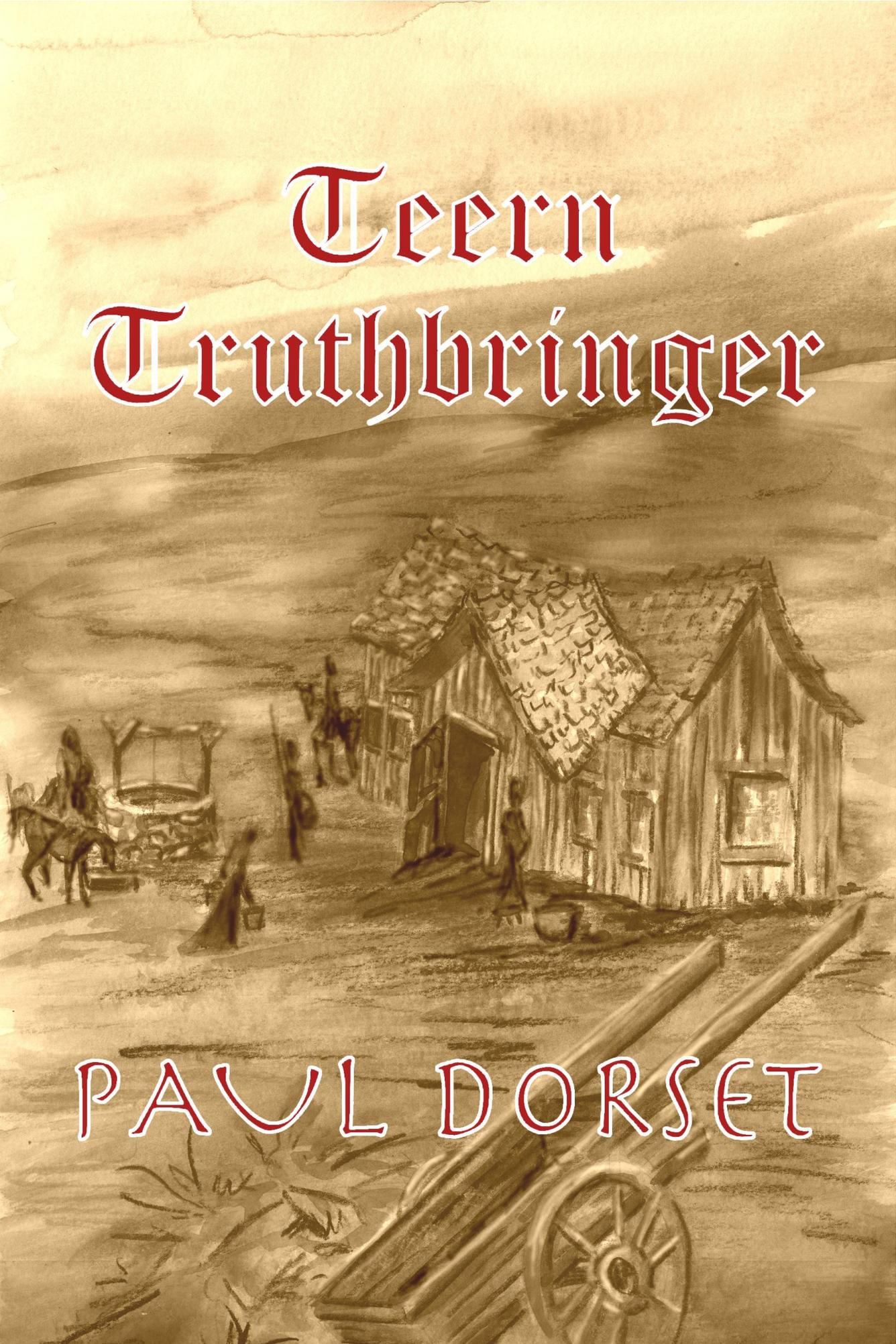


Teern Truthbringer

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Teern Truthbringer

(An Introduction to 'The Southern Lands')

A Short Story by Paul Dorset

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First Edition

Chapter 1

“Teern,” his father called out, throwing the young man a sword as he turned toward him. “Teern, catch!”

Teern reached out and grabbed the hilt of the sword, quickly moving his hands into position. “What is it?”

“Kriks,” his father replied. “Coming down the hill and headed this way. We need to be ready.”

Teern threw down the bag he had been holding in his other hand and ran toward the far side of the room. He pulled on his tightly fitting leather breastplate and secured it at the side. “How many?”

“Just three or four I think,” his father replied, moving into position behind a window. “And hopefully they will pass us by.” He motioned for his son to join him by his side. “Your mother is already taking her hiding position.”

Teern stood behind his father’s shoulder, trying to follow his line of sight. In the far distance he spotted the small, squat figures coming down the hillside toward them. It had only been during the last couple of years they had been bothered by the kriks. Before that they had lived, mostly in solitude, on the outskirts of Treloon in their farmhouse. Teern watched as the kriks drew near. Yes, there were four of them. Each was about three feet high and naked except for a cloth that covered their loins. In their hands they each carried a two-bladed dagger they called a tissop. Teern took a sharp intake of breath and drew back a little into the shadows to watch them. He knew now not to underestimate their size. Their skins were as tough as wizened leather and they could move with tremendous agility. Their tissops were usually poison-tipped and a single cut could mean your death. Teern prayed they would pass their house by.

Teern’s father grabbed his son’s arm. “It looks like we’re going to have to fight them, son. Just remember everything I have taught you. If we work together we can beat them.” He watched as the lead krik pointed at the farmhouse and turned toward it.

“I am with you, father.” Teern took a step back from his father and followed him from the room. In seconds they were standing outside, side by side, fifty paces away from the kriks. He raised his sword and waited for the attack.

The kriks let out blood-curdling screams and rushed toward the two men. They all arrived together, tissops swinging, and started their attack on Teern and his father. Teern’s father swung his two-handed sword and cleaved the first krik’s head from its shoulders. He didn’t stop to watch it roll away from the house as before he could turn about another krik was upon him. Teern engaged another krik and the two of them exchanged blows, neither one making a direct hit on the other. Teern forced the krik to back away from the house and he tried to search for his father with his eyes.

“Father, where are you? We need to stay together.”

“I am here,” his father replied, a short distance away to Teern’s left. “Just give me a few seconds.”

Teern briefly glanced toward his father before swinging another blow at the krik. “Where’s the other one? There were four.”

“I don’t know,” his father shouted.

“Mother!” Teern instinctively knew where the other krik was. It had entered unnoticed into their house. “I need to protect mother.”

“These two first, Teern. She is well hidden. Let’s just...”

Teern’s father’s words were cut short by a scream from inside the house. “Mother!” Teern screamed again. He made one final cut at the krik and turned to run. He was inside the house within seconds, scrambling to keep his footing as he slid on the dirt that covered the doorway. “No!” he screamed again as he steadied himself against the wall and came face to face with the other krik. “No!” Teern dropped to the floor and rolled toward the krik. With a lunging effort he thrust his sword upward into the creature’s belly, catching it completely by surprise. He lay on the ground and pulled his sword from the krik’s stomach. He rolled again and came to face to face with the open eyes of his mother as her severed head landed next to him, quickly followed by the dead body of the krik. “Mother!”

But there wasn’t time to think on this now. He had to get back to his father. He had left him alone with two kriks and he was supposed to fight side by side with his father. It was the safest way. They had to fight together. As one unit. He scrambled to his feet again and launched himself toward the door. He half-fell outside, just in time to see one of the kriks push its tissop deep into his father’s chest. No, this couldn’t be happening. Not today. This wasn’t real. He pushed himself fully to his feet and charged at the mass of flesh, swinging his sword as he ran. With a scream he arrived next to the first of the kriks and easily detached the creature’s arm as his sword cut through it. Another swing

and the krik was lying on the ground, blood burbling from its throat. Teern turned again and took another couple of steps toward where his father was clutching at his chest; the remaining krik stood over him ready to make the final death blow. Teern shouted out as loud as he could and swung his sword at the krik's shoulders. No, this was unreal. He saw it all in slow motion as the tissop sank once more into his father's chest. He saw the krik twist the tissop, tearing his father's chest apart as he lay in disbelief on the ground. And Teern watched as the krik's head fell from its shoulders as his own sword struck its mark. He fell onto the two bodies and passed out.

The sun was beginning to sink behind the mountains as Teern came to his senses. He rolled off the krik's body and pushed its head away from him before raising himself to a sitting position. He took his long braid of ginger hair in his hand and threw it back behind his head. His father. How was his father? Teern turned his head around and saw his father's body lying on the ground a couple of paces away from him. It was too late. He could see his father was dead. He was lying lifeless with his sword still clasped in his hand. Tears fell from Teern's eye. He reached his arm down to bear his weight so that he could get to his feet. A stabbing pain went through him. He had been cut. He could see the blood clearly now. It had only been a glancing blow but it had been enough to let a little poison enter him. That must have been why he had passed out. "Damn!" he shouted. "Damn those kriks." Carefully, Teern got to his feet and examined his arm. It would be okay. It just needed a little time to heal.

"I am sorry, father," he cried, standing over his father's body. "I couldn't protect her and then I left you. Now you have both paid the price." Teern fell to his knees once more and wept.

Chapter 2

It had taken Teern a while to regain the strength to dig shallow graves behind their farmhouse early the next morning and to place his parents' bodies lovingly within. He stood over the covered graves and said a few words to the Power Almighty. "I commit these people to your care, Almighty One. Please accept them and treat them well, for they have treated me so specially on this earth. They did no wrong in their lives and did not deserve to die like this. Please take them into your promised land." He sprinkled a little damp earth on the graves and made the sign of the sacrament, placing the first two fingers of his right hand across his chest and the first two fingers of his left hand to his forehead, eyes lowered. "Thank you, Almighty One."

After he had stood a while in silent contemplation, Teern roughly gathered up the bodies of the kriks and dragged them to the far corner of their land, piling them one on the other. He would leave them for the birds and scavengers to pick on. It was all they deserved.

When it was done Teern went back inside his house and stripped naked to cleanse himself of the dirt and the memories. He poured cold water over his shoulders and shivered as it ran the length of his body. What he was to do now he had no idea. Everything he knew, his life, and his daily routine, was based at the farm. In truth, his parents had had him late in life and he had forsaken an early marriage in order to continue helping his father keep the small farm going. Now what was he to do? Farming wasn't something he had expected to do all his life. No, he had known this day would come sooner or later. But not in this fashion. No, not in this way. Not for his parents to be so cruelly taken from him. Another tear rolled down his face as he lowered the water pitcher to the floor and pulled a piece of cloth from the tabletop to dry himself.

When he had re-dressed, Teern strapped his sword to his back and took a few

possessions and as many coins as he could find, and set off toward the city of Treloon. His intentions were to find the king's guard and tell them of the kriks. Perhaps they could offer some help and even hunt the remainder of them out. In truth he doubted they would even bother. Raiding sorties by the kriks had become more common of late and the city folk seemed mostly unconcerned.

Teern determinedly walked along the dusty track that led toward the city for about an hour until it joined with a larger, more traveled road. In the distance to his left he could see the city. Treloon was not a walled city, unlike many others he had heard about. His father had told him there had never been a need. Treloon was situated on the coast and in the far east of the country of Triluika. The occasional sortie of kriks, well outside the city, was all the danger the city knew.

As the sun slowly set in the western sky behind him, Teern finally reached the outskirts of the city. He knew that the king's men usually gathered in the Castle Inn and he made his way through the city, not stopping to return the stares he received from the people he passed. Most knew who he was; he had come to the city often enough. And he knew he stood out from the crowd, being taller than most and carrying his long ginger braid behind his back. The sight of him now, with his long sword strapped to him as well, was enough to turn many heads. Finally he reached the Castle Inn and made his way inside.

"Sirs," he called out, crossing to a table where several of the king's guards were playing dice and drinking wine. "I come with bad news."

One of the men, a portly man with rosy cheeks, looked up from his cup and got to his feet. "Stand your ground," he said, fingering the hilt of his sword. "What business do you have here?"

Teern smiled, stopped short of the table and let his hands drop to his sides. "Sirs. I am Teern Holderness. My family. We were attacked by kriks. They killed my father and my mother. I myself was injured but managed to kill them all. I come asking for help to seek out the others and have them killed."

Several of the men at the table laughed. "Others?" the portly man asked. "Where are the others?"

"There must be others, sir. We have seen many raiding parties of late, coming down from the Broken Mountains."

"There are only a few, lad. And if, as you say, you killed them then they'll like as not not bother you again." He retook his seat at the table and took a swig from his wine. "Well?" he asked, looking up to see Teern still standing his ground. "Anything else?"

"What am I to do now, sir? My parents have been killed. Am I just to return home and continue as if nothing has happened?"

The portly man laughed. "Welcome to life in the city, lad." He picked up the dice and threw them across the table. "Now be off with you and don't disturb the king's guard again."

Teern stood and watched the men in disbelief for a moment before turning and walking back across the floor of the inn. He placed a copper coin down on a table and picked up a full mug of beer and eagerly gulped it down. Then without another word he turned and left the inn.

It was already dark when Teern crossed back into the street. It was too late for him to safely make his way back to the farm that evening, so instead he followed the roadway down toward the water. The road was well-lit with light from the many houses that lined the road, and a short while later he was standing by the water's edge, looking out across the silent reaches of the water. "The Sea of Dreams," he muttered to himself. That is what they called it. It was an inlet from the ocean proper that could only be entered by a rough and narrow passage. None dared it and so the waterway was mostly empty, save for a few men that gave passage across the bay from Treloon to Costa Bar in Caldor.

Teern turned along the shoreline and walked northward along the rocky beach. Within a few minutes the lights of the city receded behind him and the only thing he could see was the rough outline of the water's edge lit by the light of the full moon. In the far distance, across the vast expanse of water, he could make out the lights of Costa Bar. Perhaps one day he would go there. It was said to be a place of intrigue and adventure.

Teern found a rock that jutted up from the shore and he sat down upon it. He unfastened his sword and laid it by his side. He let his feet dangle over the water, and from time to time they were wetted by waves that crashed nearby. What was he going to do? How was he going to survive? In the space of a few short hours his life had been turned completely upside down. Another tear flowed from his eye and he let it run the length of his face and drop silently onto the rock below.

Chapter 3

Teern tossed and turned as his restless body gave way to an uncomfortable sleep atop the rock. The rhythmic crash of the waves kept his eyelids heavy and his mind free from distraction. Teern fell into a heavy sleep and dreamed.

“What say you, soldier?” the captain asked.

“We fight of course,” Teern replied.

“Already? The men have hardly had time to recover from the latest skirmish.”

“We don’t have the time,” said Teern, already fastening his sword and testing its blade. “I have to protect the boy.”

“If you are sure.” The captain turned to his men and made a signal. In the distance a hundred men readied themselves once more for battle. “What is so special about this boy, anyway?”

“He is in my protection, sir. It is a matter I have no choice over.”

The captain nodded and strode back toward his men. “Guard him well, soldier. We are still several days from home.”

Teern nodded and glanced behind him to stare at the boy. It was difficult to clearly see his features; it was as if his vision blurred the more he looked at him. “Come boy. Stay close.” Teern blinked to try and clear his sight, but it was to no avail. “I will protect you.”

Teern muttered in his sleep and his eyelids flickered. The crash of a wave awoke him from his slumber and he sat bolt upright on his rock, hands reaching for his sword in the half-light of the pre-dawn sky. He looked about him but couldn’t see the boy. “Where are you?” he said out loud, before catching himself. It must have been a dream.

There was no boy. There was no army. There was only him, alone on a rock by the shoreline of the Sea of Dreams. He smiled to himself. Yes, the Sea of Dreams. This was probably why it was so aptly named. Just a foolish dream. He rubbed his eyes and refastened his sword before getting up and sliding down the rock to stand once more on the rocky shoreline. Just a dream.

Teern splashed some sea water over his face before turning around to retrace his steps back to the city. He still didn't know what he was going to do. It would be nearly impossible to run the farm on his own, even though he knew everything he must do. Maybe if he could get some help. Or a wife. He laughed out loud. The very thought of that seemed absurd given his current circumstances. He didn't even know where he would meet such a woman. He squeezed out a few drops of water from his braid and slowly made his way back along the shoreline.

"Well met," a youth's voice greeted him as Teern turned onto the path that led away from the sea.

Teern stopped and stared at the boy of about fifteen years who was standing in front of him. He blinked his eyes and tried to make out his features in the poor dawn light. "Greetings."

The youth gave a little bow. "I'm Pip. I live around here but I've never seen you before."

Teern absentmindedly put a hand to the hilt of his sword. "Teern." He replied. "I am from the outskirts of the city. From the foothills of the Broken Mountains."

"You're a long way from home," Pip said, smiling and throwing down a small rock to the ground. "What you doing here?"

Teern squinted at the boy and tried to focus on him. Was this the boy of his dreams? It seemed an odd coincidence. "I might ask you the same thing, Pip."

Pip laughed. "I told you. I live here." He gestured toward the sea. "Right here. Ain't got no home. I just make myself comfortable here."

"Did you see me in the night?" Teern asked, still a little unsure of himself.

"What?"

"In the night. Did you see me here?"

Pip cocked his head at an angle and stared up at Teern. "You alright? It's too dark to see nothing at night. What are you saying?"

Teern smiled. "Just a dream, Pip. Just a dream." He took a step toward the boy and ran a hand over the top of his head. "You hungry?"

Pip fell into step alongside Teern as they made their way back into the city. As the light of the early morning slowly penetrated the streets about them, they found the marketplace and waited while a few of the vendors set up for the day.

“Some bread?” Teern asked, not waiting for Pip’s reply. He handed over a copper to the vendor and took a loaf and a small piece of cheese. He broke off a large piece and gave it to Pip. “You look like you need this.”

“Thanks, sir,” Pip replied, eagerly biting into the bread. “I don’t get a lot to eat. This is a real treat.” His hand grabbed at the piece of cheese Teern was offering and he nibbled at the edges, smiling as he ate.

“You live on the beach?”

Pip nodded, trying to swallow down what was in his mouth. “Yeah. Ran away from home last harvest-time. Me father wanted me to marry this girl from the city but I didn’t like her much.” He took another bite of the bread and chewed noisily. “I decided it was time to explore the country a little.”

“Where did you live?”

“Brindle,” Pip replied, spitting a little as he spoke. “Ain’t too far from here.” He smiled a wicked grin. “Not that I’ve been back since.”

Teern laughed. “Indeed. So do you have any plans?” Pip shook his head. “Would you like to earn a little money? I have a farm and I need some help for a while. It is honest money.”

Pip stopped walking and stared up at Teern. “Honest?”

“Yes,” Teern laughed. “Honest.”

Pip raised his hand to his mouth and spat on it. He offered it to Teern to shake. “Deal then.”

Teern laughed once more. “It’s a deal.” He ignored Pip’s outstretched hand and put a little cheese into his mouth. “Come on, there’s lots to do. We need to make haste back to the farm.”

“Do you have any weapons?” Teern asked as they approached the farm a few hours later.

Pip shook his head. “Just a small knife.” He pulled it from his tunic and showed it to Teern.

“In that case just stay out of sight.” Teern unfastened his sword and pulled it free from its sheath. “Stay here.”

“Where are you going?” Pip asked, running alongside Teern.

“Stay here. I can see people at my farmhouse. I knew I shouldn’t have abandoned it for a day.” He pushed at Pip. “Wait here.”

Teern set off at a full run toward his home, brandishing his sword as he went. He turned onto the pathway that led to the main door and shouted out loud. “Halt! Who are you? This is my home. Leave it immediately.”

A skinny man appeared in the doorway. He looked back over his shoulder and said something that Teern couldn’t hear. Two more men appeared carrying small daggers that glinted in the sunlight.

“This is my home,” Teern repeated. “Get out of here.”

The skinny man pulled a dagger from his belt and stepped forward toward Teern. “Says who?” He turned to his accomplices. “Men?”

Teern strode into the three of them, striking one across the front of his arm, clean severing it off. Another of the men lunged at Teern’s back but Teern was quicker and put his sword through the man’s stomach before he could get close enough to do any damage. The third man, seeing his fallen colleagues, turned and ran. Teern watched as Pip gave chase for a small distance before he stopped and turned back toward the farmhouse. Teern stood over the armless man and put his sword tip to the man’s throat. “Who are you?”

The man’s eyes rolled in his head as he half-stared at his arm stump that was gushing blood. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. With a quick flick of his wrists, Teern cut open the man’s throat and took a step away from him to turn to face the other man. He too was already beyond help and gasping for his last few breaths of life. Teern turned back toward Pip. “Come, we have a lot of work to do today. It seems you have arrived at a fortuitous time.”

Chapter 4

Pip helped Teern carry the bodies of the two men away from the farmhouse toward the place where the already rotting bodies of the kriks lay. "Who are these?" he asked.

Teern's face dropped. "The monsters that killed my family. Still, they have met their fate." He dropped a man's body on top of one of the kriks and kicked a little dirt over him. "That's more than he deserves." He waited for Pip to do the same before he turned back to face the farmhouse. "Come, let us go clean up the mess. I fear it will take us some time."

Pip dropped in beside Teern and they walked back in silence across the small field that bordered the farmhouse. "Who is that?" Pip asked, pointing away into the distance at a figure that was making its way along the dusty path toward the farmhouse. "Another of the bandits?"

"I do not think so," Teern replied, staring hard at the figure. "It looks like a woman to me. Although just what a woman is doing here is quite beyond me." He continued walking toward the farmhouse and stopped just outside, waiting for the woman in the long red fur-trimmed cloak to arrive. "Greetings."

The woman rested on her staff and looked up smiling at Teern. She was in her middle years and had a look of serenity about her face. "Greetings," she replied, making the sign of the sacrament. "May I have a cup of water?"

"Who are you?" asked Pip, taking a step toward the woman and fingering his dagger."

Teern put an arm across Pip's body and pressed him back. "She is a traveling woman. She is no danger to us."

The woman smiled once again. "Your friend is right to be cautious," she said, turning to Teern. "There are many who would seek your death."

Teern let his arm drop from from Pip and fell open-mouthed. "My death?"

The woman raised an open palm and said a few indistinguishable words. A small

flame seemed to flicker and take light atop the woman's fingers. "Greetings Teern Truthbringer. I have searched hard and long to find you."

Teern stood transfixed by the flames that were still flickering on the woman's fingertips. "Teern. Teern Truthbringer?" he mumbled. "That is not my name."

"It is how you are to be called," the woman replied, letting the flames on her fingers grow skyward to envelop the three of them. "Do not be afraid. I am a Mother of Perception and I am come to find you, to give you prophecy."

Teern shivered as the cool blue flames engulfed him as he stood. He couldn't understand why they were not burning him. "What kind of magic is this, Mother?"

"I am called Juventas. As I have told you, I have been searching for you."

"Why?" Teern replied, looking about him to see if there was some kind of trickery involved. "I have heard of the mothers before, but never have I met one."

Juventas smiled and banged her staff hard on the ground in front of her. At once the flame extinguished itself. "You are Teern Truthbringer, soldier of Treloon. You have a great destiny."

"But that is not my name, Mother Juventas. Surely I am known as Teern, but my family is not so named as Truthbringer."

"Henceforth you shall be known by this name. You must go forth from here and find your place in the king's army. There you will fight in battle and your destiny will become clear to you."

Teern stood staring in disbelief at Juventas. "But," he started. But he did not know what else to say as suddenly he realized he was no longer standing at his farm. "Where are we?" He took a step forward, away from the edge of the cliff on which he was standing.

Juventas smiled once again. "You see what you believe and I have played my part. Now you must go forward and claim your destiny." The Mother flung an outstretched hand at the ground in front of Teern and it erupted in flames.

Teern took an involuntary step back and was suddenly lost to the open air beyond the cliff's edge. "No!" he screamed out as he fell.

"What happened?" Pip shouted, pushing at Teern as he lay on the ground.

Teern opened his eyes to see the questioning face of Pip. He looked to his right and his left. "Where is she?"

"The woman?" Pip asked. "I don't know. There were blue flames and then I couldn't see or hear anything. Then they were gone and you were lying on the ground,

screaming out." He locked eyes with Teern. "And the woman. She too is gone. I can find no trace of her."

Teern sat up and got to his feet. "You did not hear what she said to me?" Pip shook his head. "She made a prophecy over me and gave me a new name. I have never witnessed anything like this before."

"It was a magic," said Pip. "We should seek her out and kill her."

Teern brushed the dirt from his clothes and shook his head. "I don't think it was a bad magic. I have heard of these women before. There are a few of them that travel the lands, freeing it from evils where they can. It is an ancient magic, taught from the animals it is told. And it was me she was seeking out."

Pip pulled his dagger free from his belt and brandished it in front of him. "Still, I am not convinced."

"Come, we must hurry to the city once more." Teern pulled roughly at Pip and set off toward the track that led away from the farm.

"And what about the things we were to do inside the farmhouse?"

Teern stopped, turning back toward Pip and smiling. "True enough, Pip. I fear we may be gone a long time. I should gather a few things before we set off."

Pip waited while Teern went inside the farmhouse and collected some of his possessions together. Soon Teern had packed a small bag that he slung across his shoulders. "Where are we going?" Pip asked.

"To the city. I told you. We are to fight with the king's army, although I am not sure where I am to find them."

Pip laughed. "I can help you with that, Teern. There is usually a contingent of the king's men supping in the Castle Inn."

Teern smiled. "I know they sup in the Castle Inn, but I need to find the fighting army. It seems I have a destiny."

"Well, it's as good a place to start as any." Pip fingered his dagger, making sure it was wiped clean, and replaced it in his belt. "A destiny, eh? I've never met anyone with a destiny before."

Chapter 5

It was turning to night again as Teern and Pip made their way inside the Castle Inn and sought out a small contingent of the king's guard. Teern took a seat beside one of the men that was dicing with another. "Hail. I am Teern Holderness and I seek to join your army."

The man rolled his dice and looked across at Teern. "You do?" he asked, laughing as he spoke and gathering up the dice again. "You're just a boy. Come back in a few years, lad." The other men at the table joined in the laughter.

Teern got to his feet and unsheathed his sword, causing a near riot in the confined space. Immediately the men had risen to their feet and two sword tips were raised and pointed at Teern's throat. "If you would like to test my mettle," Teern said, swallowing. He lowered his sword.

The guard nodded to his men and they lowered their swords. The guard laughed again. "I'll give you this, lad. You have some courage." He fingered the tip of Teern's sword. "Do you know how to use it?" Teern nodded. "Well in that case, I dare say we can use an extra man or two. Five silver coins for a moon's service. What say you?"

"Thank you, sir," Teern replied, smiling. "And for my friend too?"

The guard cast a glance at Pip. "He looks a little scrawny that one. But if you vouch for him I'll give him four coins. Meet us at the end of the street at daybreak and we'll test you in battle." He turned back toward the others. "Now be off with you."

Teern nodded and took a step backward, pulling Pip with him as he did so. "Thank you, sir."

The fog was just beginning to lift from the foothills as Teern and Pip marched alongside the small contingent of the king's army the following morning. Teern had bought Pip a sword from the smithy in Treloon. It wasn't new but it would do the job for now until

Pip could afford something better.

“Be on your lookout, men,” the captain whispered. “I’ve heard there are a few bandits in these parts that have been causing trouble of late. As soon as we find them, I want them all dispatched. Any questions?” He waited for nods from all his men.

Teern peered through the fog and tried to make out exactly where they were headed. He thought they were only a short distance from his farm. It was difficult to tell exactly. It was somewhere...

“Over there, men,” the captain shouted, pointing with his outstretched sword.

Suddenly everyone was running toward a group of men who were emerging from the mists. “This way, Pip,” Teern shouted, already hurrying at full speed toward the bandits. He raised his sword and swung it forcefully at one of the men as he drew close. The man’s head fell to the floor. Teern turned to his left and engaged with another man. He parried a blow to his side and managed to cut the man on his forearm. Then he swung again and cleaved an arm from the man’s shoulders. But his smile turned to confusion as he felt a hot rush of blood to his side. Looking down he could see the blade of a sword sticking into him. Stars moved in his line of vision and his world turned black.

“Kneel before me, boy.”

Teern stood blinking in the bright light, his sword hanging loosely from his hand.

“Kneel!”

Teern squinted and tried to look at the man behind the voice but it was no good; the light was too bright. “Where am I?”

“Do you not hear me? I told you to kneel. Would you dare disobey me?”

Teern peered at the man again but could make nothing out. Reluctantly he dropped to his knees, groaning as he did so and putting a hand to his side. He looked down expecting to see blood pooling, but there was none. “I don’t understand.”

“Silence! I do not have the time for this. What is your name?”

Teern raised his eyes a little but all he could see were the shiny boots of a man in front of him. Well at least that is what he assumed because that was all he could really see. Somewhere above him, enveloped in the bright light, was the man behind the voice.

“Am I dead?” he asked, with a sudden realization. “I was fighting and...”

“Yes, yes, I know all about it all. You were fighting and you weren’t paying attention. And now you are here.”

“And you are the Power Almighty?” asked Teern, trying not to let his voice crack as he

spoke.

The man laughed. "I am called many things, soldier. And it does not matter. All that matters is that you are here. Now, what is your name?"

"Teern Holderness, sir. I..."

"Did you not learn anything? Did you not have a visitor?"

Teern went silent and tried to understand just what the man was asking. "Teern. Teern Truthbringer, sir. I was named Teern Truthbringer by one of those Mothers."

The old man laughed loudly, causing the very ground to shake. "Indeed. A Mother. And your destiny. Are you ready to receive your destiny?"

Teern tried to make out the face of the man but it was impossible. "Yes, sir. I am ready."

The man chuckled a little and the light about him dimmed as he spoke. "You Teern Truthbringer, soldier born of Treloon, are tasked with finding and proclaiming the Xannu, he who is to come. He who is to lead my people to deliverance. This will not be an easy task. You will face many more challenges ahead of you. So far you have lived a mere eighteen years and you look strong and youthful. And for as long as you search for the Xannu none of this will change; you will stay young and will not die as others do." The man's feet moved a few inches. "But be it known, the day you proclaim the Xannu your duty to me is over. From that day forward you will live a normal life, whatever is left of it. So too shall you die a normal death. One that is permanent. It will be then that I will judge you and proclaim sentence."

Teern looked up at the man whose face he could now nearly make out. "Xannu? Proclaim him? Not dying? What are you saying?"

"I have said what I have to say, Teern Truthbringer. Now you must go and make preparation for your task. No doubt we will meet again from time to time when you receive a mortal wound." The Power Almighty smiled down at Teern with a face that radiated light. "But now it is time to start your quest for the Xannu. You must learn how to fight. You must become the best swordsman in the land. You must learn how to protect and to live on your wits. And first you will make a journey. It will be a long journey, but make it nonetheless you must. You are to travel to a place named KA'Tor, in the country of Vandor, in the foothills of the Broken Mountains. There you will visit with the Holy Fathers and request a new sword of them. They are awaiting your arrival. Now go."

Teern raised a hand to cover his eyes as he looked up at the man. "But, sir. What about..." He didn't get to finish his question as a sudden flash of light engulfed him where he knelt and threw him to the ground.

Teern coughed and spat and rolled over on the grass. His side ached and rain beat down upon him as he rolled. He raised a hand to cover his face and he peered about him. Where was he? The land around him looked similar to his hometown, yet different. He must be somewhere in the foothills of the Broken Mountains, of that he was certain. But was he still in Caipor, or already in Vandor? What was he thinking? He was dead. Or at least he had been dead. But no, he had a destiny. He remembered it all now. The Mother had spoken about it first. He was Teern Truthbringer and he was tasked with finding and proclaiming the Xannu; someone who would save the people and deliver them from all evils. And in the meantime he was immortal. Immortal. He got to his feet and laughed out loud. "I am Teern Truthbringer," he shouted. "Come and find me."

THE END

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