

THE FORGOTTEN MONK



GREG STOLZE

THE LESSON

By Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan

The halfling placed the geas on him to go and fight the orcs, then clapped him in chains and gave him over to the jailers.

His jailers went with him as far as Anvil, where they handed him into the custody of an Imperial message-rider.

The message-rider was a slip of a girl, barely more than a child. He could have snapped her in two without effort, had he wished – and had he the freedom to act. As it was, he rode behind her to the coast, and she paid for his passage on a fishing boat across the straits called Calamity.

North, she told him on the quayside. Go north. Find the captain of the Ninth Penal Company, and report to him before the next full moon. Her words had power over him – he could feel them catch fire as he heard them, or maybe as the geas heard them. His lips moved, his mouth spoke without him, repeating her instructions to go and find the captain of the ninth.

Ten days travel from the coast, he comes to Hollow's Vale. A few farms, scattered, southfacing. Fields scraggly and bare after the recent harvest. New settlers from the heartlands of the Empire, bringing civilisation to this frontier province. A little walled town, and in it stands a fort, small but strong. Dwarf-wrought. He hears shouts as he approaches the gate. An archer appears on top of the

low wall, arrow nocked.

“Who goes there, man or orc?”

He hasn’t spoken in ten days. His voice, when he finds it, sounds like the growl of a caged beast. “Man,” he shouts.

They don’t seem convinced. The archer doesn’t relax her stance.

“I’m Captain Manser,” she called, “who’re you?”

“Karvak. I’m looking for the Ninth.”

She frowns. “Where’s your... ah.” She lowers the bow. “You’ve missed the Ninth by three days. They’ve taken half the harvest and gone north to Black Ice Castle. If you take the high pass instead of the low one, you’ll catch them up with them in a few days.” She pauses, then adds. “Do you want a bed for the night, or will you press on?”

He looks at the sun. Still hours of daylight left. “Food, a bed, whatever else you’re offering.”

“Food and a bed then. Come in.” She jumps down, and the gate opens. Another guard peers up at Karvak, sees the sword strapped to his back.

“Captain, the prisoner – he’s armed.”

“And geased, too,” says the captain. “I’ll wager he can’t even draw that sword or any weapon without permission from the Legion. The guilt-spell brought him here on his own, surer than any prison-guard or prison-chain. Leave him keep the weapon.”

“If you’re geased,” says the guard to Karvak, “then you shouldn’t stay here. You’ll want to report in as soon as you can. The spell will crush your skull if you linger too long – or break the rules.”

Karvak’s a northern barbarian. These foothills barely count as mountains. How hard can it be to catch the Ninth? “Food. Bed. Now.”

“Says he’s a man,” grumbles the guard when he thinks Karvak was out of earshot. “I’ve seen orcs that looked more human.”



Karvak dreamt of the tavern every night since the halfling

paladin put the damned geas on him and it's always the same dream. He's in the tavern, brawling, punching, roaring with delight, fury sending the blood rushing through his body like a rushing flood. The grain merchant comes up behind him, smashes a clay bottle over his head. Karvak turns and sees the man's face, sees this combination of disbelief and gleeful transgression, like a naughty child who's done something wrong, but can't stop laughing at having done the unthinkable. I'm in a bar brawl, says the merchant's face, me! In a bar brawl! What a thing!

Karvak drives his fist into the smaller man's skull, right between his eyes.

It breaks easier than the clay bottle did.



Karvak wakes with a headache, right between his eyes. The barracks is empty apart from one old man snoring in a bunk on the far side of the room. Karvak sniffs the air, smells breakfast. He stalks the smell, finds his prey two levels up in the squat watchtower.

"Here," says Mansur, "I've got some extra supplies for you, and a new blanket."

"I've no coin," says Karvak. What little money he had was taken as wereguild for the stupid merchant.

"No charge," says Manser. She sounds a little confused. "You're a soldier of the Legion. Not a volunteer, true, but not any less my brother for that."

As he eats, she tries to winkle out why he was condemned to five years service on the orc frontier. He grunts his responses, and she gives up, starts talking about the war instead. It's not like the fighting that Karvak knows, no tavern boasts about slaughter and the clash of swords. No, Manser manages to make war boring, and her talk was mostly about potatoes and maps.

The Ninth Company – or what's left it, she says, after the Battle of the Red Moon – is bringing supplies from Hollow's Vale to Black Ice Castle. Black Ice Castle sat atop Black Ice Pass, which is the only low-lying gap in these mountains. The orcs can send raiders

over the mountains through the high passes, but if they want to bring their army across, they need to use Black Ice Pass, which means taking Black Ice Castle. And there's something else about dwarven reinforcements, and feints, and second fronts, but mostly it's about supplies for Black Ice Castle.

None of it matters to Karvak. Not one word ever killed an orc. It is sword-work, not word-work that he craved.

He sets off again, following the route Manser told him to follow. The first day is uneventful.

On the evening of the second, his forehead starts bleeding.

On the third, he finds the battlefield. Snow-shrouded but still visible, the ground trampled. Spell-scarred in places, blood-stained in more. Spent arrows, broken metal, traces of butchery. Mule carcasses, stripped to the bone. An ambush, he guesses. Orc raiders came down from those rocks yonder, and fell upon the Ninth with axes and short-bows – and teeth. Tracks go north from the battlefield, but he is not tracker enough to guess if he was following the survivors of the Legion or their killers. Still, he goes north.

And on the fourth day, he starts to go mad.



The dream, again. The tavern brawl, again. The clay bottle, again.

Only in this dream, it all happens much more slowly. He watches shards of clay float lazily through the air like gliding birds, sees another brawler throw a punch that moves like a glacier.

There's the merchant – Alphond, that's his name – but his expression is different. It's quizzical, more canny, with an unfamiliar glint in his eye.

"Why are you doing this?" he asks.

And Karvak has time to contemplate that as his own punch connects like a slow tide.



He catches up with the orcs at dusk the fifth day. Maybe the sixth. They all blur together – white snow and climbing, then the tavern again, over and over.

The orc camp is maybe a dozen tents, and a big bonfire. Most of the orcs sleep out in the open. This far into the mountains, even Karvak's shivering beneath his blanket at night, but the cold doesn't bother orcs like it does humans. Hot demon blood, he guesses.

There's only one human survivor that he can see. An older man, tied and bound and dumped at one side of the camp. Maybe there are others in the tents. The pain in Karvak's skull means he doesn't have a choice. If he doesn't report in, his head is going to explode. He waits until nightfall – orcs have night-sight, but even orcs have to sleep. Or choose to, maybe – he's known orcs to march for days on end if they have to, and there's a whip behind them.

Whenever Karvak closes his eyes, the memory of the tavern swims up around him. The merchant Alphond looking at him curiously. "Why did you kill me?"

To pass the time until the slow punch lands, Karvak replies. "'Twas a mistake. My blood was up."

"Yours is a cold fury. This is how you see a fight, isn't it? Not a blind rage, but cold and slow. You chose to strike me with full force."

"It was a bar fight."

"And you were a wolf among sheep. You could have knocked me down. Picked me up and thrown me over the bar. Laughed in my face and made me piss myself in terror. You chose to kill me, I think."

The geas-mark burns hotter. The dreams must be part of the punishment. That self-righteous halfling paladin's idea of ironic justice, making Karvak relive the crime even as he atones for it. Five years knee-deep in orc-blood should pay for the death of one man, shouldn't it? It's not like Alphond did anything with his life. He didn't grow the grain, or mill it, or bake it, just bought it and sold it again. What use was he to the world?

It's dark enough for Karvak to move. He opens his eyes, and the dead man vanishes.

Karvak sneaks past the sleeping orcs. His hand goes to his sword, but he can't draw it. Even touching it makes the pain unbearable and blinding. He considers strangulation, but orc windpipes are tougher than tree-roots.

From the smell, the orcs captured the supplies that the Ninth Company took from Hollow's Vale. He watches as they hack open a barrel of salted meat, go at it like wolves around a carcass. He takes advantage of their distraction to hurry over to the bound and gagged man. Karvak lifts him and carries him into the darkness beyond the camp.

"Are you with the Ninth?"

The old man nods, eyes bulging in terror and alarm.

"I'm reporting in, all right? I'm cursed to join you." The pain of the geas does not diminish. "Hell's fingers, what does it take?"

The old man mumbles. Karvak tears away the gag, unbinds his hand. The man rubs feeling back into his pale thin fingers, flexes them, then whispers, and a ball of reddish light appears between them, warm as a fire.

Karvak hits the sorcerer in the face. "Put that out, lackwit!" he whispers. "They'll see it."

"So c-c-c-cold," complains the sorcerer.

"I need to report to the captain of the Ninth. Where is he?"

"Dead. All dead. Just me left."

Karvak clutches his forehead. "Doesn't that make you the captain?"

"No no no! Not fit for command, they said." The old man peers at Karvak. "You're geased. Um. I think they make new recruits swear on the banner if the captain's not around."

"And where," asks Karvak with remarkable patience, "is the banner?"

The sorcerer points to the biggest tent.



Karvak actually makes it to the tent before he's spotted. He ducks inside, and this big orc comes after him. In the close quarters of the tent it's a brawl. The geas stops Karvak using his sword, but it's too cramped for the orc to use his either. When the orc rushes towards him, Karvak sidesteps and drives his elbow into the orc's flank, hard enough to stave in the side of a barrel. The orc doesn't even notice and grabs him, flinging Karvak down and clawing at his face.

Karvak punches the orc, the same punch that killed Alphond. Again, the orc doesn't notice; he lifts Karvak and slams him back down, trying to smash his skull against a rock.

The tent's full of prizes and trophies taken by the orc raiders. Karvak throws out a hand, scrabbling for something he can use to stab the orc that doesn't count as a weapon within the rules of the geas. He grabs a broken length of wood, but when he pulls at it, it doesn't move – the cloth wrapped around it is tangled up in some suit of armor. It's the legion banner.

"I swear to...gah, anything!" mutters Karvak as the orc sinks fangs into his other forearm. The pain in his arm is intense; the pain in his head, though, suddenly vanishes. The geas is gone.

A moment later, Karvak's knife is in the orc's eyesocket, and what was 400 pounds of monster is 400 pounds of dead weight.



He comes out of the tent with sword in one hand and banner in the other. He takes the orcs unawares, and they suffer from it. Two, three lie dead in a few heartbeats, and a four stumbles away roaring, clutching the ruin of her right arm. Orcs cluster round him, in a ring defined by the length of Karvak's sword-arm, but they hold back.

More arrive, armed and armoured. His moment's gone. Still they hold back.

Then the orcs part, and their leader arrives. She's half-orc, guesses Karvak from her build, but her face is hidden behind a mask of bones. Her eyes glow, and she holds a bolt of lightning

in her hand. It thrashes like a serpent made of ice and light, and sends up little explosive puffs of steam when its tail lashes against the snowy ground, but she contains it with her bare hand, without effort.

“Don’t kill him,” she commands, and smiles when she adds, “yet.” The orcs draw back a little, but there’s no opening in their ranks, no chance of escape.

“I have seen you in the Orc-Lord’s rites,” she says to Karvak. “The severed heads spoke of you. The stars marked you as a killer on the night of your birth. Your murders are sacramental.” She spreads her arms. “You would not be the only wolfshead in the Orc Lord’s service. Join us.”

Mystic nonsense on top of treachery. Karvak tries to cut her down instead – he can at least die well – but she’s faster. She releases the lightning bolt like a javelin, and it sends Karvak sprawling to the snowy ground, twitching. One of his spasms rolls him over onto his back, and he stares up into the night sky. It’s very clear, and the stars are very bright. He waits for the first thrust. Orcs go for the throat by preference.

Instead, the night sky fills with flying stones, thousands of them, shooting across his field of vision like falling stars.. At first, he thinks that the orc their priestess has called some spell to blast him, but the screams and then, an instant later, the explosions and geyser-sprays of gore – tell him otherwise. Over the thunder of this spontaneous horizontal avalanche, he hears the sorcerer shouting at him to run.

Half-blinded by the whirling dust, Karvak grabs sword and banner and sprints towards the edge of the camp. Glancing behind, he sees the priestess wrestling with the sorcerer’s spell, shielding the surviving orcs from the onslaught of the stones.



“Why didn’t you do that when the orcs ambushed you?”

“I need to align myself with the elemental forces before I can

work a spell like that. And I'd already used most of my magic that day – they waited until I was spent. And also, there was an ogre sitting on me before I knew what was happening.”

“Uh,” grunts Karvak. The conversation is over.

The sorcerer is not a mountaineer. This proves to be a problem, as the only route left to them is to climb over the mountain ridge and try to cross to the upper slopes of Black Ice Pass. Karvak has to carry the older man over the tougher sections.

“Can’t you do a flying spell?”

“I am Geirbalt the Geomancer, master of the earth power! Flight is anathema!”

Which means no, apparently.

Like Karvak, Geirbalt was a criminal, paying off his debt to the Empire by fighting in the Penal Legions.

“I killed a man”, admits Karvak.

“Why?”

“It was a tavern brawl. He annoyed me.” The words taste bitter in Karvak’s mouth, shameful. Weak. “What did you do?”

“I tried to take over the world.”

“Uh.”

“I had a dungeon and minions and all. I’d have done it to, if it weren’t for meddling adventurers.”

Geirbalt summons lights once they’re clear of the orcs, and they cross the ridge before dawn. From up here, they can see both sides of the mountains – south, to the plains, and north, to the wild lands beyond the Frost Range. South, the glimmering lights of Hallow’s Vale. North, the fires of the Orc Lord’s armies.

Black Ice Keep glitters in the morning sun. According to Geirbalt, the castle is literally made of ice, shaped out of a glacier by magic. It is indestructible – smash the castle, raze it to the ground, and over the next year the ice will flow into shape again, remaking battlements and towers and dungeons. The downside is that the garrison is half-frozen all the time from living inside a block of ice. After the crossing of the night before, that sounds positively warm to Karvak.

The sorcerer pauses. “I’m going back. If you give me the

banner, I'll say that I escaped the orcs on my own. I won't mention you. The geas is gone... if you want to walk away."

"I heard they crucified deserters."

"Oh, we do. You couldn't go back to the Empire. But the earth is wide and open; there are other places you could go, and they'd all give you a longer life than Black Ice Castle."

"But you're returning there. To starve, or die by some orc's spear-thrust."

Geirbaltus rubs his feet, then stands. "Fool that I am, yes. I have friends there."

"Fight well, then." Karvak offers the sorcerer the broken banner. Geirbalt takes hold of it, but Karvak finds himself unwilling to let go. Instead, a sudden rush of misplaced anger. "Why set me free? Why not bring me to the Legion?" As if Geirbalt has declared him unworthy of fighting alongside the other soldiers.

"Do you want to die?" asks the sorcerer.

"Do you?"

"No. But... I want to serve."

"Feh. Die in a hole, then." Karvak shoves the banner at Geirbalt and turns south.

A man has the right to pick the ground he dies on, instead of having it dictated by some general or scratch-mark on a map. If he wants to kill orcs, he shall kill orcs by his own will, his own hand!

It'll be a longer road back along the pass, he knows, and he'll have to hide from Hollow's Vale and from any riders, but he's not going to die for naught.



The dream, again. This time, he's talking to Alphond the merchant after the blow landed. Alphond's lying there on the sawdust floor, head snapped back, nose broken, blood slowly flowing from his mouth, but having a conversation with Karvak all the same.

"Why did you kill me?"

"It was a tavern brawl, I tell you!"

“Why did you choose to kill me?” Alphonnd speaks as he hits the ground with agonising slowness, so sedate that Karvak can watch individual motes of sawdust rise from the impact, arc through the air, and fall back down again.

“You can’t be a ghost! They buried you with all the proper rites! So you’re some trick of the paladins to stir up guilt, or Geirbalt was wrong and swearing on the banner wasn’t enough to break the cursed geas!”

“Why did you choose to kill me?”

“I’d do it again to shut you up!” roars Karvak.

Suddenly, the tavern is gone, and he’s back at the crossroads where the halfling paladin stood in judgement over him, sentenced him to serve the Legion. Only the merchant’s corpse is lying there in the middle of the crossroads, like a broken puppet.

“He had use,” says the halfling. “His death wounds the Empire.”

“Use? Speak you of use? What use was the Empire when the Orc Lord came from the frost-rims, singing songs of ruin and mayhem? What did this son of Turgid Gulch do of use when my people fought, and when we fled? Your land is green and rich with charm, halfling, but all its useful bread-bakers and shoemakers and oath-takers shall flare like chaff in the fire without men of strength and blood. The Empire is not a thing built on use, but on power. Your dragon steeds, your war-mages, these horse-loving saber-wavers, they do not spin, nor craft, nor build, nor reap. What is their use? None, save warfare.”

“And you, then? To fight is your use?”

“To fight,” Karvak says, “is my destiny.”

Fettleling nods. “Your words have merit. You have great anger, northman, but you are no coward.”

“I have my honour.”

“Honour?” says the corpse. “And what use is that? You killed me, Karvak, because I was weak and you were strong. You killed me because you could, because it was in your power. The weak exist at the whim of the strong. It doesn’t matter why you killed me – you had that right.”

He wakes from the dream with blood pumping from a wound

in his head, and the feeling that his skull is about to split open. The geas, he thinks. I still bear its mark. That cursed halfling is laughing at me and my honour, punishing me for speaking the truth.

I have no choice. I must go back.



“Karnak, of the Ninth Penal Company. I swore to come here. As payment for my crime.”

The guards open the gates of Black Ice Castle. They swing open smoothly, sliding on polished ice. To seal the gates, all they need do is pour water on the outside until they freeze into a single block. The guards bring Karvak through the frozen corridors, up to a heated garden where the master of the castle sits with his councillors. Geirbalt is there, dressed in a fresh uniform; the sorcerer chokes when he sees Karnak, but manages to disguise it as a coughing fit.

“Commander? We have a new recruit for the Ninth,” announces the guard.

The master of Black Ice Castle looks like he was carved out of the same substance. He turns to examine Karvak. “From the Moon clans, by those markings on your arm. You’ve fought orcs before?”

“I’ve killed many of ‘em.”

“And you killed a citizen of the Empire. Do not believe that one washes away the other, even here. You atone, not erase, and the Empire forgives but does not forget. Still, if you can use that sword, you’ll be of use. Geirbalt there will tell you what to do – you’ve just doubled the strength of the Ninth by being here. Now stand and wait.”

Karvak listens to the officers’ talk. None of the news is good. With the loss of the supplies from Hollow’s Vale, they don’t have enough food to last the winter. If Black Ice Castle falls, the Orc Lord’s armies will be able to cross the pass freely and push into the lowlands beyond, as far as Jedna’s Folly and the shores of the

Midland Sea. The reinforcements to the garrison promised by the Dwarf Lord are still far away. Worse, as the officers complain, the orc raiders know the garrison's every move.

"We sent the Ninth to escort the supply train. You told 'em to take the bloody high pass instead of the usual road, and we waited to our last belt-notch to give the scouts time to make sure there weren't any orc raiders between us and Hollow's Vale," complains one soldier, red-faced, thumping her hand on the table. "And still we lost everything."

"Deserters," says another, "selling our secrets to the orcs." Even though Karvak is a stranger to the room, he can sense the tension that accusation brings. Geirbalt closes his eyes, and other soldiers bristle. Karvak guesses those are other Penal Legion members like himself.

The commander raised his hand, and the room fell silent. "Or sorcery. No doubt the orcs have sryers and seers. They could be spying on us through some magic. Geirbalt, you're the only magic-worker we have left here. What can be done?"

"I am Geirbalt the Geomancer," begins the sorcerer. Someone at the back of the room groans and throws a clod of dirt. It disintegrates in mid-air and orbits around Geirbalt's head. "The Geomancer", he continues. "My power is over the elemental forces, not spiritual ones. But -" he glances at Karvak "- I encountered an orc witch when I was their prisoner. She led the raid that ambushed the Ninth."

"You think eliminating her will secure our supply line?," asks the commander.

Karnak steps forward. He's heard enough talk. "I'll bring you her head!"

Everyone turns to look at him. Geirbalt coughs.

"Geirbalt, you will instruct the new recruit in proper discipline."

"Yes, commander."

"If you think I'll bow and serve you like some perfumed courtier -"

"I expect obedience and discipline. Nothing less. If you aren't capable of that, you will not serve in any capacity."



A week goes by. Ten days.

They instruct Karvak in the ways of the Legion, telling him where to sleep, when to eat, where to put his things. He makes it four days before he picks a fight; makes it eight before he starts thinking what it would be like to kill some of his comrades. He manages to swallow the worst of the anger, takes it out on the icy wall of the barracks instead.

The cracks in the wall heal overnight, thanks to the magic of Black Ice Castle.

Both the Ninth and Tenth Penal Companies are absurdly under-strength – the Ninth’s down to two men, from its full strength of more than a thousand, and the Tenth’s not much better, mauled by battle with the Orc-Lord’s forces. The commander puts Karnak and Geirbalt in with the survivors of the Tenth, to make one partial unit of the ruins of two. Most of the Tenth are alley boys from Glitterhaegen or Shadowport, city thieves who chose the Penal Legion instead of losing their right hands for stealing. They shrivel up in the cold north, prowling around the castle like starving cats. They quickly learn to get out of Karvak’s way when he’s in a mood.

He hears them talk, in the night. They talk about the crimes that brought them to the Legion. All the reasons they had for breaking the law – greed, hunger, ambition, jealousy, love.

Karvak lies awake, unwilling to dream.



He asks Geirbalt about the geas. “I am Geirbalt the Geomancer”, begins the sorcerer, and Karvak restrains himself before he does violence to the smaller man.

“I thought the geas would end when I reported in. That’s what they told me.”

Geirbalt fidgets with his beard. “It’s not my area of expertise. It depends on the wording of the geas, and the... penitence of

the bearer. They usually give general geases to those destined for the Legion – instead of saying guard such-and-such a place, or do something, they just say join the Legion and obey your commanders. If you made of rock, I could do more... I suppose I could turn you to stone...”

“What about the dreams? Will they stop?”

“Dreams? I never get dreams from my geas,” says Geirbalt.

Useless. The sorcerer is useless.



The commander sends out patrols to find the orc priestess and her raiders. One by one, they come back empty-handed and hollow-eyed, exhausted by days spent searching the mountains.

And day by day, the castle’s supplies diminish. Their bellies are empty. One woman dies by fainting and falling from the battlements. Two men die, in a knife-fight over some hard-tack biscuits.

Karvak wants to fight. He can smell orcs on the wind.

Why don’t they attack? Why not march down the Low Pass and lay siege to Black Ice Castle? One of the alley boys explains, using empty bowls and knives to show relative positions.

“If they come down the pass, and they don’t break us quick, then they run the risk of getting caught ‘tween us and the dwarves – and the Orc Lord don’t want a passel of angry dwarves up his arse, right? So, they sit there and wait us out, wait ‘til we run out of food so we can’t put up a fight. An’ we can only get food from Hollow’s Vale, and they’ve got raiders between us and the town. So we can’t bring up any more supplies, e’en if they had ‘em, ‘cause the raiders would take ‘em again. In short, the commander’s praying that we get killed by orcs instead of starvin’ to death. We can’t beat the orcs, but we might take ‘em with us.”

“A good death,” observes Karvak.

“A good death is dying of old age, in bed, in a pleasure-house full of elf women.”

“Nah,” interrupts another. Horlac? Herlac? Karvak didn’t

bother learning their names. “Commander’s not stupid. No use in us dying here. We give up on the pass, fall back to Hollow’s Vale or Foothold. Let the dwarves keep their stupid mountains.”

“The old man won’t give up.”

“Then we should.” They start talking about ways to sneak out of the castle, to desert and get back south. They look at Karvak, weighing him up. None of them know how to survive in the mountains. None of them are much good in a fight, unless it’s knifing someone in an alley. They need him if they’re going to have any chance of escaping the Legion.

He sneers, and the alley boys go back to prattling about Glitterhaegen gossip, about which guilds are the richest, about which merchant families are in the ascendent. Even beggars in that town know the value of shares in one trading company or another. Karvak has stolen to survive when he had to, but these thieves remind him of the merchant, Alphond. Weak, frail, greedy for coin. As though wealth can make a man worth something. As though a span of days makes a life.



“Go back to Hollow’s Vale,” orders the commander. “Tell them we need more supplies to last us through the winter. Take the Low Pass.”

“You want me to fetch grain?” Karvak clenches his teeth against the rage, forces out words instead of a battle-cry. “I... send me to hunt. Send me to kill the orc witch. I am a slayer, a reaver, not a... grain-merchant. Make use of me.”

The commander idly runs a gloved hand along the ice-rimed table, lost in thought. “If they have grain left, I’ll offer thanks to the Dark Gods and the Light and everyone in between. It’ll be bitter-roots and dried berries at best.” He looks up at Karvak. “I don’t need slayers. Even if I had a thousand slayers, there’d still be ten times as many orcs outside my door, just as eager to spill blood. Go get me supplies so I can hold this castle.”

For a moment, the commander reminds Karvak of Alphond

the merchant, only there's steel in the commander's voice. Karvak nods. At least a march in the mountains will stretch his legs.

They have to drag Geirbalt the Geomancer out of the castle gates and half-drag him down the mountain. He rants about the orc priestess and the tortures he endured after the last ambush, and how it's madness to go back, how he'll happily eat ice and dirt instead of risking another march down to the town. The other soldiers of the Tenth on the detail are eager to go, and whisper about escaping once they get to Hollow's Vale. None of them, though, are brave enough to cut their throats of the loyal soldiers by night, and that's what they'd need to do to be sure of escaping.

There's no sign of the raiders led by the orc priestess.

They make camp a day north of Hollow's Vale. That night, Karvak dreams. It's the same dream as always, the tavern brawl, Alphond's skull breaking under his fist. All the familiar details re-enacted. Like a mummer's show he saw in the south, once, players mouthing the same lines night after night, retelling the tale of the Wizard King.

"The weak exist at the whim of the strong," he mutters as he wakes, echoing dream-Alphond's words. He curses the geas, curses the halfling who laid it. What lesson was he trying to teach Karvak? What does the barbarian have to do to break the spell?



Captain Manser meets them in the council room at Hollow's Vale, along with the burghers of the town. She nods a greeting at Karvak as he passes.

"The uniform becomes you. I'm less likely to put an arrow in you on sight. How do you fare at Black Ice Castle?"

"No food, no drink, and a bed made of ice. If it weren't for the guilt-spell, I'd have stayed south of the mountains."

"You're free of it now, though. The geas doomed you to come here and swear loyalty to the Legion, but that's all. You choose to stay true to your oath, just like the rest of us." She gestures to her own uniform. "Volunteer or hireling or condemned, we're

all under the same oath.” One of the town elders calls her over – Karvak hears raised voices, arguing – and Manser bids him farewell.

“You already took everything we had to spare, and more!” shouts one of the townsfolk. “We can’t feed Hollow’s Vale and Black Ice with what’s left!”

“Without these supplies,” argues one of the Legion officers, a half-elf named Daelin, “we can’t maintain the garrison at Black Ice Castle. The Orc Lord’s army will march down the pass and slaughter you all – and everyone else south as far as the waters.”

“We already gave you the supplies! And you lost them to orc raiders! If you can’t even guard your own food, why should we trust you to guard the pass?” demands one elder.

“The dwarves will come,” says another, making it an article of faith. “The dwarves will save us all.”

Captain Manser wades into the fray, trying to find a compromise between town and castle. Geirbalt sighs and sits down next to Karvak. “What’s the use of it all? They’re arguing over the order and manner of their deaths, that’s all. The orcs will kill us all.”

The argument goes on until nightfall without resolution, and then moves from the council hall to the barracks. Karvak overhears Manser and Daelin debate what can be done, and what should be done. “We can take the food by force,” argues Daelin, “with an Imperial Writ of Requisition to cover us. The townfolk can go south before the roads become impassable, to go Foothold or somewhere.”

“Go as beggars? This is their home, and they already gave us enough to supply the Castle. They’re right in that. If you draw swords against them, they’ll fight back.”

“And what will they do when the orcs come? Shout ‘ah, we’re all going to be horribly slaughtered, but at least we die with slightly fuller bellies?’”

All the arguing and whining, all the what-may-bes and what-thens feel like stones in a cairn that they’re heaping atop Karvak’s spirit. He goes down to the barracks, finds an empty bunk, and sleeps.



Shards of clay tumble towards the ground like snow on the wind.

"You killed me without reason, because you need no reason," says Alphond. Karvak has seen the merchant's face so many times it's more familiar to him than that of any lover or friend. He can see how awkwardly the words fit into the merchant's mouth, how ill-fitting the man's expression. "You have many reasons to kill them."

"Kill who?"

The fist connects. Alphond's head rocks back, his neck snapping, but he turns it into a shrug as he starts his long crumple towards the floor. "Kill the townsfolk, and take the food you need. Kill the guards, and escape with the thieves. You are strong, and they are weak, wolfshead. Yours is the right to shape the world, to decide on what is useful and what is chaff."

Karvak changes the dream. He catches Alphond's corpse, the dead man's head in his hand, and squeezes. Pressing his thumbs into the same spot in his own skull where the geas took hold.

"You're right. I had no reason to kill the grain merchant. He was weak, and I was strong, and I took his life because I wanted to kill. You, though, I kill because you torment me."

The mask breaks, and beneath it is another mask of bone. The half-orc priestess smiles at Karvak from behind the ruin of Alphond's skull.

"Witch!" he spits, dropping the dream-corpse like it's a poisonous snake.

"Join us!" she insists. "The Orc Lord's spirit is in you. That's why I walk in your dreams, and you speak to me through the severed heads. Your strength, your battle-lust comes from the same source as my magic. We both follow the wild way of the Orc Lord. You will never know the sword-joy as long as you let the weak bind you with their oaths and rules and guilt-spells. Break free of their chains! Kill because you wish to kill!"

The barbarian's boot comes down, crushing Alphond's skull.

In the slow time of the dream, it takes an eternity.



The priestess is woken from her trance by the screaming of the skulls. Frustrated, she kicks the loudest of them, breaking its jaw. The others shut up hastily.

“What’s wrong?” It’s Tarblood, the orc warleader.

“The Moon Tribe warrior broke my seeing-spell,” says the priestess. Her face feels numb, unfamiliar; she’s spent too long wearing masks in one dream or another, and her waking shape is strange to her.

“So how do we spy on them now?” roars Tarblood. “What if they slip past us on some high pass?”

“There are other ways to spy,” she says hastily. Tarblood would kill her if he had no use for her; he mistrusts magic. “Give me a few hours. Even if the soldiers leave Hollow’s Vale right now, we’ll still be able to catch them long before they cross the pass. Give me time.”

She searches the mountainside until she finds a bird’s nest. It’s empty this late in the year, but picking among the remains she find an egg. Some serpent has cracked open the egg and eaten the yolk, but all she needs is the shell. She takes it back to the raider camp and fills it with her blood. She takes one of her skulls, stoppers its nose and eye-sockets with clay, and fills that with meltwater. She cooks the egg over a fire, and at dawn it hatches.

The blood-bird takes flight, and she sees through its eyes. She sends it down from the mountains to circle over Hollow’s Vale.

A line of figures march north, towards the low pass. She sees carts laden with supplies, and the uniforms of the legion. It’s hard for her to count while sharing the blood-bird’s ersatz consciousness, but she guesses there are more soldiers in that company than she glimpsed in the waking dreams she stole from Karvak. Intrigued, she flies lower.

She sees the X-shaped wooden frames in the street outside the fort. She’s seen enough. She lets the bird-shape go. The blood-

bird explodes in a splatter of gore, spraying itself across the bare snowy fields below, and the priestess returns to her own body.

“The Legion’s taken the supplies from the town – and stripped it of its garrison too. I saw crosses in Hollow’s Vale. Maybe some of the soldiers defied orders, or maybe some of them tried to desert and got killed for it”

Tarblood doesn’t care. “Which was is the Legion going?”

“The low pass. If we cut them off at-”

“Doesn’t matter. They’re carrying supplies and moving slowly. We’ll catch them before they reach Black Ice.” He stands, gestures for the other raiders to start moving. He points south with his axe.

“What about the pass?” asks the priestess.

He speaks thickly, as if he’s forgotten how to talk. “You just said the town’s undefended. Kill the townsfolk before they flee south, then chase north and kill the Legion. We kill them all.”

“That’s a mistake. We should go after the Legion.”

Tarblood stares at her in silent, then raises his axe and points it at Hollow’s Vale. “We kill them all,” he repeats.



The sight of the fort’s walls gives the priestess pause. It’s nothing compared to Black Ice Castle – this fort will, at least, burn when they torch it – but it’s still an impressive fortification. Dwarves made it, she thinks, and they know how to build. From the lack of movement in the town, though, both town and fort seem abandoned. She didn’t see the townsfolk leaving, though, so they must be hiding here.

She girds herself with protective spells, calls up a lightning-spear, but her magic is thin today. Fear has crept in, groundless and weak but still present, a niggling worry that stops the full flow of her power. Tarblood is making a mistake by attacking the town first, but there’s no point in arguing – the orcs want to kill, and they can kill the townsfolk first before chasing the Legion. She might as well argue with a river’s desire to flow downhill.

One of the orc scouts snarls and points at the granary. “In there,”

he growls. She hurls a bolt of lightning at the door, shattering it, and the orcs rush in, axes ready to butcher the mewling cowards huddled within.

They're met by knives. Close-quarter weapons, blades sharp enough to cut even an orc's windpipe. Soldiers swarm out of the granary, Legion troops.

It's an ambush, she thinks. She backs away, looking for space to work her stronger battle-spells, but the alley behind her suddenly closes. The stone walls clasp together, blocking her retreat. Someone in the granary cackles and shrieks about geomancy.

Up the street comes Karvak, sword in one hand, Tarblood's axe in the other. Drenched in orc-blood. Moving with controlled fury, no waste or hesitation, no fear or doubt. A born killer.

He sees her with no recognition in his eyes. Like she'd broken a clay bottle on his back.



Spring comes late the next year. The mountain passes are still treacherous and snow-clogged when the half-elf Daelin makes his way back down from Black Ice Castle.

The fort at Hollow's Vale still stands. He sneaks through the empty town, finds it abandoned. He comes across a trail in the snow, and follows it to a small warren of caves inhabited by goblins. They swarm out and attack him, but his sword makes short work of them. He leaves one alive, and makes it guide him to the master of this little dungeon.

"I am Geirbalt the Geomanc- oh, hello," says the evil sorcerer. "Ah. I... this just felt more comfortable than waiting around in the empty fort, and the goblins needed me... what happened at Black Ice?"

Daelin sheathes his sword. "We held. The Orc Lord's spies saw us bringing supplies into the castle, and they held off attacking, knowing how long the siege would take. The dwarves arrived just after yule, and they had food with 'em. It was a close-run thing – we couldn't have fed both the garrison and the townfolk that wintered

with us, too. A few more days, and we'd have all starved. The fighting's moved off west, now. They're trying to break through at Cairnwood instead, and the townsfolk will be coming back down soon, before the full thaw even." Daelin glances around the cave. "Were you the only survivor?"

"No. A few of the Glitterhaegen thieves made it out alive. They ran home, I guess."

The half-elf scowls. "No great loss to the Legion. What about that barbarian?"

"He went north, across the high pass."

"Doesn't surprise me."

"You think him a turncoat? The ambush was his notion."

"Not a turncoat. But a man who knows only killing, and who serves only when he's ensorcelled – He was more orc than man, that one, and the Legion has no use for him."