

Blackveil

(sample chapter)

by

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BLACKVEIL

“Remember, we are all prey here.”

As one, Grandmother’s retainers glanced down at the puddle of blood soaking into the duff of the forest floor. It was all that remained of Regin.

“Do not step outside the wards,” Grandmother said, “where I cannot protect you.”

As if to augment her words, a bestial cry rang out from the forest. Sarat whimpered, and the others shifted uneasily.

Grandmother said some appropriate words in memory of Regin. He’d been a good, strong porter, always helpful with camp and obedient to her every wish, and devout in the ways of Second Empire. During their break, he had left them to relieve himself. By necessity, the warding Grandmother set when they were stopped for a mere break was not great in circumference. Regin had taken but a couple steps too many past its protection. They heard his scream, its sharp cut-off, and he was gone.

Blackveil Forest was dangerous. Perhaps the most dangerous place on Earth. Grandmother frequently reminded her people of the forest’s treachery, but Regin proved that a moment of inattention could be one’s last. A harsh lesson to them all.

It did not help anyone’s flagging spirits they were lost. Again.

She pulled her hood up against the unceasing drizzle. It was late winter, but snow never seemed to reach the ground here. It was as if the whiteness of snow was too pure, too clean, to exist within the darkness of the forest. The drizzle seeped through the canopy of crooked tree boughs and matted clumps of pine needles, and anything that dwelled here lived in perpetual dusk. At night, the blackness was total.

Blackveil was the product of conquest and defeat. Long ago, Grandmother’s ancestors, led by Mornhavon the Great, sailed from the empire of Arcosia to the shores of the New Lands

seeking resources and riches. Not only did they find these in abundance, but also resistance from the native people who rejected the will of the empire, sparking a hundred years of war.

The first land to fall to the empire was the Eletian realm of Argenthayne, which covered the whole of a peninsula that bordered Ullem Bay to the east. Mornhavon made it his capitol, renamed it Mornhavonia, and at first his campaigns to quash rebellion and dominate the New Lands went well, but then supplies and reinforcements stopped coming from the empire.

Abandoned, with dwindling forces, and many enemies arrayed against him, Mornhavon fell in defeat.

The Sacoridians then walled off the peninsula, trapping within the residue of darkness left behind by Mornhavon. The perversions he created with the art festered here for a millennium. The forest rotted amid etherea defiled by the use of the black arts during the war, gripping the land and spreading like a disease; ignored, neglected, and forgotten, until an Eletian coveting the residual magical power of the forest breached the D'Yer Wall three years ago.

Their journey through the forest was not only dangerous, but toilsome. They attempted to follow an ancient road of upheaved cobblestones. Sometimes it vanished into bogs or was swallowed by masses of thorny undergrowth. Patiently they sought ways around the obstructions and more than once found themselves led astray along remnants of side roads, or following paths toward traps set by wily predators.

This time an impenetrable thicket of scrubby trees, exhibiting wicked dagger-like thorns, had blocked the road and sent them off course. During trials such as these, Grandmother began to believe their situation hopeless, for she could not even consult the sun or stars for direction in this cloaked, shadowed place. She thought they'd die, forever lost in the tangled wilderness of the forest. She assumed they might yet. Their chances of survival, even if they found their way back to the road, were not good.

She was careful never to convey her doubts to the others. She could not. She must hold them together. They expressed complete faith in her, believed she would bring them through this. But if she fell apart, they'd fall apart, too, so she maintained a façade of confidence, even though it was a lie.

She gazed upon her weary retainers. There were only five of them now. Five, plus her true granddaughter, Lala, who sat upon a slimy log playing string games. Lala never issued any complaint, remained implacable as ever, trusting in her grandmother.

To find the road again, Grandmother would have to use the art, and do so before Regin's death, and fear, had a chance to grip her people. From the basket she carried over her wrist, she removed a skein of red yarn and cut a length of it with a knife that hung from her belt. Her fingers were cold and stiff, but moved nimbly to tie knots, and as she did so, she spoke words of power.

In Blackveil, she was cautious when it came to using the art. The etherea of the place was unstable, tainted, and apt to warp even the simplest spell. She'd discovered this the hard way when she tried to ignite an ordinary campfire with a touch of power to the kindling. A tree beside her exploded into flame, almost torching her skirts. Fortunately the forest was so damp the blaze

did not spread to a full-scale forest fire, but after that, she did not draw upon magic, except in need for wardings and wayfinding, and even then, reluctantly.

When she finished tying knots, she breathed on them, and they tightened inward of their own volition, flexing and melding together into a single mass that transformed into a luminous, red salamander perched on her palm. Her people, she knew, still only saw a snarled wad of yarn.

“Find the road,” she commanded the salamander, for it was a compass.

It gazed at her with eyes of coal, and lashed its serpentine tail this way and that until it settled on a direction, pointing the way with its tail. The others probably saw nothing more than a loose end of yarn lifting in an air current.

“We must carry on,” Grandmother said to her people. “We must continue our journey. Regin would wish it.”

Swiftly they took up their packs, one or two with tears in their eyes. They redistributed Regin’s burden, setting aside personal items of his they could not use. Grandmother then turned, stepping carefully through the forest, following the direction indicated by the magic salamander’s tail.

In a moment, Lala was there beside her, grasping her free hand. Grandmother smiled down at her. Lala gave her the strength to carry on, as did her conviction that the empire must rise again.