

The Blood Prince

By Jeff Wilson

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The Fall of House Edorin and the Birth of the Blood Prince

Built around a wide harbor, the evolving structure of a great city fell under Aisen's view, branching out in every possible direction beneath the massive citadel under which it sheltered. The fortress walls, composed of seamless stone masonry, had been built to a tremendous height, and the simple, ageless superiority evident in their construction, boasting strong clean lines and angles, made the city and its hastily built buildings and alleyways, look dirty and full of chaos. Duke Kyreth Edorin, Aisen's grandfather, had started out with ambitious plans that envisioned broad streets on which to travel, and a system of clean waterways to supply a network of fountains and pools, but the city was growing so quickly that it defied all efforts to impose such order upon its expansion.

This was Aisen's home, but it was not a place that welcomed him and he felt nervous as he rode towards it. Unbearably hot under the heavy plate armor that he wore, Aisen tried to ignore the discomfort, reserving his sympathies instead for his horse. The young stallion bore him on without complaint, but a sheet of perspiration was beginning to accumulate on the animal's dark bay coat. Aisen had more reasons than these to regret the heavy armor that he wore. No part of the idea, to use this overwrought set of ornately engraved ceremonial plate, had been his own.

As he began his approach to the city, Aisen retrieved his golden helmet from where it rested on the pommel of his horse's saddle, and secured it in place over his head, hiding his Rendish features from view. He was spotted by curious onlookers long before reaching the edges of the city. It was no surprise that they noticed him; how could they not. His armor, specifically prepared for this day, was overlaid with an alloy of bronze meant to resemble polished gold. Sunlight reflecting off of the mirrored finish on some of the larger plates, made Aisen visible from miles away, and up close, he was almost blinding.

The decorative additions had increased the armor's weight, and yet failed to compensate for it with any corresponding improvement in protection. But the armor was meant to create a spectacle, and in that respect, it was proving to be a complete success. Crowds were gathering around him now, slowing his progress through the streets. A group of bold adolescents, who were running along beside his route, were in turn trailed by others younger still who struggled to keep up. This informal procession, accompanied by the stream of excited cries which issued forth from these young children whose interests he had captured, concentrated ever more attention upon Aisen.

The city was used to seeing armored men, soldiers of the Sigil Corps moving through the city, but this was different. This was some prince of high status and great wealth, come to pay respects to the late Duke Kyreth Edorin. Aisen wondered how excited the crowds would be once they learned who it was they were admiring.

Few of the people of Nar Edor, Aisen knew, would want to see him assume his rightful position as the next ruler of House Edorin. He was however, not entirely without reliable support. Aisen was a Captain in the Sigil Corps, and the members of this elite military

fraternity, almost alone it seemed, expressed no opposition towards him and could be counted upon to firmly support his claims to the succession.

“Lord Aisen,” shouted a man from amongst the people who were now crowding the streets. This would be someone working for Ledrin, the commander here under whose authority, the soldiers of the Sigil Corps patrolled, guarding the Citadel and the surrounding city. At this signal, Aisen removed the enclosure on the front of his helmet and revealed his face to the crowd, inwardly lamenting the loss of his anonymity as he did so.

“Lord Aisen!” shouted someone else, hesitantly at first, and then with increasing vigor as more men and women joined him. The cheers rolled into a greeting fit to hail the arrival of a king. In response to this adulation, Aisen experienced an intense pride bursting within his breast, for which he immediately felt foolish.

The people will embrace you, Ledrin had told him, but you have to give them a reason to believe you were a leader who should be followed. It was often possible to accomplish this, he had gone on to explain, with nothing more than an object, something capable of conveying the authority of the ruler who held it. It was the reason why a king wore a crown, but it could be any symbol; a ring, a scepter, a royal cloak or mantle. In Aisen’s case, they would begin with a very impractical set of burnished ceremonial armor.

Aisen wanted to disagree, feeling it was wrong to reduce strength, power, and leadership to something so trivial, but Ledrin’s strategy was working, and Aisen was forced to admit that the commander had been right. Perhaps these people would accept him, but then they had little choice in the matter, and neither did Aisen. Ledrin had seen to that.

Despite continued hindrance from the growing crowds, and the considerable remaining distance to the Etorin family crypts where his grandfather had been prepared for internment, Aisen did not feel the slow passage of time as he travelled. His mind was distracted by the many ways in which his life had been so abruptly altered, and he was still working to resolve himself towards the inescapable changes that were yet to come. He would be required to resign his commission with the Sigil Corps before officially assuming control over House Etorin. Strict rules, both by the traditions of the Sigil Corps, and the requirements of the nobility, precluded the option of remaining in one while belonging to the other.

The walled perimeter of Alsegate, the Etorin ancestral home, appeared to grow larger as Aisen approached. Complete with its open expanse of green gardens, a towering central castle, and a scattering of aged buildings that included the Etorin family crypts, it was a refuge from the conglomerated structures that were built up all around it. Older than the rest of the city, this fortified property commanded a high hill that overlooked the entire region. However, in consequence of its placement near the western walls of the Port Citadel, Alsegate appeared small from Aisen’s current vantage point, where it suffered under unfair comparisons with its much older and far more imposing backdrop.

Five banners flew beneath the white sword crest of House Etorin above Castle Alsegate’s highest tower, signifying the presence of contingents from all five of the vassal houses sworn to Aisen’s family. Included among these were Lord Teveren’s black spear and the three silver overturned drinking cups of House Ansett, just above the red and gold falcons of House Afnere. Below these were the Houses of lower rank, most notably the two standing pillars that represented the union between the Baron of Udras and the daughter of the late Lord Morve nt with her territories in the north of Emensvale. Lower still was the stylized grey winged dragon

of House Novin, and almost irrelevant, at the very bottom, was a green tree against a white background; the sign of Baron Gensaer and House Hemir.

The men of these houses were here to honor the passing of their lord. The question that remained was whether they would swear that same loyalty to Aisen. Normally, those oaths would have been counted on as a matter of mere formality, but Aisen knew that Teveren had openly voiced a preference for seeing Aisen's younger brother Beonen made the next leader of House Edorin. Given an opportunity, Aisen might have agreed.

Beonen was better immersed within the inner circles of the noble houses of Nar Edor, and though it could have been argued that he was too young, he was quite possibly better prepared for the role than his older brother. Of greater importance, where Aisen resembled his father Aedan Eldurn, with dark foreign skin and unusual grey eyes, his brother had lighter Edoric features inherited from their mother, Kyreth Edorin's daughter. Beonen possessed the height, light hair, and bright penetrating blue eyes that their grandfather had been renowned for, and he looked the part of an aristocrat and prince.

Aisen was the soldier, having spent his entire youth and what little adulthood he had experienced in the service of the Sigil Corps. His training under their care, valuable as it may have been, had not in Aisen's mind truly prepared him for the world he was being asked to enter. It felt to Aisen at times as though he had been deliberately isolated; so much so that he had developed very few relationships with anyone outside the Sigil Corps.

Passing through an opening between a pair of heavy gates, Aisen crossed into Alsegate and left the crowds behind. The citizens would be allowed in tomorrow, so that they could pay their respects to the duke before he was sealed away in his resting place, but for now they were denied entry. Only ranking officials, and certain prominently connected citizens specifically invited by house Edorin, of which there were a great number, would be permitted access today.

Aisen dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to a waiting stablehand. He asked the boy where Beonen was, but looking intimidated, the young servant stumbled through his answer. "Captain," he began, accustomed to addressing Aisen by his rank in the Sigil Corps. "Lord Aisen," he said correcting himself.

"I will be resigning my position in the corps, and I am not yet officially a lord either," Aisen said. "For now, you should just call me Aisen."

These instructions inspired a look of horror on the boy's face, and caused him to tighten his grip on the reins of Aisen's horse. He couldn't possibly speak to the duke's grandson, a man who would in two days be the next duke, in such a familiar way. "I do not know whether he is here, or if he is here... where it is he might be," the boy finally answered, sidestepping the whole issue by not formally acknowledging Aisen's name or title at all.

The servant's discomfort could be understood, and forgiven. Aisen had spent as little time as possible in Alsegate, and as such he knew only a few of the men and women who lived on the grounds while providing their services to House Edorin. Aisen always felt uncomfortable, both here and in the surrounding town, so he routinely found excuses to be away, out on extended patrols as an officer of the Sigil Corps. As a result, Aisen was more familiar with many of the people and places in the small towns and villages across the breadth of Nar Edor, than he was with the ever growing port city where he had been born.

These circumstances placed Aisen out of his element inside of Alsegate. There were not many people here in whom he felt he could comfortably rely. His brother was one such person

though, and not having seen him in nearly a year, Aisen was eager to meet up with him now. Beonen would certainly be on the property somewhere, and Aisen was going to need his help bridging relationships with their peers amongst the nobility, if he ever hoped to rule effectively. Aisen supposed that his brother would find him soon enough, so he looked away, off towards the chapel near the crypts at the southernmost edge of Alsegate. It would be disrespectful to do anything other than immediately go to see the body of his grandfather.

Retrieving his sword, the Eadorin Sigil Blade, from where it was tied to the saddle, Aisen fixed it to his belt before instructing the boy to take the tired horse to the stables. His armor made him appear imposing, but Aisen, though he was not short, was not tall either, and the length of the long blade looked awkward at his side. It hung at a sharp angle ensuring that it would not come into contact with the ground.

Aisen normally wore the sword in a sheath that was open near the top on one side, making it easier to draw, but today the weapon was in a handsomely decorated scabbard of leather and wood. This aged work of art was not original to the weapon, which was far more ancient, but it had been paired with the sword since before the memory of anyone now living, and was always used for formal occasions like this one. It was beautiful, but also impractical in a way that made it impossible to clear the Sigil Blade in a swift or fluid manner.

Now on foot, Aisen felt the full weight of his armor. It was the heaviest set of Plate that he had ever worn, and when the time came, he would be grateful to store it away. Aisen was young and strong though, and it was not the weight of his armor that caused him to slow his progress as he walked towards the crypts.

Aisen had loved his grandfather, as had all the duke's vassals and servants, but the relationship had never been an easy one. Aisen's father, Aedan Elduryn, had parted on difficult terms with the duke some fifteen years ago, leaving Nar Eador while Aisen and Beonen were still very young, with no promise of ever returning. Kyreth Eadorin had been unable to see Aisen, without recalling bitter memories of the boy's father whom Aisen so resembled. It had formed a distance across which neither one of them had ever been able to travel.

It wasn't that Kyreth Eadorin had ever been unkind. He simply had never been able to sustain much warmth or regard for his oldest grandson. His love and adoration had instead been lavished on Beonen. Aisen knew that in Beonen, Kyreth Eadorin could see a continuation of himself, whereas Aisen only reminded him of a man who had taken things from him, things that he could never again reclaim.

Despite this, Kyreth Eadorin had entrusted Aisen, and not Beonen, with the continuation of his legacy. His grandfather had achieved much during his long life, contributing to the formation of a new set of ideals, which Aisen had sworn to preserve at any cost, and had established himself as a servant of his people. His accomplishments included the founding of the Sigil Corps, guarantees on freedom of travel within Eadorin lands during times of peace, building up the Port City from almost nothing, and establishing overseas trade with the nations of the Ossian League. Duke Eadorin's policies had promoted an unprecedented prosperity which had spread far beyond the lands that the duke governed himself. Aisen considered in sober terms, the heavy task of protecting these improvements and building upon them.

Aedan Elduryn too, had been a catalyst for all of these changes, though few outside the Sigil Corps, where he was an almost mythical figure, would ever acknowledge it. Whatever had caused the breach between the two men, no one seemed to know, but it had not lessened the

reverence with which the men of the Sigil Corps regarded Aedan Elduryn. It was a view held by some, that they regarded Aisen's father more highly even, than their patron the duke whose vision it had been to revive the ancient order.

His descent from two such important figures had not made Aisen's life easy. He had been abandoned by one, and barely accepted by the other, and their legacies had created expectations that he could never fulfill. He had earned, and in other ways inherited, a great deal of respect within the Sigil Corps, but he was never going to be the equal of his father, and no one believed Aisen capable of ruling as wisely as his grandfather had. It made Aisen feel, as it always had, as though he were very much alone, and he pushed forward now under the fear that he was not equal to the challenges that he would be expected to overcome.

He yearned for the sight of a friendly face, someone sympathetic to his cause and his plight, someone who could help him carry his burden. But the stares and cautious reactions that greeted Aisen as he encountered people on his way, offered no such support. They looked instead to him, anxious about whether or not he would serve them well, and seemingly afraid that he would fail.

Pushing these fears and dire thoughts away, Edryd climbed the steps of a bright stone building, and proceeded across a narrow terrace on his way to the building's tall arched doorway. The interior of the chapel was illuminated by sunlight that entered through rows of windows near the ceiling on either side of the building, painting the stone surfaces within in a soft white light. There were more people inside than out, and the space was filling up with groups who were taking advantage of the cool beneath the high roof, which was supported by the vaulted chapel's perfectly rounded stone pillars. It was however, a large enough space for Aisen to maneuver past the scattered mourners, without ever deviating from the broad central aisle that bisected the room.

Aisen was glad that he would not need to force a smile for any of these people today. He would not have been able to manage it. Although they all must have recognized Aisen, barely anyone acknowledged his presence, and if they didn't appear to ignore him altogether, it was not because they were not trying. Only once he passed beyond them, did they begin to stare, watching Aisen with uninterrupted interest as he proceeded east down the length of the room. They continued to watch as he entered the enclosed apse at the far end the chapel where the body of his grandfather, Kyreth Edorin II, lay in full armor within an open stone sarcophagus.

There was less light in this room than there was in the rest of the chapel, from which it was walled away, but it was not dark. There were torches set in the back wall, and light also came in through the entrance and through holes in the stone latticework screen atop the walls through which Aisen had just passed. The back of the domed space was carved directly into the rock face of a long jutting uplifted scar in the earth, against which this entire funerary building had been raised. A descending passageway tunneled through the cliff face, leading directly from this room down into the Edorin family crypts.

Removing his helmet and setting it upon the floor, Aisen lowered himself upon one knee, and offered a prayer, a silent appeal that his grandfather should be welcomed into the Houses of the High Realm. Aisen was not sure whether he believed in such things, but if there were any truth in the traditions of his people, he was certain that his grandfather had earned a place of honor in the world where his soul would now reside.

Aisen rose in response to footsteps, the sounds originating from behind him and echoing off of the stone walls and domed ceiling. Someone had been waiting for him, standing against the back wall where he would not be seen. Aisen did not need to turn to know that it was his brother, Beonen, but he could not have explained to anyone else, or even himself, how exactly he could recognize his brother only from the sound of his walk.

"It's good to see you, Beonen," Aisen said, as he turned to greet his brother.

Beonen responded with a smile, and continued forward, but there was a certain nervous excitement in his manner, as if in response to a long held anticipation of this moment. "Endless patrolling agrees with you," Beonen said. "You look well, Aisen, a little shorter than I remembered, but you look well."

"You are the one who has grown taller," Aisen answered. "You passed me a while ago, by the look of it, and I fear you haven't stopped growing yet either."

Beonen looked pleased at this observation, almost excessively so. Aisen had long ago accepted that his brother would one day stand taller than he did, so it was no particular surprise to learn that just such a day had come at some point during the last year.

"I hear you outfought the king's champion," Aisen said, in reference to his brother's success in a contest held by King Eivendr at the capital during the year end solstice festival. "It doesn't seem like you have even a single suitable rival to challenge you amongst all the noble houses of Nar Edor."

Aisen's brother was less affected by this compliment, than he had been by the acknowledgement that he had grown to become the taller of the two of them. Beonen was used to being praised for his skill, and so that recognition meant less to him, but he still looked visibly contented upon receiving this confirmation that the news of his most recent accomplishment had reached Aisen's ears. It was to have been expected, though. The duels held at the king's court were major events, and news of the results spread out quickly across the country. Beonen knew that his brother paid little attention to such things, but this was not something that would have gone unspoken of, even in the far flung places where Aisen frequented while performing his duties for the corps.

"He was nothing," Beonen said. "It was difficult to not embarrass the poor man. If you had been there, you would have seen that it was no great accomplishment." The dismissive arrogance, with which Beonen was trying to downplay his victory, lacked even the smallest trace of discernable humility, and he walked closely past Aisen with his head inclined towards the ceiling as he spoke, before turning around in the center of the room near a corner of the sarcophagus.

Aisen recognized his brother's movements for what they were. Beonen was maneuvering an opponent, trying to position him carefully and draw and direct his eyes. Aisen took a few steps, turning to face his brother now as if he had noticed nothing, but creating a little distance in the process. He kept a part of his attention focused on the entrance to the room, where four men, two on each side of the doorway, peeled away from the walls and moved to close the doors.

It took two of them working together to lift and place the heavy beam that would secure the room. Aisen recognized a couple of them immediately; sons of House Afnere and House Novin. It took him a little while longer to place the other two. From House Hemir was Baron Gensaer's first son by his second wife. The last he knew as the youngest son from Baron

Udras's first wife. Try as he might, Aisen could not remember any of their names. They were all young, these men who had come in support of his brother, and none of them of any real importance; a collection of nothing better than the second sons from four of the five sworn Houses.

"You should introduce your friends," Aisen said to Beonen. Aisen had no idea what all of this meant, but a fear was growing inside his heart. Conspicuous more for their absence, there was no one representing Lord Teveren. He would be involved too, of course. He might even be behind this; powerful enough to force the involvement of the others, while keeping his own hands clear.

"They will not interfere," Beonen said. "They are here only to observe."

"Observe what?" Aisen demanded.

"They will all confirm that I acted in defense, after you made an unprovoked attack."

Aisen could not accept what he was hearing, or believe that these words had come from Beonen. "What are you talking about?" Aisen asked. He was certain that he had either not heard his brother correctly, or that he had misunderstood.

"You are the wrong person to lead our house," Beonen answered.

Aisen stood silent, bereft of any mean by which to understand what was happening, and unable to form a response. This was a brother that had idolized him when they were young. Beonen was still young now, and not yet even fully grown. When their father, Aedan Elduryn, had left Nar Edor, Aisen had then taken over responsibilities that would have belonged to a parent, teaching Beonen everything, and protecting him against hurt or harm from anything that could threaten him.

"I am sorry Aisen," Beonen said. "You need to surrender the Edorin Sigil Blade."

"And then what?"

"Then we fight," Beonen answered. Pain could be seen in the younger brother's eyes, but he was also filled with purpose, and determined to carry this through.

"I refuse to do it," said Aisen. "I will not draw my sword against you."

Beonen was starting to appear uncertain. He felt a strong bond with his brother, but his resolve barely wavered as he formed his response. "I am sorry, Aisen, but I will not let you leave this room alive." As Beonen said this, he drew his weapon, a dueling sword of exceptional quality that had won him much fame.

There could be no mistaking these words or the solemnity in which they had been spoken. Beonen's intention was to kill his brother, and assume control over House Edorin himself. Aisen felt anger, but no fear. Beonen was going to learn that there was a difference between contests with the champions of the noble houses, and attacking a captain of the Sigil Corps. Beonen was going to learn the difference between the regimented dance of a duel, and the uncontrolled floodwater currents of a battle.

"Will you allow me to clear my sword?" Aisen asked, thinking of the trouble he would have getting the weapon free from its scabbard. He carried nothing else, and there was no way to quickly draw the weapon.

"No," Beonen answered. "I won't allow that blade to be damaged."

Aisen laughed at this. He had rarely used the ancient Sigil Blade, but in the years he had carried the great weapon, he had never once been able to do anything to damage its edge. It

had never tarnished, or received any mark or blemish. Beonen was about to find that Aisen and this sword were of a kind; he would discover, that he had no power to harm either one of them.

"You without armor, me without a sword – the terms sounds fair enough," Aisen said, amused, but also troubled. He did not want this to happen, and he could not imagine what would make his brother think that he could possibly win. What Beonen knew of sword fighting, Aisen had taught it to him, and surely he should have appreciated the differences in their skills better than most. Aisen's experiences during years of constant training in the Sigil Corps were worth more than all of the duels Beonen had ever fought.

"I am not the boy I was when we last tested each other," Beonen said. He spoke with confidence, hinting, with what felt like a shade of remorse, at a deeper meaning to these words than was conveyed on the surface.

Beonen made eye contact with one of the men who stood guard by the door. In response, the young noble from House Afnere stepped forward. Aisen took a couple of steps backwards, so as to keep both his brother and the approaching nobleman, in front of where he stood.

"I told you before, they are not here to help me," Beonen said with exasperation. He seemed to not like the idea that Aisen might think that such help was needed.

"Not if they expect to live," Aisen threatened. This situation was still within his control, but if he had to fight them all at once, he would certainly injure or perhaps even kill most of them. That would hardly improve his relations with their fathers.

"Temet, give Aisen your sword," Beonen ordered. Temet complied, drawing his weapon with slow deliberate care before handing it to Aisen hilt first.

As soon as Aisen took hold of Temet's arming sword, the man began backing away, and continued to do so until he once again stood with the three others. They all looked on in awe, awaiting a battle that would ensue between two rivals, witnessing a contest that would decide the future of House Edorin and their places within it. It was far from their minds in that moment, that they had by mutual agreement, sworn to fabricate the accounts that they would give.

Now that he had a weapon, Aisen was better armed than his brother. In this confined space however, the heavy plate mail could in a number of ways be a significant disadvantage. It would slow Aisen's movements, it would make it difficult to move around obstacles, and it would wear him down physically if the fight wore on. He would have much preferred a lighter set of armor, or even no armor at all. The heavy plate did give Aisen a margin for error though, and would allow him to take risks. He would need to be taking some of those if he wanted to end this quickly.

Without giving any further warning, believing that he had more than adequately declared his intentions, Beonen began his attack. Not able to believe that his brother would really do this, Aisen was slow to react. He barely brought his sword up in time to block. Beonen's first strike was compact and simple, intended to initiate action and explore Aisen's defenses. His second attack, expertly thrust in under Aisen's guard, was of a more serious nature, and Aisen was only just quick enough to step away in time. The weight of the armor was affecting him, and Beonen would know how to take advantage.

From this short exchange, Aisen could see that his brother had indeed grown in skill since they had last trained together. Aisen took a few steps back. It would have been better to close

the distance between them, where the extra protection afforded by his armor would give Aisen the advantage, but he could not afford to chase his brother. He needed to draw him in.

Chancing a quick look towards the entrance, Aisen confirmed that the others had made no move to support Beonen. Failing to appreciate that Aisen was trying to lure him into another attack, Beonen took the invitation and stepped in with a heavy rising strike, hoping to take full advantage of his brother's brief moment of inattention. Aisen expertly knocked the attack away, opening up his brother's guard, and he stepped in as well, close enough now that he could almost take hold of Beonen with his free hand. Another step and he could send his brother to the ground.

Beonen, recognizing the danger, leapt away with a speed that defied reason. Safely out of reach, he began to pace a little, with his sword held low and a broad grin spreading over his face. He was exulting in the thrill of combat, burning fiercely in this test of his skill. He wanted to be challenged, and he wanted to feel the excitement that only came in the face of a grave risk.

Still trying to comprehend the impossible speed with which his brother had retreated, Aisen became concerned for the first time. Hindered by eighty pounds of armor, it would be impossible to catch Beonen. He would have to trap his brother in a corner, but Beonen had more than enough skill to avoid that.

Beonen caught the look in his brother's eyes and it was now his turn to laugh. "You think that you know the extent to which I have grown, but you have not seen it yet," he said. Aisen did not doubt this claim. He could not bring the fight to his brother. He would have to wait patiently, and try to force Beonen to make a mistake.

"Why are you doing this?" Aisen asked. He was not sure that his brother would answer, but he needed to know.

"Because you would be a puppet of the Sigil Corps, and you would upend the order that our grandfather fought for."

"You believe I would do that?"

"Ledrin has already seized control of all the trade, and commands all of the military strength in in this city. You would be ruler of House Edorin in name only. It is Ledrin that would hold the power."

There was truth in these accusations. But it was all by the designs of their grandfather. Duke Kyreth Edorin had cared more about the future of the Sigil Corps, than he did for the continuation of his family line. The ideals of the Sigil Order were the part of his legacy that he had most wanted to preserve and leave behind. He had hopes too for both of his grandsons, but those plans did not include an expansion of their wealth and power.

"You don't understand, Beonen," Edryd said, pleading with his brother. He needed to make him listen.

"No, Aisen, I do understand. I already know everything."

Aisen could not think what his brother meant, although Beonen seemed to assume otherwise.

"What are you talking about?"

"Aedan betrayed our grandfather," Beonen replied, watching Aisen carefully to measure his reactions to this accusation. "He wanted to create an Ossian colony city in Nar Edor."

"I don't see many Ossians in Nar Edor, or Rendish people of any origin, apart from the both of us. Father didn't even stay here himself. If he was creating a home for Ossians in Nar Edor, it failed. There are no more men with Rendish blood in this land. They were expelled from their homes and forced to leave Nar Edor forever, well before you were ever born, Beonen."

"And what do you call the Rendish Districts?" Beonen demanded.

"A virtual prison to those who live there, under constant guard with barely the space needed to accommodate trade. Aedan swept the rest of Nar Edor clean of every last one of them, because the king ordered it, and our grandfather in turn ordered Aedan to carry it out. Exceptions made for him, and for us, but no one else. If Aedan betrayed anyone, it would be the men who shared his blood, not House Eadorin, Grandfather, or anyone else in this country."

"Even in that light then, the man was a traitor. Besides, he knew it all could be reversed, and he saw forward to a day when he could put Nar Edor under the heel of the Ossians. It only means Aedan was patient enough to play a longer game, waiting until he could place a son at the head of our house."

"You are talking about our father," Aisen said, trying to make his brother see clearly. "I know you don't remember him very well, but he was nothing like what you are describing, and he was your father too."

"Maybe," Beonen said, "but if he is my father, I do not claim him. He was a filthy traitorous Rend." Aisen's brother spat these words as though he had doubts about whether Aedan was truly his father, and as though Beonen did not himself share the Rendish blood that both he and Aisen had inherited. He had also conveniently ignored the fact that Aedan had saved Nar Edor from an invasion by an alliance between Seridor and several other Rendish nations. Those factions *had* sought to carve out a territory here, but Aedan had led the forces that defeated them. He was not a traitor, he was a hero.

Aisen was overcome with sorrow as he looked at his brother's light blue eyes. Beonen's face was a picture of seething rage and hatred, reserved if not for Aisen directly, then with so much anger for their father, that it boiled too fiercely to be calmed by means of simple persuasion alone.

"What happened to you?" Aisen said, expecting no response. He had no sound theories for what could have affected such a terrible change in his brother.

"I learned the truth, and some other things besides," Beonen answered, a light reappearing in his eyes as he spoke, signaling that the time for talking was over, and that he was eager to resume the fight.

Beonen leapt forward, attacking recklessly with a wide two handed overhead strike. Aisen stepped clear of the swing, and attempted to bring his sword down atop Beonen's, to prevent his brother from bringing his weapon back to a ready position. Aisen's intent was to create an opening in which he could safely step in close, but Beonen suddenly reversed his swing. The two swords collided with tremendous force. Aisen's weapon vibrated painfully in his gloved grip, resonating with the impact. Aisen did not have time to marvel at how his brother had generated such force in that upward swing, for Beonen was already crashing down with another overhead strike aimed across Aisen's guard.

At the outset, Aisen had reasoned that although his brother might come close to matching him in speed, Beonen was nowhere near his equal in strength and power. Blocking Beonen's current attack, Aisen was forced to reevaluate those assumptions when the force of the impact

nearly tore Aisen's sword loose from his grip. This was not his brother's typical style of combat, which relied on rapidly connecting feints with well-timed thrusting attacks. Beonen was instead trying to win this contest, by bringing to bear sheer brutal force.

His pride allowing for no other response, Aisen pushed forward, taking over the flow of the battle, delivering a combination of short compact attacks that pushed Beonen back. The force behind Aisen's attack was focused and powerful, but Beonen simply gave ground as he blocked the strikes. Aisen was trying to conserve energy, using short efficient movements, but as things were going, he would tire out long before his brother did. It was time to take a risk. Holding the hilt of the weapon in both hands, Aisen let his sword drop low, and breathing in and out quickly as though he had begun to wear down, he stumbled forward into the range of his brother's fencing sword. Counting on the protection of his armor, he prepared for the blow Beonen would surely deliver.

The attack came, too fast it seemed; so much so that Aisen nearly panicked. Releasing the grip he had on his sword with his right hand, Aisen raised his right arm to ward off the incoming strike. A cutting weapon like the one Beonen was using was almost useless against his heavy armor, and Aisen trusted that the strike would glance harmlessly off of the reinforced plate that protected his arm. Simultaneously, Aisen made a long arcing swing with his sword, which was still held in his left hand. In the middle of delivering his own attack, it would not be possible for Beonen to get clear.

The competing attacks were executed all at once, with neither one preceding the other, and no discernable moment of separation between them. Aisen's shoulder pauldron deformed heavily, absorbing the impact from Beonen's sword and nearly breaking loose in the process. But Aisen's sword had also connected, splitting Beonen's tunic from his right hip all the way up across his torso to his left shoulder. Beneath the divided shirt, was a similarly divided protective leather jerkin, and beneath this, Aisen could see traces of blood. Beonen had not been as imprudent in his preparations for this moment as Aisen had supposed, but the light armor had not helped. Beonen had survived, only because Aisen had not wanted to kill his brother. The cut could have gone much deeper.

Beonen seemed to realize this, but it only stoked his fury as he retreated. "That was your only chance, Aisen!" he shouted, making the acknowledgment that his brother could have killed him, but refusing to allow that this insight ought to change anything. "You will regret wasting it."

Proving the sincerity of this threat, Beonen attacked, giving no heed to the wound across his chest. As his brother struck once more, Aisen felt something behind the frightening speed with which the fencing sword came slicing through the air. He had felt it before, but this was different. Not different in nature, but in degree. Beonen's sword strikes were infused with the addition of some unnatural force, delivering far more power than Beonen was capable of producing with technique and strength alone.

Aisen could feel it intensify and build beforehand, each time his brother attacked. More curious to Aisen, he could read in the moment before its release, the direction in which the built up energy would travel, and he knew the precise path which Beonen's sword would take. He read all of this, as though he were seeing a glimpse of what would happen. Guided by this awareness, this ability to see the perturbed forces Beonen was creating, Aisen was able to anticipate each attack perfectly. He could sense the energies right up until they were released

at impact whenever the blades crossed, at which point it became simple power, which mercilessly transferred down the length of his sword, through the hilt, and into his frame. Aisen struggled to handle the shock as he met each blow.

Beonen did not stop; he kept hammering at his brother, never giving the slightest pause, possessed with a determination to wear his opponent down. Aisen was a strong man, and accustomed to intense combat, or he would not have been able to mount a defense against the violence his brother was raining down upon him. As it was, Aisen could do no more than retreat. The attacks came in such a rapid succession, and with such force, that even knowing where his brother would strike next, there was no time to attempt any sort of counter.

There was madness in Beonen's expression as they fought, and after a while, something else as well. His eyes began to appear dull and unfocused, but he did not slacken his pace or the strength in his attacks. In time, he did begin to tire, though not so much as he should have done. In considering the exhaustion that Beonen should be experiencing, the same exhaustion that Aisen himself felt tread over with after so much sustained fighting, Beonen should have been out of breath and out of strength.

Eventually, Beonen stopped. Aisen, who had been forced to step back unceasingly under the barrage of successive attacks, continued moving away several paces before he realized that his brother was no longer advancing. Across the distance, he could see that Beonen, who was trying to control his breathing by taking in deep measured breaths, had been worn down, and was using this time to recover. Aisen though, was worn out. He had withstood a violent beating. His hands and arms, his shoulders and his back, all seemed to recoil at the prospect of absorbing even more damage once the battle resumed.

Inspecting the borrowed sword in his hand, Aisen noted that its appearance closely resembled how his body felt. It too had taken a beating. It was a testament to the craftsmanship that had gone into this simple weapon that it looked no worse than it did, but it had been severely compromised. It no longer carried a straight edge, and had been warped by Beonen's attacks. Though Aisen had parried as often as possible only with the flat of the sword, along its edges were numerous deep gouges, mainly concentrated nearest to the hilt where Aisen had received and deflected some of the attacks. It was practically useless now as a cutting weapon, and completely beyond repair.

Aisen looked to Beonen's weapon, expecting to see similar damage, but saw instead only clean edges and a dull red glow, as if the weapon had been heated by the repeated impacts. He thought then at how he had laughed when Beonen had worried over causing damage to the Sigil Sword, and began to understand where those concerns had come from. He considered for a moment, whether this pause was the opportunity that he needed to get the ancient weapon free from its scabbard. He began to move his free hand closer to the hilt of the Etorin Sigil Blade, where it was belted at his side.

Beonen noticed, and took a step forward to discourage his brother. The red heat in his fencing sword had faded, and with it had gone the vacant look in his eyes. The rage too, seemed to have dissipated. "That weapon is mine by right," Beonen said.

"Not by right," Aisen answered. "It can no more be yours than it was ever mine. It will answer to no claim of ownership, and cannot be gained by forcible seizure. If you should take it from me, it will be of no use to you." He was repeating things he had once been told by his

father, things he had understood then no more than he did now, but Aisen felt and firmly expressed the truth within these words. Beonen would not be capable of wielding the sword.

Visibly agitated by this declaration, Beonen made a pointed response. "You admit then, that it is not yours, and that it does not belong to you?" Beonen could not refute his brother's words of rebuke, but he had heard most clearly Aisen's admission that he too was unable to wield the sword. That thought comforted Beonen more greatly, than did the truth of his own unworthy state give him pause, in his desire to take the weapon.

Ominously, Beonen seemed to grow calm. "It is time we ended this," he said, and crashing forward he moved to make good on his promise to bring the fight to its conclusion.

The first attack knocked the damaged sword free from Aisen's hands, producing echoes through the chamber as the metal rang against the marble floor. Aisen caught the next attack on a reinforced part of the armor on his right arm, a ridged section of rounded heavy plating that served him now as a small improvised buckler. Beonen's strike deformed the metal, pinning it inward, but the chopping attack did not penetrate all the way through. Beonen wrenched the weapon free and struck two more times, turning the plating into a misshapen mess. Fearing that his defense would fail with another attack, Aisen stumbled backwards blindly, trying desperately to get out of range.

Beonen lunged forward at his brother, aiming the point of his blade at his brother's heart. Aisen could feel the infusion of power. He would have expected against an ordinary opponent, that upon being struck by such an attack, that the tip of the incoming sword would glance harmlessly off of his armor, but Aisen knew that if he did not step aside, that the point of Beonen's sword would penetrate the heavy plate. If he took this strike, he would die.

Unarmed, he had no means to even attempt to knock the attack away, and if he evaded, he would still be vulnerable to a follow up attack. Even after having recognized what was coming in advance, there was hardly any time to step clear. He did not need to get completely free though. He had a desperate plan, and he was going to make it work. Aisen took the attack on the far left side of the broad chest plate of the armor. Beonen's sword pierced cleanly through and continued on out the armor on Aisen's back. Aisen had wanted to avoid injury, but he had not been quite as precise as he had hoped. Beonen's weapon made a shallow scraping cut across his brother's chest beneath his left arm.

Aisen turned his torso sharply, pulling the trapped blade free from Beonen's grasp. Within that same motion, Aisen struck out with his right hand, catching Beonen in the throat with a gauntlet covered palm. Beonen dropped to the ground immediately, making choking sounds and bringing his hands to his neck, struggling for air. Beonen's sword, though it had not cut deeply, was still locked in place through Aisen's armor. Intensely hot, as had been suggested by the red glow which had been visible during the fight, it was impossible to remove, and even more impossible to ignore as the blade painfully continued its work, burning away the skin against which it was making contact.

Beonen had brought to bear overwhelming force, but in spite of this, as Aisen thought about it now, though no one else watching the fight would have agreed, he told himself that his brother had never truly stood a chance. His brother had not understood combat, in the way that only a soldier does.

Aisen moved to support his brother, intending to prop him up, and help him regain his breath, which was coming to Beonen in startled fits that left him unable to recover from the shock of having lost. Maybe now he could convince Beonen to listen.

His plans, such as they were in that moment, were cut short. From behind him, Aisen heard one of the young nobles drawing his sword. Upon turning to face him, he could see that it was the son of Baron Gensaer. Aisen recognized the man by his short height and sharp features, and even more by his uneven temper, which was currently on display within dark close set eyes, staring out from beneath a deeply furrowed brow. The emblems showing a green tree against a white background decorating his sleeves were also definite hints to his identity, but Aisen could not quite remember the man's name.

"Stop, Hathim!" Aisen said, guessing at the name, which he thought he might have half remembered. The guess was either accurate, or close to it, because Hathim stopped, and did not try to correct Aisen.

"I won't see my family lose what honor it has left, by swearing oaths to the half-blooded spawn of a Rend who forced himself upon the daughter of the Lord of House Eдорin!" yelled Hathim, seething with contempt.

Here, Hathim might not have even been speaking of Aisen's father, Aedan Elduryn. He instead appeared to be referencing a vile bit of speculation, that Aedan had wed Kyreth Eдорin's daughter to cover the fact that she was carrying the son of a Rend who had taken her captive. Some of the bolder versions promoted the idea that the Rendish man who had violated Aisen's mother, had been Beodred, the leader of the Rendish alliance that had attempted to invade Nar Eдор.

In those stories, Aisen was not of Rendish descent through the one time leader of the Sigil Corps, Aedan Elduryn, he was the son of a vicious Rendish man from Seridor who had brought violence to all the shores of Nar Eдор, until he had died in defeat here some twenty years ago. Though the timeline would have fit, this story about Aisen's parentage was untrue. All such claims had been demonstrated to be false, but that had done substantially less than nothing to stop the rumor from spreading.

"House Hemir," Aisen responded, "has no honor left. You need not risk your life, defending something that is gone already."

Aisen's insult was no exaggeration of the truth. House Hemir was of no importance in any of the affairs and activities across Eдорin lands. Hathim's father, Baron Gensaer, was a public embarrassment, famous for having wasted all of the resources of his family. They were destitute, and relied entirely on patronage from House Eдорin for their support. Behaving as if all of this were somehow Aisen's fault, Hathim stepped forward aggressively.

"Inflicting a long painful death upon the insult to House Eдорin that is its bastard son," said Hathim, "will go far in restoring that honor."

Aisen was not the sort to rise to bait thrown at him from an enemy, and he was tired and worn out from his fight with Beonen, but his patience was worn down even further still, and so he responded in anger without stopping to take any thought. Hathim, only moments before filled with righteous indignation, now shied back and dropped his sword, cringing in terror as Aisen surged forward and caught him around the throat. Aisen raised him off of the ground and pinned him against a column near the center of the room.

He was relaxing his grip, and in the middle of contemplating whether he ought to lower the terrified noblemen to the ground, when two of the others came rushing in to aid their friend. Temet, who of course no longer had a sword, crashed in, knocking Aisen to the ground, and in the process he freed Hathim who promptly collapsed upon the floor. Aisen knew that there was a second enemy, but he found he could spare no attention to locate the other threat, as he was now pinned to the ground on his back. Between the weight of his armor, and Temet who lay atop his chest, Aisen was immobile.

The second nobleman drew his sword, and brought it slashing down against Aisen's leg, where it was deflected harmlessly away by Aisen's protective plate armor. Aisen almost felt that he deserved what was happening. As outmatched as these men may have been, he had left them with the opening that they needed to take him down when he had allowed Hathim's insults to draw away all of his focus. He had very little strength left, but he was not about to give up.

Reaching his arms around Temet, who was in turn holding him down as though his life depended on it, Aisen's hand felt the rough edges of a patterned surface which had been carved into bone. It was the grip of a knife belted at Temet's side. Why hadn't Temet drawn this weapon when he had had the chance? Aisen recalled what Beonen had said of the others: they had come only to observe. Hathim was obviously here for more than that, but perhaps not all of these young men bore him such hatred. Aisen pulled the knife free.

He could have killed Temet, but the man had only attacked in defense of his friend, and Aisen did not want to regret how he chose to respond. Noticing that Aisen had gotten a hold of his knife, Temet spared him of the need to make that difficult decision by getting to his feet and backing away. The second nobleman had since been joined by the last of the group, and he was at the present moment, preparing to put an end to his downed target. He was aiming another attack, this time at Aisen's exposed head.

Deflecting the attack with his arm, Aisen saw that the man had made a mistake. He had stepped in far closer than he had needed to, and his legs were within easy reach. Aisen drove the knife he had taken from Temet, deeply through the man's leg, and quickly pulled it back out, dropping him to the ground. The young man, forgetting everything but the pain of his injury, cried openly as he knelt within the blood which was rapidly issuing from his body. Aisen then rolled up onto his own knees, so that he faced his opponent, and he tore through the man's torso with the knife.

The man dropped his sword, and stared down helplessly as life began to leave him. Aisen saw now who it was he had just injured. It was the young nobleman from House Novin. Although Aisen had trained endlessly to become proficient in combat, he had never killed anyone before. He didn't have the time now to reflect on this, as there were more enemies in the room. Baron Udras's son was mere feet away, but he appeared hesitant. Wisely so, given what he had witnessed a moment before.

In the other direction, behind Aisen, Hathim was not nearly so cautious. He had recovered from his earlier fright, and had collected from the ground the sword that he had dropped earlier. Whatever honor he felt he had, it was clear that he believed that Aisen had insulted it. In one hand, he held his sword, and in the other, he held a parrying knife. He hurried forward, intent upon running his sword through Aisen's back.

Ignoring the son of Baron Udras, Aisen rose to his feet and turned to face a charging Hathim, who was by now screaming invectives at the object of his hatred. Aisen could not control the man, and he did not dare take him lightly, so Aisen quieted the tormented cries by putting his knife through Hathim's throat.

Aisen turned then to look upon the son of Baron Udras. He had never seen a man look so frightened, and he learned then the ways in which fear could drive a cornered man to respond. In an attack that rivaled some of the strikes Beonen had delivered, the nobleman swung his weapon at Aisen's neck. Aisen knocked the swing away with his arm, his armor saving him once more, as it had now done so many times. The son of Baron Udras followed this attack with several more, each one growing successively weaker. Such was the fury with which he attacked though, and the almost crazed manner in which he harmlessly battered at his armored enemy, that Aisen was for a moment, thoroughly confused.

Aisen had no weapon with which to fight back; Temet's knife was still in Hathim's throat, but his training took over and when an opportunity came, Aisen trapped his opponent's blade between his left arm and his chest plate. Stepping in with what little he strength he had left, Aisen threw his fist, supported by the solid steel of the gauntlet which wrapped his hand, into the side of his enemies head. The blow tore gashes into the man's face, and terminated with an audible crushing sound, a noise made by the splintering of bones. The man's head snapped back from the impact, and then the son of Baron Udras collapsed, falling lifeless to the ground.

Aisen fell too. His strength had been spent. As he rested upon his knees, Aisen realized that he was not safe yet, there was one remaining man. It was a struggle to raise his head. This difficulty was not solely the result of Aisen's weakened state; it was also caused by his reluctance to view the harm that he had inflicted. When Aisen did look up, he immediately located the last of the noblemen, the young man from House Afnere.

Temet, having witnessed everything, and finding himself in a burial chamber in which there were now three more lifeless bodies than it was intended for, was desperately trying to leave. Temet's long knife had inflicted most of the damage on the fallen bodies, but it had done so in Aisen's hands, not his own. With his sword and knife sheaths both empty, he was no longer a threat to Aisen, and he had never meant to be one to begin with.

For Aisen, this had been an unimaginable disaster. Having gone this far, it might have made sense to kill Temet as well. The young nobleman was not going to give anyone an honest accounting of what had taken place. But Aisen had neither the strength nor the resolve to consider the idea. He was sickened by what he had done already. So Aisen remained where he was, watching the one surviving nobleman struggle with the heavy beam which secured the doors. It was plain to Aisen, that what had taken place here, would cast a dark color upon his name, one which he would never be able to erase.

A surge of energy formed just behind Aisen, giving a warning, but too little time in which to react. Beonen drove the blade of his knife deep, piercing cleanly through the armor that protected his brother's back. Aisen heard himself scream, but he did not recognize at first that he had been the source of the sound, and he was too weak to respond.

Beonen tried to pull the knife free, in order to strike again, but it was stuck, and he only succeeded in breaking the blade just above the guard. Then his eyes came upon the hilt of the Eadorin Sigil Sword, which was firmly seated within the scabbard belted at his brother's side. If Aisen could have turned to see his brother's face, he would have seen desire written in every

part of Beonen's expression. Beonen took hold of the wire wrapped hilt, but before he could begin to draw the ancient weapon free, he suddenly released his grip and jumped away with a protest of pain as a bright white light filled the room.

Beonen stared in shock at his fingers, which had been badly burned. In the few seconds this distraction provided, Aisen crept forward a few inches and turned to face his brother. He kept himself upright by sitting with his back against a pillar. Beonen looked around, surveying the floor in search of a weapon, of which there were several scattered about. He found a sword, Temet's arming sword, the one that had been all but completely destroyed, and picking it up, he began his final walk. Beonen raised the weapon high in the air, in preparation to bring it down, point first, into his Aisen's chest.

Feeling helpless, Aisen looked around in desperation, and felt at his sides with his hands. He was too weak to move from where he was, but the fingers of his right hand found faint hope as they curled around the hilt of the Edorin Sigil Blade. The sword rested on the ground near his right hip, still casting light throughout the room. The ancient weapon had burned more than just Beonen's hand. It had completely incinerated the leather and wood casement that had bound it, reducing the material to feathery burnt ashes. Despite this, the weapon felt cool to the touch in Aisen's hand.

It was Aisen's arm that swung the blade that killed his brother, but he would forever remember the moment as if someone or something else had guided his hand. From where he sat positioned on the ground, he should have had no leverage with which to do much damage, but the blade cut cleanly halfway through Beonen's torso, and stopped only after Beonen dropped his own sword, letting it fall harmlessly to the ground. "I am sorry, Aisen," were Beonen's last words before he died, a glimpse of the awe with which he had always regarded his older brother, finally showing through at the end.

As if returning from some other place, and wishing in the deepest part of his soul that he had not come back to a world in which his brother was gone, Aisen became aware of where he was and what he had done. It seemed like he had lost a long extended moment, during which he had been absent; both insensible to and unaffected by the passage of time. If there had been such a moment, there was no indication that it had lasted for more than a brief instant. Beonen, still impaled on Aisen's sword, was only now falling to the ground, and Temet was still struggling to unbar the doors.

Careful not to look at the body of his brother, who had collapsed backwards, Aisen remained where he was, resting on the ground against the pillar. The Sigil Sword was no longer producing the unusual light, but Aisen continued to tightly grip the cold metal of its hilt. He could not dismiss the idea that the instrument was somehow alive in his hand.

Unable to focus his mind, Aisen felt drawn in several directions at once under the confused influence of competing flows of darkness, all of which were drawing energy from an even more powerful underlying current. He felt it so strongly that he imagined he must yield to these forces and become something immense, if he did not wish to be pulled apart. And yet it

seemed to Aisen as if he were also still incredibly small, and strangely incapable of any sort of emotion. The course, upon which the world was moving, had been altered. More than anything else, Aisen was certain of that one fact, for he could feel it all shifting, seeking stability, and trying to settle into a newfound semblance of balance.

Strength returned to his body, and Aisen used it to stand, slowly maneuvering his tired frame until he was back up on his feet. He felt strange, and he was worried over maintaining his balance, but the faint unsteadiness he was experiencing was not felt by his body or in his mind. It existed on a deeper level, far beneath the surface.

Beside the doors, Temet continued to fail in his attempts to lift the heavy beam out of the supports. As Aisen watched these struggles, he saw how important Temet would be in the days to come. The young man was the only living witness to what had taken place here, and the story he shared, would profoundly impact not only Aisen, but everyone in Nar Edor, and perhaps go much further than even that. Temet turned to look at Aisen for just a moment then, as if he had felt the pressure from of the heavy scrutiny he was under. The terrible sight of Aisen, standing straight and bearing the bloody marks of battle, inspired a fear that gifted Temet with the strength that he had been lacking. In a desperate panic he managed to lift the beam free. The heavy length of solid timber made a series of soft sonorous echoes as it rebounded several times on the floor.

Pushing the fallen beam clear, Temet yanked the doors open. A crowd, having heard the sounds of fighting, had gathered at the entrance. Temet rushed forward, knocking people out of his way, begging them to let him through. It was the last Aisen would ever see of Temet. Once the way was clear, Temet, a not unimportant son of House Afnere, began to run. Fear had taken him, and it would not release its hold until he was out of the chapel, well clear of Alesgate, and if possible beyond the borders of the entire port city.

So remarkable was the terrible fear that had overcome Temet, that the eyes of the men and women assembled together in the chapel were drawn towards him when he had first opened the doors, and they had all then continued to watch him as he ran. It was only after he had gone that they turned back to look upon the scene from which Temet had run.

Bodies lay in spreading pools of blood, positioned as if with intended disaccord around the sarcophagus in the center of the room. The walls of the chamber, as well as its several pillars, had also all been decorated in sprays of red, and Aisen stood in the midst, the craftsman whose proficiency had so transformed this hallowed space. Covered now by the medium in which he had worked, the light from the torches in the back of the room danced atop Aisen's shoulders, making his armor appear fluid, and its color made red from the blood of his enemies.

Aisen saw the fear in their eyes. Nar Edor had known more than forty years of internal peace, and a scene like this one, which elsewhere and in other times could ever be found on an active battlefield, had become distant and remote to them until this moment. Some of the fear, was of the ordinary kind, and those affected by it slowly backed away. But a greater part of the crowd remained where they were, concerned not so much over their immediate safety, as they were made weak under the comprehension that this was the man to whom they owed oaths of loyalty, and to whose power they were all unavoidably subject.

They would obey him, out of fear and respect, but these people would never love him. They owed him no such devotion, for in turn he had no feelings in his heart for the people of this city, who had been unable to accept him as one of their own. And their fears were not

misplaced. They were a distorted reflection of Aisen's own deep apprehensions. His impending rule would bring about conflict, suffering, and war, all in consequence of the events that had just taken place. Looking into the crowd, Aisen imagined that he saw the lives that would soon be cut short. Many of these people it seemed, had no futures, and those that did, were about to be swept up under by the currents of violence and upheaval that would overtake all of Nar Edor.

Under their intense stares, to which he found himself the sole and singular focus, Aisen also turned his attentions inwards towards himself. He perceived his nature, the source and object of their fear, more deeply than they could have known. What he saw of himself caused Aisen to recoil against a fate that he could not accept. But no matter how he tried, he could not see his way clear of it.

To survive, even a short while, Aisen would have to leave behind the man which he believed himself to be. The choices, which he would face, would be like those he had been forced to make today; He would kill his enemies and consolidate his strength, or he would die. The losses he would experience, and the suffering he would endure, would fill his heart with hatred, and make him an enemy of better men. He knew this with an unavoidably surety, and saw with such clarity the poisoned shapes that were forming about him, that Aisen could not dismiss these premonitions as the troubled musings of his tired mind. These changes, in one form or another, were going to happen if he was allowed to follow his grandfather in the rule of House Edorin.

Whether he lived or not in the days that would come, and Aisen did not want to die, he could no longer remain the same person he had been before today. Together with the grandfather and the brother he had just lost, Aisen mourned also his own death. He believed that he was sobbing openly, but no sound of protest escaped from Aisen's lips, and no pain made its way to the determined expression on his face. He felt something break deep inside, and though he did not understand what it was, Aisen knew that he had been irretrievably changed.

With a calm confidence that betrayed none of the anguish which he felt, Aisen began to step forward, travelling straight down the center of the chapel. Those that had not already done so, backed away as he approached. Everyone kept well clear, receding into the arched aisles that ran along the walls. The metallic sounds made by the plating of Aisen's armor, sections of which were heavily damaged and hanging loose, were clearly heard above the muffled noises of shifting fabric and back treading footsteps across the stone floor, produced as people anxiously moved out of his way.

Aisen felt as though he were in a trance, sustained only by external forces, which gave him for the moment, the barest presence of mind and just enough strength to leave this place. But that is not what others saw. They saw the grim visage of a force against which there could be no opposition, a man who looked past them all, and a power that would dominate everything in its path.

Already, some made plans to offer support, and seek out Aisen's favor. Others, most especially those few with some knowledge of the plot, which had just now failed in an extraordinary way at displacing Aisen in favor of his younger brother, knew that they were in danger. Fearing discovery, they thought only of how they might escape. If they could get safely beyond the borders of Edorin lands, they could go to the capital and seek protection from King

Eivendr. No one else would be strong enough to stand against this bloody Rendish terror of a prince, who would surely seek retribution for what they had done.

After Aisen exited, disappearing beyond the covered terrace through which he first entered, the crowd of mourners began to relax, noticing only then how they had all collectively held their breathing in check. One of them began to speak, other voices followed, and then a frightful tumble of continuous sounds rose up through them. In attempting to determine what had happened and what it all meant, a few men, possessed of enough resilience in such things, began to survey the scenes of death and violence at the end of the building. During these inspections, were made the first mentions of the words Blood Prince in connection to Aisen. Whether this title had been made in reference to his mixed parentage, or to the aftermath left in the wake of the violent combat in which he demonstrated so much skill, would later become a subject of debate, but in truth it did not matter which, for both were clearly appropriate.

As is the tendency with such an occurrence, where an event of obvious importance transpires in such a way that its causes are not well understood, opinions surfaced immediately. Some said with authority, although they spoke in ignorance, that it was the normal state of affairs in matters of succession in Rendish nations, to put to the sword any family rival who might threaten to split an inheritance. This was purely imaginative on the part of those who spoke, with barely any basis in truth. But no one questioned these claims, for they were prepared to believe much that was terrible, and little that was good, of the foreign nations in other lands, and they felt the same about the people who lived in such far off places.

The tendency, too, where it was natural for some people to invent exaggerated details when retelling a story, should have been expected, especially when as in this case, there was so little risk of being reliably contradicted. However, the death of Beonen, who had defeated in combat so many of the champions of the other noble Houses of Nar Edor, and the deaths of three other young nobles, all accomplished themselves to varying degrees in the mastery of sword combat, needed no such exaggeration. The stories that were told, if anything, gave Aisen less credit than was due, for they made no mention of the unnatural talents and abilities that his brother had demonstrated.

One point, universal in all accounts, was that Aisen was invincible in combat, and that he had no capacity in forbearance towards any who stood in opposition to him. This reputation would spread far beyond the borders of Nar Edor, and would follow Aisen, forever now known as the Blood Prince, all the rest of his life.

Thank you for reading my short story. If you enjoyed The Blood Prince, please take a moment to leave a [review](#).

Thanks!

Jeff Wilson

This short story serves as an introduction to the Archon Sigil Trilogy, the first book of which, **The Sigil Blade**, will be published in early 2015. An [excerpt](#) of the first chapter of The Sigil Blade is included at the end of this book for your enjoyment and a [preview](#) of the entire first chapter can be found on my website.

For more information on the upcoming Archon Sigil Trilogy please feel welcome to visit my website JeffWilsonBooks.com or The Archon Sigil Trilogy [Facebook](#) page.

About the Author

A writer of science fiction and fantasy novels, Jeff Wilson is the author of the soon to be published first book in the Archon Sigil Trilogy. Jeff fell in love with both fantasy and science fiction at an early age, and inspired by worlds built in the imaginations of others, he began to create worlds of his own. The decision to write about the heroes and demons populating these worlds was slow in coming, but after spending years reworking and refining his ideas, the words demanded expression.

Encouraged and assisted by a small group of fans, which included his brother, and his younger sister and her husband, Jeff completed work on his first short story, The Blood Prince.

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An Innis

Obscured by steady rain and dark evening skies, a cloaked figure quietly moved along the deteriorating causeway. The tide was out, but substantial portions of the crumbling stone works remained submerged, and the figure, seen from afar, appeared to be an otherworldly apparition, crossing over to the tidal island by walking upon the surface of the sea.

It hesitated upon reaching the island, taking a moment to evaluate the footing. In that pause, the figure appeared to grow more solid, becoming nothing more than the simple and plainly dressed young man that he was. His coarse leather boots were entirely soaked through, and with the land before him drenched by the unrelenting weather, the shallow depth of water above the bed of stone and gravel in which he now stood, might well have seemed a preferable surface to the muddy earth along the shoreline. He was determined to continue onward though, and as the man resumed his stealthy passage, he ignored the dark grey clay collecting on his feet.

Broken walls and left over remnants from the foundations of ancient, ruined buildings lined the shore. Stones had been pillaged from these structures, but enough remained in places to give cover. No one lived on this edge of the island. It was too close to the forests that had grown over a much older civilization, one that had once flourished in a past age throughout the expansive lands to the east, of which this rediscovered island had only been a small part. The mainland, where all attempts to revive any lasting settlements had ended badly, was a dark wilderness, avoided entirely by the current population living on the island.

The man glanced nervously towards some of the crumbling walls as he travelled, concerned that someone could be watching from concealment. He could not spare too much of his attention, though. In the near darkness, it took considerable concentration to hold to the little used trail he was following. Occasionally, paved stones broke to the surface, but before long the path would revert back to its usual condition, which was nothing more than a narrow band of loosely packed mud. The intermittent exceptional areas, which suggested that the trail might once have been a well maintained roadway, were but tired echoes of a time now long forgotten.

The unmaintained path continued on around the southern edge of the island, skirting its central feature, a steeply sloping uplift of rock and earth, which extended to the north before it ended in a precipitous drop. A palatial stone structure, more an enormous home than a castle or fortress, crowned the peak of the mountain.

Over the course the evening the man passed by a few damaged buildings, and a single isolated cottage, but he saw little else until he arrived at the top of a hill near the edges of a settlement on the western edge of the island. He could vaguely see from here, the position of the setting sun, and in the diminishing light that it imparted across the turbulent sky, he surveyed a continuous collection of buildings built upon a graduated slope, which rose up from the western shoreline, climbing in stages to the island's mountainous peak. Several broad structures dominated the shore beside two stone piers, which projected straight out into the

waters beyond the island. A number of other large buildings dotted the curving paths that headed up the mountain.

Less impressive dwellings haphazardly crowded the intervening areas. These smaller homes looked recently built and poorly constructed. Most of them, judging by their appearance, had been recently abandoned and were rapidly falling apart. The buildings that were inhabited could easily be differentiated from the others, by the light that escaped through the cracks in their shuttered windows, which were all closed tight against the ongoing storm.

Because of the late hour and the poor weather, the streets were empty and the cloaked figure met no other travelers on his way through the town. Eventually, as he neared the shoreline, he found himself on a wide, open street in what appeared to be the town's commercial section. It was lined with shops and other business establishments, but only a handful showed signs of use, and only one of what had once been several large inns and taverns, remained open. A sign board, affixed beneath the overhanging second floor of the inn, displayed a carved and decorated image of a tarnished sword hilt.

Stepping onto the porch of the inn, he tried to find a place to scrape his boots, but there wasn't a section of the paving that was free of mud. It took some determined digging with the toe of his boot to expose the top of the stone surface that lay buried beneath the grime in the entryway. Giving up, he took a quick look inside the establishment, and saw that his efforts had been pointless. The floors were already covered in layers of wet earth and old dirt throughout. There was more filth trailing out than there was being tracked in.

Upon entering, he was assaulted by a collection of odors: mold, tobacco smoke, and alcohol, all mixed in with the pungent smell of rendered animal fat. None of these, taken alone, would have been terrible, and a couple would even have been quite welcoming, but when experienced in combination, it was very unpleasant. Two drinking rooms were situated to his left, one empty and the other occupied by a group of ragged looking men immersed in a game of dice. They gambled with piles of pale white oblong shells that were used for money. He watched them for a moment, observing their game as one of the men replenished his dwindling pile of shells, pulling more of them a couple at a time, from a string that was secured to his belt and threaded into a pouch at his side.

The entrance to a kitchen could be seen at the back of the inn, and the rest of the lower floor was taken up by the large hearth hall. Men, some of them young and others old, were conversing with each other as they relaxed around the fireplace. If any of the men took an interest in the stranger and his late evening arrival, they gave no outward indication. He lowered the hood of his cloak, unfastened a brass clasp, and then removed the woolen overcoat from where it hung upon his shoulders, and shook it free of the beads of water that had collected on its surface. A number of small emblems pinned along the edge of the cloak, disappeared into the folds of the damp cloth as he arranged and neatly divided it over his arm. He stood for a moment in the doorway, a dimly lit figure against the backdrop of the darkened rain soaked street. The doorframe serving as reference, measured him a man of a less than average height, slender to a degree, but physically strong in appearance.

He took deliberate steps inside, and made his way to the back of the inn where he draped his cloak over a chair in a dark corner of the hearth hall. A couple of the silver emblems, which were pinned upon the coat, made a muffled metallic sound as they struck against the others, serving as an unintentional but audible claim being made to the table he had selected.

The stranger had intense grey eyes, which were the color of spent charcoal, and a dark sun weathered complexion. His calm resolute expression carried echoes of a hardness that came from defeat, causing him to seem older and possessed of more experience than his otherwise youthful appearance would have suggested. Sweeping stiff fingers through his dark damp hair, he eased himself into a chair, and took silent stock of the interior surroundings. Lacking any semblance of appropriately deferential behavior, he began to study the other men in the room.

This is an excerpt from the first chapter of, *The Sigil Blade*, a full length novel which will be published in early spring 2015. You can discover more on my website JeffWilsonBooks.com where you will find a sample of the entire first chapter of *The Sigil Blade*.

Thank you for reading!

Jeff Wilson