

THE
WRATH
of
HEROES

DAVID BENEM

THE
WRATH
of
HEROES

A REQUIEM FOR HEROES
BOOK TWO

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places and events are divined from the author's imagination or are being used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, places or events is entirely coincidental.

The Wrath of Heroes
A Requiem for Heroes, Book Two
© 2017 David Benem. All rights reserved.
ISBN: 978-0-9961939-2-4

Cover and formatting by Damonza.com

1
BACK IN THE SADDLE



THIS WOULD BE *a lot easier if I were drunk.*

Lannick eased back in the saddle and scratched at his scarred face, grimacing crookedly as he did. His destination, Kevlin's farm, stood only another day's ride distant. There a motley bunch of old soldiers awaited, a fair number of whom either thought him dead these last nine years or at least wished he'd been.

A gull squawked in the afternoon sky above, a rumor of Ironmoor and the Sullen Sea two days behind them. The place dragged at his thoughts still, with murky, wine-blurred memories of too many years spent draining too many tankards. Too many years spent blaming himself for the murder of his family at the hands of General Fane.

He sighed. Part of him worried he wasn't fit to leave that place, like he belonged to its seedy taverns the same way a corpse belonged to a tomb. But another part of him—an increasingly louder part—hoped that leaving meant a sort of liberation, like he'd buried that bloated carcass of shameful mistakes and left it behind.

He looked to the landscape aside the dusty road. Low hills

with thin trees and tall grasses rolled languidly about, dotted by the occasional farmhouse or mill of piled stones.

He grimaced again.

And nary a tavern in sight.

“Now there, Captain,” said Brugan from beside him, the barkeep’s thick form looking as though it’d cause the scrawny, piebald horse beneath him to snap in two. “I’m seeing that old look, that sad scowl you’d wear when you’d skulk into my tavern after making an ass of yourself the night before.”

“You needn’t worry, Brugan. I won’t be turning back to *that*.”

“But Lannick,” Brugan rumbled on, acting as though Lannick hadn’t spoken, “you needn’t feel that way. You gave your speech to these lads. They agreed to join this effort and follow you, remember?”

Lannick remembered well his “speech.” He’d managed precisely one word: vengeance. His heart had trembled that day much as his hands would the morning after a bad drunk. He knew the men harbored ill feelings toward him for what had transpired after the Battle of Pryam’s Bay, almost a decade before. After Fane branded Lannick a traitor, every last one of his men was decommissioned. Those who’d voiced objection were tossed into the brig.

First a parade of proud heroes, then a march of shackled prisoners.

He looked to Brugan. “I reckon most of those men blame me for what happened to them after the war.”

“Don’t fret, Lannick. The lads will come round. They respected you. All of them did, and they will again.”

“That was a long time ago. When you gathered them up in Ironmoor a couple of weeks back there seemed a good deal of doubt and anger in their eyes. They think I betrayed and abandoned them, and I reckon it won’t be easy convincing them they should allow me among them now.”

Brugan clapped a hand against Lannick’s shoulder. “You’ve changed these past months. You’ve changed into something closer

to your old self and the lads will see that. Hell, you even look like your old self again, if the eyes can forgive a crooked jaw and twisted nose!” He chuckled. “Even with your new dents and divots you still look less the scoundrel than that shaggy-haired, stubble-faced drunk I got too used to seeing at *The Wanton Vicar*.”

Lannick scratched at the hair he’d been keeping cut short in a soldier’s fashion. “I always was the handsome sort,” he said with a smirk.

“You and me both!” Brugan laughed, patting his flat, nubby face. “But you need to trust me, Lannick,” he said, sounding serious once more. “The lads will notice the way you’ve changed and I know it won’t take them long. Let your deeds speak for you and the lads will listen.”

Lannick nodded, eyes dropping to hands looped by the leather reins of his horse. His palms had yellowed with callouses, his knuckles striated with small scabs and scars. They seemed different hands now than what they’d been months before, when they’d seemed hands most used to drawing a tankard to the lips over and again.

They seemed now like hands most fit for hefting a sword, and that notion carried with it the thought of the man for whom that sword was intended.

General Fane. That vicious mad bastard who’d taken from him all he held dear.

Lannick bunched his hands into fists, a sudden anger swelling within him. “Aye.”

“Lannick, all you need to do to make this all happen is keep from slipping into those old habits again. Stay away from the drink. You need to—”

“I know,” Lannick said firmly, his hatred of Fane chasing doubt to the far corners of his head. “There’s no need to worry.”

“Better not be. I’m happy to be your sergeant again, though I’m through being your nursemaid.”

“Enough, Brugan.”

Brugan regarded him with a cocked brow, his lumpy face puckering in odd places. “Oh?”

Lannick was rankled by the challenge in his friend’s tone. “Dead gods, man! I don’t need such talk from you!”

“Really? You need such talk *most* of all from me. You don’t think I recognize that look in your eyes? That look when you waver from old hero to old drunk? I have every right to remind you, to keep you in line. How can you expect the men to keep from doubting you so long as you continue to doubt yourself?”

Lannick held his eyes straight ahead. His will faltered at times, sure, but he remained determined to see this through.

“I shouldn’t make sure you’re staying true to this?” Brugan asked. “I shouldn’t make certain the resolve hasn’t fled your heart?”

“No,” Lannick said, voice steady. “You think I don’t want a drink now and then? Of course I do. But I’ve stopped blaming myself for the death of my family, and realize now their blood has not stained my hands. It’s General Fane. It was always Fane, and it took me far too long to realize that. Don’t worry, Brugan. I’ll not let my thirst—or any other weakness—keep me from vengeance.”

“That’s it, Lannick,” Brugan said, his tone softening. “You can’t be forgetting that, no matter how hard it is. We can win this thing, but we’ll need every bit of venom and vigor within us all. Keep your edges sharp, lad. Even if it means reopening those old wounds now and again.”



Near evening they caught sight of other riders on the road, four horses and a wagon kicking up yellow dust far ahead. The glint of metal shone upon the riders in the waning sunlight, weapons likely. Crows cawed from a skinny tree then scattered, as though racing to warn the local farmers of strangers on the road.

“Perhaps a few more lads riding to join our cause,” Brugan said, pride lifting his voice. “Cudgen said he’d passed along word

to his relations, not former soldiers but a few capable lads whose father commanded a garrison near the Southwalls. The fellow died at the front because Fane refused to send reinforcements. We can expect them and perhaps more.”

Lannick didn't answer, studying the figures on the road. Two figures on horseback, two others atop a horse-drawn cart. They were well distant but it seemed clear they were riding toward them, not away. What was more, Lannick spied red sashes on their shirts. *The High King's men. Men under Fane's command.*

“More of our lads,” Brugan said, a smile creeping across his face.

“No,” Lannick said, finding the hilt of his sword dangling near his leg. “Fane's men. Keep your weapon ready in case this gets complicated.”

Brugan shaded his eyes with a hand and squinted. After a moment his wide face paled. “Dead gods. There are a couple of lads in the bed of that wagon. I heard rumors of conscriptions, especially after the thanes got word of the desertions at the front. They'd never try that sort of thing in Ironmoor where it'd draw notice but out here in the countryside I reckon it's a different matter. We should leave the road and make for cover.”

Lannick shook his head. “They've seen us already and they'll track us down if that's what they're after. Best to take our chances and try talking our way around any questions.”

“And hope they find no use for a couple of old soldiers?”

“I'd suggest only admitting to being a barkeep and his favorite drunk,” Lannick said through his crooked grin.

Brugan smiled anew. “I can play that part, and have an idea or two. Don't say a word. Pretend you can't hear and can't speak. Leave the talking to me.”

“I usually do.”

The distance between them was closing and soon Lannick could see the figures not only wore the red sashes of the High King's armies but leather armor and plenty of weapons, as well.

The wagon held two young men with hands bound, though it seemed big enough to hold half a dozen or so more. Lannick figured the soldiers were itching to fill it.

“These soldiers aren’t likely to be the hardest of men,” Lannick said. “Perhaps regulars but not the sort needed at the front. Probably old dogs or lame ones.” He frowned and rubbed at his aching jaw. “But then we’re not exactly at our best anymore, either.”

“Speak for yourself,” Brugan said with a huff. He loosened the straps holding his hammer to his saddle. “I can still crack heads with the best of ‘em. I was always gentle with you when I had to toss you from my tavern but most other louts weren’t so lucky.”

Lannick studied the soldiers as they approached. They were much as he expected, two with bellies broad as their horses, the two others with faces pinched from age. Nevertheless, they were well-armed and armored, while Lannick and Brugan had merely a sword and hammer between them.

“Halt, on order of Chamberlain Alamis,” said the fattest one, a man on horseback with a sour sneer twisting his pimply face. He held a hand upraised and pulled his miserable-looking horse to a stop.

“The *chamberlain*?” Brugan chuckled. “Since when is he—”

“Since High King Deragol died two nights back,” the soldier said with an annoyed tone. “Died without an heir, he did.”

A terrible weight fell upon Lannick’s mind and his hand moved to his Coda. *The High King? Dead without an heir?* His thoughts were pulled along an old and almost forgotten course, a feverish curiosity coupled with a driving purpose.

Most regarded the High King as a blithering idiot, but Lannick knew the man and his forebears carried a divine blessing from the goddess Illienne herself. The High King was blessed with Illienne’s grace to rule Rune, and to touch the Godswell where Illienne and Yrghul descended into oblivion a thousand years

before. It was said none but those of that bloodline could touch that eternal gate.

Without the High King, could another open the Godswell? Lannick gripped the box holding his Coda, seized by fear and desperate for the information the Variden were certain to be trading.

“Hadn’t heard that,” Brugan said, shaking Lannick from his thoughts. “Troubling news.”

“Needn’t trouble you fellas,” said another mounted soldier, an old one nearer the wagon with pale eyes and half an ear missing. He had three yellow stripes on his red sash, marking him a sergeant and the leader of this contingent. “We’re still at war and the army needs sword-arms all the same,” the man continued. “You fellas look like you’d make fine fodder for the front.”

Lannick did his best to appear unmoved, but the problem was the more he tried to look like he wasn’t troubled the more troubled he became. He felt sweat beading on his forehead and it wasn’t overly hot.

“Sorry, lads,” said Brugan. “My friend there is deaf. Dumb, too. Can’t hear, can’t talk. I’m a cousin of his—alas, with a trick knee and a few other infirmities myself—taking him back to the family farm so he’s no longer a burden to the good folk of Ironmoor. He can milk a cow maybe, but he’s not good for much else.”

“That so,” said the half-eared sergeant, matter-of-factly. “I reckon I’ve heard worse lies along this road, but a lie’s a lie all the same. You boys look familiar...” He stared to Lannick. “You ever serve?”

Brugan puffed his chest a bit. “I did, and proudly at that. That is until my knee took a hard blow from a hammer in the last war. Sadly my cousin’s afflictions kept him from taking up arms for the Crown.”

“That so,” the sergeant said again, pale eyes narrowing. “I guess my sight must be failing me, ‘cause he looks real familiar.

Clagger, see whether this ‘deaf’ idiot minds a wee whisper in his ear.”

Clagger, the fat one who’d stopped them, clicked his tongue and eased his horse forward. He came even with Lannick and looked to him with a nasty smile. He pulled uncomfortably close, tilting in his saddle until Lannick could see the purple veins on the bulb of his nose and smell his fetid breath.

“Now, lads,” Brugan said, holding his hands out. “We don’t want no trouble, least of all from honorable soldiers of Rune. As I said I served honorably myself many years ago! Men like us—old soldiers—needn’t disagree!”

The sergeant sneered. “Clagger?”

Clagger grabbed Lannick’s chin between plump fingers and drew even closer, bringing his mouth just aside Lannick’s ear. Lannick felt sweat trickle down his brow, wishing very much Brugan had told a very different lie. With his far hand he found the hilt of his sword.

“Good day, lad,” Clagger said softly.

Lannick blinked but did not otherwise move, keeping his eyes straight ahead and playing the role of deaf mute.

“I said...” Clagger said again, his voice rising and its volume becoming painful.

He’s going to shout. Shout as loud as he can.

Lannick wasn’t about to have his ear ruined. *Damn it, Brugan!*

He heard Clagger’s deep inhalation. Then Lannick gave the fellow a hard pop in the gut with his elbow followed by a fierce whack to the throat with the back of his fist. Clagger reeled backward, struggling for balance with flailing arms. He teetered and fell from his horse with a heavy thud.

“To arms!” screamed the half-eared sergeant, struggling for his sword as his horse wheeled beneath him. The soldiers driving the wagon followed suit while Clagger kicked at the dirt, hands pressed against his throat as he gasped.

Brugan freed his hammer from its straps. He pulled his horse

close to one of the soldiers seated atop the wagon. Brugan twisted the hammer back and made ready to swing.

Lannick ripped his sword from its scabbard and dropped from his horse. He moved straight at Clagger. The man's eyes bulged with fear as Lannick closed upon him. He struggled upon his back, waving hands frantically. Lannick noticed the man's sword in a scabbard on his horse but the beast meandered a dozen or so spans away.

Lannick felt a hint of mercy stir within him. Then the nearby crack of Brugan's hammer against bone forced such notions from his head.

There can be no half-measures now. No turning back.

He plunged his blade into the man, through a pleading hand, a layer of hardened leather and into the chest beneath.

Lannick pried his blade from the corpse and looked about. The soldier Brugan had struck twitched on the dirt beside the wagon, half his head turned into a bloody crater by Brugan's hammer.

Only two soldiers remained, the two older ones. The veterans. The half-eared sergeant with a dented blade in hand and a hooded, squint-eyed codger standing in the wagon's bed with a bow drawn.

Lannick focused on the bowman knowing the half-eared sergeant was too far away to do him harm. This man with the arrow nocked was the man who could kill him now.

The twang of the bow sounded.

Lannick lurched ahead and arched his back inward, contorting as an arrow whistled behind him. He rushed forward and pressed near Clagger's wayward horse, keeping its mass between him and the archer. He snatched the horse's reins and tried to guide it ahead. He cooed in its ear and scratched its shoulder but the horse fought and stamped its hooves.

There were grunts and the clang of metal. Lannick knew Brugan had engaged the sergeant. With any luck the big

barkeep would avoid the blade long enough to whack it from its wielder's hands.

The bowstring sang again. Lannick ducked beside the horse as a shaft whizzed overhead. "Move, beast!" he urged, seizing its withers in a fist and pushing forward. At last the horse yielded and began prancing along a roundabout course toward the archer.

Lannick chanced a look over the saddle. He saw Brugan and the sergeant grappling, both atop their mounts but in peril of being unhorsed. Each held the arm of the other, their weapons swaying overhead but incapable of being put to use. Black blood colored Brugan's sleeve. Lannick guessed that but for the wound the barkeep would have overpowered his opponent before now.

Twang!

Lannick ducked behind the horse just before hearing the *thunk* of an arrow sinking into flesh. He hissed as the horse beside him shuddered.

The beast reared clumsily and fell. Lannick barely managed to dance away before the falling steed could crush his legs. A shaft protruded from the horse's neck, the wood still quivering.

Not more than twenty feet away the squint-eyed archer stood atop the cart. He drew another arrow from his quiver.

Lannick saw his moment and ran. There was no cover between him and the bow but the distance was short and the archer unready. Lannick drew back his blade, roaring as he did.

The archer nocked the arrow to his bow but wasn't quick enough. Lannick leapt over the cart's edge between the wide-eyed conscripts. He dove headlong into the man, knocking him from the wagon. They fell in a tangled heap and Lannick barely managed to pull his head clear of the arrowhead.

The archer flailed but couldn't stop Lannick's sword from piercing his ribs. He clawed at Lannick with empty hands, then fell still as Lannick twisted the blade and drove it deeper. Lannick rolled away and rubbed blood from his eyes.

He sucked in a deep breath and lay there. He listened, but

there were no grunts or shuffles or clashes of steel. He exhaled. It seemed Brugan had managed to smash his hammer into the sergeant's skull.

"That so," came a deadpanned tone. "Seems you're not much of a soldier after all."

Lannick jerked upward. There, just half a dozen yards away, the half-eared sergeant sat on his horse, leering triumphantly over Brugan. The big barkeep struggled to his knees, his sleeve soaked through with blood and another spot welling on his opposite shoulder. He reached for his hammer with shaking hands but it was too far for him to grasp.

Lannick tugged at his blade's handle but it wouldn't move, stuck between the fallen archer's ribs. He scrambled about and found the archer's bow and an arrow nearby. He grabbed both then fumbled to fit the arrow against the string.

"No need to stand," the half-eared man said to Brugan. "You'll die just as well on your knees."

Lannick frantically drew the bow, aimed for the man's head, and loosed the arrow. It flew toward him but Lannick had been too hasty. The shaft sailed just wide of its mark.

The sergeant looked away from Brugan, startled. His pale eyes narrowed and he bared his teeth ferociously.

Lannick searched about and spied the archer's quiver. Another chance. He seized a shaft and nocked it.

The sergeant had returned his attention to Brugan who was suddenly out of reach of his blade. The big barkeep had collapsed, whether by wit or weakness Lannick couldn't guess.

"Bah!" the sergeant cursed. But then he hesitated, seemingly trying to decide whether to dismount and finish Brugan or make a move toward Lannick.

Lannick used the moment to aim carefully. He was no marksman but at this short distance and with this time he could shoot true. He breathed in, made certain of his shot, and released the string.

The arrow found its target, sinking into the shoulder of the sergeant's sword-arm. The man grunted in pain and his weapon fell from his hand. "Bah!" he said again.

Lannick snatched another arrow.

The sergeant kicked his horse in the flanks. The beast leapt forward, past Brugan and onto the road. The sergeant looked back at Lannick with what seemed a hateful glare in his eyes. He then charged down the road at a gallop.

Lannick loosed the arrow. It smacked into the horse's haunch. The mount stumbled and clumsily fell, pitching the sergeant from atop it. The horse rolled over the sergeant and then struggled to get upright. The sergeant remained facedown on the road a hundred feet away, immobile.

"Dead gods," Lannick spat. He knew they needed to get clear of the place, and fast. He dropped the bow and rushed toward his friend. "Brugan!"

Brugan groaned and rolled onto his back, a pained grimace on his face. "Bastard fought dirty," he said with a wince. "Kicked my horse and the dumb beast dropped me. Then he stabbed my shoulder when I rushed him. A lucky poke is all. I'll live."

"Lucky," said Lannick in agreement, though he wondered how much of it had been rust and age.

Brugan pulled himself up and stared at his arm, the brown sleeve slick with blood and stuck to the skin. "I don't think it's too deep but I'll need to stitch it. You hiding anything to drink? Any strong spirits?"

Lannick's hand found his purse and then the outline of his flask. He paused for an instant. *No half-measures, and no turning back.* He slapped open the flap and handed the flask to Brugan. "Use all you need, then toss the flask aside. I'll not be needing it any longer."

"Very well, lad." He pressed himself to his feet, swaying slightly and steadying himself against Lannick.

"You shouldn't ride."

“No. I reckon not.”

“Get in the cart. We’ll take it and their horses and head off road.”

“And what of us?” came a timid voice.

Lannick looked to the cart where the bound conscripts still sat. They were skinny fellows, barely older than boys and clad in little more than rags. “Are you lads alright?”

They nodded in unison, grubby faces appearing to ease with relief.

Lannick moved back to the corpse that trapped his sword and with some effort yanked the blade loose. He cleaned the blood and gristle from the weapon then strode to the wagon.

The boys held gangly arms toward him, thin hands squeezed together by thick rope. Lannick set about sawing through the cords and managed to free their bruised and bloodied wrists.

“You can walk?” he asked. “You can ride?”

They stumbled away from the wagon, both rubbing their hands. “Aye,” they answered.

“Very well,” Lannick said. “Take two of the horses and ride away from here as swiftly as you can. There’ll be trouble coming soon,” he said, thinking again of the death of High King Deragol. “Trouble for us all.”



Near nightfall they made camp far from the road, aside a tumble of stones that looked to be an ancient cairn marking some forgotten death or battle. Brugan sat beside a small fire, wincing as he wrapped new bandages about his wounds. He wore a weary look, his wide face showing no hint of the smile that usually warmed it.

Lannick paced farther away, allowing the silence to settle upon them. He studied the land about, the setting sun drawing long shadows across the hillsides. He pulled his green cloak—the

cloak of the Variden—about his shoulders, worrying over threats drawing near.

He worried not over conscripting soldiers, though. His head could manage swinging steel and violent men. He worried of threats far graver. These were near-forgotten thoughts, things he'd not considered in a long time. But now these things troubled his head once again—old worries of ancient evils. Worries of a dark lord thought vanquished a millennium ago and of the vile necromancers who'd persisted in his wake.

The Necrists. With High King Deragol dead and heirless, could the power of the Godswell lay open to them?

He considered also General Fane and the fact the man had struck some black bargain with these creatures. A bargain that initially demanded the life of the general's daughter, and later the life of Lannick, the fallen disciple of the Sentinel Valis.

Lannick had not thought long on this before—his head had been too sullied by drink and grief and shame. Besides, he'd always known Fane to be a madly, viciously ambitious man, and so even some compact with the Necrists seemed something of which he was capable. A bargain, perhaps, for some ill-gotten influence, the answer to some imponderable question, or maybe the perverse return of a loved one long dead...

A shiver seized Lannick as he thought on that last possibility, his head filling with images of the stitched faces of his own wife and children worn by the Necrists who'd hunted him.

He shook it aside as best he could and focused.

Fane had bargained with the Necrists. In light of the warnings of his former Variden brethren that the Spider King had allied with the Necrists—coupled with the news of the death of High King Deragol—Lannick wondered if Fane's dealings had been all the more treacherous. The general had lost battle upon battle to the Spider King's armies, casting his men to the enemy like stones to the sea.

Could he have bargained with the Spider King, as well?

He wondered if the Variden had underestimated the general's role in things and the danger he posed. He wondered if Fane's ambitions stretched so far as to compel the ultimate treachery.

Could he be losing this war by design?

Suddenly, Lannick knew his quest for vengeance had become all the more desperate, all the more vital. The stakes had grown immensely greater, and Lannick knew what would happen if he failed.

His hand found his purse and the outline of his Coda. He reckoned he'd need the thing far sooner than he'd like.

His remembered when the Coda had "chosen" him, as the Variden said. He was a much younger man, only a year past twenty, back when his motives and ideals were still untainted by the corruptions and compromises of age. He'd been traveling from Ironmoor to his father's farm when he stumbled upon an old man, perhaps sixty years of age and wearing a cloak of green. The man's wagon had lost a wheel and the fellow fumbled about trying to refit it to the axle. Lannick offered to help but upon seeing him the man succumbed to some sort of swoon and collapsed aside the wagon.

"It is yours to bear!" the man had gasped when he awoke. With shaking hands he'd seized Lannick's wrist, then threw upon it a heavy bracelet of black iron.

The Coda had snapped shut on his arm like the maw of some terrible beast. Lannick was horrified, and his head flooded then with an agonizing torrent of visions. He'd seen then—through the Sentinel Valis's eyes—the form of Yrghul the Lord of Nightmares, a monstrosity of bone and swirling shadows, standing triumphant upon the ruins of Ironmoor. His eyes had burned as Illienne illuminated the darkness, and he'd watched in awe as she diminished while divesting her divine power. He'd felt the surge of that power as a part of Illienne's divinity filled Valis, forcing his mind to burn and his limbs to tremble. He'd felt Valis's confusion when Illienne told the Sentinels she needed to descend

to oblivion with her dark twin in order to defeat him. And he'd felt a cold fury in his heart as Valis and the other Sentinels rushed to Illienne's side in her final struggle, falling upon Yrghul with vicious blades and sending both gods to oblivion.

And, too, he'd felt Valis's disgust upon being banished from Rune, and his steely resolve to hold true to his oath while he and the other Sentinels were led in chains over the Southwalls. Lastly, he'd felt the sharp point of the knife—wielded by Valis's own hand—against Valis's throat as he'd made ready to pour his power into the Coda he'd forged, thereby carrying out his oath through his followers, the Variden.

Then the cascade of the Variden's voices had struck Lannick. They'd assailed him with a barrage of welcomes and warnings, followed by whispers of history's secrets. Ominous accounts of a war in the shadows of the world, a desperate battle against those foul necromancers who'd remained true to Yrghul. Tales of an eternal vigil, a watch against the Necrists and other enemies in Rune and foreign lands.

His world had changed that day. It had expanded to a vast realm of uncertainty and peril, a place stalked by foes who'd not rest until their vile master had risen from death and laid waste to the living.

He'd agreed to take the oath of the Variden, and keep at bay those forces lurking in the dark.

Lannick felt again the weight of that oath. He'd sworn to remain ever watchful against Rune's most ancient and most powerful enemies, those forces common folk were either merrily ignorant of or thought of as villains in fairy tales. For most, the truth of the existence of the enemy had faded from memory and into myth as the world moved on from the dead gods.

But the Variden are sworn to remember. And in the nine years after my family's murder I permitted myself to forget.

He paced farther from the camp, holding his Coda in his hands. He drew it close, studying in the fading light the lines

etched across its dull surface—words of power in the very language of gods.

The weapon with which to fight the shadows.

A notion struck him, and he exhaled with a whistle through his chipped tooth. Codas left their bearers when those men and women died or grew infirm or useless. Just as his Coda had chosen Lannick, it could have chosen another after he'd hammered it from his wrist those many years before. It would have sensed his thoughts, his failure and despair, and would have compelled him to give it to another more suited to carry on the fight.

Yet it didn't, even when I abandoned the others.

As they had many times of late, his thoughts turned to Fane. This time, though, those thoughts carried a new urgency. If Fane was in league with the enemy, then the man *needed* to be slain. His leadership had brought nothing but ruin, and had allowed the Spider King to march nearly undeterred through Rune's southern reaches with only an illusion of resistance. Rune's armies needed to be freed from the deception of his treachery, or they'd have no chance at all of beating back the Arranese.

Lannick knew, then, that this was why his Coda remained his and his alone. His purpose, vengeance, was now intertwined with that of the Variden.

He sniffed. He'd not be lashing the Coda to his wrist anytime soon—he didn't fancy the idea of old comrades poking about in his head.

No. My grief and regrets are mine alone to possess.

He looked outward, across the darkening landscape fading beneath the blanket of night. He was very likely headed to his death, as were a good many folk finer than he. The task would be as great a one as the kingdom had ever faced. There'd be horrors unimaginable ahead.

There seemed an inevitability to that. An impending doom that inspired at the same time it frightened, for it left no room for half-measures or turning back.

This was his path.

This was his purpose.

This was how he'd avenge those he'd loved.

He would kill Fane. And after Fane's death, he'd wage war with Fane's army against the Spider King and his Necrist allies. And in doing so, perhaps he'd save the kingdom.

A crooked smile crept to his face.

Captain Lannick deVeers, he thought. *Protector of Ironmoor*, indeed.