

The cover art depicts a dark, atmospheric forest with gnarled, leafless trees. In the foreground, a tall, dark-skinned elf with a black cape and a sword on his back stands looking towards the right. In the lower right, a small, furry creature with large ears is seen from behind, looking towards the elf. The overall color palette is muted, with greens, greys, and browns.

PILLARS
OF
ETERNITY

BLOOD REGISTER



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BLOOD REGISTER

Neolas licked his thumb and turned the page of his ledger. He stood in the open doorway of a farmhouse. The farmer had not seen fit to grant him entry, and was planted with arms resolutely crossed. Neolas doubted that the humans of Loghome had ever seen an orlan in a position of authority.

“One last question,” Neolas said. “To your knowledge, how many families have been impacted by the Hollowborn epidemic?” When the farmer stared at him with open distaste, he continued: “You’re not in trouble. I’m gathering information for the capital. It’s called a census.”

The farmer cleared his throat. “How come they need to know this?”

“We’re in a crisis,” said Neolas. “The Duc needs to know which regions need the most attention.”

“You’re gonna tell Duc Aevan we need help?” The farmer’s expression shifted. “Does he have a cure for the Legacy?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Neolas. “Can we return to the survey?”

The farmer adjusted his stance. Neolas recognized the inner struggle. He seemed at once empowered to know that his answers could draw the attention of Duc Aevan, but disgusted that the one to present it stood no taller than his doorknob. Then he glanced over his shoulder with a frown, and refocused down on Neolas.

“Five families,” said the farmer. “All pregnant. ‘Course, there have been others in the past.”

Neolas softened his tone as he took notes. “Did any of those come to successful term?”

The farmer shook his head.

They spoke at further length, but Neolas already had what he needed. Of the eight Loghome residents who agreed to take his survey, all of their answers added up to the same result.

A brick wall of a man was waiting for him down the lane. His hand rested on the hilt of a sword that could have cleaved a tavern in half. His broad, elvish features registered little in the way of emotion.

“Gacgen,” hailed Neolas.

The big elf grunted noncommittally.

Neolas’ orlan stature brought him just above the height of his companion’s wolf-shaped belt buckle. “Two more surveys make ten. Then we move on.”

Gacgen nodded. They made their way to the next house. Once more, Neolas’ bodyguard didn’t need to draw his sword. And once more, Neolas confirmed his fears: Waidwen’s Legacy was getting worse.

They adjourned to their room at the *Darling Fampyr* as the sun went down.

“There is a hut on the outskirts of town I want to visit tomorrow,” said Neolas. “After that we make for Eina’s Rest.” He was sitting at his desk: a wooden crate pushed under the sole window. The innkeep had looked strangely at Neolas when he purchased the room for two. His travel budget had not factored in a bodyguard, which made Gacgen’s presence a luxury that he could hardly afford.

A prolonged groan erupted from the bed as Gacgen settled under the covers. “What are you writing?” he asked.

“Incentives,” said Neolas. “The farther afield we travel, the more suspicious these locals get. They need a reason to trust me.”

“Because you’re an orlan,” Gacgen said.

Neolas didn’t vocalize what he thought of that. “They’re protecting their children,” he said.

“Even Hollowborn ones?” asked Gacgen.

Neolas tapped out his pen and blew gently on the last slip. “A family is capable of remarkable things,” he said.

Gacgen considered this, and then rolled over to face the wall. “Your incentives won’t work,” he said. “People trust silver and gold. Lies are too easy to write down.”

There was something in his voice that gave Neolas pause. In Gacgen, Neolas recognized a fatalism more desperate than that of the families they visited. Even if he didn’t disclose as much, Neolas could tell that the elf had already experienced some great loss or disappointment. He filed that away for later, but said nothing. His companion wanted coin, not the sympathies of a defenseless clerk under his protection.



They set out at first light, taking a brisk pace to fight off the morning chill. Neolas shrugged on the weight of his ledger, for which he had fashioned clever bindings that secured it to his back. Following directions from the helpful innkeeper, Neolas pointed them off the road and toward a copse of trees, where a winding goat path traced their new bearing.

The hut at the end of the lane better resembled a growth in the landscape. Patches of moss and lichen sealed the many holes in the rotten log walls, and mushrooms bloomed from the sod roof. The wind carried a rotten smell.

Gacgen sniffed and held back. “I dislike this place,” he said.

“We won’t be long,” said Neolas. “Besides, we need our tenth.”

Readying his ledger and quill, Neolas knocked on the door. A shuffling sound grew in volume on the other side.

“I’m with the office of Duc Aevan,” called Neolas. “We’re conducting a census.”

The door opened a crack and a bearded man peered through the gap. Behind him, the hut's interior was dark. He squinted into the morning light, confused until he looked down to find Neolas.

"Ach!" he spat in revulsion. "A likkle thing, isn't it? Why d'ye darken my door, smallish one, eh?"

It took a moment for Neolas to realize that the man had spoken some vague, accented dialect of Aedyran and not just spouted verse in a singsong tongue.

"I have some questions," he said.

The door opened further, and a breeze of human filth gusted out. The man on the other side wore threadbare rags that hung off his bony frame. "Drashok Green-Thumb has no answers to spake at 'ee," he said.

Neolas withdrew a slip of paper and held it across the gap.

"In exchange for your time," he said, "you will be entered in a raffle to win a golden Duc."

Drashok goggled at Neolas as if he'd described a transaction of equal complexity to the motion of the stars. "'Ee'll gift me that pretty paper for words spake in truth?" He rubbed his jaw line, and his lips split open to reveal a toothy grin.

Neolas favored Gacgen with a knowing glance. The elf stood in motionless stoicism.

He questioned the hermit for several minutes. Drashok was a self-described gardener with no living relations. From the state of his home and the queerly-colored mushrooms sprouting around the porch, Neolas could believe it.

"Do you know many families are affected by the Legacy?" Neolas asked.

Drashok opened the door further. "Nay, but I hear things. Wot soul essence were once plentiful, now is scarce as royal honey." He

made a beckoning gesture. “‘Ee cam inside right away, likkle thing. ‘Tis warm and moist as can be.”

Before Neolas could offer a polite refusal, an enormous force muscled him to the side. It was Gacgen. He had drawn his sword, and wore a resolute expression as he faced Drashok Green-Thumb. The usual vacancy of his demeanor, though hardly changed, was taken over by controlled aggression.

“What are you doing?” said Neolas.

Gacgen thumbed up at the eaves of the hut, where fungus hung down like a funerary veil. Then Neolas saw what he had missed before: the twining moss and mushrooms were shaped like *claws*, and they had crept notably lower during his survey.

“What in Berath’s keyhole is that?” trailed off Neolas.

But no one was listening to him. Drashok bared his teeth at Gacgen in a snarl. “My likkle spore-babes have empty guts, and I’ll not let the likes of ‘ee steal a ripe morsel from them!”

The door flew open in a rage, exposing the gardener to full light. Gray-black tendrils extended off his discolored skin, connecting him to the hut like a fungal marionette. By the time he rushed out the door, Gacgen had already raised his sword. He brought it down in a ruthless diagonal swipe, and Drashok took the full blow.

The stench that billowed from the hut’s orifice completely overwhelmed Neolas, who staggered away and retched into a bed of black mushrooms. His ledger slipped from his hands, and steel flashed on the blurring periphery of his vision. Drashok kept advancing on Gacgen in spite of his wounds, forcing the warrior to back away as his sword danced in the air between them. Every swipe carved at the deranged man, who kept clawing until there was naught left that could maintain the assault.

Neolas fought to regain his bearing, numb to all that transpired around him. Then a hand gripped him by the arm, and he almost flinched out of his skin. It was only Gacgen helping him to his feet.

His foe lay in pieces scattered about. No blood had spilled, but clouds of spores that rose from the body inspired both men to cover their mouths with their sleeves. Neolas only allowed the big elf to usher him away once he had retrieved his ledger from a bed of squirming fungus.

“Sporelings,” Gacgen said. “Juvenile ones. I don’t know if he was feeding them, or if they...” He shook his head and frowned back to the hut. “It should be burned.”

Neolas did not protest. Once they were clear of the area, Gacgen used tinder and flint to light a makeshift torch. He placed some dry twigs and dead grass as kindling around the porch. Though flames licked its walls and popped the larger mushrooms, the duo didn’t tarry to watch it burn.



Neolas hefted the ledger strapped to his back. Its weight felt extra cumbersome today. They took the road east, grateful to put Loghome in their shadow.

“Your swordplay was commendable,” Neolas said. “As were your instincts.”

Gacgen offered a modest nod. “In my youth I worked with the Dozens. Not for any idealistic reasons,” he added.

“What brought you to them?” Neolas asked. Though seldom invested in the history of those he employed, this man had just saved his life.

“I was searching for something,” Gacgen said. “When I didn’t find it, I left.”

Cryptic, thought Neolas. “You could say I’m doing the same.”

Neolas took the silence as an opening to elaborate.

“I have a wife in Defiance Bay,” he said. “She’s with child.”

Gacgen remained silent, but a thought crossed his face that he kept under guard.

“We don’t know for certain if the Legacy has any geographic limits,” said Neolas. “If I can find some pattern, or a region less afflicted than others...” he shrugged. “The Duc pays a handsome enough bounty for full ledgers that we could afford some time away from the city.”

“Finding a pattern in the Legacy sounds as likely as teaching a xaurip to waltz,” said Gacgen.

In spite of himself, Neolas had to laugh.

“Do you have children?” asked Neolas.

“No.” At first it sounded like Gacgen had nothing further to contribute. Then he said, “A child needs the permanence that I never had.” He turned to Neolas, but apparently thought better of speaking his mind.

Those they interviewed at Eina’s Rest were starved for hope, and looked to Neolas to set their minds at ease. If only they knew that he was doing the same. Surveys indicated that the Rest was no better off than anywhere else. Though Neolas collected his ten respondents, he felt as if he had gained little.

Gacgen was quieter than usual during this visit. Neolas took it for a fighter’s introspection. After all, the elf wasn’t being paid for his opinion. So it took Neolas by surprised when Gacgen chimed in without provocation.

“Eir Glanfath,” he said.

Neolas was sitting before their room’s roaring fireplace. Some dew or rain water must have gotten between the pages of his ledger, so he left them open to dry.

“Sorry?” he asked.

“You might find answers there,” said Gacgen.

"That takes us too far from Dyrwood," said Neolas.

"Yes, it does." Gacgen stepped closer. "But you've learned all that these rural kith can teach. Where is the value in visiting Dyrford or Baelreach if you know that their results will be the same?"

Neolas couldn't deny the probable truth of these words. Still, he was trying to decipher his companion's motive. "Glanfathans, though?" he said. "Most of their ilk would rather kill a census taker than tolerate one."

"Not if they knew you were traveling with one of them."

Neolas raised an inquisitive brow. Gacgen sat across from him and shared his story. He spoke in a restrained manner, weighing every word against his ingrained sense of privacy.

Gacgen grew up in an orphanage on the Dyrwood border. When he came of an appropriate age, his keepers released him upon the world and bequeathed his inheritance: a wolf-shaped belt buckle passed down from his mother. Craftsmen and appraisers identified it as Glanfathan-made, and dear enough to be an heirloom. From his first day of freedom, Gacgen had taken every opportunity to cross into Eir Glanfath in search of his roots.

"I've gone to strange places, and done desperate things, to find my people," he said.

"Even throwing in your lot with the Dozens," Neolas said. Part of his companion's history suddenly clicked into place.

"Aye," said Gacgen. "In time, I came to know the tribes outside of mercenary skirmishes. I went as far as Twin Elms, but no one knew of a family who gave up their babe to Dyrwoodans."

A log popped in the fireplace. Neolas nudged his ledger off to the side. "A fine story," he said, "but the Duc isn't paying for Glanfathan surveys, and I have to be back in Defiance Bay at month's end."

"This survey isn't for the Duc," said Gacgen. "It's for your family. Unless you want your child born in the shadow of the Legacy?"

Gacgen rifled among Neolas' papers until he found their map. Snatching up a quill, he drew a path east that could only have come from study and experience. Neolas watched this unfolding procedure with skepticism. Gacgen laid out a detailed breakdown of their route, which would cut into Eir Glanfath and circle out of it so expediently that they'd arrive back in Dyrwood with comparatively little delay.

"It's still a detour, I grant you," said Gacgen.

"Perhaps one we can't afford to pass up," mused Neolas. "What are you taking from this plan? Don't tell me it's your sense of altruism."

Gacgen hesitated. "I compromised much in the company of the Dozens," he said. "I would not have my blood – present or future – see me that way. If I can help your kin, it would be a more..." he had to ruminate on the word, as if seldom used, "*worthy* pursuit."

"What are the chances that we find your family out there?" Neolas asked.

Gacgen considered. "As good as our chances of finding a place where children are born whole."



They left Eina's Rest that morning, and abandoned the main road soon after. One moment they were following a path marked by fresh boot prints and wagon wheels, the next they were walking in an open plain toward a line of tall trees at the horizon. Neolas felt a trill of excitement rush through his extremities.

"I may live a clerk's life," he said, "but that doesn't mean I haven't considered alternatives."

They didn't need to consult their compass too frequently to stay on track, since at present they only needed to keep the river on their left. Because their journey would take them far north of Twin Elms, Gacgen speculated that obvious Glanfathan settlements would prove somewhat elusive. Nomadism was still very much in their nature.

That didn't stop the first encounter from taking them by surprise. Neolas was hiking up his trouser to step over an exposed tree root when an arrow thudded into the wood next to his ear.

"I wouldn't finish that step," called a distant woman, chilling in her solemnity.

Though Neolas and Gacgen searched their surroundings, neither could pin down the location of the speaker. "On whose authority?" said Neolas.

A low chuckle echoed after them. "A compact older than either of our homelands," came the accented voice. "Turn back, *estramor*, or go elsewhere."

Neolas and Gacgen traded glances. *Outsider*, Gacgen mouthed. Then the big elf called out in a tongue Neolas had never heard before, the words indistinct to his Dyrwoodan ear. The pause that followed lengthened so that the forest seemed to hold its breath.

A crunch of leaves announced a newcomer in their midst. She was an orlan, taller than Neolas by an inch, but altogether different. Her long ears pricked back like a laurel, and waves of brown fur covered her face in an intricate pattern. Neither of which was as important as the arrow she nocked back in her bow and pointed at them.

"Who are you?" she asked.

Neolas gave Gacgen the space to converse with the orlan since they shared a common heritage. Any intervention on his part would have only gotten in the way, though he was still eager to discuss the Legacy with someone from these parts. Every so often, the orlan glanced up at Neolas and sniffed in a disconcerted manner.

After a time, she broke from her dialogue with Gacgen and identified herself to Neolas as Alrow of the Fisher Crane.

"I can't speak for your friend's kin or how the Legacy has affected our people," she said, "but I know someone who might." A wicked smirk crossed her features. "Unless she decides to kill you. Good

luck, little estramor." She winked and sprinted off into the wood. "Gacgen!" she called. "Follow your friend's example and stay put."

The big elf flinched at this remark. Speaking the language and knowing the customs did not make him any more Glanfathan. Neolas could sympathize. His race from different parts often treated each other with similar disregard.

They were talking of their journey ahead when a blind orlan stepped up to the clearing. White fur hung down past her neck, and she wore a ceremonial getup of woven reeds. They stood to greet and assist her, but she had no problem navigating the woods on her own. She turned to Gacgen as if in recognition.

"You are the lost one?" Without waiting for a reply, she took his hand and raised his palm to the level of her face.

"Curious," she said. "Estramor, do you have a copper pand?"

"Certainly, madam." Neolas fished into his pocket and retrieved a small coin.

The hag brushed the coin's edge along Gacgen's wrist and leaned in closer to smell him. A disturbed look crossed her withered features.

"Your essence is familiar," she said. "I recall it to a marketplace southeast of here, but that is all I know. There is a stall decorated with the sigil of a wolf. Perhaps they know of your kin."

She dropped his hand, wearing an indecisive frown. Gacgen was too preoccupied by her words to notice it, but Neolas took heart.

"Are you sympathetic to soul energy, then?" asked Neolas.

"Something like that," she said.

"Thank you for your insight, lady," said Gacgen, bowing. Neolas offered his genuflection as well, but he also cleared his throat in a polite manner.

The old woman darted her rheumy eyes his way. "You seek answers to the Legacy," she said. "I have none."

Crestfallen, Neolas nodded. "I understand."

"I can tell you that children have been born closer to White March," she said with a shrug. "You would be better off speaking with the Keepers of the Stone. Though they aren't likely to share their birth records with any estramor."

As she turned about and took her leave, the hag sniffed the air. She turned back to Neolas with a look of disgust.

"You have a reek about you," she said. "It's the city you squat in, corrupt and overfull. But it's something more. You stink of bad earth." She shook her head dismissively and resumed her departure.

At first Neolas didn't know what to make of her parting words. *Bad earth?* He and Gacgen shared a confused look.

"It couldn't be," Neolas murmured. But when the idea took shape, he wondered if it was possible. As quickly as he could move, he unstrapped the census ledger from his back and set it on the ground, thinking *No, no, no, no, no*.

"What's wrong?" Gacgen stepped closer. As soon as Neolas flipped open the ledger, the elf stopped in his tracks. A familiar stench had entered the clearing.

The page Neolas opened was thick with fungus. Tiny white caps sprouted over a column of numbers. Dates, names, and figures were all shrouded in fur-like mold. He turned the page to assess the damage. The binding pulled with resistance, like a scab clinging to a wound.

"I dropped the ledger while you were fighting Drashok," Neolas said. "You don't think..."

"Burn it," said Gacgen, chilling in his judiciousness.

Neolas shook his head in disbelief. "My family," he said.

Heedless of the squirming fungus, he tore out the infested pages and crumpled them into a ball that he hurled into the forest. *Days of*

work. Then he took a rag and dragged it across the rest of the book with the force of a galley slave scrubbing a deck.

“Maybe someone in the market has a remedy,” he said, “or some paper to copy the data.”

He wanted Gacgen to offer a word of support, but his companion’s dispassionate look communicated his final word on the matter.

“Maybe,” said Neolas, since no one would say it for him.



A day and a half passed as they searched for the market. During that time, they came across two groups of Glanfathans. The first were Keepers of the Stone who listened to Gacgen’s proposal, but would not speak to Neolas. The second were Guided Compass traders. They were only too happy to lend their wisdom in exchange for a traveler’s knowledge of Dyrwoodan border towns. One of them told Neolas about his newborn niece with pride. Both groups seemed equally curious as to why Neolas and Gacgen would visit the marketplace, but didn’t try to force the question.

Along the way, Neolas scrawled notes in his decaying ledger, trying to ignite some dim spark of hope. Tearing out pages only slowed the infestation. Entries from Gilded Vale were almost totally obscured by ominous gray fuzz. He was loath to excise those, as the survey data had been particularly difficult to get from the combative locals, which had preceded his hiring of Gacgen in the first place.

When they smelled cooking meat, and the chatter of shoppers broke the monotony of the forest, Neolas and Gacgen shared a glance of mutual understanding. The colorful pavilions and stalls of the market lay ahead. A sizable number of Glanfathan dwarves shouldered their way through the presses, which betrayed any hope of Neolas or Gacgen blending in with the crowd. Neolas noted that these dwarves were a robust and warlike variety.

“I had not expected to find Ethik Nöl this far north,” muttered Gacgen.

“Ethik Nôl?” said Neolas.

“Druids,” said Gacgen. “Crazy ones, obsessed with ritual sacrifice and blood magic.”

Most of the dwarves they crossed shirked traditional armor in favor of minimalist animal skins, which showed off a plethora of scars.

“Now I recall,” said Neolas. “They brew that infamous war paint. It’s supposed to make them remarkable on the battlefield.”

Gacgen nodded. “We should stick together.”

They found an herbalist’s tent among the rabble. Upon inspecting the census ledger, the shopkeeper said he could brew up a specialized fungicide to treat it. The preparation would take an hour, and he made no promises of its success. When Neolas asked about the Legacy, the herbalist confirmed that the crisis was all but a rumor in Maiden Falls. Neolas left with a little optimism to counterbalance their mutual caution.

At last they spotted the hut with the symbol of a wolf on its hide walls, painted in what appeared to be blood. Neolas and Gacgen hung back and observed the comings and goings. A steady stream of customers left the tent carrying armloads of clay pots.

“Let’s go take a look,” said Neolas. They crossed the lane and parted the opening to the tent.

The first thing to hit them was the smell. A syrupy stench hung heavy in the air. Rows of tall urns lined the far wall, each inscribed with symbols that were alien to Neolas. At least a dozen assistants wearing robes stirred the contents of massive cauldrons. Even though there was no fire underneath, the crimson liquid inside bubbled in a frenzied manner.

A bearded dwarf advanced on Neolas and Gacgen, waving his hands in a *well, get on with it* gesture and speaking in an elaborate accent. The only word Neolas picked up was “estramor,” to which he was becoming increasingly accustomed.

“Aedyran?” Neolas asked.

The dwarf regarded him with exasperation. “Close the damn flap! We can’t have outside air contaminating the mixing process.”

Gacgen did as instructed while Neolas held the dwarf’s attention. “My friend wanted to inquire—” he started.

But before Neolas could finish the thought, the dwarf turned his wide-eyed attention to Gacgen.

“You,” he said. “Have we met before?” He scanned Gacgen up and down like a fascinating work of art.

The elf straightened his posture. “No. It’s possible that you know my family, which is why we’ve come.”

“So familiar,” the dwarf muttered. “Is your father a holy man, by chance? Or your mother a warrior?”

“I don’t know,” said Gacgen.

Neolas did not like the way the merchant inspected his companion, and imagined that Gacgen liked it less.

“We’re seeking a family who gave up a babe to a Dyrwood orphanage,” said Neolas.

“Hmm,” said the merchant. It was unclear if he was even listening as he pulled on the ends of his beard and studied Gacgen. Then his eyes widened, and he muttered words of astonishment in Glanfathan.

He spun around to one of his assistants. The pair of them conversed heatedly, pausing to glance back at the estramor with increasing interest. As the conversation drew on, more of the tent’s staff craned their necks to listen.

“Do you understand any of this?” Neolas whispered.

Gacgen said, “They speak too fast for me.”

The merchant broke from his dialogue to approach the duo, clasping his hands in a more congenial manner.

"You must forgive me," he said. "It has been many years since I encountered a man of such...*substance*. I never had the pleasure to meet your family, but they are beloved in our ranks. If only we knew that they had a son, we would have sought you out long ago."

Gacgen's demeanor softened. "Do you say they are dead?"

Something flashed in the merchant's eyes. "Yes, but we remember them well. The strength they lent us, the vigor, was unparalleled."

He clapped his hands. An assistant swept past and halted before Gacgen, presenting a clay pot. Neolas reached his tiptoes to get a look inside. The sludgelike contents were the same deep red as the other pots, but this container was nearly empty. The merchant dipped the tip of his finger in its depths and swirled the contents in a loving manner.

"*Blaidhcaw*," he said. "Wolf's paint. In my whole career, this is most potent mixture I've found. You should be proud. Your mother and father had the most resplendent essence."

Gacgen was puzzling out the meaning of this when the truth hit Neolas like a hammer to his brow.

"Oh gods," Neolas murmured.

Then Gacgen met the merchant's hungry stare. His lips pressed into a hard line as he struggled to find the words. "My family was sacrificed," he said, "to make war paint?"

"They gave of themselves freely to the community," said the merchant. "Many battles were fought, and won, with their strength on our side. The world has not seen its like since." His expression shifted. "Until you showed up. And people wonder at the cyclical patterns of nature."

More assistants gathered to observe the exchange. They regarded Gacgen with open-mouthed wonder. Neolas didn't like the direction this was heading: the merchant suddenly intrigued, and Gacgen, struggling to balance his thoughts. One thing was abundantly clear

to him: Gacgen's family had died, perhaps horribly, for the profit of everyone in this tent.

"If we had known how dire circumstances would get," said the merchant, "and how the Legacy would spread, we would have hoarded more of the blaidhcaw. This is the last of our supply, and there is little enough left in the world." In a daring gesture, he laid his hand on Gacgen's bicep and squeezed. "We could use your strength again, brother."

Brother. Neolas felt something pass between them. It was kinship. A connection so strong and so palpable that he knew, without quite knowing *how*, that it was exactly what Gacgen had set out to find. The distance between he and his companion suddenly felt very wide indeed.

Gacgen blinked once, twice. Neolas could tell that the cogs of the elf's mind were grinding against each other disharmoniously, and all outward appearances of numbness were simply the quiet before the storm. Though he had encouraged Neolas to burn his census ledger, the notion of Gacgen's hopes ending as abruptly did not take to him with ease. That moment of indecision held, and when Gacgen broke the silence, no one could have guessed his response.

"No," said Gacgen.

In a motion too fast to follow, Gacgen snatched the pot from the assistant's hands and dashed it to the ground. Blood-tinged war paint and shards of ceramic sprayed the circle of the assembled. Gacgen drew his blade in a flash.

"Fuck," murmured Neolas.

From spiritual despair to impassioned rage, the emotions of the room burned too hot and too fast to be contained, and the tent itself seemed to explode with the force of the shattered pot. The assistants shrieked and the merchant advanced. Gacgen's sword leveled at his throat prompted him to stop. By the seething rage in his eyes, Neolas would have guessed the merchant capable of impaling himself on

the blade if only to get close enough to wrap his fingers around the desecrator's throat. Behind him, the assistants drew keen-edged daggers from their robes.

"You monster!" rasped the merchant. "The strength of our people. Your birthright! To cast it aside like that?" He spat at Gacgen's feet. "It would have been better with your consent, but we can manage without."

Holding the merchant's gaze, Gacgen said to Neolas: "Time to go." The twitch on the side of his lip told that he wasn't yet sure how they were going to manage it.

Although no one was paying attention to Neolas, he held up his hand to beg for a moment's patience. He unstrapped the census ledger from his back, and clasped it like an old friend. It might have been his imagination, but he felt something squirm deep in the binding.

He opened the book to an infested page of surveys. Long fibers of fungus stretched apart like tendons. The merchant glanced down an instant before Neolas filled his lungs with air and blew across the page, sending a cloud of spores billowing into the sealed tent.

The merchant covered his eyes and shrieked. Assistants scrambled to protect the vulnerable pots of war paint. Neolas slammed the book shut and grabbed Gacgen, then spun them out of the tent.



They ran as their lengthening shadows gave chase, pressing on until the moon hung pregnant in the night sky. Exhausted, Neolas and Gacgen collapsed on opposite sides of a wooded clearing.

"I'm sorry," said Neolas.

Gacgen struggled to catch his breath. "Your book?"

Neolas was still clutching the ledger to his chest. Now the binding bore a pair of hand-shaped indentations. It felt spongy

and insubstantial. He wondered how much of it would survive the journey back to Dyrwood.

“Time will tell,” he said.

Indeed it would. Even if the ledger survived long enough to transcribe anew, Neolas wondered if the lands east of Dyrwood were truly any safer from the Legacy, and if they would remain that way. Time would tell.

Gacgen was fixated on his boots, which were splattered with remnants of red paint.

“You know,” Neolas said, “even if your family welcomed their fate, it seems that they wanted you to lead a full life. They had their reasons. That might be all the meaning you can find.”

Gacgen looked up at him with a contemplative frown. In his mind, he was still in that merchant’s tent. He was also in Loghome, Eina’s Rest, and even Drashok’s hut.

“A family is capable of remarkable things,” he said.