

The Blood Prince

By Jeff Wilson

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The Fall of House Eadorin and the Birth of the Blood Prince

Built around a wide harbor, the evolving structure of a great city fell under Aisen's view, branching out in every possible direction beneath the massive citadel under which it sheltered. The fortress walls, composed of seamless stone masonry, had been built to a tremendous height, and the simple, ageless superiority evident in their construction, boasting strong clean lines and angles, made the city and its hastily built buildings and alleyways, look dirty and full of chaos. Duke Kyreth Eadorin, Aisen's grandfather, had started out with ambitious plans that envisioned broad streets on which to travel, and a system of clean waterways to supply a network of fountains and pools, but the city was growing so quickly that it defied all efforts to impose such order upon its expansion.

This was Aisen's home, but it was not a place that welcomed him and he felt nervous as he rode towards it. Unbearably hot under the heavy plate armor that he wore, Aisen tried to ignore the discomfort, reserving his sympathies instead for his horse. The young stallion bore him on without complaint, but a sheet of perspiration was beginning to accumulate on the animal's dark bay coat. Aisen had more reasons than these to regret the heavy armor that he wore. No part of the idea, to use this overwrought set of ornately engraved ceremonial plate, had been his own.

As he began his approach to the city, Aisen retrieved his golden helmet from where it rested on the pommel of his horse's saddle, and secured it in place over his head, hiding his Rendish features from view. He was spotted by curious onlookers long before reaching the edges of the city. It was no surprise that they noticed him; how could they not. His armor, specifically prepared for this day, was overlaid with an alloy of bronze meant to resemble polished gold. Sunlight reflecting off of the mirrored finish on some of the larger plates, made Aisen visible from miles away, and up close, he was almost blinding.

The decorative additions had increased the armor's weight, and yet failed to compensate for it with any corresponding improvement in protection. But the armor was meant to create a spectacle, and in that respect, it was proving to be a complete success. Crowds were gathering around him now, slowing his progress through the streets. A group of bold adolescents, who were running along beside his route, were in turn trailed by others younger still who struggled to keep up. This informal procession, accompanied by the stream of excited cries which issued forth from these young children whose interests he had captured, concentrated ever more attention upon Aisen.

The city was used to seeing armored men, soldiers of the Sigil Corps moving through the city, but this was different. This was some prince of high status and great wealth, come to pay respects to the late Duke Kyreth Eadorin. Aisen wondered how excited the crowds would be once they learned who it was they were admiring.

Few of the people of Nar Edor, Aisen knew, would want to see him assume his rightful position as the next ruler of House Eadorin. He was however, not entirely without reliable support. Aisen was a Captain in the Sigil Corps, and the members of this elite military

fraternity, almost alone it seemed, expressed no opposition towards him and could be counted upon to firmly support his claims to the succession.

“Lord Aisen,” shouted a man from amongst the people who were now crowding the streets. This would be someone working for Ledrin, the commander here under whose authority, the soldiers of the Sigil Corps patrolled, guarding the Citadel and the surrounding city. At this signal, Aisen removed the enclosure on the front of his helmet and revealed his face to the crowd, inwardly lamenting the loss of his anonymity as he did so.

“Lord Aisen!” shouted someone else, hesitantly at first, and then with increasing vigor as more men and women joined him. The cheers rolled into a greeting fit to hail the arrival of a king. In response to this adulation, Aisen experienced an intense pride bursting within his breast, for which he immediately felt foolish.

The people will embrace you, Ledrin had told him, but you have to give them a reason to believe you were a leader who should be followed. It was often possible to accomplish this, he had gone on to explain, with nothing more than an object, something capable of conveying the authority of the ruler who held it. It was the reason why a king wore a crown, but it could be any symbol; a ring, a scepter, a royal cloak or mantle. In Aisen’s case, they would begin with a very impractical set of burnished ceremonial armor.

Aisen wanted to disagree, feeling it was wrong to reduce strength, power, and leadership to something so trivial, but Ledrin’s strategy was working, and Aisen was forced to admit that the commander had been right. Perhaps these people would accept him, but then they had little choice in the matter, and neither did Aisen. Ledrin had seen to that.

Despite continued hindrance from the growing crowds, and the considerable remaining distance to the Etorin family crypts where his grandfather had been prepared for internment, Aisen did not feel the slow passage of time as he travelled. His mind was distracted by the many ways in which his life had been so abruptly altered, and he was still working to resolve himself towards the inescapable changes that were yet to come. He would be required to resign his commission with the Sigil Corps before officially assuming control over House Etorin. Strict rules, both by the traditions of the Sigil Corps, and the requirements of the nobility, precluded the option of remaining in one while belonging to the other.

The walled perimeter of Alsegate, the Etorin ancestral home, appeared to grow larger as Aisen approached. Complete with its open expanse of green gardens, a towering central castle, and a scattering of aged buildings that included the Etorin family crypts, it was a refuge from the conglomerated structures that were built up all around it. Older than the rest of the city, this fortified property commanded a high hill that overlooked the entire region. However, in consequence of its placement near the western walls of the Port Citadel, Alsegate appeared small from Aisen’s current vantage point, where it suffered under unfair comparisons with its much older and far more imposing backdrop.

Five banners flew beneath the white sword crest of House Etorin above Castle Alsegate’s highest tower, signifying the presence of contingents from all five of the vassal houses sworn to Aisen’s family. Included among these were Lord Teveren’s black spear and the three silver overturned drinking cups of House Ansett, just above the red and gold falcons of House Afnere. Below these were the Houses of lower rank, most notably the two standing pillars that represented the union between the Baron of Udras and the daughter of the late Lord Morve nt with her territories in the north of Emensvale. Lower still was the stylized grey winged dragon

of House Novin, and almost irrelevant, at the very bottom, was a green tree against a white background; the sign of Baron Gensaer and House Hemir.

The men of these houses were here to honor the passing of their lord. The question that remained was whether they would swear that same loyalty to Aisen. Normally, those oaths would have been counted on as a matter of mere formality, but Aisen knew that Teveren had openly voiced a preference for seeing Aisen's younger brother Beonen made the next leader of House Edorin. Given an opportunity, Aisen might have agreed.

Beonen was better immersed within the inner circles of the noble houses of Nar Edor, and though it could have been argued that he was too young, he was quite possibly better prepared for the role than his older brother. Of greater importance, where Aisen resembled his father Aedan Eldurnyn, with dark foreign skin and unusual grey eyes, his brother had lighter Edoric features inherited from their mother, Kyreth Edorin's daughter. Beonen possessed the height, light hair, and bright penetrating blue eyes that their grandfather had been renowned for, and he looked the part of an aristocrat and prince.

Aisen was the soldier, having spent his entire youth and what little adulthood he had experienced in the service of the Sigil Corps. His training under their care, valuable as it may have been, had not in Aisen's mind truly prepared him for the world he was being asked to enter. It felt to Aisen at times as though he had been deliberately isolated; so much so that he had developed very few relationships with anyone outside the Sigil Corps.

Passing through an opening between a pair of heavy gates, Aisen crossed into Alsegate and left the crowds behind. The citizens would be allowed in tomorrow, so that they could pay their respects to the duke before he was sealed away in his resting place, but for now they were denied entry. Only ranking officials, and certain prominently connected citizens specifically invited by house Edorin, of which there were a great number, would be permitted access today.

Aisen dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to a waiting stablehand. He asked the boy where Beonen was, but looking intimidated, the young servant stumbled through his answer. "Captain," he began, accustomed to addressing Aisen by his rank in the Sigil Corps. "Lord Aisen," he said correcting himself.

"I will be resigning my position in the corps, and I am not yet officially a lord either," Aisen said. "For now, you should just call me Aisen."

These instructions inspired a look of horror on the boy's face, and caused him to tighten his grip on the reigns of Aisen's horse. He couldn't possibly speak to the duke's grandson, a man who would in two days be the next duke, in such a familiar way. "I do not know whether he is here, or if he is here... where it is he might be," the boy finally answered, sidestepping the whole issue by not formally acknowledging Aisen's name or title at all.

The servant's discomfort could be understood, and forgiven. Aisen had spent as little time as possible in Alsegate, and as such he knew only a few of the men and women who lived on the grounds while providing their services to House Edorin. Aisen always felt uncomfortable, both here and in the surrounding town, so he routinely found excuses to be away, out on extended patrols as an officer of the Sigil Corps. As a result, Aisen was more familiar with many of the people and places in the small towns and villages across the breadth of Nar Edor, than he was with the ever growing port city where he had been born.

These circumstances placed Aisen out of his element inside of Alsegate. There were not many people here in whom he felt he could comfortably rely. His brother was one such person

though, and not having seen him in nearly a year, Aisen was eager to meet up with him now. Beonen would certainly be on the property somewhere, and Aisen was going to need his help bridging relationships with their peers amongst the nobility, if he ever hoped to rule effectively. Aisen supposed that his brother would find him soon enough, so he looked away, off towards the chapel near the crypts at the southernmost edge of Alsegate. It would be disrespectful to do anything other than immediately go to see the body of his grandfather.

Retrieving his sword, the Eadorin Sigil Blade, from where it was tied to the saddle, Aisen fixed it to his belt before instructing the boy to take the tired horse to the stables. His armor made him appear imposing, but Aisen, though he was not short, was not tall either, and the length of the long blade looked awkward at his side. It hung at a sharp angle ensuring that it would not come into contact with the ground.

Aisen normally wore the sword in a sheath that was open near the top on one side, making it easier to draw, but today the weapon was in a handsomely decorated scabbard of leather and wood. This aged work of art was not original to the weapon, which was far more ancient, but it had been paired with the sword since before the memory of anyone now living, and was always used for formal occasions like this one. It was beautiful, but also impractical in a way that made it impossible to clear the Sigil Blade in a swift or fluid manner.

Now on foot, Aisen felt the full weight of his armor. It was the heaviest set of Plate that he had ever worn, and when the time came, he would be grateful to store it away. Aisen was young and strong though, and it was not the weight of his armor that caused him to slow his progress as he walked towards the crypts.

Aisen had loved his grandfather, as had all the duke's vassals and servants, but the relationship had never been an easy one. Aisen's father, Aedan Elduryn, had parted on difficult terms with the duke some fifteen years ago, leaving Nar Eador while Aisen and Beonen were still very young, with no promise of ever returning. Kyreth Eadorin had been unable to see Aisen, without recalling bitter memories of the boy's father whom Aisen so resembled. It had formed a distance across which neither one of them had ever been able to travel.

It wasn't that Kyreth Eadorin had ever been unkind. He simply had never been able to sustain much warmth or regard for his oldest grandson. His love and adoration had instead been lavished on Beonen. Aisen knew that in Beonen, Kyreth Eadorin could see a continuation of himself, whereas Aisen only reminded him of a man who had taken things from him, things that he could never again reclaim.

Despite this, Kyreth Eadorin had entrusted Aisen, and not Beonen, with the continuation of his legacy. His grandfather had achieved much during his long life, contributing to the formation of a new set of ideals, which Aisen had sworn to preserve at any cost, and had established himself as a servant of his people. His accomplishments included the founding of the Sigil Corps, guarantees on freedom of travel within Eadorin lands during times of peace, building up the Port City from almost nothing, and establishing overseas trade with the nations of the Ossian League. Duke Eadorin's policies had promoted an unprecedented prosperity which had spread far beyond the lands that the duke governed himself. Aisen considered in sober terms, the heavy task of protecting these improvements and building upon them.

Aedan Elduryn too, had been a catalyst for all of these changes, though few outside the Sigil Corps, where he was an almost mythical figure, would ever acknowledge it. Whatever had caused the breach between the two men, no one seemed to know, but it had not lessened the

reverence with which the men of the Sigil Corps regarded Aedan Elduryn. It was a view held by some, that they regarded Aisen's father more highly even, than their patron the duke whose vision it had been to revive the ancient order.

His descent from two such important figures had not made Aisen's life easy. He had been abandoned by one, and barely accepted by the other, and their legacies had created expectations that he could never fulfill. He had earned, and in other ways inherited, a great deal of respect within the Sigil Corps, but he was never going to be the equal of his father, and no one believed Aisen capable of ruling as wisely as his grandfather had. It made Aisen feel, as it always had, as though he were very much alone, and he pushed forward now under the fear that he was not equal to the challenges that he would be expected to overcome.

He yearned for the sight of a friendly face, someone sympathetic to his cause and his plight, someone who could help him carry his burden. But the stares and cautious reactions that greeted Aisen as he encountered people on his way, offered no such support. They looked instead to him, anxious about whether or not he would serve them well, and seemingly afraid that he would fail.

Pushing these fears and dire thoughts away, Edryd climbed the steps of a bright stone building, and proceeded across a narrow terrace on his way to the building's tall arched doorway. The interior of the chapel was illuminated by sunlight that entered through rows of windows near the ceiling on either side of the building, painting the stone surfaces within in a soft white light. There were more people inside than out, and the space was filling up with groups who were taking advantage of the cool beneath the high roof, which was supported by the vaulted chapel's perfectly rounded stone pillars. It was however, a large enough space for Aisen to maneuver past the scattered mourners, without ever deviating from the broad central aisle that bisected the room.

Aisen was glad that he would not need to force a smile for any of these people today. He would not have been able to manage it. Although they all must have recognized Aisen, barely anyone acknowledged his presence, and if they didn't appear to ignore him altogether, it was not because they were not trying. Only once he passed beyond them, did they begin to stare, watching Aisen with uninterrupted interest as he proceeded east down the length of the room. They continued to watch as he entered the enclosed apse at the far end the chapel where the body of his grandfather, Kyreth Edorin II, lay in full armor within an open stone sarcophagus.

There was less light in this room than there was in the rest of the chapel, from which it was walled away, but it was not dark. There were torches set in the back wall, and light also came in through the entrance and through holes in the stone latticework screen atop the walls through which Aisen had just passed. The back of the domed space was carved directly into the rock face of a long jutting uplifted scar in the earth, against which this entire funerary building had been raised. A descending passageway tunneled through the cliff face, leading directly from this room down into the Edorin family crypts.

Removing his helmet and setting it upon the floor, Aisen lowered himself upon one knee, and offered a prayer, a silent appeal that his grandfather should be welcomed into the Houses of the High Realm. Aisen was not sure whether he believed in such things, but if there were any truth in the traditions of his people, he was certain that his grandfather had earned a place of honor in the world where his soul would now reside.

Aisen rose in response to footsteps, the sounds originating from behind him and echoing off of the stone walls and domed ceiling. Someone had been waiting for him, standing against the back wall where he would not be seen. Aisen did not need to turn to know that it was his brother, Beonen, but he could not have explained to anyone else, or even himself, how exactly he could recognize his brother only from the sound of his walk.

"It's good to see you, Beonen," Aisen said, as he turned to greet his brother.

Beonen responded with a smile, and continued forward, but there was a certain nervous excitement in his manner, as if in response to a long held anticipation of this moment. "Endless patrolling agrees with you," Beonen said. "You look well, Aisen, a little shorter than I remembered, but you look well."

"You are the one who has grown taller," Aisen answered. "You passed me a while ago, by the look of it, and I fear you haven't stopped growing yet either."

Beonen looked pleased at this observation, almost excessively so. Aisen had long ago accepted that his brother would one day stand taller than he did, so it was no particular surprise to learn that just such a day had come at some point during the last year.

"I hear you outfought the king's champion," Aisen said, in reference to his brother's success in a contest held by King Eivendr at the capital during the year end solstice festival. "It doesn't seem like you have even a single suitable rival to challenge you amongst all the noble houses of Nar Edor."

Aisen's brother was less affected by this compliment, than he had been by the acknowledgement that he had grown to become the taller of the two of them. Beonen was used to being praised for his skill, and so that recognition meant less to him, but he still looked visibly contented upon receiving this confirmation that the news of his most recent accomplishment had reached Aisen's ears. It was to have been expected, though. The duels held at the king's court were major events, and news of the results spread out quickly across the country. Beonen knew that his brother paid little attention to such things, but this was not something that would have gone unspoken of, even in the far flung places where Aisen frequented while performing his duties for the corps.

"He was nothing," Beonen said. "It was difficult to not embarrass the poor man. If you had been there, you would have seen that it was no great accomplishment." The dismissive arrogance, with which Beonen was trying to downplay his victory, lacked even the smallest trace of discernable humility, and he walked closely past Aisen with his head inclined towards the ceiling as he spoke, before turning around in the center of the room near a corner of the sarcophagus.

Aisen recognized his brother's movements for what they were. Beonen was maneuvering an opponent, trying to position him carefully and draw and direct his eyes. Aisen took a few steps, turning to face his brother now as if he had noticed nothing, but creating a little distance in the process. He kept a part of his attention focused on the entrance to the room, where four men, two on each side of the doorway, peeled away from the walls and moved to close the doors.

It took two of them working together to lift and place the heavy beam that would secure the room. Aisen recognized a couple of them immediately; sons of House Afnere and House Novin. It took him a little while longer to place the other two. From House Hemir was Baron Gensaer's first son by his second wife. The last he knew as the youngest son from Baron

Udras's first wife. Try as he might, Aisen could not remember any of their names. They were all young, these men who had come in support of his brother, and none of them of any real importance; a collection of nothing better than the second sons from four of the five sworn Houses.

"You should introduce your friends," Aisen said to Beonen. Aisen had no idea what all of this meant, but a fear was growing inside his heart. Conspicuous more for their absence, there was no one representing Lord Teveren. He would be involved too, of course. He might even be behind this; powerful enough to force the involvement of the others, while keeping his own hands clear.

"They will not interfere," Beonen said. "They are here only to observe."

"Observe what?" Aisen demanded.

"They will all confirm that I acted in defense, after you made an unprovoked attack."

Aisen could not accept what he was hearing, or believe that these words had come from Beonen. "What are you talking about?" Aisen asked. He was certain that he had either not heard his brother correctly, or that he had misunderstood.

"You are the wrong person to lead our house," Beonen answered.

Aisen stood silent, bereft of any mean by which to understand what was happening, and unable to form a response. This was a brother that had idolized him when they were young. Beonen was still young now, and not yet even fully grown. When their father, Aedan Elduryn, had left Nar Edor, Aisen had then taken over responsibilities that would have belonged to a parent, teaching Beonen everything, and protecting him against hurt or harm from anything that could threaten him.

"I am sorry Aisen," Beonen said. "You need to surrender the Edorin Sigil Blade."

"And then what?"

"Then we fight," Beonen answered. Pain could be seen in the younger brother's eyes, but he was also filled with purpose, and determined to carry this through.

"I refuse to do it," said Aisen. "I will not draw my sword against you."

Beonen was starting to appear uncertain. He felt a strong bond with his brother, but his resolve barely wavered as he formed his response. "I am sorry, Aisen, but I will not let you leave this room alive." As Beonen said this, he drew his weapon, a dueling sword of exceptional quality that had won him much fame.

There could be no mistaking these words or the solemnity in which they had been spoken. Beonen's intention was to kill his brother, and assume control over House Edorin himself. Aisen felt anger, but no fear. Beonen was going to learn that there was a difference between contests with the champions of the noble houses, and attacking a captain of the Sigil Corps. Beonen was going to learn the difference between the regimented dance of a duel, and the uncontrolled floodwater currents of a battle.

"Will you allow me to clear my sword?" Aisen asked, thinking of the trouble he would have getting the weapon free from its scabbard. He carried nothing else, and there was no way to quickly draw the weapon.

"No," Beonen answered. "I won't allow that blade to be damaged."

Aisen laughed at this. He had rarely used the ancient Sigil Blade, but in the years he had carried the great weapon, he had never once been able to do anything to damage its edge. It

had never tarnished, or received any mark or blemish. Beonen was about to find that Aisen and this sword were of a kind; he would discover, that he had no power to harm either one of them.

"You without armor, me without a sword – the terms sounds fair enough," Aisen said, amused, but also troubled. He did not want this to happen, and he could not imagine what would make his brother think that he could possibly win. What Beonen knew of sword fighting, Aisen had taught it to him, and surely he should have appreciated the differences in their skills better than most. Aisen's experiences during years of constant training in the Sigil Corps were worth more than all of the duels Beonen had ever fought.

"I am not the boy I was when we last tested each other," Beonen said. He spoke with confidence, hinting, with what felt like a shade of remorse, at a deeper meaning to these words than was conveyed on the surface.

Beonen made eye contact with one of the men who stood guard by the door. In response, the young noble from House Afnere stepped forward. Aisen took a couple of steps backwards, so as to keep both his brother and the approaching nobleman, in front of where he stood.

"I told you before, they are not here to help me," Beonen said with exasperation. He seemed to not like the idea that Aisen might think that such help was needed.

"Not if they expect to live," Aisen threatened. This situation was still within his control, but if he had to fight them all at once, he would certainly injure or perhaps even kill most of them. That would hardly improve his relations with their fathers.

"Temet, give Aisen your sword," Beonen ordered. Temet complied, drawing his weapon with slow deliberate care before handing it to Aisen hilt first.

As soon as Aisen took hold of Temet's arming sword, the man began backing away, and continued to do so until he once again stood with the three others. They all looked on in awe, awaiting a battle that would ensue between two rivals, witnessing a contest that would decide the future of House Edorin and their places within it. It was far from their minds in that moment, that they had by mutual agreement, sworn to fabricate the accounts that they would give.

Now that he had a weapon, Aisen was better armed than his brother. In this confined space however, the heavy plate mail could in a number of ways be a significant disadvantage. It would slow Aisen's movements, it would make it difficult to move around obstacles, and it would wear him down physically if the fight wore on. He would have much preferred a lighter set of armor, or even no armor at all. The heavy plate did give Aisen a margin for error though, and would allow him to take risks. He would need to be taking some of those if he wanted to end this quickly.

Without giving any further warning, believing that he had more than adequately declared his intentions, Beonen began his attack. Not able to believe that his brother would really do this, Aisen was slow to react. He barely brought his sword up in time to block. Beonen's first strike was compact and simple, intended to initiate action and explore Aisen's defenses. His second attack, expertly thrust in under Aisen's guard, was of a more serious nature, and Aisen was only just quick enough to step away in time. The weight of the armor was affecting him, and Beonen would know how to take advantage.

From this short exchange, Aisen could see that his brother had indeed grown in skill since they had last trained together. Aisen took a few steps back. It would have been better to close

the distance between them, where the extra protection afforded by his armor would give Aisen the advantage, but he could not afford to chase his brother. He needed to draw him in.

Chancing a quick look towards the entrance, Aisen confirmed that the others had made no move to support Beonen. Failing to appreciate that Aisen was trying to lure him into another attack, Beonen took the invitation and stepped in with a heavy rising strike, hoping to take full advantage of his brother's brief moment of inattention. Aisen expertly knocked the attack away, opening up his brother's guard, and he stepped in as well, close enough now that he could almost take hold of Beonen with his free hand. Another step and he could send his brother to the ground.

Beonen, recognizing the danger, leapt away with a speed that defied reason. Safely out of reach, he began to pace a little, with his sword held low and a broad grin spreading over his face. He was exulting in the thrill of combat, burning fiercely in this test of his skill. He wanted to be challenged, and he wanted to feel the excitement that only came in the face of a grave risk.

Still trying to comprehend the impossible speed with which his brother had retreated, Aisen became concerned for the first time. Hindered by eighty pounds of armor, it would be impossible to catch Beonen. He would have to trap his brother in a corner, but Beonen had more than enough skill to avoid that.

Beonen caught the look in his brother's eyes and it was now his turn to laugh. "You think that you know the extent to which I have grown, but you have not seen it yet," he said. Aisen did not doubt this claim. He could not bring the fight to his brother. He would have to wait patiently, and try to force Beonen to make a mistake.

"Why are you doing this?" Aisen asked. He was not sure that his brother would answer, but he needed to know.

"Because you would be a puppet of the Sigil Corps, and you would upend the order that our grandfather fought for."

"You believe I would do that?"

"Ledrin has already seized control of all the trade, and commands all of the military strength in in this city. You would be ruler of House Edorin in name only. It is Ledrin that would hold the power."

There was truth in these accusations. But it was all by the designs of their grandfather. Duke Kyreth Edorin had cared more about the future of the Sigil Corps, than he did for the continuation of his family line. The ideals of the Sigil Order were the part of his legacy that he had most wanted to preserve and leave behind. He had hopes too for both of his grandsons, but those plans did not include an expansion of their wealth and power.

"You don't understand, Beonen," Edryd said, pleading with his brother. He needed to make him listen.

"No, Aisen, I do understand. I already know everything."

Aisen could not think what his brother meant, although Beonen seemed to assume otherwise.

"What are you talking about?"

"Aedan betrayed our grandfather," Beonen replied, watching Aisen carefully to measure his reactions to this accusation. "He wanted to create an Ossian colony city in Nar Edor."

"I don't see many Ossians in Nar Edor, or Rendish people of any origin, apart from the both of us. Father didn't even stay here himself. If he was creating a home for Ossians in Nar Edor, it failed. There are no more men with Rendish blood in this land. They were expelled from their homes and forced to leave Nar Edor forever, well before you were ever born, Beonen."

"And what do you call the Rendish Districts?" Beonen demanded.

"A virtual prison to those who live there, under constant guard with barely the space needed to accommodate trade. Aedan swept the rest of Nar Edor clean of every last one of them, because the king ordered it, and our grandfather in turn ordered Aedan to carry it out. Exceptions made for him, and for us, but no one else. If Aedan betrayed anyone, it would be the men who shared his blood, not House Eadorin, Grandfather, or anyone else in this country."

"Even in that light then, the man was a traitor. Besides, he knew it all could be reversed, and he saw forward to a day when he could put Nar Edor under the heel of the Ossians. It only means Aedan was patient enough to play a longer game, waiting until he could place a son at the head of our house."

"You are talking about our father," Aisen said, trying to make his brother see clearly. "I know you don't remember him very well, but he was nothing like what you are describing, and he was your father too."

"Maybe," Beonen said, "but if he is my father, I do not claim him. He was a filthy traitorous Rend." Aisen's brother spat these words as though he had doubts about whether Aedan was truly his father, and as though Beonen did not himself share the Rendish blood that both he and Aisen had inherited. He had also conveniently ignored the fact that Aedan had saved Nar Edor from an invasion by an alliance between Seridor and several other Rendish nations. Those factions *had* sought to carve out a territory here, but Aedan had led the forces that defeated them. He was not a traitor, he was a hero.

Aisen was overcome with sorrow as he looked at his brother's light blue eyes. Beonen's face was a picture of seething rage and hatred, reserved if not for Aisen directly, then with so much anger for their father, that it boiled too fiercely to be calmed by means of simple persuasion alone.

"What happened to you?" Aisen said, expecting no response. He had no sound theories for what could have affected such a terrible change in his brother.

"I learned the truth, and some other things besides," Beonen answered, a light reappearing in his eyes as he spoke, signaling that the time for talking was over, and that he was eager to resume the fight.

Beonen leapt forward, attacking recklessly with a wide two handed overhead strike. Aisen stepped clear of the swing, and attempted to bring his sword down atop Beonen's, to prevent his brother from bringing his weapon back to a ready position. Aisen's intent was to create an opening in which he could safely step in close, but Beonen suddenly reversed his swing. The two swords collided with tremendous force. Aisen's weapon vibrated painfully in his gloved grip, resonating with the impact. Aisen did not have time to marvel at how his brother had generated such force in that upward swing, for Beonen was already crashing down with another overhead strike aimed across Aisen's guard.

At the outset, Aisen had reasoned that although his brother might come close to matching him in speed, Beonen was nowhere near his equal in strength and power. Blocking Beonen's current attack, Aisen was forced to reevaluate those assumptions when the force of the impact

nearly tore Aisen's sword loose from his grip. This was not his brother's typical style of combat, which relied on rapidly connecting feints with well-timed thrusting attacks. Beonen was instead trying to win this contest, by bringing to bear sheer brutal force.

His pride allowing for no other response, Aisen pushed forward, taking over the flow of the battle, delivering a combination of short compact attacks that pushed Beonen back. The force behind Aisen's attack was focused and powerful, but Beonen simply gave ground as he blocked the strikes. Aisen was trying to conserve energy, using short efficient movements, but as things were going, he would tire out long before his brother did. It was time to take a risk. Holding the hilt of the weapon in both hands, Aisen let his sword drop low, and breathing in and out quickly as though he had begun to wear down, he stumbled forward into the range of his brother's fencing sword. Counting on the protection of his armor, he prepared for the blow Beonen would surely deliver.

The attack came, too fast it seemed; so much so that Aisen nearly panicked. Releasing the grip he had on his sword with his right hand, Aisen raised his right arm to ward off the incoming strike. A cutting weapon like the one Beonen was using was almost useless against his heavy armor, and Aisen trusted that the strike would glance harmlessly off of the reinforced plate that protected his arm. Simultaneously, Aisen made a long arcing swing with his sword, which was still held in his left hand. In the middle of delivering his own attack, it would not be possible for Beonen to get clear.

The competing attacks were executed all at once, with neither one preceding the other, and no discernable moment of separation between them. Aisen's shoulder pauldron deformed heavily, absorbing the impact from Beonen's sword and nearly breaking loose in the process. But Aisen's sword had also connected, splitting Beonen's tunic from his right hip all the way up across his torso to his left shoulder. Beneath the divided shirt, was a similarly divided protective leather jerkin, and beneath this, Aisen could see traces of blood. Beonen had not been as imprudent in his preparations for this moment as Aisen had supposed, but the light armor had not helped. Beonen had survived, only because Aisen had not wanted to kill his brother. The cut could have gone much deeper.

Beonen seemed to realize this, but it only stoked his fury as he retreated. "That was your only chance, Aisen!" he shouted, making the acknowledgment that his brother could have killed him, but refusing to allow that this insight ought to change anything. "You will regret wasting it."

Proving the sincerity of this threat, Beonen attacked, giving no heed to the wound across his chest. As his brother struck once more, Aisen felt something behind the frightening speed with which the fencing sword came slicing through the air. He had felt it before, but this was different. Not different in nature, but in degree. Beonen's sword strikes were infused with the addition of some unnatural force, delivering far more power than Beonen was capable of producing with technique and strength alone.

Aisen could feel it intensify and build beforehand, each time his brother attacked. More curious to Aisen, he could read in the moment before its release, the direction in which the built up energy would travel, and he knew the precise path which Beonen's sword would take. He read all of this, as though he were seeing a glimpse of what would happen. Guided by this awareness, this ability to see the perturbed forces Beonen was creating, Aisen was able to anticipate each attack perfectly. He could sense the energies right up until they were released

at impact whenever the blades crossed, at which point it became simple power, which mercilessly transferred down the length of his sword, through the hilt, and into his frame. Aisen struggled to handle the shock as he met each blow.

Beonen did not stop; he kept hammering at his brother, never giving the slightest pause, possessed with a determination to wear his opponent down. Aisen was a strong man, and accustomed to intense combat, or he would not have been able to mount a defense against the violence his brother was raining down upon him. As it was, Aisen could do no more than retreat. The attacks came in such a rapid succession, and with such force, that even knowing where his brother would strike next, there was no time to attempt any sort of counter.

There was madness in Beonen's expression as they fought, and after a while, something else as well. His eyes began to appear dull and unfocused, but he did not slacken his pace or the strength in his attacks. In time, he did begin tire, though not so much as he should have done. In considering the exhaustion that Beonen should be experiencing, the same exhaustion that Aisen himself felt tread over with after so much sustained fighting, Beonen should have been out of breath and out of strength.

Eventually, Beonen stopped. Aisen, who had been forced to step back unceasingly under the barrage of successive attacks, continued moving away several paces before he realized that his brother was no longer advancing. Across the distance, he could see that Beonen, who was trying to control his breathing by taking in deep measured breaths, had been worn down, and was using this time to recover. Aisen though, was worn out. He had withstood a violent beating. His hands and arms, his shoulders and his back, all seemed to recoil at the prospect of absorbing even more damage once the battle resumed.

Inspecting the borrowed sword in his hand, Aisen noted that its appearance closely resembled how his body felt. It too had taken a beating. It was a testament to the craftsmanship that had gone into this simple weapon that it looked no worse than it did, but it had been severely compromised. It no longer carried a straight edge, and had been warped by Beonen's attacks. Though Aisen had parried as often as possible only with the flat of the sword, along its edges were numerous deep gouges, mainly concentrated nearest to the hilt where Aisen had received and deflected some of the attacks. It was practically useless now as a cutting weapon, and completely beyond repair.

Aisen looked to Beonen's weapon, expecting to see similar damage, but saw instead only clean edges and a dull red glow, as if the weapon had been heated by the repeated impacts. He thought then at how he had laughed when Beonen had worried over causing damage to the Sigil Sword, and began to understand where those concerns had come from. He considered for a moment, whether this pause was the opportunity that he needed to get the ancient weapon free from its scabbard. He began to move his free hand closer to the hilt of the Edorin Sigil Blade, where it was belted at his side.

Beonen noticed, and took a step forward to discourage his brother. The red heat in his fencing sword had faded, and with it had gone the vacant look in his eyes. The rage too, seemed to have dissipated. "That weapon is mine by right," Beonen said.

"Not by right," Aisen answered. "It can no more be yours than it was ever mine. It will answer to no claim of ownership, and cannot be gained by forcible seizure. If you should take it from me, it will be of no use to you." He was repeating things he had once been told by his

father, things he had understood then no more than he did now, but Aisen felt and firmly expressed the truth within these words. Beonen would not be capable of wielding the sword.

Visibly agitated by this declaration, Beonen made a pointed response. "You admit then, that it is not yours, and that it does not belong to you?" Beonen could not refute his brother's words of rebuke, but he had heard most clearly Aisen's admission that he too was unable to wield the sword. That thought comforted Beonen more greatly, than did the truth of his own unworthy state give him pause, in his desire to take the weapon.

Ominously, Beonen seemed to grow calm. "It is time we ended this," he said, and crashing forward he moved to make good on his promise to bring the fight to its conclusion.

The first attack knocked the damaged sword free from Aisen's hands, producing echoes through the chamber as the metal rang against the marble floor. Aisen caught the next attack on a reinforced part of the armor on his right arm, a ridged section of rounded heavy plating that served him now as a small improvised buckler. Beonen's strike deformed the metal, pinning it inward, but the chopping attack did not penetrate all the way through. Beonen wrenched the weapon free and struck two more times, turning the plating into a misshapen mess. Fearing that his defense would fail with another attack, Aisen stumbled backwards blindly, trying desperately to get out of range.

Beonen lunged forward at his brother, aiming the point of his blade at his brother's heart. Aisen could feel the infusion of power. He would have expected against an ordinary opponent, that upon being struck by such an attack, that the tip of the incoming sword would glance harmlessly off of his armor, but Aisen knew that if he did not step aside, that the point of Beonen's sword would penetrate the heavy plate. If he took this strike, he would die.

Unarmed, he had no means to even attempt to knock the attack away, and if he evaded, he would still be vulnerable to a follow up attack. Even after having recognized what was coming in advance, there was hardly any time to step clear. He did not need to get completely free though. He had a desperate plan, and he was going to make it work. Aisen took the attack on the far left side of the broad chest plate of the armor. Beonen's sword pierced cleanly through and continued on out the armor on Aisen's back. Aisen had wanted to avoid injury, but he had not been quite as precise as he had hoped. Beonen's weapon made a shallow scraping cut across his brother's chest beneath his left arm.

Aisen turned his torso sharply, pulling the trapped blade free from Beonen's grasp. Within that same motion, Aisen struck out with his right hand, catching Beonen in the throat with a gauntlet covered palm. Beonen dropped to the ground immediately, making choking sounds and bringing his hands to his neck, struggling for air. Beonen's sword, though it had not cut deeply, was still locked in place through Aisen's armor. Intensely hot, as had been suggested by the red glow which had been visible during the fight, it was impossible to remove, and even more impossible to ignore as the blade painfully continued its work, burning away the skin against which it was making contact.

Beonen had brought to bear overwhelming force, but in spite of this, as Aisen thought about it now, though no one else watching the fight would have agreed, he told himself that his brother had never truly stood a chance. His brother had not understood combat, in the way that only a soldier does.

Aisen moved to support his brother, intending to prop him up, and help him regain his breath, which was coming to Beonen in startled fits that left him unable to recover from the shock of having lost. Maybe now he could convince Beonen to listen.

His plans, such as they were in that moment, were cut short. From behind him, Aisen heard one of the young nobles drawing his sword. Upon turning to face him, he could see that it was the son of Baron Gensaer. Aisen recognized the man by his short height and sharp features, and even more by his uneven temper, which was currently on display within dark close set eyes, staring out from beneath a deeply furrowed brow. The emblems showing a green tree against a white background decorating his sleeves were also definite hints to his identity, but Aisen could not quite remember the man's name.

"Stop, Hathim!" Aisen said, guessing at the name, which he thought he might have half remembered. The guess was either accurate, or close to it, because Hathim stopped, and did not try to correct Aisen.

"I won't see my family lose what honor it has left, by swearing oaths to the half-blooded spawn of a Rend who forced himself upon the daughter of the Lord of House Eдорin!" yelled Hathim, seething with contempt.

Here, Hathim might not have even been speaking of Aisen's father, Aedan Elduryn. He instead appeared to be referencing a vile bit of speculation, that Aedan had wed Kyreth Eдорin's daughter to cover the fact that she was carrying the son of a Rend who had taken her captive. Some of the bolder versions promoted the idea that the Rendish man who had violated Aisen's mother, had been Beodred, the leader of the Rendish alliance that had attempted to invade Nar Eдор.

In those stories, Aisen was not of Rendish descent through the one time leader of the Sigil Corps, Aedan Elduryn, he was the son of a vicious Rendish man from Seridor who had brought violence to all the shores of Nar Eдор, until he had died in defeat here some twenty years ago. Though the timeline would have fit, this story about Aisen's parentage was untrue. All such claims had been demonstrated to be false, but that had done substantially less than nothing to stop the rumor from spreading.

"House Hemir," Aisen responded, "has no honor left. You need not risk your life, defending something that is gone already."

Aisen's insult was no exaggeration of the truth. House Hemir was of no importance in any of the affairs and activities across Eдорin lands. Hathim's father, Baron Gensaer, was a public embarrassment, famous for having wasted all of the resources of his family. They were destitute, and relied entirely on patronage from House Eдорin for their support. Behaving as if all of this were somehow Aisen's fault, Hathim stepped forward aggressively.

"Inflicting a long painful death upon the insult to House Eдорin that is its bastard son," said Hathim, "will go far in restoring that honor."

Aisen was not the sort to rise to bait thrown at him from an enemy, and he was tired and worn out from his fight with Beonen, but his patience was worn down even further still, and so he responded in anger without stopping to take any thought. Hathim, only moments before filled with righteous indignation, now shied back and dropped his sword, cringing in terror as Aisen surged forward and caught him around the throat. Aisen raised him off of the ground and pinned him against a column near the center of the room.

He was relaxing his grip, and in the middle of contemplating whether he ought to lower the terrified noblemen to the ground, when two of the others came rushing in to aid their friend. Temet, who of course no longer had a sword, crashed in, knocking Aisen to the ground, and in the process he freed Hathim who promptly collapsed upon the floor. Aisen knew that there was a second enemy, but he found he could spare no attention to locate the other threat, as he was now pinned to the ground on his back. Between the weight of his armor, and Temet who lay atop his chest, Aisen was immobile.

The second nobleman drew his sword, and brought it slashing down against Aisen's leg, where it was deflected harmlessly away by Aisen's protective plate armor. Aisen almost felt that he deserved what was happening. As outmatched as these men may have been, he had left them with the opening that they needed to take him down when he had allowed Hathim's insults to draw away all of his focus. He had very little strength left, but he was not about to give up.

Reaching his arms around Temet, who was in turn holding him down as though his life depended on it, Aisen's hand felt the rough edges of a patterned surface which had been carved into bone. It was the grip of a knife belted at Temet's side. Why hadn't Temet drawn this weapon when he had had the chance? Aisen recalled what Beonen had said of the others: they had come only to observe. Hathim was obviously here for more than that, but perhaps not all of these young men bore him such hatred. Aisen pulled the knife free.

He could have killed Temet, but the man had only attacked in defense of his friend, and Aisen did not want to regret how he chose to respond. Noticing that Aisen had gotten a hold of his knife, Temet spared him of the need to make that difficult decision by getting to his feet and backing away. The second nobleman had since been joined by the last of the group, and he was at the present moment, preparing to put an end to his downed target. He was aiming another attack, this time at Aisen's exposed head.

Deflecting the attack with his arm, Aisen saw that the man had made a mistake. He had stepped in far closer than he had needed to, and his legs were within easy reach. Aisen drove the knife he had taken from Temet, deeply through the man's leg, and quickly pulled it back out, dropping him to the ground. The young man, forgetting everything but the pain of his injury, cried openly as he knelt within the blood which was rapidly issuing from his body. Aisen then rolled up onto his own knees, so that he faced his opponent, and he tore through the man's torso with the knife.

The man dropped his sword, and stared down helplessly as life began to leave him. Aisen saw now who it was he had just injured. It was the young nobleman from House Novin. Although Aisen had trained endlessly to become proficient in combat, he had never killed anyone before. He didn't have the time now to reflect on this, as there were more enemies in the room. Baron Udras's son was mere feet away, but he appeared hesitant. Wisely so, given what he had witnessed a moment before.

In the other direction, behind Aisen, Hathim was not nearly so cautious. He had recovered from his earlier fright, and had collected from the ground the sword that he had dropped earlier. Whatever honor he felt he had, it was clear that he believed that Aisen had insulted it. In one hand, he held his sword, and in the other, he held a parrying knife. He hurried forward, intent upon running his sword through Aisen's back.

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