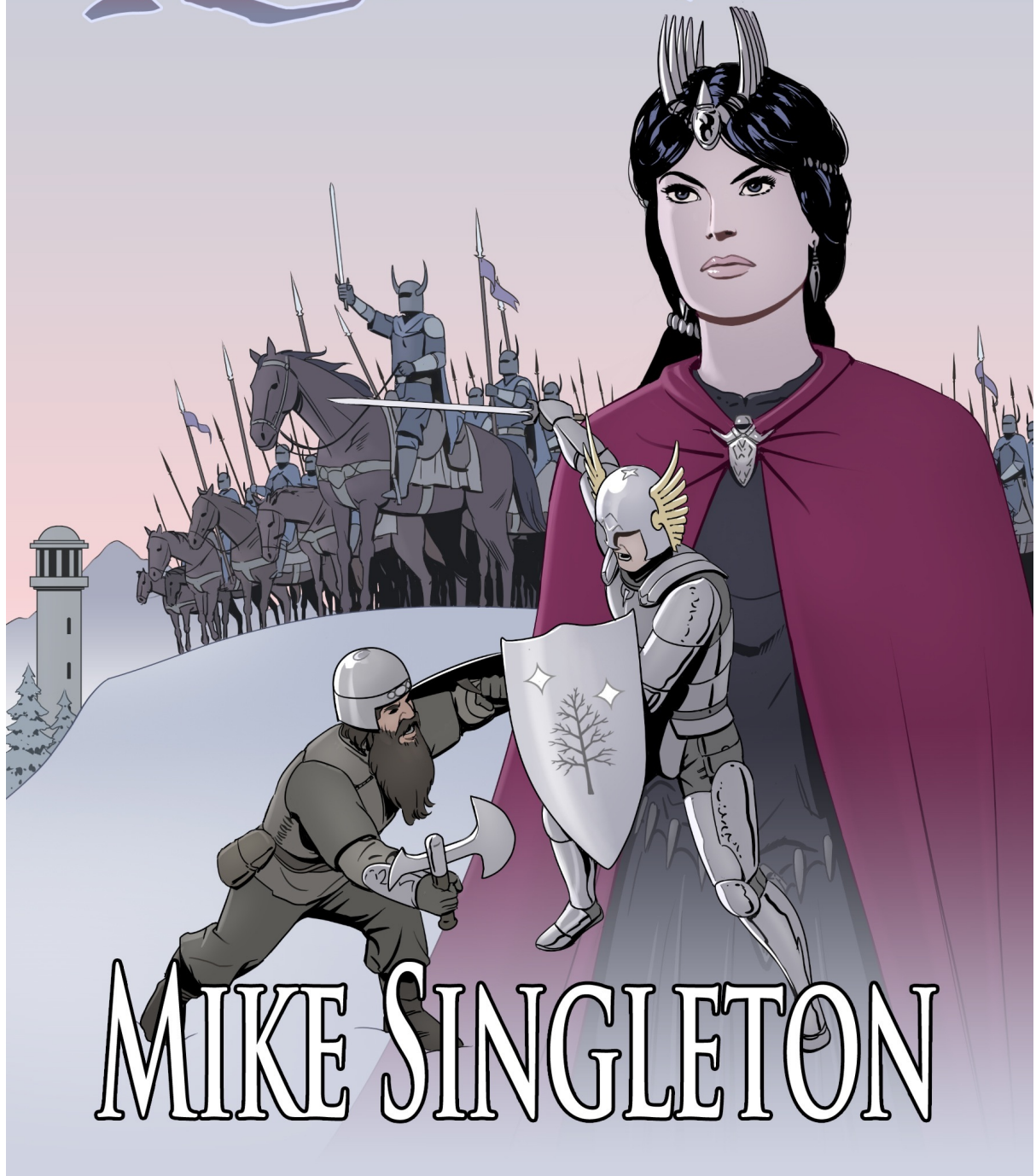


DOOMDARK'S REVENGE



doomdark's REVENGE

the icemark chronicles

by mike singleton

CHAPTER ONE

PEACE



The way was obscure but he moved onwards, little caring what he moved towards. The trees thickened and the darkness of the forest closed in upon him yet he hardly noticed; his thoughts were frozen; tomorrow unimaginable, but forgotten, yesterday a strange dream that had happened to someone else - if it had happened at all. Now the thing was destroyed, what else was left to do? All the fear Morkin had held at bay for so long, because he had to succeed, was unleashed with that success. His mind was just a wilderness now, bleaker than the Plains of Despair.

Elsewhere, time still moved. The burden of the Witchking's cold dominion had lifted from the lands of Midnight like a sudden waking from nightmare. At first not daring to believe that their ordeal was over, people simply took quiet and solitary pleasure in the respite. Then, as dawn followed dawn and the dread did not return, the day of tidings came. Doomdark is finished! The Witchking is dead! Rejoice, we are free! Borne on the wings of whispers, the message took flight and sped across Midnight, bringing laughter and song to hearts that had too long been empty of all but despair.

In its wake, the warriors of the Free made their weary way home, welcomed

as heroes in each village or hamlet on the way, yet longing beyond all for the welcome of their hearth fires and the glad faces of their kin. South from Ushgarak. Luxor's great army trudged a desolate path, at Kor the army turned and plunged into the Forest of Dreams. No signposts marked their way but the Fey, gathering magically out of the gloom of the trees bearing lanterns and firesticks, lit a deep road into the darkening forest to their hidden fastness, the fabled Citadel of Dreams.

The victorious army made camp beneath its shimmering walls. The city was in turmoil as it set about to prepare for a vast feast of celebration. All through the encampment ran rivers of children, festooning the soldiers with garlands and ribbons and begging tales of war. Still, a sadness lingered, the memory of friends irrevocably lost, of brothers' spilt blood, of the cold implacable Ice Fear that had stricken so many good men.

Tarithel did not remain at the feast. As night fell and the city put on all the raiment's of light it could find, she slipped quietly into the forest. Her father would not notice; with all the grand and puissant Lords of the Fey and the Free gathered here, he would scarcely have a moment to spare.

He would expect her presence, but he would not notice it. Though there was no doubting the greatness of the triumph, what part had she in a warrior's carnival? In the silent, dreaming glades, lit only by starlight and with the song of the forest, as the only fanfare, Tarithel would whisper her thanksgiving to the dead and the living and the dying.

The deep shadows of the forest wrapped the girl in long gowns of grey and she slipped through the twilight like a wraith, swiftly, silently trailing between the colonnades of trees. Far from the clamour of the city she wandered, letting the forest lead her down its secret ways, letting her mind mingle with the slow and ancient thoughts of the dreaming trees to catch glimpses of Midnight's long-forgotten summer, the birth-pangs of its green dawn and the dark dance of death auguring autumn. Gradually her pace slackened. As if the rhythm of the forest had seized her lithe limbs and urged a gentler motion upon them, until she halted at last in a deep glade. There she stood, flanked by tall towers of green, waiting and watching just as the forest had waited and watched down the long ages. Gently she swayed, a young sapling in the midst of its elders, till softly the dew gathered like stars in her sweeping tresses and bedecked her green cloak with the glistening jewels. The boy rode past her like a ghost, unmoving, unseeing. Tarithel called out to him but he did not turn. Then, suddenly struck with fear for him, she whispered a strange wordless song, swift of rhythm yet slow at heart and as a clear and broad of melody as the wind rushing through the tall grasses of the open plains. The boy's horse lifted its head, turned and cantered up to her, nuzzling into her cloak as it stopped beside her. The boy himself stirred too and turned his puzzled eyes upon her.

She saw him then, as the moonlight struck down through the trees and bruised his face with its stark brilliance, lost in desolation. His eyes were as cold as death, his mouth a thin scar frozen on a face of stone, yet Tarithel seemed to see behind this mask and sense a greeting in his icy gaze, a hint of laughter in his barren eyes. She smiled warmly.

"I bid you welcome, sir, to the Forest of Dreams. Will you not tarry a while? 'Tis a long and lonely road you follow"

The boy was silent for a moment and then he laughed bitterly.

"I follow no road, I simply ride," his harsh words softening even as he spoke. "I go where my horse takes me; if he has led me here then I should be thankful, for fairer vision than thee I have never seen."

Suddenly, the boy's marble face was lit by the faint fire of a blush and he turned his eyes from Tarithel to gaze intently on the snow on the ground. Tarithel shivered inwardly, sweet delight and bitter apprehension mingling and clashing within her as his words touched her open heart, his gauche compliment, his hopeless statement of no intent, his simple and unbroken pride. She loosened her mind to let his dreams flow into her yet she felt nothing but the slumbering, ageless reveries of the Forest. Somehow, he had sensed her intention and had drawn into himself so swiftly that his mind was intangible. She gasped with wonder.

"Come," she said, "let us find shelter. The night grows long and cold."

The boy smiled. "Then you must ride with me; I cannot ride and have you walk,"

Tarithel laughed softly.

"And can you not walk?"

"I can," he replied, then lowered his voice, "But I would rather we rode together."

With a nimbleness that surprised him, Tarithel took two swift steps, grasped his arm and leapt up behind him onto the horse. Wrapping her warm arms around his waist, she brought her mouth close to his ear and whispered, "The path to the left, gallant knight."

Suddenly, the boy spurred his horse forward; like an arrow unloosed from a taut bow, they galloped across the frozen glade into the deeper darkness of the Forest of Dreams. The boy laughed in delight, the girl clung tightly to him, knowing he expected her to, and the stallion snorted with pleasure, stretched out its swift legs and ran for sheer joy after so many days of dreary wandering.

It was but a few minutes before they broke out of the forest again and saw before them the Citadel of Dreams, its high towers glimmering like amber in the glow of a thousand torches, its sheer walls bright with the banners of the Fey and the Free, its great gates decked with flags and lanterns. Before it lay another city of tents and pavilions that shivered and shimmered as the air trembled in the heat of bonfires that bejewelled the dark plain. The boy reined his stallion and gazed in awe.

"What is this place?" he asked. "Why this carnival? How can they?"

Tarithel felt the boy's muscles stiffen and begin to tremble. His growing fury was unmistakable.

"How can they do what?" she asked, gently.

"How can they rejoice, how can they rejoice?"

"This is the Citadel of Dreams, stronghold of the Fey, Imlath Quiriniel, Jewel of Midnight. Before you lie the armies of Luxor the Moonprince, bearer of the Moon Ring, the War Ring of the House of the Moon. They have journeyed here

from the gates of Ushgarak itself. They rejoice surely this much you know - because Doomdark is defeated, slain by the sword of Prince Luxor himself!"

The boy slumped forward, buried his face in the stallion's long mane and began to sob uncontrollably, Tarithel leant forward to try to comfort him, whispering gentle questions and words of solace, but he would not speak or listen. At length, she dismounted and led the boy and his stallion across the open snow, through the ranks of lanterns and bonfires and merry-makers, through the high arches of the Gate of Dreams, along the bustling streets, to a deserted courtyard deep within the Citadel.

In the midst of the courtyard stood a green oak. Lamps flickered in every branch, casting dancing rainbows on the worn cobbles under its vaulting canopy. Beyond, a fountain tumbled molten silver into a shivering pool and, further still, on a plinth of marble, blazed a bowl of green and golden fire that sent a trembling mist of light and warmth throughout the stillness. The peace of the courtyard seemed to fall upon the boy and his sobbing slackened. He slid down from his horse, letting Tarithel take his hand, letting her lead him to the side of the fountain pool, then letting himself down to rest beside her on the sitting-stones by its bank.

Tarithel wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly, as though he were a small child who had grazed his knee. Gradually, his sobbing ebbed away.

"Tell me what ails thee," she whispered.

The boy eased away from her. He took her hands in his and raised his head to gaze at her steadily. His eyes were sparkling with gladness as his mouth suddenly creased into the broadest of smiles.

"I thought he was dead," said the boy in a rush of words, "I thought the War was lost and Midnight doomed. Rejoicing! I thought they were rejoicing for Doomdark's victory. I thought I'd found it and destroyed it all in vain. Too late to help, too late for anything. I don't know where I've been since. What did it matter? If the Foul One had won, nothing mattered anymore: everything would be wilderness. Why bother finding haven? There would be no haven, there would be no peace, there would be no warmth, ever. I thought he was dead, but he lives!"

"Who? Who did you think was dead? What did you destroy? You talk in riddles that I cannot fathom," said Tarithel, but the boy seemed not to hear.

"When I cast it into the lake, it shrieked and screamed as it dropped towards the water. Even the air about it seemed to thicken, as though the thing was trying to save itself by freezing the very wind. It fell so slowly, like a knife dropped in syrup, I thought it might stop. Then, when it touched the water, came a crack of thunder as it shattered and flew apart. Suddenly, the lake erupted with boiling clouds of steam that caught and melted the fragments even as it burst asunder."

"I leapt and danced for joy. It was gone, forever. The task was done. It was over! Then, as the lake stilled and the clouds of steam thinned away to nothing a rolling peal of laughter boomed from the North and an icy yet velvet voice spoke to me. 'Fool,' it said, 'You are too late, you puny child. Luxor is dead. His

mighty armies are maggot-fodder now. Xajorkith has fallen and burns even now; Corelay has been ravaged and every man, woman and child put to the sword - if they were lucky! The Fey fawn at my feet. All you have done me is a favour. It is so tiresome having to dispose of obsolete possessions.' Then the laughter rolled again and slowly dwindled away. For days, perhaps moons since, I've just wandered aimlessly. There was no point after that, no point at all."

The boy's eyes glazed over as he remembered. Another moment and he would be lost again in the silence of his long ride. Taking his shoulders in her hands, Tarithel shook him until he was jogged back to wakefulness.

"What did you destroy?" she insisted.

The boy looked at her quizzically, as if this were no puzzle at all.

"Why, the Ice Crown of course."

For the moment. Tarithel was aghast. Then, she shook her head and laughed softly.

"That is the sweetest answer I have ever heard. 'Why, the Ice Crown of course. A mere bauble, a deed of no more consequence than... than casting away an old cloak. You must be Morkin, then, son of the Moonprince."

Tarithel looked at the boy as though he were a dream that might suddenly vanish. He gazed back at her, wistfully.

"Yes, I am Morkin, ' he said, "But your name I know not."

"I am Tarithel, the daughter of the Lord of Dreams and Lady of the Forest, since my mother relinquished the right on the eve of the Solstice."

"But you are so young and the Forest- I have wandered in this Forest for days- it seems to have no end!"

"I am as old as you, my Lord, and though you be but a boy, you have travelled half of Midnight on your quest. Was **that** an easy task?" said Tarithel, fiercely.

Morkin laughed and shook his head. He looked up slowly and fixed his eyes upon hers. He could not believe the completeness of her beauty, still less the longing and love that shone in her face, no more than Tarithel could believe the rapture with which he beheld her. Neither could look away, neither could speak, so fierce and tender was the fire they saw kindled in each other's glistening eyes.

Blindly, their hands touched and twined. Morkin seemed to melt inside as he felt the warmth of her slender hands seeking and finding his, Tarithel felt a fresh, cool wind blow through her as his firm but yielding grasp closed up on hers and slowly, like two branches bending towards the same brilliant light, they drew closer together until their lips touched in the gentlest of kisses, to part swiftly as though each had brushed a candle-flame. They looked at each other, bewildered by themselves. Then, suddenly overwhelmed by longing and delight, Morkin took Tarithel in his arms, crushing his lips against hers. They clung to each other tightly and, as they kissed, they seemed to become one fire, one flame burning in the cold, clear night.

Though the stars span overhead, though the night seeped away like a dark liquid running from a crystal goblet, their thirst for the heady wine neither had tasted before stayed unquenchable. As the sounds of feasting waned and the

footsteps of home comers rang in the cobbled streets, Tarithel led Morkin within and took him along the winding corridors to the Western Tower.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FROZEN EMPIRE



Kahangorn rang to her cries. Though she raged and screamed for her slaves, none dared to approach her. The messenger who had brought the news had been disembowelled on the spot and her hands were still bloody with his entrails. She stormed at the thick stone pillars of the great hall and clawed at their unyielding flesh as if she would tear them apart and bring the tall roof crashing about her.

"I will bathe in his blood! I will feast on his flesh! How dare he? How **dare** he usurp me?" she ranted.

Flecks of froth flew from her lips and she span round and ran the length of the hall to the heavy oak doors. She flung them apart as if they were mere match wood, then sped through the dark corridors and up the twisting stairways to the battlements of the Fortress of Kahangorn. Standing on the southern walls, staring like one demented into the blue distance, she shrieked forth a storm of filthy curses. Shareth the Heart stealer, Empress of the Icemark, dread ruler of the Frozen Empire, was distraught.

The object of her invective was Prince Luxor, Lord of the Free and Moonprince of Midnight. Though it was two moons now since the War of the

Solstice had come to a sudden end with the fall of Ushgarak, the news of Doomdark's defeat had travelled north at a snail's pace as the last cohorts of the Doomguard struggled across the Frozen Wastes towards the sanctuary of Icemark. Only six out of six hundred men had completed that terrible journey but fewer still survived the road that led from the Outlands, through the Kingdom of the Giants, to the borders of the Frozen Empire. Just one warrior reached the gates of Kahangrorn, only to find death there at the hands of the Empress, by way of thanks for his travail.

None but the Wise knew that Doomdark, in earlier moons, had himself journeyed through the northern wilderness and found the ice-locked land of Icemark. And few even of them knew that there, in brief union with a cold Queen of the North, he had spawned a daughter. She was called Shareth and was, perhaps, the only thing that Doomdark had ever loved. The Witchking left her in Icemark for her own safety, fearing that some would seek to use her against him, but his long-roving vision kept watch over her. As she grew and matured in evil under Doomdark's distant tutelage, she gathered about her the trappings of power and came to rule a kingdom if anything, more foul than his.

When she learnt of Doomdark's death at the hand of Luxor, she was not stricken with grief, for grief was beyond her. Her consuming fury sprang from other sources. Someone had dared to touch her father, had dared to challenge and destroy her flesh and blood. To Shareth, it was almost beyond belief that a pitiful Prince of the Free had the temerity to take that pleasure from her, so long had she planned in gruesome detail the murder of the Witchking and the seizure of his domains. Doomdark had tutored her too well in his own ways, for her to feel anything but delight at the thought of disposing of one whose power outweighed hers. The insistent ache for power and dominion burst to sharp pain when she learned that the Moonprince now ruled Midnight. Midnight was hers! Midnight was hers! Though Doomdark might not have planned it so, believing foolishly that his only daughter loved him in return, and crying out even with his dying breath, "Avenge me, Shareth, avenge me!" she was about to wreak a terrible revenge upon the Free and their Moonprince.

The battlements of Kahangrorn darkened as the storm clouds gathered, summoned from the ice-barriers of the North by Shareth's wails and shrieks. Safe in their watchtowers, the soldiers of the Iceguard tried to joke.

"The she-hag's brewing up a hurricane!"

"Someone's going to catch it, mark my words."

"Nothing like a good dose of plunder and frightening to clear the air, that's what I say."

"I'll wager two-to-one it'll be the snivelling Dwarves who get their come-uppance this time."

"Nah! Haven't you heard? Some nancy prince from south of the Wastes has tickled her fancy - she's blowing him a kiss, that's all"

Shareth raised her long arms to the sky and cried into the wind, uttering words no man could understand. The storm, however, seemed to leap and swirl as her strident voice pierced through the air. Across the Frozen Empire, from Fangrorn to Imiriel, the dark sky became a boiling turmoil. Then, as Shareth

shrieked, the great storm gathered itself and sped southwards across the Icemark.

Shareth turned and fled to her tower, her fury spent for a while. Her private room there had no walls or windows or ceiling, only mirrors. The Empress flung herself upon the silken sheets of her bed and looked up at herself. She liked what she saw. The anger of the past hours had brought a rare flush to her cheeks and now that she had set her revenge in motion, her marble-sculptured face had softened to perfection. With slim and nimble fingers, she smoothed the white satin of her gown.

"I am so beautiful! " she cried, 'I will make the whole world love me!'"

She smiled seductively at herself and then turned to look in a different mirror. Like her father, the Witchking, Shareth had only ever loved one thing in her life and followed his example faithfully; he loved Shareth, so did she. Night after night she fell asleep surrounded by her own ravishing reflections. Even in dreams she did not escape herself, and she woke each morning feeling more beautiful, more irresistible than ever.

"I will journey to Talorthane tomorrow," she whispered to herself, "And have the Giant for a while. His praises are so clumsy but he loves me so **much!**"

The arch Empress began to giggle like a maiden. Dreamily, she stroked her long, white arms and wriggled from the bed. She approached one of the mirrors closely, blowing a soft mist of breath onto its polished surface, then watched entranced as the mist melted away and her own image took form again before her. She twisted her face into a grimace and bunched up her shoulders.

"Your hair is like an eagle's nest, my love and your nose is as cold as a mountain," she bellowed at herself, finally collapsing back on the bed in fits of laughter at the wit of her parody.

Night fell swiftly upon the Icemark, hastened by the storm that flew from the North. From the great City of Varangrim, a motley battalion of Giants gathered swiftly together at the approach of the storm clouds and marched towards the borders of the Frozen Empire, hoping to forestall the onslaught that such foul weather was apt to carry in its wake. Likewise, from Carudrium and Carorthay, the Dwarves sent forth their warriors towards Fangorn to challenge, if needs be, the marauding Iceguard.

Further south in the City of Imorthorn, the Lords of the Fey met in council to discuss the import of the great tumult in the sky. Some were for raising the alarm at once and marching on Thigrak and Glormane, fearing that the Dwarves had betrayed them to the Heartstealer. Others were waiting, reasoning that even if the Dwarves had betrayed them, it would be better to fight the Iceguard in the deep and tangled forests than to march forth onto the open plains. The Lord of Imorthorn, however, was adamant that the storm was destined for other lands.

"You will have heard by now, surely my Lords, of the war that has been raging in the lost land of Midnight far, far to the south west of our Icemark. Though it is now two moons since its conclusion, the news of the Moonprince's victory has travelled slowly. Rumours of a secret traffic betwixt the Heartstealer and the Witchking have come to our ears for many moons now. Indeed, on the eve of the Solstice itself, did we not waylay a band of dark and foul warriors

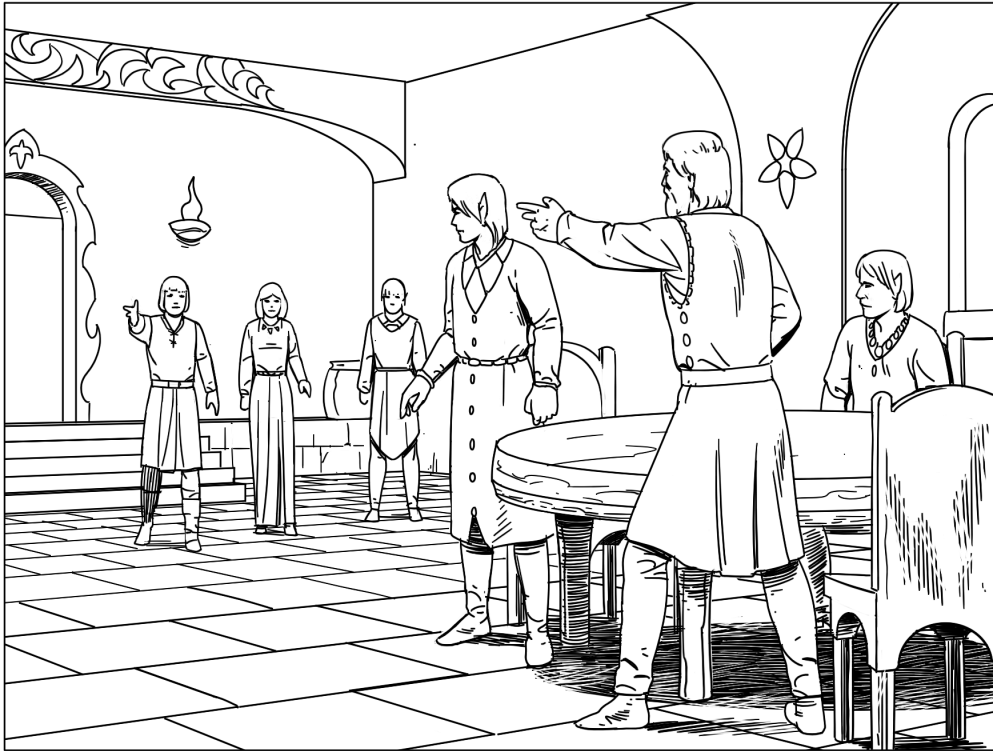
riding north from the Gate of Varenorn? I know it is many, many moons since any of our number has dared its terrors but that is the only passage we know of that still leads to Midnight. I am sure the Heartstealer sends the storm not against us but against this Luxor, this fabled Moonprince of Midnight. Look, even now the storm turns southwest!"

The Lord of Imorthorn raised his arm and pointed to the tall windows of his hall. The council turned and looked out at the dark, flying clouds. There was a murmur of agreement and then confusion as they argued what they should do if this was indeed the truth of the matter. At length, they agreed that their brothers in the land of Midnight, the Fey of the legendary Forest of Dreams and other forests now long forgotten, must be warned of the peril that approached them. Meanwhile, they should make ready for war, for there was no foreseeing Shareth's plans. If she had designs upon Midnight, the route of her armies might well pass through the Kingdom of the Fey and there was small hope that such a passage would be peaceable.

Accordingly, as the night deepened, the Lord of Imorthorn climbed to the Tower of Hawks and took his swiftest bird, a white falcon, from the mews. Round one of its jesses, he wrapped a thin strip of parchment, fastened it there with hot wax and pressed his seal upon it. Then, unhooding the falcon, he spoke softly to it and lofted it into the turbulent sky. In a moment it was gone, winging its way towards Midnight and the Citadel of Dreams.

CHAPTER THREE

THE COURT OF THE MOONPRINCE



Tarithel and Morkin tarried long in the warmth of each other's company before they rose to meet the day. Then, side by side, they rode out through the Gate of Dreams towards the pavilions of Luxor and his Lords. The crowds of soldiers and townsfolk parted, with a flurry of whispers and questions, and closed in again behind them, staring in wonderment. But when they dismounted at the doorway of Luxor's pavilion, Morkin found the way barred by a sentry.

"You cannot pass, sir. Prince Luxor is in council and will not be disturbed."

"I fear he will be if you bar the way to his son, good soldier. Pray let us pass."

The whole assembly turned as they entered and the Moonprince leapt to his feet at the unasked-for intrusion. At first he looked puzzled, not expecting to see such slight and slender figures approach. Then, suddenly recognising the boy, his countenance lightened and filled with joy. He flung his arms out high and wide.

"Rise, my Lords!" he shouted, "My son has returned!"

Shining with pride, Luxor cast aside his chair at the high table and rushed to greet the boy as he climbed, hand-in-hand with Tarithel, the steps to the dais. He stared fondly at the boy for a moment, then clapped a hand to his shoulder.

"Morkin, my boy! Others would return haggard and drained from such a quest as yours, but you have thrived! Is it two inches or four that you have grown?" laughed the Moonprince.

Morkin smiled, suddenly rendered speechless. Then, finding his tongue, he said, "Father! Once I thought never to see you again but you have won the great victory and stand before me alive and well. I may have grown in height but not so much as in happiness to see you once more!"

There was a murmur of approval at this from the gathered Lords. Few had set eyes on the boy before but his courtesy warmed their hearts to him. Rumour, which had it that he was brash and wild, they now put aside. Luxor turned to them and raised Morkin's arm up high.

"This is the boy who saved us at Ushgarak, who, as we fought our bloody way through hordes of Foul creatures to the gates of the Witchking's palace and felt his cold breath clawing at our strength and our courage, smashed the heart of his dread power and lifted the burden of the Ice Crown's terror from us! Salute him, my Lords. Though mine was the sword which plunged into the Foul One's heart, this is truly the hand that slew him!"

The assembled warriors lifted their swords high into the air and cheered loud and long. Morkin tried to tug his hand down, but Luxor kept a firm grip until the applause had dwindled. Then the Moonprince turned back to the boy.

"My son, I would thank thee for simply being still alive, but now we all have cause to give thee our thanks. If there is a gift that lies in my power to grant, name it and it shall be yours."

"Father, do not praise me so, the victory was yours! You slew the Witchking, your armies took Ushgarak, your skill and vigour brought him to his knees," said the boy fiercely.

"Your part was as much," insisted the Moonprince, "More! Do you imagine we could have succeeded without you? Is peak not now as your father, Morkin, but as Moonprince of Midnight; name your wish. The Lords of Midnight will not countenance your refusal."

"I fear it is not yours to grant, my Lord," said the boy.

"How so?" asked Luxor, puzzled and disturbed by this strange turn of events. "Tell me your desire! "

"The hand, tomorrow, of this fair maiden who stands beside me: Tarithel, Lady of the Forest of Dreams. That is my wish, Father."

Morkin looked up steadily into the eyes of the Moonprince, as if daring him to say aught against his ambition. Amongst the assembled Lords, there were more than a few swiftly stifled guffaws and the company was suddenly beset by an outbreak of coughing and clearing of throats. Luxor stayed impassive, as if he had not heard the words his son had uttered. Then Morkin turned to Tarithel and Tarithel turned to him. The smiles that passed between them left no doubt as to the candour of the boy's resolve. Stiffly, the Lord of Dreams rose to his feet and began to speak.

"My Lord Moonprince," he began, "This is my only daughter who stands before you. Her hand may not be yours to give but, if she will sit, I would give it gladly to your son."

"I do, Father, I do!" cried Tarithel suddenly.

"Then let this be a token," said the Lord of Dreams, "That the Fey and the Free are now as one under the protection of the House of the Moon. My consent is given."

With that, the Lord of Dreams sat down again. There was turmoil, then, amongst the gathered company. Loud cheers and congratulations filled the long pavilion. The Moonprince smiled and waited till the tumult died away.

"Your wish seems granted, Morkin, and a fairer daughter I could not hope for. Yet you are both so young. Think upon it, both of you, before you tie a knot that all of time cannot undo."

His words were hardly from his mouth before they both answered, almost in unison, "We have, my Lord!"

The Moonprince turned to his council and laughed, as if in appeal to them.

"What can I do, my Lords? I have given my word," he said. Then turning back to face Morkin and Tarithel, he softened his voice and added, "So it shall be. On the morrow you shall wed. All that remains now is to celebrate this happy, unlooked-for moment. Come, sit with me, and we will talk of the things that have passed 'fore the new feast begins - a feast this night of love, not war!"

"Many tales were told that day, many battles fought again by tongue. Luxor's high council, summoned to decide the fate of Doomdark's old dominions, put aside its purpose and fell to reminiscing. The mead flowed, brave deeds grew braver, terrors waxed more terrible yet and the day drew slowly on. Yet, before evening fell, a strange event came to pass. A white falcon flew in through the open doorway of the pavilion, circled thrice above the high table, then came to rest on the shoulder of the Lord of Dreams. As the rest of the company stared in amazement at the bird, Tarithel reached a gentle hand towards it and nimbly untied its jesses. Then, at a soft word from her, it took flight again and disappeared from the pavilion.

Tarithel handed the message attached to the leather thong to her father. He puzzled at the seal for a moment, then broke it apart to unravel the parchment. The ancient Fey runes he found there surprised him; his skill in them had not been lost but it was many moons since he had needed to use it. He read the message slowly and carefully before turning to Luxor. His expression was a mixture of astonishment and concern.

"My Lord Moonprince," he began, "This message hails from lands beyond our ken, from the cold Icemark which has been severed from Midnight for a thousand moons and more. A Lord who calls himself Imorthorn writes it, addressing himself to his brothers Fey of the Forest of Dreams. It warns of a great storm flying from the North towards Midnight and of the evil designs of one he calls the Heartstealer upon our fair land. He also calls her Empress of the Frozen Empire and hints that she may have made some pact with the Witchking before his demise. I know not what to make of it but one thing is certain - it was indeed written by the hand of a Fey. The ancient runes are known to few of us and none, to be sure, of others."

The Moonprince shook his head slowly, as if lost for anything to say. A heavy burden seemed to have fallen on his shoulders. At length, he spoke.

"If this message bears the truth, then it seems our long struggle is not over yet, but surely this Imorthorn cannot be right. The Frozen Wastes lie between us and the lost land of Icemark. Why else was a falcon sent to bear the ill-tidings to us? I cannot see how any Empress of the North, however evil her intent, can threaten the peace that now befalls Midnight. The Wastes would destroy armies a thousand times stronger than Doomdark's before they ever reached our borders. As for warning of a storm, should we sharpen our swords, wax our bow strings and prepare to do battle against the wind and snow? This message makes no sense," said the Moonprince, wearily.

"We can at least tighten the guy-ropes of our tents and wear thicker cloaks," shouted the Lord of Ithorn." Perhaps this Lord Imorthorn is a dealer in furs and cannot find market for his wares!"

The company of Lords broke into laughter at this. More ribald suggestions followed and the portent of the strange message was forgotten in the general merriment. Yet Luxor remained troubled. He drew the Lord of Dreams aside and spoke to him quietly.

"My friend, see what more you can discover of this matter. Though I cannot see how, I fear this message is more timely than we imagine."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE STORM BREAKS



A dark and starless night fell upon the Forest of Dreams as, high overhead, the vanguard of Shareth's storm gathered. Long past midnight, the feasting finished and the two cities of stone and of cloth fell silent under the lightless sky. Though the parting would be brief and tomorrow he would be joined forever with Tarithel, Morkin could not sleep. He wandered restlessly around the encampment, pausing at the dying camp fires to gaze into the embers and wonder what the future held for him and his beloved Tarithel.

In the distance, he heard the vague rumble of thunder and instinctively drew his cloak more closely about him. He thought of the strange message from the Icemark. Turning to the North, he peered into the chasm of the sky where soft-flickering flames of lightning lit the heavy clouds. A shiver ran through him; this was no ordinary storm: there was something unnatural in the way it moved, in the far distance churning swiftly southwards yet overhead almost motionless.

An urge suddenly betook him to see once more the sweet glade where Tarithel had found him. In a few minutes, Morkin was on his horse and riding slowly through the blackness of the forest, his way lit only by memory. Whether it was Morkin or the stallion who truly found it is difficult to say, but eventually he emerged into the broad clearing where the snow glowed on the frozen ground like a pale, phosphorescent pool. The stallion walked to the heart of the

glade and waited there while the boy peered around himself, trying to conjure out of the darkness his meeting with Tarithel .

Above, the storm clouds thickened and deepened and circled over the Citadel of Dreams, as though searching for something. Thunder cracked and lightning raked the steep walls of the great fortress, scouring the stone with its blinding fire. Sheets of hail hammered at the rooves and windows of the tightly huddled houses and the taut canvas of the encampment. The wind wailed through the empty streets, tearing at slates and shutters, rending proud banners, flinging itself at the tall wooden gates till they groaned and shrieked at the onslaught. The turbulence flew outwards from the Citadel, whirling through the ancient trees of the Forest, stripping them bare and snapping their stout limbs.

Into the clearing where Morkin sat rushed a flurry of debris and flying leaves, yet at the very centre of the glade the air remained unruffled. Suddenly everything grew still. Then, a moment later, a torrent of sharp and icy hail sliced down. The stallion, not waiting for command from its master, started for the shelter of the trees but before they reached the edge of the clearing a single bright tongue of blue fire licked down from the tormented sky and seared into the ground before them. The stallion reared, throwing Morkin into the snow, then rushed off into the darkness.

Stunned and half-blinded, the boy clambered to his feet to go in search of his terrified steed. Once again, the lightning struck down ahead of him, so close that he could feel its heat on his face, feel his skin tingle and tremble as its power crackled through the air about him. Then the storm loosed off bolt after bolt until the boy was trapped in a circle of raging, incandescent fire. So fierce was the raw power that danced around the boy that his very muscles seized and locked. Helplessly frozen there by the lightning, he could only stare into its blinding blue flame until consciousness fled him.

Suddenly, the storm relented, the lightning stopped abruptly and the unconscious boy slumped to the ground. Above, the towering clouds simply melted away and the bright stars gleamed in the sky once more. The calm that followed was profound the Forest seemed to hold its breath and wait, as if suspecting that the slightest whisper would bring the terrible tumult raging through it again.

Morkin lay unmoving, wrapped in strange dreams. A woman stood before him beckoning gently. Somehow he knew he was hopelessly in love with her. As she stood there smiling, radiant in her beauty, he ran towards her open arms yet he seemed to draw no closer. Her deep, crystal eyes mocked him. You must run more swiftly to catch me, my love, she seemed to say, you must run more swiftly.

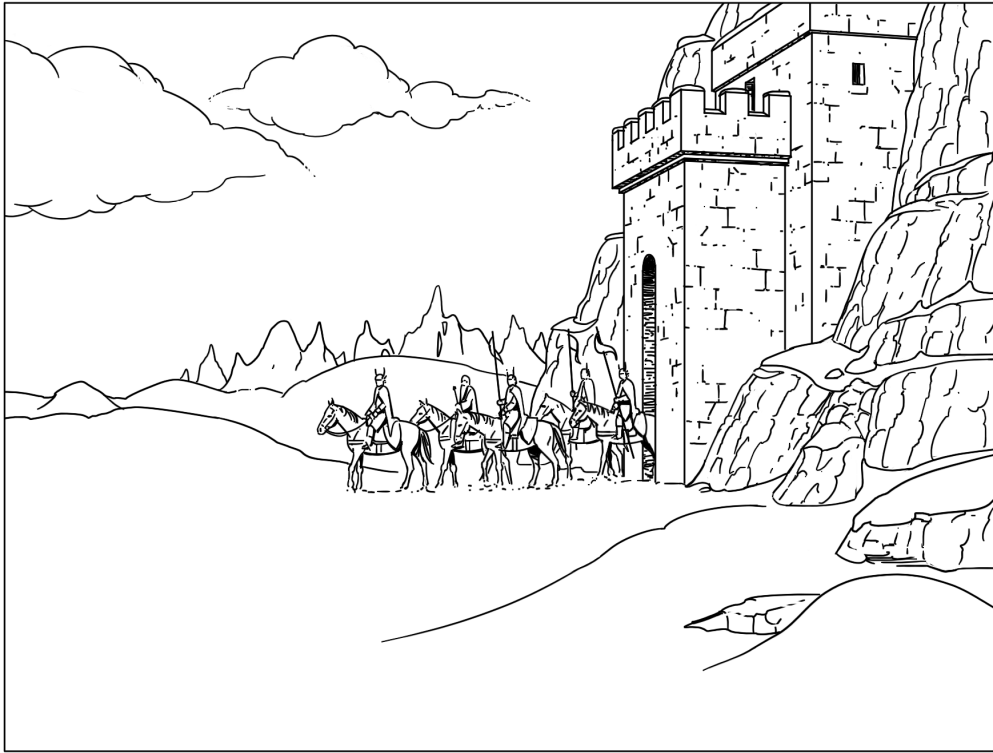
As he ran, the ground gave way beneath him and he began to tumble down a dark chasm. The wind rushed swiftly past him and he seemed to fall for hours before he saw a tiny point of light glimmering in the yawning space beneath him. The point grew and grew as he fell until it became a room in to which he was falling from the dark and open sky. Upon a silk-strewn bed lay the woman who had beckoned him, her sheer and perfect beauty now naked to his enraptured eyes. But, as he tumbled, an invisible hand seemed to reach out and

slow his downward flight until he hovered above the sleeping figure, almost able to reach out and touch her, but not quite. "So the dream ran on, the woman who had beckoned appearing again and again, each time her beauty more ravishing and voluptuous than before, each time the boy seeming to move inexorably towards her open embrace but never completing that final distance.

Morkin woke with no memory of the night that had passed. His mind felt blank and numb. A tall stallion nuzzled him as he lay in the cold snow, trees that were high, bare and broken enclosed in but beyond that the boy knew naught. Only a single, urgent thought filled his mind. North, it whispered, North! You must ride swifter than the wind. In a daze, he hauled himself onto the stallion's saddle. He looked around himself bemused, then, shaking off the last shackles of sleep, urged the horse forward. Northward they galloped, and were quickly lost in the deep tangle of trees.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GATE OF VARENORN



Morkin was not seen again. No word of him was heard, no trace of him could be found. Three days later, Tarithel disappeared as well, taking with her one of her father's swiftest mounts. The Moonprince despatched messengers far and wide but of the fate of Morkin or Tarithel not a whisper returned. The armies camped 'neath the battlements of the Citadel of Dreams dispersed and wound their way southwards to home and hearth and kin. Only Luxor remained with a thousand riders of his Houseguard, waiting for news.

For three moons, none came. Then, out of the North rode Rorthron the Wise, bearing ill-tidings. When news of the boy's disappearance had reached him, he had ridden to the broken Citadel of Ushgarak and then West across the Plains of Despair to the Tower of Doom itself, hoping to find some clue to Morkin's fate. In Ushgarak he had found nothing but at the Tower he had unearthed a letter addressing itself to "My dearest Father, Doomdark, Witchking of Midnight," and signed, "Your ever-loving Shareth, of the Frozen Empire."

His suspicions roused, Rorthron had turned his far-reaching vision Northwards across the Frozen Wastes to the land of Icemark, but he could not penetrate further than the southern borders of a grey and desolate domain he imaged must be the Empire spoken of. Shareth, it seemed, had powers too. In the swirling mists at the grey borders, she conjured up an image of herself,

radiant with cold and piercing beauty. She challenged him fiercely to try his powers further and when he refused, she laughed scornfully.

"You are all so puny and pathetic! Soon I will have you all in my power," she had crowed, "Tell this to your precious Moonprince: I have his son in my grasp already. The boy is mad with love for me and lies at this very moment locked in one of my less pleasant dungeons, pining piteously for my embraces. When I am ready, I shall set him at the head of my armies and send him back to Midnight to shatter the peace you snivellers are so fond of! Seven moons from now I, Shareth, Empress of the Icemark, will ride forth to avenge Doomdark, my beloved Father. The Frozen Gates I shall tear down. Midnight I shall lay waste and through the portals of Xajorkith I will pass, triumphant. All shall adore me and despair! Or, if the Moonprince prefers, let him ride to hammer at my door and find defeat more swiftly!

Fearing that Shareth's words were not an idle boast, Rorthron had ridden East with all haste- and came at last to the Tower of Lorgrim. There he learnt that the Frozen Gates had cracked open at the last new moon. A lonely figure, riding northwards, had plunged into the dark caverns beneath the barrier ice before a sudden, thunderous ice-fall had closed the Gates once more. Rorthron tarried no longer but sped south to the Forest of Dreams.

To Luxor, everything now grew clear - the strange warning of the white falcon, the murderous storm that heralded the disappearance of Morkin, even Tarithel's sudden absence so soon after the first vanishing. She had surely guessed Morkin's peril, as surely as she divined the slow, slumbrous songs of the dreaming trees. Though doubtless many leagues behind, she would have followed, listening for the distant whispering of his bewitched and troubled dreams. The Moonprince hardly paused before deciding upon the course of action that must be taken.

Northwards at once they must ride; any delay would only serve to allow Shareth time to gather her power more fully. Against failure, the Lord of Dreams would remain in Midnight to marshal the Fey and the Free but Rorthron would ride with the Moonprince to the Frozen Gates. Swiftmess was the watchword, to strike at the Empress while she felt safe and secure. Before the hour had passed, the riders of the Houseguard of the Moon thundered north towards Lorgrim with Luxor and Rorthron at their head. Banners swirling, helms and spears gleaming in the clear noon sun, they swept through the Forest of Dreams like a torrent.

They rode without pause, passing Droonhenge at Midnight, reaching the Plains of Fadrath by next morning. Never had an army ridden so swiftly. By nightfall of that day, the Tower of Lorgrim rose before them, flanked by the grim wilderness of the Icy Wastes. Only at the foot of the Frozen Gates did they come to a halt. The jagged ridge of ice gleamed blood-red as the westering sun cast its fading brilliance on the cold towers and barren pinnacles. The Gates themselves, black and cavernous mouths that led to secret ways beneath the glacial ice, were closed, blocked by mountainous shards that had toppled from the ice-ridge above.

Few hearts did not quail, but Rorthron, seizing his staff in his right hand, galloped forward and charged at the great bergs that stood before them. As he

rode, his deep voice boomed out across the wilderness, quelling the insistent wails of the North Wind and echoing back in a thousand fragments from the endless wall. His words held no meaning for those who heard them, but all could sense they were Words of Power. The army waited breathlessly for fire to leap forth from his staff. No such spectacle ensued, instead the ice seemed to turn to molten glass and sink back into the precipitous face of the barrier ridge parting like a curtain as it slithered backwards. Suddenly the jaws of the Frozen Gates were revealed and Rorthron, now a mere speck in the distance, rushed into the throat of their age-long darkness.

The Moonprince and his riders cheered and sprang forward after him. Swiftly the darkness swallowed them and there, in the mouth of a broad tunnel, they paused to look one more time upon the fair land of Midnight. Rorthron's commanding voice spurred them to swift motion again.

"Ride swiftly, my friends, ride swiftly! The spell will not hold! If we tarry, the Gates will come crashing down upon us."

Now, at last, his staff burst forth with fire and Rorthron launched himself into the black depths beyond like a blazing comet. The Moonprince and his riders galloped after the fleeing light with as much speed as they could muster. The crack and thunder of exploding ice that followed them as they rode left no doubt in their minds as to the truth of Rorthron's words.

Though soon safe in the bowels of the earth, the cohorts of the Moonprince pressed on with all speed. The last road to the Icemark was dank and malodorous, broken, slithery and pitted. Curses and oaths filled the rank air. Tired beyond mere exhaustion, none wished to pause. Finally, after many hours of dark passage, the army emerged into the clear night of the Icemark.

Luxor turned and looked up at the deserted towers and walls of the Gate of Varenorn, Guarding the northern entrance of the road to Midnight. He smiled.

"It seems our haste has not been in vain, Rorthron. The witch looks not to guard herself against us," he said.

"Perhaps, my Lord Moonprince, perhaps, or perhaps she has simply left the door of the coop open to entice a fox. It was your hand that slew Doomdark; it will be your death she desires most of all, even though she lusts after all of Midnight," cautioned Rorthron.

"If I fall, so be it: the safety of my son is paramount."

"If you fall, Luxor, so will Midnight. Creatures such as Shareth feed on their own success and quaff the power of their victims. She will be unassailable, I fear, if her vengeance is assuaged."

"Then do you advise me against this course, Rorthron?" asked the Moonprince.

"No, my friend. The boy must be rescued; 'twould be unthinkable to leave him in such foul hands, even were it not that the Heartstealer has the power to twist him and use him against the land of his birth. We are caught in a cleft stick, I fear."

"Rorthron, we must strike at the source of her power, at her stronghold, wherever that may lie. I have no doubt you speak truly, yet her arrogance may still be used against her. If she expects anything, she will expect us to attempt no

more that a rescue before fleeing from the Icemark. Let us instead strike at the vitals of her cold Empire! While Doomdark's daughter lives, Midnight will remain in mortal peril. Let us rid ourselves of this pestilence in a single stroke!" said Luxor forcefully.

"Indeed, my Lord, I see no other way. Nothing would more imperil Morkin's life than an army hammering at the gate of his prison. But come, we must all rest before the day breaks. We are strangers in this land and may be forced to follow unforeseen paths before we win through; we must find friends as well as enemies."

When dawn broke, the Moonprince mounted his charger. He took once more the Moonring, last of Midnight's great Rings of War, and slipped it on his finger, where it had not rested since the slaughter of Doomdark. Then, he lofted his hand to the sky, the Moonring blazing there like a fragment of the rising sun. As its glad power shone out, a rousing cheer came from the long ranks of riders.

"For Midnight!" cried Luxor, "For Midnight and the Free! Hear me, Shareth Heartstealer; we ride to tear the Frozen Empire a sunder!"

Rorthron whirled his staff about his head, flinging a storm of golden fire into the chill air, the trumpets of the heralds blew a proud fanfare, and the cohorts of the Moonprince rode forth from the Gate of Varenorn into the Icemark.

Far away, in a deep and dreamless forest, Tarithel reined in her horse and paused, listening with her mind to the whisper of hope that rippled through the morning mists. The Moonring is unveiled, she thought to herself, the Moonprince rides! She too had travelled the dark road that led from Midnight to the Gate of Varenorn, searching for many days along the ridge of the Frozen Gates before finding a crevice that would let her through. Now, with all hope of finding Morkin's trail lost, she was journeying towards rumours of the City of Imorthorn in search for any scrap of news, in search of any person who might remember his passing. Though she had seen the new moon turn to full and wane again, she had found no trace of him. Despair had worked its way with her and she rebuked herself constantly for keeping her fears to herself when she rode off in pursuit of her Morkin, even though at the time those fears had been so vague and formless that she could not have put word to them. Only when it was too late to turn back for help did she realise the immensity of her task, and feel the cold, implacable power of the Heartstealer's dreams.

The thought, now, that Midnight was roused and that its mighty Lords marched upon the Frozen Empire warmed her like a fire. She put aside her doubts and despair.

"Morkin, I will find thee, my love," she whispered. "No ice, no storm, no sword or shaft shall keep me from thy side, no hagwitch's twisted dreams shall come between us. Let her fling a thousand foul armies in my path, still I will find thee!"

Tarithel rode on towards Imorthorn. The webs of time shook softly and a shiver trembled across the land of Icemark. Many tears were about to be shed, much blood to be spilt.

The wind howled.

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