on him. He watched as the sword came cleanly down upon his neck and ended his life of devotion to Kalma.



AWAKENING

FEREB....*fereb djé nesz én....*

The voice he heard was soft and far away. “*Fereb*” it continued to speak. “*Fereb djé nesz én*”. The voice began to creep into his head, invading his mind. No matter how he shook his head or held his ears the voice remained. “*Fereb.... fereb djé nesz én....*” He pulled his head from his hands and looked up.

All around him were ruins. Destruction and slaughter was all he could see. Everything was covered in a fine layer of dust and ash. “*Lenndomgon!*” the voice changed. Shadows and dark mist began to wrap up from the ground and into the bodies surrounding him. Their bones murmured and groaned as they were enveloped in shadow. They be-

gan to stand up all around him, stepping toward him with jerking motions and chattering jaws. He scrambled up, searching around him for a weapon. The skeletal jaws began to mumble as one voice. "*Én van valasziv tô.*" He fell and tried to crawl away but the shadowy mist brought more bodies to him. He tripped over a pile of bones and stared up in terror as the misty skeletons surrounded him in a circle. "*Én van valasziv tô*" they spoke down at him. "*Tô dun lenniv ha kiralyf sofén.*" The mist became darker and swirled around him. He tried to fight it off but it seemed to hold his arms down to the ground. "*Tô dun lenniv ha kiralyf sofén.*"

"Who are you? What do you want?" he cried. He trembled as he spoke. The bodies were all around him now.

"*Én lim Hasedek. Tô dun lenniv ha kiralyf sofén.*" Some skeletons broke from the communal voice and began to chant in a low tone, "*Kiralyf...Kiralyf...Kiralyf...*"

The dark mist became more corporeal. One of the bodies stepped towards him from the circle, casting a long dark shadow upon the cowering figure. The dark body reached its hand towards the trembling figure. A dark shadow fell upon the ground where he was held. The trembling stopped. A power began coursing through him, growing in the darkness. Mist and shadow enveloped him as his fear faded. "*Tô dun lenniv ha kiralyf sofén*" said the figure in front of him.

He did not reply. He was now completely enveloped in the mist. The power of the darkness was now flowing through him completely. But as soon as he opened himself to it, the mist began to recede. The bodies began to collapse around him where they had stood. The shadowy figure in

front of him spoke one final time before collapsing. “*Én lim Hasedek. Tô dun lenniv ha kiralyf sofén.*”

The mist and shadow receded completely and the body in front of him collapsed. He could still hear a soft chant echoing through the ruins of Riverrun.

“*Kiralyf...Kiralyf...Kiralyf...*”



03

WANDERER

KIRALYF wearily dragged his bones up the worn path. His cloaked shoulders sighed as he reached the top of the hill. He had no lungs that would have gasped for air and no muscles that would have ached, but he felt weary nonetheless. He gathered his ragged cloak about himself and sat on a rotting log to rest. The shadows of the trees covered him in dappled sunlight. He looked down the road he had come from as he rested. He gazed lazily at the trees and the path that worked up the hill before he sat forward on the log.

A figure dressed in lightly colored clothes was working their way up the hill. A sack was slung over his back, and Kiralyf thought he heard a soft song drifting from this

traveler. Kiralyf stood from the log.

The traveler raised his head up. "Hey ho! This is one heck of a hill isn't it?"

It took Kiralyf a second to reply. "Yes," he finally replied.

"Well sit down and rest," said the traveler. "I'll make my way up in my own time. Say, what's your name?"

"Kiralyf," he said cautiously. '*Who is this?*' he thought. He hadn't seen any other travelers on the road.

"Kiralyf, eh? That's a strange name. Me, I'm Bingo. Just regular old Bingo," said the traveler. He was practically leaping up the hill, bounding over rocks effortlessly.

It only took a minute for Bingo to reach Kiralyf. "Well holy heck, Kiralyf! Looks like your face fell off!" Kiralyf pulled his cloak around himself. He slowly opened his mouth to reply, but Bingo cut him off. "Hey, it's no problem to me. I've seen a little bit of everything in my travels. And I can tell you're not one of them."

Kiralyf relaxed a bit. "Come on then, let's sit and take a breather after that mountain of a hill," said Bingo. Kiralyf wasn't sure that Bingo really needed a rest, but he sat back on his log. "So where are you going, Kiralyf?" asked Bingo.

"North. My purpose lies there," said Kiralyf.

"North, huh?" Bingo jumped in. "Hopefully not too far north. I've been up there in my travels, and it can get pretty strange there. There's some sort of old magic in the lands there." Kiralyf sat silently. "Not much of a talker, eh? That's fine. I talk enough for two or three anyway."

'You certainly do.' Kiralyf thought.

"So then where did you come from?" Bingo probed.

"Riverrun," Kiralyf said softly.

"Riverrun!" Bingo exclaimed. "Riverrun has been a

dead place for a *century*! What were you doing in that cursed place?”

“I woke up there.”

Bingo leaned forward. “You were sleeping at the gate of Lim-Vithara? That’s some wacky stuff, Kiralyf.” He shook his head. “You must not be afraid of too much.”

“I wasn’t sleeping. I just woke up there.”

“What is that, some kind of riddle?” Bingo bit his lip and crossed his eyes in thought. “You woke up, but not from sleep...hang on now.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Kiralyf.

“No one but the dead dwells in Riverrun.” Bingo’s eyes were wide now. “Deader than you are now, even. The only way that you could have woken up there...” Bingo stood from where he had been sitting. “How did you wake up, Kiralyf?” he asked cautiously.

Kiralyf stood up too. “A great shadow woke me. He named me Kiralyf.”

Bingo began to back away. “Ha-hang on now, Kiralyf.” He tripped over a dead branch fell onto his back. Kiralyf slowly stepped towards him until Bingo was consumed in his shadow. “Come on, Kiralyf” begged Bingo. “Wha-what are you doing, now?”

“Tell me, Bingo.” Kiralyf spoke evenly. “What do you know of Darkness?”



04

DARKNESS

COLD meant nothing to Kiralyf. He couldn't remember a time when it did. But now, looking at the frozen waste of death around him, he could almost feel his bones becoming more brittle and his joints becoming harder to move. He shrugged the idea away and stepped though the corpses that littered the frozen ground as the wind whispered around him.

The sun was low in the sky, casting eery twilight shadows. But despite the sun threatening to set below the horizon, Kiralyf knew he had days of sunlight left. The deep magic in this part of the world permeated even to the heavens. In the far north, the sun and the moon acted according to a different covenant. Days lasted for months

and nights even longer. The nights were so bitter cold that they drove away the moon entirely, creating absolute darkness and plunging the continent into winters dark enough to drive the living mad. The long nights would devour the last men who tried. It was for this reason that no living souls ventured this far north anymore.

Kiralyf was not worried for the dark night. He continued his journey as the sun sunk lower towards the horizon. The sun was finally beginning to dip below the horizon, and the shadows were growing longer on the frozen ground. The skulls scattered around him became more macabre in the gloom, as though they were ready to rise from their long slumbers.

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The barest sliver of sun was still visible as Kiralyf reached Kullheggain. In the old time its towers would have loomed over even the icy mountain it was built into, but now its walls and ramparts all lay in ruin. The tallest tower, once the pride of the mighty fortress, had collapsed to become a cold hill of rock. Kiralyf strode through what remained of the main gate. Empty skulls, still wearing their helmets, watched him from their guard posts dotted along the route from the gate to the main hall. Kiralyf ignored them.

The main hall was once the center of Kullheggain. Its soaring ceiling and great arches were carved directly from the mountain that the fortress was built into. It was once defended by the living, but the Shrieking Wind that drove

men to madness and Heaving Earth that swallowed men whole had turned the fortress and its garrison into a cold, dark tomb.

As Kiralyf climbed the long stairs from the gate to the main hall the last rays of sunlight disappeared below the horizon. The fortress and the expanse of ice that surrounded it were plunged into complete darkness. Kiralyf continued on his path to the hall unperturbed by the darkness. He had arrived just as it was beginning.

The last ray of sunlight ascended the mountain and finally fled entirely from the frozen wasteland. Kiralyf stopped in his tracks. He had just stepped onto the final stair before the main hall. Despite the lack of light, he could see the fortress perfectly. The mountain loomed over the colossal stone doors of the hall. Kiralyf bent down on the ground, one knee on the cold stone and his head bowed to the doors as they were flung open.

Kiralyf remained kneeling and brought his head up to look at the doors. The darkness that emerged from the hall was unlike any that he had experienced. It was a darkness he could not see through. The main hall had become a void completely free of light. Kiralyf thought he could feel himself being pulled toward the threshold.

A shadowy voice emanated from the hall. "*Étôr vam bekkiv merattiv én.*" The voice made the mountain above rumble and the towers of the fortress shook. Rocks fell down around Kiralyf but he did not flinch. There was a final powerful roar from the hall that seemed to shake the continent that lay out before the fortress. A final rock clattered down to Kiralyf's left before silence fell. Kiralyf looked around. The inky darkness in the hall was gone.

He stood and spun around to look at the fortress. There was no movement, no sound. The sun was still gone, but the darkness that came from the hall had disappeared.

“Kiralyf” spoke a voice. He turned to see a single skeleton standing at the threshold of the hall. “Come. I wish to show you something.” He gestured into the hall and turned to walk farther into the mountain. Kiralyf hurried to keep up. “My true form is tiring for me” said the skeleton. “I have been exiled in this fortress for too long. My powers have forsaken me.” He raised his arms to gesture to himself. “This form is more convenient.” As they walked past the gigantic arches, skeleton guards sprang up from piles of bones. They stood at attention with their spears in one hand and shields in the other, staring directly across into the hall. “Come. It is not much farther now.”

They had walked into a large circular chamber several hundred yards across. The domed roof was so far over Kiralyf’s head that he could barely see it in the darkness. The floor was cut out of the stone to be perfectly flat and smooth, except in the middle of the room where a stone cylinder rose fifty feet into the air. Stairs were cut into the side of the structure and at the top was a chair carved into the cold stone. Around the monolith were four small spots carved into the floor. They were no bigger than a hand and were perfect hemispheres that appeared as though they had been scooped out of the floor.

“This,” said the skeleton, “is where my power comes into this world.” He raised his arms to the ceiling and stepped closer to the center of the room. His voice boomed off the walls and the ceiling and reverberated back out the main hall. The guards did not blink at this, but remained

staring straight ahead. The skeleton shook his head and looked down at the floor. "But I have little power left. The four stones of Meval have been scattered across this world." He turned to Kiralyf. "That is why I have chosen you, my *Kiralyf*. You are to renew my power in this world."

"Yes. I know." Kiralyf said softly. "That is why I was awakened."

The skeleton turned back to look at Kiralyf. "Yes" he spoke. "I have chosen you to complete this charge for me. My power in this world is weak, but I lend it to you for this task."

The skeleton gestured to one of the guards. The guard stepped forward and kneeled before the skeleton. "This will be your *Helyt*. He will be your link to me and assist you with this task. Now go. Become the *Kiralyf* I awakened you to be."

The skeleton began to recede into the dark hall. Kiralyf bowed his head as his patron spoke, his words echoing in the chamber. "Bring me this power, *Kiralyf*. This is your purpose."

As the last words echoed in the chamber, Kiralyf lost sight of the skeleton. He turned to look at Helyt.

"Come" said Kiralyf. "There is much work to do."



05

VÁROS

DARK clouds swirled over the Citadel as Kiralyf stood on the balcony of the great *building*. The largest dome of the Citadel was nearing completion. He gazed out upon the city that lay before him. Helyt stepped onto the balcony and stood behind Kiralyf's shoulder.

"Look, Helyt." he spoke without turning. "The construction of the walls has begun to the east. The Citadel is nearly finished. Our work is progressing well."

Helyt did not reply. He looked out at the city.

"What is it, then? You've come with bad news?" Kiralyf turned around.

"Unfortunately, no. A letter has arrived from the Grey City. They are upset with the lack of updates we have given

them concerning the progress of rebuilding Arear."

Kiralyf chuckled. "Alright, Helyt. Back to business." He turned and walked back along the long terrace to the doorway. "Send them back another letter. Tell them again that the construction of the city was total and that rebuilding will take time. It is important that the State believe that this city is a pile of rubble until we have more power."

"That's the trouble, Kiralyf. They are upset with our letters and wish to see the city for themselves. An Office ? official has been sent to us. He will arrive within the week."

They had reached the council chamber and Kiralyf sat at the large table. His chair was taller than all the other chairs by two feet, and had no ornamentation. When Kiralyf sat back in it, he was almost entirely cloaked in shadow. Only his pale skull and the faintly glowing crown around his head were visible. But now he sat forward in his seat as Helyt sat across from him.

"It was only a matter of time before the State poked their nose into our business. But our *cejal* is far too important for those bureaucrats to mess up." He sat back in his chair and thought for a minute. "Kat *Kislan*!"

The small girl ran to him from the entrance to the chamber. "Assemble the council. We have much to discuss."