

THE
NOTHING
SWORD

BOOK II OF THE NAMELESS KING TRILOGY

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Rattle-tattle, shiver-shatter
Hollow eyes and yellow rue.
Howler-fowler, cover-cover
Nothing Sword is come for you!
— Children's rhyme, Kor

CHAPTER THREE

The Singer

Robin crouched in the shadow of a tree, watching the moonlight shine off the blade of a spear. Long and wide, the blade was, and curved slightly back, like a saber. In the light of the sun, she knew it would look dull and grey, but the moon turned it a pale milk-white. It was all she could see of the soldier in front of her, who was otherwise a motionless blob in the midst of darkness.

Robin counted slowly and silently, waiting. Her legs were getting stiff, but it was only a little bit longer now, and the soldier would move on. They were as predictable as clocks, the soldiers, always using the same guards, the same patterns, the same patrols. The Defender claimed they were consistent down to the second, but Robin didn't have his innate sense of time. She could count well enough to make do.

When she hit eight thousand, she shifted forward, her bare toes sinking into the soft ground. The forest floor was fairly even here, and covered with the full growth of spring. She prayed silently to Ior that no hidden nettles waited for her in the darkness. She'd barely stayed alive the last time she had stepped on one of those, cursing loudly before she could stop herself, drawing every damn soldier in the camp down on top of her. She spent that night running blind through the forest with a foot full of spines, until she finally found a tree with branches low enough to scramble up and hide in. That night had passed in shivering and in pain, exhaustion threatening to spill her off the branch and onto the forest floor.

There had been worse nights since.

The sound of boots and metal creaked in front of her, and the soldier began to move, white blade turning and bobbing through the darkness. Robin counted

another slow fifty and then padded forward, not bothering to crouch or hide. They never looked back, the soldiers, and she hated crawling along the ground like a squirrel. Twenty steps forward, then sixteen bearing left, four more forward, and then twelve to the right. She paced them out, and could see the blade of another soldier circling in from the left already—the second guard, coming to take the place of the first. As expected.

Robin quickened her pace, boosting herself over a fallen tree trunk, slipping in about a dozen paces behind the second soldier, who was taking up guard position in the exact same spot as the first. She could see the glow of the fire now, coming from the main encampment in front of her, a hundred paces inside the ring of sentries. They would be about to finish their weapons cleaning, the soldiers, and then they would talk. That was what she had come to hear, what the Defender had tasked her with gathering information on. So far she had heard nothing useful.

As she neared the fire, she slowed, and was forced to crouch, moving forward in a kind of hunched scuttle. The fireflies were out, and they blinked around her in slow songs of light. The south was full of such strange creatures. She slipped under the weeping boughs of an elder snowfall, its branches ripe with the scent of spring flowers, and down she went to her belly, crawling the last few feet forward. The shadows of the soldiers and spears flickered in the light of the fire, and through the leaves the small ring of tents rose up like small, peaked barrow-mounds. There were twenty-two soldiers, all told. The squads were always twenty-two soldiers: one officer, one signifier, and twenty spears. For the next hour, eight of those would be on the line of sentries circling the camp. Then the guard would switch, the soldiers would bed down for the night, and Robin would slip through the gaps back to her own little camp, hidden a half mile away or so, in a tangled stand of beech trees.

But first came the Recitation.

That's what Jair called it, anyway. As far as Robin knew, it didn't have an actual name. Or if it did, it was one of the many secrets that the Nightmare kept hidden in the pages of its book. The soldiers cleared a ring around the fire, moving weapons and packs and the remnants of the night's dinner. The firelight turned their grey uniforms into a kind of dull orange, and Robin looked for faces she recognized, soldiers she had come to know from many previous nights. She did not know their names. They never used each other's names. Like most southrons, their faces were mottled and patterned like leaves in shadow, or mold on rocks, and in the flickering light it was often hard to tell them apart. The women had their hair cut short, and wore the same trousers, vests, and jackets as the men. Indeed, the first couple nights Robin hadn't even known that there were women in the squad. She'd only noticed when she'd risked following the soldiers a few hours during the daylight, and the whole company spent an hour bathing in one of the little rivers that ran everywhere across these woods.

The soldiers settled cross-legged on the ground in a circle, each equally distant from the others, radiating out from the central fire like spokes on a wheel. Robin inched a bit sideways, looking for a better vantage point.

There was silence for a time. The fire muttered and snapped under the quiet, overhanging boughs. Then a tall, slim figure stood up and walked to the center of the circle, a book in hand.

The signifier.

He was dressed in black, the signifier, with a long, wool robe that hung down to his booted heels, stitched on the breast with the three white tears of Tjabo. Tattoos covered his face—strange, sweeping lines of black and red, swirls and stars, figures and flowers, patterns too intricate to unravel. They shone in the firelight like polished glass, framing eyes as black as coal. They all had black eyes, but the signifier's were the worst, like two deep pits into his skull.

“Call to mind the truth,” the signifier began, as he always did. He had a normal voice, disturbingly normal, coming from such a strange face. “And let yourself dwell in it. For there is pleasure, and there is pain. There is freedom, and there is slavery. There is light...”

“...And there is shadow,” the circle finished.

“So it is, so it was, so it will be,” the signifier continued. “For the balance rules all.” He paused and opened his book, reading silently, and Robin leaned forward a little. Every soldier in the Nightmare carried that book, or one like it, slim and square and bound in leather, tucked into the breast of their uniforms, near the heart. The Order, it was called—a book the Defender wanted more than any other, a book that would burst into flame the moment it was taken from its owner, and kill the owner besides. As the signifier read it, the tattoos on his face began to shift and move: slowly, ever so slowly, so that it almost seemed a trick of the light. Yet Robin had seen it happen too many times to have any doubt.

“Once, there was a rich woman who took pleasure in food,” he said, beginning to pace slowly around the fire. “And often she was going to balls and dances, banquets and wedding feasts. She was a beautiful woman, and so sat at the head of every table, where she smoothed her skirts and straightened her back and caught the light of the torches in her emeralds and sapphires. Slaves brought her plates of food, caramelized pigs and peacocks in brine, sugared lemons and iced dates, goblets of beer and wine and kinci as golden as the sun. And whatever dish they brought her, the woman merely sighed, and exclaimed that she was already stuffed to the brim, and so took nothing but a bit of water and dry bread. And the others admired her, and spoke well of her and her beauty and restraint, and many men there were, who sought to possess her.”

The tattoos on the signifier's face began to move a bit faster, crawling across his cheeks like ants in sap. There was something fascinating about them, hints of patterns that seemed to move just under the surface. All was quiet save for the tread of his feet, and his measured voice. Even the fire seemed to have fallen

silent; Robin could see it flickering, but heard no sound of wood burning.

“But she dismissed all of her suitors,” the signifier continued. “For her desire was only for her food, and the pleasure that its denial could bring her. Soon she began to refuse it in private, calling for sumptuous meals in her bedchamber, and then sending them back untouched. And as her slaves carried the food away, she pressed her ear to the door, and listened as they asked themselves wonderingly how she ate so little and stayed so beautiful. And their words were better food to her than bread. She fed on that bitter meal daily, as her body began to waste and decay, and ate her beauty for lack of meat. Soon enough the admiration of others turned to worry, the praise to slander. Yet the woman found more pleasure in the worry of others than she had in their praise, and so she sighed and slept and starved, as her belly bloated with pain and her bones crumbled with dry rot. Until, at last, the very sight of food was a horror to her, and she turned her face to the wall, and welcomed the embrace of death.

“Thus we see that there is pleasure in pain,” he said. “And pain in pleasure. One cannot exist without the other, for they are walls of the same house. If one is removed—”

“—Both shall fall,” the rest of the soldiers replied.

“So it is, so it was, so it will be,” the signifier repeated. “For the balance rules all.” Tattoos swirled, joined, broke in a thousand patterns. Memories bubbled up in Robin’s mind unbidden, of Bryndon and Gran and her father, all the people she missed most. She tried pushing them down, tried to look away from the signifier’s face; but it was like punching water to keep it from rising, and they flowed in and around and through her steadily. The memories would get worse, before the end.

“There was a man with two sons,” the signifier said. “One short and fair of face, the other tall and hideous. And the—”

“—And the short one was hung like a mule, and the tall one like a cricket,” a harsh voice broke in.

The spell snapped at once. Sound flooded back into the world, the song of the cicadas and the sigh of leaves. Robin blinked and shook her head, and a stocky, muscular man strode into the light, with four or five men behind him, swords strapped across their backs.

There was no hesitation from the soldiers. They snapped to their feet at once and seized their spears from the weapons rack, moving swiftly to form ranks on the opposite side of the fire. A whistle went up from somewhere, and Robin heard the sound of the sentries crashing through the undergrowth at full speed, returning to the camp. One passed less than a foot from her hiding place, boots pounding the ground near her face for a moment, then gone. In seconds, the whole squad was drawn up in three ranks against the interlopers, twenty identical blades pointed in the same direction, with the officer behind, sword in hand.

“What a welcome!” the stocky man said, clapping. He was dressed in deep

purple and red, and his hands were covered in rings of gold and jewels that flashed in the firelight. “Truly extraordinary discipline. Maybe someday you’ll learn how to keep me and my men from striding into your camp like a gang of princes into a riverside whore house.” He laughed and flung back his cloak, revealing a pair of silver-hilted daggers that hung at his belt.

The signifier had not moved an inch. “Mordax,” he said. The patterns on his face continued to shift and swim, and he regarded the newcomers with a sort of passive annoyance, holding his Order with both hands clasped in front of him, as if he was about to begin a prayer. “You are late.”

“Am I?” the man named Mordax said. “Maybe I’m just early for our next meeting.” He snapped his fingers at one of the men behind him, who swung a strange wooden contraption off of his back and began rapidly unfolding it into a small chair. He set it on the ground behind Mordax, who settled into it with a flourish. *No, not a chair*, Robin thought. *A throne*. High backed and solid, with dragon heads carved into the arms. Robin thought she caught the glimmer of emeralds, set in the dragon’s eyes. Mordax leaned back into it, as if unaware of the small forest of spears pointed at him. He was the only one who seemed relaxed. The men with him looked ready to draw at any moment.

“We cannot speak now,” the signifier said. “You must go. Return tomorrow.” He gestured, and the officer barked an order. The ranks snapped their spears forward and broke into two groups, circling to either side of the intruders.

“I’m busy tomorrow,” Mordax said, polishing one particularly large ring on the front of his shirt. The other hand rested on the hilt of a knife. “I’m afraid you’ll have to break the ritual tonight.”

The signifier gestured with one finger. The fire dropped into almost nothing, as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water on it. The others disappeared into darkness, until only Mordax and the signifier could be seen in the red glow. The night had turned cold. Robin fought off a shiver. She knew that chill.

“Cute,” Mordax said, nodding to the fire.

“You have been of some value to us, Mordax,” the signifier said.

“How sweet of you to say,” said Mordax, smiling.

“Do not end that value tonight with foolishness,” the signifier continued, tattoos twisting.

“Foolishness is a relative term,” Mordax replied. “Sometimes what looks like foolishness is simply wisdom by another plan.”

“You have the span of three breaths to leave this place,” the signifier said. “Or else you and all of your men will die.”

“How dramatic,” Mordax said. There was a sound of swords being drawn behind him in the dark, and Robin tensed, getting ready to run.

“One,” the signifier said.

“Ugh. Such a boring, predictable number to start with,” Mordax said, rolling his eyes. “I suppose you’ll say two next.”

“Two,” the signifier said.

“I knew it,” Mordax said. He snapped to his feet, waving a hand. “Enough of that nonsense. I have your prisoner. If you want him, I would suggest waiting a bit longer before trying to kill us.”

The signifier paused. “The singer?” he asked.

“That’s what you’re paying me for, isn’t it?” Mordax said. He whistled, high and piercing, and there was a shuffling and dragging sound in the darkness. A massive, bearded man in a great black bear skin came into the light, dumping something on the ground in front of Mordax. It was the body of a man, wrapped in a tattered, dark cloak that could have been green or black. Mordax put a boot up on the man’s back, as if he was a footrest. His buckles glinted yellow with gold.

“This is the singer?” the signifier asked.

“What did I just say?” Mordax said. “I swear, sometimes I’m talking to myself.”

“He was supposed to be alive,” the signifier said.

“And so he is,” Mordax said. He nudged the man with his foot, then unleashed a couple kicks. The man groaned and rolled over, revealing a face blackened and puffy with bruises.

As he turned, Robin felt a wave of dizziness wash over her. The world twisted a bit to the side, and for a moment a bright light shone forth from the man’s face, as clear and high as the noon sun. Then he groaned again, and the moment passed, leaving only the dim red glow of the fire, and a deep purple afterglow in her eyes. Robin blinked tears away, shaking her head. The dream magic often guided her feelings and impressions, but she hadn’t seen a true vision like that for years. Not while awake. Not since—

“Wake up, ashiq,” Mordax said, kicking the man again. “Your patrons want to hear you sing.”

“I am awake,” the man croaked, sitting up. And Robin stopped breathing.

It was Bryndon.

His face was so broken by blows that it was almost unrecognizable, but his voice—she would have recognized the voice of her brother anywhere. The voice that had woken her every morning from her terrible dreams, the voice that had scolded her for being rude to strangers, sang her softly to sleep. It had been years since she had seen him last, years of wandering and searching, long seasons broken by a few days of reunion. The last time they’d been together was in Wyd, two years and hundreds of miles away. And now here he was, in the hands of some bounty hunter. Beaten and bound.

“You, prisoner,” the signifier said to Bryndon. “Look at me.” The light from the fire rose again, and the signifier locked his black eyes on her brother. Bryndon looked back without a word, and a strange, hard tension rippled out from their stare. Robin felt a cold pressure on her chest and head, as if the whole clearing had just plunged into the bottom of a lake. Mordax grunted and took a half-step

back, his hands grasping for his knives. *He feels it too*, Robin thought. *Whatever it is. What in Ior's name are you doing, brother?* She felt like some sort of struggle was going on, some battle taking place on a plane she could not see.

At last, the signifier looked away, and the pressure vanished at once.

"Find what you were looking for?" Bryndon asked.

"You have done well, Mordax," the signifier said, ignoring Bryndon. His voice was as plain as ever, giving no indication that anything strange had happened.

"Of course I have," Mordax said, after a moment hesitation. He settled back into his little throne, pretending to ignore Bryndon as well. Though Robin saw he did not let go of his knife hilt. "He's the one you want. I assume you have my payment ready?"

"No," the signifier said.

Silence.

Mordax smiled.

"No explanation?" Mordax asked. "Not even a well thought out lie? You insult me."

"We have not been able to obtain the item that you asked for," the signifier said.

"You mean the payment you agreed to," Mordax said. "And you're lying."

The signifier shrugged.

Mordax waited for a few moments. The silence hardened.

Then he stood, sweeping his cloak around himself. "We shall be on our way, then," said Mordax. "If you want your prisoner, you know how to find me."

"Leave him," the signifier said.

"No," Mordax said.

He was still smiling. But now it was one of the more terrifying expressions Robin had ever seen. Behind him, one of his men folded the throne back together, strapping it on his back.

The signifier sighed. "The thing you seek is difficult to obtain. It is quite well protected. But we will pay you some day, Mordax. The Free Army does not lie," he finished, using the Nightmare's name for itself.

"No, indeed," said Mordax. "Only gods and men can lie, and you are neither."

"We cannot allow you to leave with the prisoner," the signifier said. "We will kill you if necessary."

"Perhaps you should count to three again," Mordax said, turning to go. "That worked well for you last time." The big man in the bear skin came forward again, kneeling to scoop Bryndon up into his arms.

The signifier held up a hand. "If you leave the fire—"

Mordax pivoted. There was a flash of steel in the darkness, whistling over the big man's shoulder, and before Robin could blink, a knife buried itself in center of the signifier's hand.

He cried out and dropped to the ground in a heap. The fire blazed up in a

massive plume, and then it went out like a candle, plunging the whole camp into an inky blackness.

Curses. Shouts of confusion in the dark. A whistle went up from somewhere, and Robin heard the officer bark an order. Then came the sound of boots, and steel, and cries of anger and pain as the Nightmare slammed into Mordax and his swordsmen.

Robin cursed and jumped to her feet, trying in vain to see through the thick night. The flare of the fire had nearly blinded her. She could see fighting in the shadows, Mordax's men back-to-back in a struggling mass between the two groups of Nightmare soldiers.

Bryndon was going to get killed in the middle of all that. But what was she going to do? She was unarmed, barefoot, and blind.

She took a deep breath.

Then another.

There was a wet thunk near her, and a man screamed and fell. A burst of blue fire erupted out of the man's chest, illuminating the world briefly—the Order disintegrating as the man died.

And then the world twisted to the side again, and a light blossomed in the midst of the darkness, bright and pure, shining forth again from her brother's face. He lay draped over the bear man's shoulder, who fought one-handed with a long, broad-bladed sword. The light broke and echoed around all of the struggling figures, casting sharp shadows against the tents and trees, shadows that fought and struck and sought to kill. Again, no one seemed to notice the light but Robin. She was still barefoot and unarmed. But she was blind no longer.

She ran out into the night.

The battle surrounded her in moments. Blades and bodies whistled by her face, boots pounded the ground. She doubled over, moving in a kind of half-crouch, trying to stay below the level at which the soldiers were likely to strike. Two men went tumbling past her, locked in a terrible struggle, and Robin rolled away, running toward the fire. There was a series of dull cracks from the forest, and Robin looked up to see a half dozen or so men swinging down from the lower limbs of the trees surrounding the clearing, slinging crossbows at their hips and drawing swords. Mordax had not left himself without help. The newcomers slammed into the rear of the Nightmare on both sides, and the officer went down without a word, slashing open the thigh of his attacker as he fell. More blue flames flared up as the Nightmare died. The other soldiers turned to face the new threat, long spears pushing Mordax's men back.

Robin seized a log from the fire pit, cold and hard and about as thick as her arm. She turned and slammed into the back of someone, one of Mordax's men, who yelled and slashed out at her with his sword. But she was already sprinting away, heading for the light and her brother.

The bear man had lost his sword, and fought now with the broken end of

a Nightmare spear, slashing and spinning. He looked huge and impossible in the strange light, carrying Bryndon across his shoulder as if he weighed no more than the tattered cloak he was wearing. Robin gritted her teeth and tightened her grip on the wood. He was too big to knock out. She doubled her speed, and heard herself screaming, the sound blending into the cries of battle. She launched herself, low and straight, the log held out in front of her like a spear.

It struck the bear man in the back of the knee, and Robin slammed in behind it, the full weight of her leap smashing into the man's legs. She felt the log splinter and snap, and pain erupted in her shoulder. The bear man roared and went down, falling in a heap to the ground. Then she was up, and grabbing at the hand of her brother, trying to drag him from the tangle of bodies. Her right arm would not work, and hung limp at her side. The soldiers of the Nightmare seemed not to know what had happened, holding their ground, waiting for the bear man's next attack.

"They cannot see, Bryndon!" Robin cried out, straining. "Quickly!"

Then Bryndon was up, and Robin saw the shock of recognition on his face as he saw who had pulled him free.

Then he kicked her legs out from under her, and Robin cried out in pain as she hit the ground.

A sword cut the air above her, and Bryndon crashed into the man who was holding it, knocking him flat. She saw a flash of gold on the man's boots as he fell, and then she was up, her numb right hand held in Bryndon's, and they were sprinting away, heading for the trees. They passed mere feet from bandit and Nightmare alike, most of whom recoiled and stepped back, unsure of what new enemy was passing them by.

Then at last the sound of battle was at their backs, the forest before them, and Robin tried her best to keep up with Bryndon's long, loping strides. The light from his face faded and vanished as they left the camp behind them, and they plunged blind into the night. Robin blinked tears out of her eyes, panting for breath, praying that Ior would not put any nettles under her feet.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Doom of Kor

Kor was once a city like any other, built of wood and brick, set on a cliff above the water, where the river Osku swallows up the river Kloan. For many years her people lived and worked in quiet and in balance, under the rule of Tjabo the king. They prospered greatly, for the rivers brought trade from all corners of Nora—red timber from Atra, grain from Vilan, moonstones from the foothills of Drig. People brought trade, and trade brought wealth, and wealth gave birth to trouble.

One day a man rose to power, a prince of the people, whose name was Dasi. He was a shrewd man, and spent his time on nothing but his own desires and pleasure, dealing cruelly with those weaker or poorer than himself. Often he was lending to those in need, and when they could not repay him, he took them as slaves, or threw them from the cliffs onto the river rocks below, until the whole city lived in fear of him. When his wealth had surpassed all others, Dasi built himself a palace, larger and grander than any in the city. He filled his palace with gold and wives and objects of power, and sons and daughters were born to him. And he set this palace at the highest point of the city, surrounding it with great walls of grey stone that cast all beneath them in shadow.

Now one day, Dasi went walking along the southern cliffs, watching the setting sun and thinking only of his wealth and prosperity. Some hours he walked, until the sky was dark and cold, until he reached the southernmost tip of the cliffs of Kor, where the two great rivers meet. There the land forms a point, high above the water below, and on a clear day one can look to the south for miles and miles, almost to the red city of Locus. And as Dasi looked, smiling and happy, a stone

struck him from behind, and black stars exploded in his eyes. He stumbled and fell, dizzy and confused, and rough hands seized him. They wrapped around his throat, clutching and squeezing, and he writhed in terror, flailing for his life.

“Prince Dasi, is it?” a voice whispered. “Admiring your work, my lord?”

The man shook him, like a child shakes a doll. “My sister is down there,” the voice said. “You had her thrown off last year, when she couldn’t pay her rent. ‘Too ugly for the whore house,’ you said. ‘Only a fish would enjoy a face like that.’”

The prince swung his arms wildly, connecting with the man’s head and back. But it was like striking iron, and Dasi could feel hot blood running down his neck, where the man’s fingers continued to squeeze.

“How do you think the fish would like your face?” the man said. “Perhaps we should find out.”

The man seized Dasi by the shirt and dragged him toward the cliff edge, lifting the smaller man nearly off the ground. In panic and horror Dasi twisted and pulled and struck, all to no avail. Until at last they had reached the edge, and the water yawned cold and dark beneath him.

But as the man gave one final shove, Dasi clung to his arm like a branch to a tree. The man stumbled and cursed, tripping on a loose stone, and down they both went over the lip of the cliff. But Dasi reached out and wrapped his hand around a stone, and with a hard jerk he kicked free of the man, and heard his screams as he fell to the river below.

There was a dull wet thunk, and then silence.

And Dasi clung madly to the stone and struggled to breathe through his ruined throat, shaking and shivering in the cold, empty air.

It was not long that he clung there. Fear of death can make men do powerful things, yet Dasi was a weak man, used to a life of comfort. His arms quivered and burned; his hands went numb almost at once. And he would have fallen to his death, then and there, except that another hand reached down, seized him by the wrist, and yanked him onto solid ground.

Dasi looked, sobbing, and there was a shepherd, bearded and bent, clad in dark wool. He was an old man, with white, scraggly hair and brown eyes that looked black in the dark of the evening. Behind him a little flock of grey-wooled sheep were gathered, perhaps six or seven, and all of them were staring at Dasi, some chewing silently on mouthfuls of grass.

“Can you walk?” the man asked, bending low over his crook. “Eh? Hear us boy? Can you walk or can’t you?”

Dasi could not answer. He lay on the grass, his arms wrapped around himself, curled into a ball.

“Suppose not,” the old man said. He ran his fingers through his beard, thinking. “Hmph. Let’s see you then.”

And he began to poke and prod at Dasi, pulling his arms away from his sides,

gently but firmly, examining him for injury. He laid two warm fingers on the lump forming on the back of Dasi's head, and *tsked* at the bloody gouges in his throat.

"Hold this, Zambak," he said, handing his crook to one of his sheep. Zambak took the staff in its mouth, and the old man scooped Dasi up with a grunt. Then he turned and carried him away, his sheep following close behind. To a small hut they went, a hovel of driftwood and stone that clung to a cleft in the rock, where there was little more than a bed, a sheep fold, and a fire.

Some days Dasi stayed there, while the old man cared for him, feeding him broth and fish from the river, putting him in old, warm clothes. The wounds on his throat festered, and Dasi shivered with terrible fever, hovering near death. But the old man placed a cool rag on his head, and muttered prayers while he sat by his side. And when at last Dasi's fever broke, the old man dressed him again in his fine clothes, washed and cleaned, and gave him a glass of wine.

"Best be on your way, then, when you're finished," the old man said, as Dasi drank the wine. "We've only a small patch of grass here, so just head toward the Heights. You'll see the city over the ridge line soon enough, where the back of that prince's palace rises over the wall."

But Dasi did not move. He thought of the open air, and the sound of the rivers, and the sight of the wide green fields that stretch away from Kor to the horizon. And he was afraid.

"Come on," the old man said. "Zambak will show you the way." He whistled, and the big grey sheep came inside, waiting expectantly. "It's no more than a few hundred steps," the old man said.

"What is your name?" Dasi asked, his voice raspy and raw from injury and disuse.

"Coban," the man said.

Dasi waited for a moment, but the old man did not ask Dasi's name. He let Zambak lead him out, and, with hesitant steps, they walked to the city, Dasi's eyes on his feet the whole way, refusing to look up. When they reached the gate, where the back of his palace rose up against the wall, the sheep left him at once and returned to its home and master.

Now prince Dasi disappeared into his palace. And many months passed where he was not seen by any but his closest servants. Those in debt to him began to hope, and his slaves wondered, and other men of wealth began making careful inquiries into the state of his property. Until at last the trees turned to autumn, and the wheat ripened in the fields, and the cold wind from the north blew across the river plains. Then at last the gates of Dasi's palace opened, and out of them came the wall builders.

Stone masons they were, bricklayers and carpenters and woodworkers, men skilled in the building and shaping of all things. In teams they issued forth, going throughout the city, to every house and street that Dasi owned. And when they arrived they set to work building walls, walls upon walls upon walls, high and

strong and grey, joining them to buildings and roofs. Up and up they built the walls, until they were higher even than those protecting city, and half of Kor was covered in their shadows.

And where Dasi had been cruel and ruthless before, he was doubly so now, devouring the city block by block. Some land he bought, and some he stole, and some was given into his hands from those who feared him. And whenever he possessed a new place in the city, he sent the stonemasons, who built walls around it, again and again, joining them to the walls of his other holdings, and those of his palace, until the walls were as tangled as his own mind, until the streets were as shadowed as his soul. He sent his miners onto the faces of the cliffs for the stone, carving out jagged and twisting tunnels beneath the city. He allowed no one to stand behind him, and shunned the sight of sky and horizon. And often he traveled with a pair of musicians, who played loud and constant, lest he should hear the splash and sigh of the river in the distance. And always when he walked about Kor, it was behind his walls, scuttling from place to place, and sniffing after the next house, the next street, the next possession.

Then, at last, there was no place in the city or near it that did not cover beneath his walls, and no street that was not broken or twisted or shattered by their presence.

None, that is, except for the shepherd and his small patch of grass. For the shepherd's land lay behind Dasi's palace, just outside the city, near the point where the two rivers met, and Dasi feared to go there.

So the prince sent men to the shepherd with bags of gold. "Sell us this land," they said. "For Prince Dasi has need of it."

"Need?" the shepherd said. "What does one of such wealth need with our bare stretch of pasture?" And he refused to listen to them.

Again, the prince sent men, once with fine clothes and costly gems, and a third time with magical potions and objects of power, worth even more than gold. "Come," they said. "Do not be foolish. We offer you more than you have ever dreamed. Will you not take it and sell your land?"

"Do you know my dreams so well, then?" Coban said. "What does the prince want with us? Speak, and perhaps we shall give it to you."

"He will build walls around this field," they answered. "And fill it with stone and shadow."

At this, Coban shook his crook at them and sent them away. "Shall I deal with a slave when I am a master?" he said. "Let the prince come himself, if he wishes it, and we will give it into his hand for a pittance. We await him."

And so the men returned to Dasi, and told him what the old man had said. But Dasi grew afraid and refused to leave his palace, and he cursed and struck the men who had returned to him, commanding them to go again and convince the shepherd to leave.

"He will not listen to us," the men told Dasi. "For he clings to his hovel and

his poverty. Have done with the man. He has rejected gold, and he has rejected gems. Let us return with swords. We will kill him and his sheep, and the land will be yours.”

But Dasi, heartless though he was, could not bring himself to do such a thing to the one who had saved his life. And so he called in his wisest counselors, men of long beards and grey heads. And he put the question to them.

“See here,” Dasi said. “A long time I have spent, increasing my wealth and my land, until the whole city is mine. Wealth I have in abundance, and power beyond all mortal men. Yet this shepherd defies me. He values gold not, nor gems or precious stones. And I shall not kill him, or order him killed. How then, wise men, how can I convince him? Who can deliver this land into my hands? To that one I will give great wealth and power, and place him and his descendants at my right hand forever.”

At this there was a great murmuring, and many stood forward to suggest an answer, but none satisfied Dasi. Some length they spoke thus, until at last the wisest among them stood forth, a man named Kinci, who had been silent.

“If you would not kill the bird,” Kinci said. “Then ruin the nest. Sheep need grass and men need water. Therefore, send a messenger to your kitchens, and from your storehouses bring up all of your salt. Put it in the hands of your slaves, and send them in the night, to spread it deep and wide on this shepherd’s field. Then neither man nor beast will be able to abide there. And when he deserts it, you may take it for yourself.”

Now this idea pleased Dasi, and so he did as Kinci had said. He sent his slaves into his storehouses, and brought forth all of the salt of his great wealth. Then when night had fallen, he sent them into the little grass field, and there they dumped every last grain. So much salt did they spread that it stood in great heaps on the ground, like sand in a desert. And then they returned to the city, and Dasi looked out of the windows of his palace onto the dead field below, and waited for the dawn.

Now when the sun rose at last, behold! There was Coban and his flock of sheep, standing in the salt like watchmen, facing the prince’s window. And when the old man saw the prince, wrath burned in his face like fire, and he shook his crook.

“What have you done, O prince?” he cried. “What madness to take what little we have, to crush it under your great bulk? We told you to come to us yourself, and we would have given the field to you. But you, in your fear, have sought to destroy us instead. So now look, and tremble, for you have destroyed yourself.”

He whistled and motioned to his sheep. And Zambak came forward, with a knife in its mouth. It handed the knife to the old man, and then with a great cry it rose up on its hind legs, and Coban seized the creature’s head, and drew his knife across its throat. And as he killed Zambak, he let its blood flow out on the salt.

“Cursed be the prince of Kor!” Coban cried. “Let the blood of my sheep

witness against you! Let another man rule over your city, and another enjoy the fruit of your labor. Let Ior curse you and your children for all time. For I say to you, as long as one grain of salt remains on this ground, your sons and grandsons will be tormented by your fear of open places, and no walls will ever be raised on my field. And as for you, foolish prince, tonight your very life will be taken from you.”

And calling each of his sheep in turn, the shepherd walked about his field, and slaughtered them all, spilling their life upon the salted ground. And when the last lay dead and the field lay red, he broke his crook in three and walked away, disappearing into the north.

With great fear, Dasi shut himself up in his room, locking the doors and taking no food. And it happened that night that a great storm swept over the city, a storm of terrible wrath and wind. And when the storm was at its height, there came a shrieking cry from the bedroom of the prince. His slaves and guards rushed to him, and when the locked door at last was thrown wide, they found the window open to the storm, filling the room with wind and rain. And Dasi himself they found in his own bed, his eyes open and sightless, struck dead.

Now the shepherd was never seen again. Yet his words proved true, for from Dasi's time to this, each prince has had his father's fear of open spaces and far horizons. And since that time the walls of Kor have only gotten higher and more twisted, except that no wall has ever been raised on the shepherd's ground. For the prince's sons, fearing the curse, dare not trespass on it, except to gather remnants of the blood-stained salt as best they could, and slaughter no sheep in their kitchens.

Such was the doom of Kor.