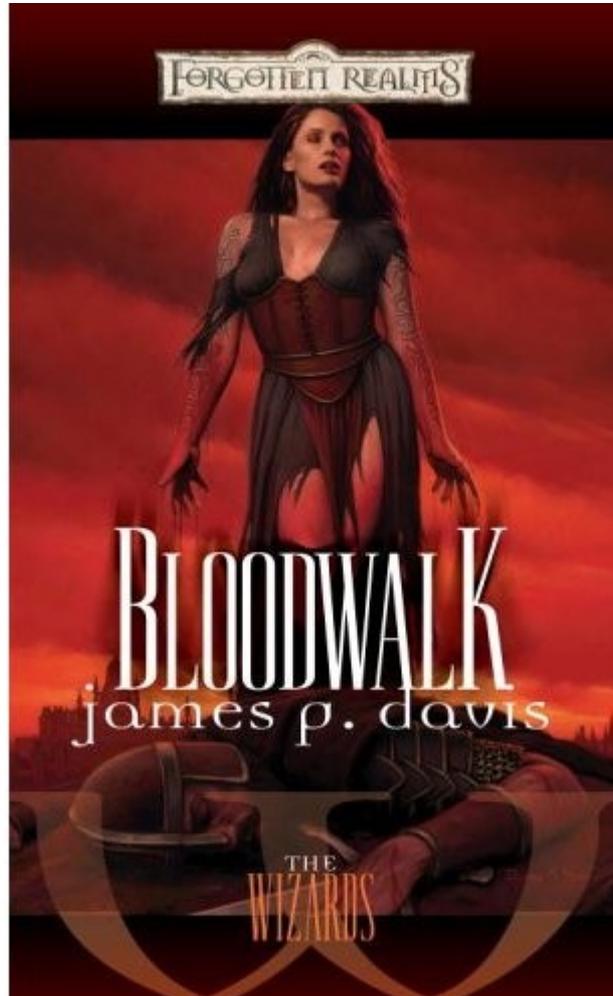


Bloodline

By James P. Davis



Year of Moonfall (1344 DR)

The horizon glowed with the early signs of dawn. The vast plains of Narfell stretched out toward infinity as Tirenan stared with blurry eyes and weary limbs. Blood covered his hands, sticky and cold. Life slowly ebbed from the wound in his stomach and he could find no more strength for crawling. The winter wind numbed his senses, dulling his pain to a low ache. Rolling over, he stared at the sky, a vast gray blanket of clouds. A sky under which he was now free, free of his family, his destiny, and soon, free of his blood.

As he watched, the sky began to change. The clouds faded away, replaced by a deep red of seemingly infinite depth. Shapes moved in that alien sky, tiny silhouettes winging through the murky, crimson atmosphere. Nearer ones stood as if on firm ground, watching the plains that steamed and smoked, curls of vapor trailing across the red void. These beings in shining armor with gleaming swords paid him no mind as they watched the unhallowed ground he lay dying upon. Their eyes were inhuman, cold and comforting at once, the color of polished pearls. This was the vision of his blood, his family, and the legacy he had fought to escape.

His vision faded, and the scene disappeared into limitless black.

He heard movement nearby, but he did not stir, struggle, or attempt to call for help. Warm hands touched his face and his breath quickened. Left for dead in the wilds of Narfell, he had no reason to court illusions of hope and much more reason to dread living.

His head was lifted and light entered his eyes revealing a face of startling beauty staring back at him. Blonde tresses framed fair skin and eyes the color of a clear sky. He knew this face, had watched her escape as he fought. Whispered prayers found his ears, becoming stronger as the first rays of dawn crested the horizon. Warmth flowed through his body, easing his pain and unburdening his troubled mind.

Trying to speak, he coughed, the taste of blood still in his mouth. His voice, when it came, was barely more than a whisper.

"Why is this happening?"

The woman's brow furrowed at his question, unsure of how to answer. Her voice was strong and sure as she eased his head to lie upon her lap. The sun set her hair on fire -- a long twisted braid of gold blowing in the wind.

"Does it matter?"

Year of the Bloodbird (1346 DR)

Tirenan shook his head, wincing at the pain in his skull as he willed the dreams of his past away. Looking up, he watched the sun set across the plains of Narfell, painting the hardy grasses and snow in hues of bright red against stark white. Cold wind blew across the rooftops of N'Jast and he was grateful for the chill on his face. It helped him restore his focus to the task at hand.

Several yards away Lethuriel sat at the corner of the wall they had chosen to watch from. She stood still enough to be a shining gargoyle in light silver armor. Her eyes never left the streets below, her head twitching left to right like an eagle seeking a rabbit. Her hair blew in the wind languidly, a raven black tide of perfect strands. To the casual observer she appeared as little more than an elf, but then she could change her appearance to match the expectations of lingering eyes. Even now, nearly a year after they'd first met, he felt the gulf of mortality that lay between them. She was of the eladrin, a celestial hunter called a ghaele. He was merely a human and never more so than when in her presence.

"Another dream?" she asked, whipping her head toward him, burning her opalescent eyes into his.

"No," he replied, "not really. Just a memory."

"Worse that," she said, returning her gaze to the streets. "Dulls the instincts -- can spoil the hunt."

He paid her no mind and moved to another corner, studying the lanes of the trade city, watching merchants prepare to pack their carts for the day and caravan workers load up wagons for the trek west or south. Only a few would travel east -- better armed and larger bands than the ones he could see. The North Country in the east was a harsh territory and promised only the Endless Wastes beyond and wild Rashemen to the south.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, those avenues took on a darker nature as shadows crawled ever longer to eclipse the cobblestone streets and summon a doubled patrol of city watch. Tirenán envied those watchmen, for their duty was to maintain justice among the "mortals," as Lethuriel called them. He and the eladrin sought a much more dangerous foe -- a hidden one to most human eyes. Once, millennia ago, Narfell had been an empire of devil priests and fiendish contacts. The dream of that Narfell still existed and still moved through the minds of certain ambitious men -- just as those fiends that slumbered in long forgotten tombs and graves still sometimes moved through the world seeking another foothold in a new empire.

The role of the ghaele was obvious: a celestial hunter, a sentinel to guard against incursion. Tirenán's place in the scheme was less well defined, since he had once allied with those seeking to bring about the dominion of Narfell. The shame of his existence had brought him to this place, to Lethuriel, away from the tribes of Kaeless and the life he hadn't deserved. N'Jast is where he knew his blood's spending would lie. For now he was content to help Lethuriel in the capacity for which she needed him. As his eyes narrowed on a small figure nearly a block away, he felt that capacity rush his brain in a wave of pain.

"Leth!" he gasped. "Here!"

She appeared at his side in an instant, as silent as a light breeze. Her eyes found the boy quickly, spotting the odd step in his gait and the straight manner in which he held himself. Tirenán breathed deeply, pushing past the pain and waiting upon Lethuriel's trained eye to make the decision. She looked from the boy to Tirenán and cocked her head, blinking as she observed the trail of tattoos down the left side of his face.

"The pain is growing stronger, yes?" she asked, her words at once clipped and graceful.

Tir looked away as she studied the patterns, the whorls of black that marked him as a champion of the Creel tribe and identified his status among their secret priesthood. The Creel's violence among the Nar tribes was well known and feared, but Tirenán knew too well that their reputation was miniscule compared to the ambitions of a chosen few among them.

"Yes," he answered at length. The pain faded from its former sharpness.

"Good," she answered coldly, returning her attention to the boy. "That means we're getting closer."

Tirenán preferred her emotionless attitude toward him. It kept him from growing attached -- kept him from feeling human.

"Is this the one?" she asked.

Tir remembered the face of the child he had left behind among the Creel, the one he had failed to protect in saving himself.

"No, that's something else, but it's connected."

"Then we follow."

She whispered a spell in her own tongue, her form shimmering away to become invisible. Tir felt the magic tingle across his skin as she took him by the arm and leaped from the wall. His stomach lurched as they fell for a heartbeat then appeared standing at street level. Lethuriel paused, watching the child's movement, waiting to see if they'd been discovered. Tirenán checked his scimitar, remembering the hands that had blessed the weapon.

The child's strange stride, unnoticeable by most, was the giveaway to those such as Lethuriel. Tirenán had come to notice the differences too and learned what to watch for as they'd hunted together. By all appearances the boy was no different from any other: ordinary clothes, dressed warmly for the early winter, and a mop of tousled brown hair. He seemed unmoved by their hidden appraisal, but only for a moment. He stopped in his tracks, still barely a block away, and cocked his head as if listening.

"Hells," Lethuriel whispered, surprising Tirenán with one of the rare moments when she was not all cold commands and demanding questions.

The boy turned slowly. Even before seeing his eyes Tirenan spotted the edges of a ragged inhuman smile curling across the illusionary skin of the child's face. Where there might have been teeth, he could see only shiny black insect mandibles. The eyes were faceted and they reflected a deep shade of burning crimson in the early moonlight. That gaze fixed itself firmly on Lethuriel before the twisted face reformed to that of an innocent child. Casually, it continued walking, just yards away from the edge of the street and disappearing around a corner.

"Stay close," Lethuriel whispered.

Tirenan knew the drill, remaining under the blanket of her invisibility. Hunting fiends inside the city was dangerous, especially ones dressed as children. All manner of heroic adventurers might come to the aid of noble warriors chasing a horned beast from the depths of the Lower Planes, but much fewer responded well to those threatening a child in the street. It was a common disguise and the Creel wizard-priests that the pair sought made sure it was not dispelled easily.

He fought to keep up with Lethuriel's stride. The eladrin was much faster than any human and truly had no need to walk on solid ground at all. The child stayed always one turn ahead of them, growing faster and bolder in its taunting appearances. Farther and deeper into the city they ventured, and Tirenan noticed they'd entered the Edges, the older neighborhoods where darker, narrower streets prevailed. His heart pounded from the exertion, though Lethuriel showed no sign of tiring at all. Nearing a block of abandoned buildings and trash-littered alleys, Tirenan felt the pain flare in his head again as his tattoos burned in reaction to something of the Creel -- of the Order.

He gasped and fell to his hands and knees. He watched as the ground beneath him writhed like a carpet of pale worms. The worms whispered in his mind, saying nothing he could understand or felt a desire to hear. He expected Lethuriel's reproach at any minute, warning him to keep running -- to continue the hunt -- but she said nothing.

Looking up from the cold ground, he saw her standing still and straight, her hand on the hilt of the heavy blade at her side. Following her gaze to the end of the street, he saw the child had stopped also. As they watched, four more children joined the first, all dressed in ragamuffin clothes, and all moving in the odd precise gait of the first. Tirenan stood slowly, ignoring the pain in his head and cautiously seeking the source. Something nearby had triggered the attack, something that repelled him as a traitor, spoke to his blood and the destiny it echoed.

Lethuriel's voice broke the silence of the stand-off, carrying through the winter air in tones of divine command.

"I bind you, fiend, and compel you to stand!"

The boy they'd chased tilted its head and smiled again in a jagged expression of mandibles and torn cheeks. His voice was deep and scratchy -- a whisper of thunder. "You have no power here, maiden of Arvador. This is contested ground, but we will stand, as we see fit."

Lethuriel sneered at the child-beast's confidence and drew her sword, a long blade of incandescent light.

"So be it," she muttered and strode forward, abandoning the shield of invisibility that had proven useless against the fiend. Tirenan drew his scimitar as well, following the eladrin's lead and keeping a cautious watch for Creel hiding in the shadows.

The children responded in kind, casting off their innocent costumes -- their skin writhing and boiling as they resumed their natural forms. Hard chitin replaced ragged clothes; forearms split along their lengths into separate clawed limbs. Their heads seemed to burst as large multifaceted eyes appeared on beetlelike heads. Long tridents appeared in their claws as the transformation completed.

Two of them disappeared, but Tirenan could already hear their clawed feet charging from behind. He turned to deal with these as those facing Lethuriel cast spells in the language of the Lower Plains. He caught a glimpse of a yellow cloud billowing toward them before raising his sword against the rear pair. He heard Lethuriel cast a spell also, likely dispelling the cloud as Tirenan's scimitar deflected the first trident thrust.

Tirenan stepped into their attacks, swinging wildly to gain space. He enjoyed the moments when things became simple and he could relish the fierce warrior training he'd been given among the Creel. His slashes neared but

never connected, making the fiends scramble backward from this seemingly crazed human. That distance vanished quickly as they hissed through their mandibles and joined him in battle lust.

One trident thrust toward his right thigh, the other his left shoulder. He stepped toward the lower thrust and locked his scimitar between the prongs, hooking it and redirecting the weapon high, just enough to intercept the other. The tridents clanged as they met and he kicked at the exposed abdomen of the fiend to his right. His kick was caught by the beast's lower set of limbs, the claws digging into his calf as they swung him into the alley wall.

Tirenan threw his left arm wide to lessen the blow, but succeeded only in saving his skull. His back took the brunt of the blow. The fiend's strength was considerable, but less than he'd expected. He feigned losing his wind as they came again, intending to pin him against the wall. At the last moment he spun to the right, blocking one trident with his blade and slamming his shoulder against the shaft as he pushed between the pair. The fiend hissed again as it was pushed off-balance and he used the momentum to slash again, this time slicing through the chitin of a lower right limb as he side-stepped to the center of the alley.

The creature screamed, an unearthly clicking sound, as its companion turned, yanking its embedded trident from the wall. Tirenan glanced at Lethuriel, amazed by her speed and ferocity against the other three, or rather two, as one's head split under a blow from her sword. Returning his attention to the uninjured fiend, he made sure to raise his scimitar, to let it witness the hissing of its partner's blood on the blade. The blessing on the sword was strong and effective against such as these. The beast seemed not to care, rushing close to thrust again.

This time the attack was more careful -- the trident came much faster and met his counterattacks more skillfully. Tirenan sought an opening, hoping to cut down the fiend before the other rejoined the fight. His luck did not hold however, and the other returned, cradling its bleeding stump beneath the grip on its weapon. Taking a wild gamble, he feinted and reached for the expected thrust at his shoulder. Slicing the palm of his hand on the trident's prong he gripped the weapon where the prongs met, using the opening to slam the pommel of his scimitar into the fiend's eye.

The clicking scream came again as it stumbled backward. Releasing the trident, Tirenan charged at the other, aiming his cuts to force the fiend to block above its severed arm. After several blows the tactic worked, and the creature turned its uninjured side forward. His scimitar hissed into the fiend's torso, the chitin cracking and burning around the blade. The beast staggered, pulling Tirenan off-balance as he fought to free his weapon. Wincing as he drew a dagger from his belt with his injured hand, he started stabbing into its abdomen, hoping to break through and end the struggle. The pair fell and Tirenan's dagger bit home, releasing a gout of viscous fluid from the wound. The light faded from the faceted eyes, but not before the beast could thrust the haft of its trident into Tirenan's jaw.

Rolling backward with the blow, Tirenan's vision swam and the familiar pain of something nearby hit him full force. Lying on his side, struggling to determine which direction he was facing, he saw the other fiend joining the battle with Lethuriel, obviously assuming the human was done for. Shadows and stars crawled at the edge of his sight, the acrid smell of the dead fiend stung his nose, and his tattoos writhed across his face as the scene in the alley faded and changed.

Year of the Saddle (1345 DR)

He'd waited until the tribe was asleep save for the mounted sentries that patrolled the perimeter of the waymeet. Moving as quietly as possible, he gathered what things he needed and took one last look at the sleeping Kaeless, his love, now his wife and soon to be chieftain of the Sedras upon the death of her ailing father. She was peacefully unaware of his decision to leave, though she had certainly suspected that something was wrong. A silence had grown between them as Tirenan's dreams grew stronger, more vivid, and more frequent. He hadn't the heart to explain or describe them, but he knew now that something had to be done.

The last item he took was the sword she had given him, the handle wrapped by her hands, the blade blessed by her prayers. For a moment he doubted his decision -- doubted the words of Lethuriel who had appeared to him several nights ago. He knew, deep down, that it had not been the eladrin who convinced him, though. He had convinced himself long before their meeting. His eyes drifted to the ground beside Kaeless as he contemplated what to do. His thoughts were interrupted by a dull ache in the back of his neck, and the ground churned with the whispering worms -- the ancient promise of Narfell's past.

He looked away and, squeezing his eyes shut for long moments, opened the tent flap to step outside. The pain in his neck grew and traveled to the base of his skull. He lengthened his stride and made for the horses, his saddle slung over one shoulder. The waymeet was quiet and the wind was light. The tribe that had only grudgingly accepted this Creel among their numbers would not lament his absence.

Approaching the long-legged Nar steed he called Dusk, he began to set the saddle. He pushed through the process, ignoring the pain in his head and the growing ache in his heart. He knew it was the right thing, to fear for her safety and the deepening madness brought on by his past. An oath to a dark god wormed its way through his soul daily and he must make amends for that mistake lest it destroy everything he loved.

Climbing into the saddle, he kicked Dusk's flanks and rode to the perimeter, nodding to the sentry that watched. It was not unusual for Tirenán to mount so early, dressed and armed for a hunt, so no suspicions were aroused. Likely they would suspect he met with some ill fate on the plains, as such things were common. Riding north through the grasslands dotted with large patches of snow and ice, he held the reins tight as the pain in his head became the visions he feared.

The sky became twilight in his mind, the horizon lit by an unholy light. Large herds of wild horses stampeded around him, their eyes rolling and their hides darkened by patches of some unknown plague. The ground boiled with hidden power, and strange vents exploded dark vapors into the sky. The plague-ridden horses were new to this vision, as if the vision grew and changed as time passed, adapting to the future where it sought to take root.

He pulled on Dusk's reins, slowing the steed to a stop. Searching the horizon, he looked for Lethuriel through the vision, for the eladrins would appear in the waking nightmare at times. She had said she would meet him here, somewhere on the plains. As he squinted through the vapors, listening to the screams of the distant horses pounding through steaming soil, he caught the eye of another beast in the distance. Silhouetted against the illusory horizon, it had the shape of the wild oxen that roamed the plains, but there the resemblance ended. Its flanks were patchy and dark, seeping with blood like the plagued stallions. Its horns were broken, though one was longer than the other and bore a nimbus of shadow that chilled his soul.

The eyes that fell upon him were old and wise, promising all the power that his past oath and inherited blood had once demanded of this malevolent power. It was the Outcast, the Voice of Goorgian: Gargauth himself had appeared to witness his abandonment of peace for the cold future of a sleeping war. In a flash of light the vision was gone, leaving him blinking and shaking his head under the dark sky. He would wait here for Lethuriel and dread the sight of that terrible bull for the rest of his days.

Year of the Bloodbird (1346 DR)

Tirenán rolled over onto his stomach, wincing as his head swam from the trident's blow. The ground grew cold beneath his hands. Snow and tall grass had replaced the mud and broken cobbles of the alley. Fear gripped him and a sense of vertigo made his stomach turn. Pushing himself up on his hands he saw a night sky of dark clouds and the plains of Narfell surrounding him. Lethuriel was gone, the fate of her battle against the fiendish insects unknown. Looking around slowly he saw naught but the plains, an infinite expanse of snow, ice, and grass. The scent of that landscape was perfect -- so real for what he knew was only another nightmare to torment his mind's growing madness.

Then he caught sight of the bull -- the broken ox invoked at the first crossroads of his life and that had visited at the second. Thunder rumbled through the dream clouds, summoning a vibration in the ground around him. Sitting up on his knees he watched the soil squirm with the unseen worms, and their whispers sounded louder now. Words began to form in that chorus of tiny voices and he realized Gargauth was speaking to him.

"You do not look like the one I once spoke to," it said curiously.

Summoning the strength to meet the ox's gaze, Tirenán responded, his voice hoarse and scratchy. "We have never spoken," he replied.

"Well, I suppose I have never spoken to you and truly do not deign to speak now but through these dutiful servants that lie buried in the ground. However, I recall that you have spoken to me once." Menace filled the whispers of the last and pain flashed through the tattoos on Tirenán's face.

"I am reminded daily," Tir answered angrily, gripping the hilt of his scimitar and realizing its uselessness to him.

"Anger. Rage. Regret. You do not look like poor Goorgian, but the resemblance on the inside is remarkable." The whisperers chuckled as they conveyed the god's will.

"Why am I here? Why now? Is this the end? Am I to repay the debt I swore?"

"Nothing so boorish I'm afraid. Besides, your debts have been paid in full."

Tirenan raised his eyebrows in shock. The ritual of the binding where he'd sworn himself to Gargauth had been quite specific in matters of debt. His name had been chiseled into the stone along with the others of the Creel's secret order. The weight of his debt had ridden his shoulders for years, now replaced with the knowledge of his seemingly unwitting complicity in the god's schemes.

"What do you mean paid?"

The whisperers did not answer the question except to chuckle again before changing the subject.

"I have little care for the Creel -- they were merely the first. Or rather Goorgian was. An experiment in that time before I escaped the prison of my enemies." The ox looked away as if lost in thought, but those thoughts were still spoken through the whispers. "My current ambitions lie elsewhere, but from time to time I check in on my old projects. I had thought that you might be the one I expected to never see, but now with your alliance with the fey . . . I can only warn that such dalliances lead to trouble."

"It is my choice, to atone for the oath I made to you and to protect -- "

"Silence!"

The thunder rumbled again and Tirenan felt the god's anger crush his spirit, choking the words from his throat.

"I find myself in the intolerable position of owing a debt to a mortal that has spurned my power! I do not care for the details of his miserable life!" The whisperers were silent this time, the thunder speaking for Gargauth's rage, but the whispers returned, the tone softened. "I honor my contracts, if nothing else, and I was curious to revisit the children of Goorgian, a bloodline of some fortitude it would seem."

"A cursed bloodline," Tir managed to say through his fear.

"Ah, perception is your demon I'm afraid. One man's curse is another's destiny." The statement was vague and hinted at everything Tirenan had feared in life. "But I digress. You and your fey are searching for something stolen perhaps? A book of Goorgian's scribbles?"

Tir merely nodded, his mind still occupied by Gargauth's vagaries and riddles.

"Follow your pain, mortal. It will make sure you find the way. You will find little resistance where you're going."

Tirenan looked up again, wondering at this unasked-for favor from a god whose faith he had betrayed.

"What's in this for you?"

This time the whisperers hissed and the thunder rumbled with hideous laughter as Gargauth answered.

"Oh, pardon, I never tire of hearing that question. Now my debt is paid. If our paths cross again I shall likely not even notice you." The ox turned and the scene of Narfell's plains wavered.

That's a blessing, Tirenan thought as the world dissolved around him.

Another chuckle roared in his mind, preceding one last reply from the ox.

"Ah, there's that perception again."

He awoke in much the same position he had blacked out in, lying facedown on the chitinous chest of the stinking fiend. The ghostly smell of the plains was still with him for a moment as he pushed himself to stand.

Remembering where he was, he looked to Lethuriel finishing off the last of the beasts. Curious, he walked toward her, knowing that it wouldn't have taken her that long to dispatch crude creatures such as these. She would have left him for dead by now while he dreamed of the meeting with Gargauth.

She turned around in a circle, pointing her sword in each direction, willing more attackers to come and spit themselves on her glowing blade. None came and she sheathed it, annoyed.

"You killed one," she stated, her surprise obvious as she noted the yellow blood on his scimitar. Her cold eyes surveyed the alley as Tirenán wondered at the events that had just transpired. She continued, oblivious to Tirenán's confusion, "No more it seems. Mezzoloths, just mercenaries, but expected for one of the Outcast's followers."

"Sure," Tir mumbled. "Mercenaries."

Lethuriel rested her eyes upon him then, the stony gaze of those pale slits burrowing through him, sensing something. He blinked and tried to formulate what he would tell her, how he might describe the unwanted attentions of a god. Before the words could come, he felt the pain again, the herald of the visions and his blood's curse despite his perceptions as Gargauth saw them.

"What's wrong? Another dream?" Lethuriel asked, anxious for more battle.

He shook his head, remembering Gargauth's advice to follow his pain. This agony in his mind was, to the god, a twisted form of blessing. Reality rippled around him, and the waves of that ripple spread beyond the alley -- beyond the tops of the nearest buildings. The vision was the strongest he'd had, and the most painful. His blood burned, his tattoos squirmed, and his eyes formed tears as he watched the city change almost imperceptibly. He staggered forward, Lethuriel close behind as he tried to discern what he was seeing, what change had taken place.

From one building to the next he discovered the answer and knew what he should do. The city he viewed as he left the alleyway, choking on pain and forcing his feet to move, had no doors. Every entrance to every dwelling had disappeared. He assumed he would find only one door visible to him -- he only prayed it would be close by. Lethuriel took on the form of an elf in plain robes, placing her arm around his shoulders as if walking home a drunk from a tavern.

"What are we doing, Tirenán? Where are we going?"

He didn't answer, but just kept walking and searching. They turned a corner and the pain lessened slightly, for which Tir was grateful before realizing he'd made a wrong turn. He was to follow his pain, not run from it. Almost laughing at the irony of Gargauth's "blessing," he turned back, spying another dark avenue stretching into the Edges. The pain dutifully returned, getting stronger as they passed into the shadows of yet another narrow street.

After passing a small alley, he turned back again, the source of the pain being focused on the area. A mountain of refuse filled the back of the alley with no doors visible on either side. Diving forward, he began to dig into the rotted leavings of what must have represented years of the city's inhabitants.

"This is madness!" Lethuriel hissed behind him and he imagined it must have appeared so. A grown man digging through trash, his hands frostbitten by mud and ice, covered in filth, would not have seemed very sane, but he knew his purpose, even if he questioned the source.

Finally, at the back wall behind some old planks of wood, he found it: a single door. As his hands touched the door's surface, his pain subsided and the vision faded, reality rippling around him to resume a sane man's impression of the city. He stood there, staring at it and catching his breath as the pain left him. The markings on his face still burned slightly and he instinctively knew he would never be free of Gargauth's touch, but perhaps the invasiveness of that touch might lessen. He was surprised by his renewed sense of hope.

"What is this place?" Lethuriel asked. She still wore the elven form, but the battle-ready eladrin still seethed in her stance and bearing.

"The place we've been looking for, Leth. At least, I suppose it is."

"You suppose? I demand to know how you brought us here, mortal." Her eyes flashed, returning the opal gaze he'd loathed to bear witness to, but somehow it felt lessened and he held his secret.

"No. You may trust me or not, but I am an active participant in this and have been for almost a year," he began, his voice taking on a strength he hadn't felt in a long time. "I'm going through that door with or without you."

He turned and reached for the door's handle, fully expecting Lethuriel to wrench him away and attempt a stronger demand.

"Well, that's new," she said, an odd tone in her voice. "I thought humans were born with those."

"What's that?" he asked, straining to pull the door open on rusted hinges.

"Backbones," she answered dryly.

He stopped his exertions and turned to look at her incredulously.

"Was that a joke?"

Lethuriel merely smiled and pushed past him to wrench the door open with ease. The sight of her smile was nearly enough to stagger him and he wondered what other traces of actual personality she'd kept hidden from him.

Once inside, the stench of death abolished his musings, wafting over them both in a pall of fetid air and cold moisture. A short hallway stretched into the darkness and led to a flight of descending stairs. Lethuriel went first, since her eyes better adapted to a lack of light. The stairs were quite old -- they creaked with each step, threatening to fall through at any moment, but they held. At the bottom lay another door, this one ajar. Through the crack lay the pale, emaciated arm of what appeared to be a man.

Pulling the door open carefully revealed the body that lay facedown before the door. His position suggested some failed attempt at escape. Lethuriel summoned a small globe of light allowing Tirenán to see the scene that awaited them in the room beyond. Tirenán noted the familiar robes of the body, identifying it as a member of the Creel and one of the Gargauthans who'd had fought so hard to conceal their intrigues and identities among the tribe. The rest of the room presented only more of the same.

A dozen or so figures lay sprawled in the chamber, their robes spotted with dried patches of blood and their skin showing signs of the plague from Tirenán's dreams. Their faces seemed bruised, and their cheeks seemed swollen with a feverish blush. All of them appeared to have been dead for several days at least. Lethuriel looked coldly on the chamber, her lack of expression conveying all that Tirenán expected of her. These were mortal deaths, circumstances chosen and consequences endured through free will. Though many such casualties might occur in the "sleeping war" she would talk about at times, the deaths of these advanced the cause of neither side.

Tirenán searched through the room, inspecting the bodies. He felt a mixture of shame and relief when he noted that the boy he had left behind with the Creel two years ago was not to be found in the chamber. He couldn't decide if that was a good or a bad thing at the moment. One face was familiar, wearing the most decorated robes of dark brown, lined with fur. He knelt beside it and stared into the glazed eyes of his brother, Malkirahs. It had been Malkirahs who had dealt him what should have been a mortal wound if Kaeless had not returned for him. She would have been sacrificed that night and Malkirahs would have slain her as well.

Lifting a wide sleeve away from his brother's chest, he found what he had sought: a book bound in reddened leather, looking in much better repair than its true age. One of the fabled tomes of Goorgian, a Nar wizard who had, legend had it, been the first to hear the voice of Gargauth in the Realms. He had poured the secrets of the god into several tomes such as this, devoting his life to the formation of a secret order in Gargauth's name.

Taking the book from his brother's arm, he stood and surveyed the chamber one last time.

"They tried to use the book," Lethuriel said solemnly.

Tirenan studied them. Each body was covered in the plague sores, twisting in agony. He would never forget the smell -- would never forget each face's silent scream. He knew, and had known, that any one of them might have been himself.

"It seems they were successful," Tirenan replied and walked out, done with musings for now and still burdened by deeper questions.

Lethuriel remained behind several heartbeats while Tirenan shoved the book under his cloak and stood outside in the cold. He could smell the smoke of a fire. Lethuriel was destroying the bodies inside, lest the pestilence somehow spread. Winter would fall upon Narfell in full strength soon, and travel in and out of N'Jast would slow to a crawl for several months. Tirenan hoped that Lethuriel's war could wait that long at least -- maybe even wait until after he had long since left the world. Maybe it would never come at all.

Lethuriel appeared at his side, and they wordlessly left the Edges to return to their perch. The eladrin would be off to her watch and Tirenan to some much needed rest.

Atop the guard tower along N'Jast's outer wall, the hours passed in silence. Lethuriel resumed her gargoylike crouch, seeking sign of movement, ever vigilant and never resting. Tirenan had tried to sleep, but to no avail. He envied the eladrin her sleepless nature and wondered if she truly marveled at his ability to dream.

Staring out across the plains, he came to the slow knowledge that he was to be the last of his own bloodline. Goorgian's legacy would fall with his death. Gargauth's words still haunted him. The favor granted and the paid debt. He shivered at the thought of events he might have set in motion -- some unwitting, thoughtless action that had somehow benefited the god's schemes. He looked to Lethuriel and envied her again. She had a simple mission -- a design she could follow through time and never waver. He was trapped in her life now, having abandoned Kaeless.

"I am the last, aren't I?" he asked her.

She looked at him sidelong, a sudden emotion in her eyes saying something he couldn't quite fathom. It was strange to see any feeling at all cross her features so he could never be sure. She looked away quickly, seemingly disturbed.

"I recall you have an older sister, do you not?" she said finally.

"Yes, I suppose I do. She is called Denovan, but she is barren." He remembered Denovan even less fondly than his brother. A cold woman of the Creel, betrothed to the chieftain's son before the discovery that she could bear him no sons.

Lethuriel closed her eyes briefly, then raised her head to stare at him again. His fear of her eyes doubled in that moment. He couldn't explain the sensation save that it was the closest thing he'd seen to a look of sorrow from her. Twice in one day he was stunned by the emotions that she had shown him -- emotions magnified perhaps by her divine nature or ones he supposed she could not normally afford to give credence.

"And what of your daughter?" she asked.

"My daughter?"

Lethuriel stood, the import of her words settling in his gut like a stone. He merely sat in shock as she looked out beyond the wall and stoically continued.

"Not long ago, the priestess you loved gave birth to a child," she said, each word making the wind just a bit colder and his muscles a bit weaker and more tired. "My sisters across the plains gather from time to time to exchange news. The child was a girl. Her name is Morgynn."

His mind reeled at the news and he sat quietly for a long time, unable to speak and forcing himself to breathe. He'd been Gargauth's fool. The debt had been paid, the bloodline would continue. No one could say when or if that was a good thing or a bad. He had only his own life to compare by. Perhaps with the Sedras his daughter would be safe from the legacy; perhaps he could return, if only briefly, to make sure.

Lethuriel still stood staring at the plains as if waiting to see what he would do with the news. He knew why she hadn't told him before -- another bit of revealed emotion and compassion beneath her cool facade.

"I need to see her," he said, though he hadn't the strength to stand, much less to search the plains for the Sedras.

The eladrin looked sidelong at him, raising an understanding eyebrow.

"Would it change anything?" she asked, her tone suggesting the obvious answer.

His head rested against the stone and he stared at the approaching dawn, the horizon glowing with the promise of a new day. He didn't answer. He knew the answer. Exhaustion flowed in waves through his body, his mind lost in the sensation of falling through the veil between reality and nightmares. He could already see them, hear them -- the horses, running by the hundreds across Narfell. Plague swam in their rolling eyes and he wanted to scream, but resignation won out in the end.

Blinking, he stared at Lethuriel and wondered if she were real or just another figment of his madness. Had he really been here all this time, fighting alongside a celestial warrior against fiends in some secret cold war? Or had madness created a life where he might hide from his sins and give him excuses for abandoning those he loved? The eladrin's silver armor shined in the rising sun and her perfect black hair flowed in the winter wind, a divine image that defied all reality. The nightmare's horses screamed in the back of his mind, their hooves a thunder racing with his heart.

"Why is this happening?" he asked, choking past the knot in his throat.

Lethuriel's eyes met his, dawn twinkling in their opal depths.

"Does it matter?"