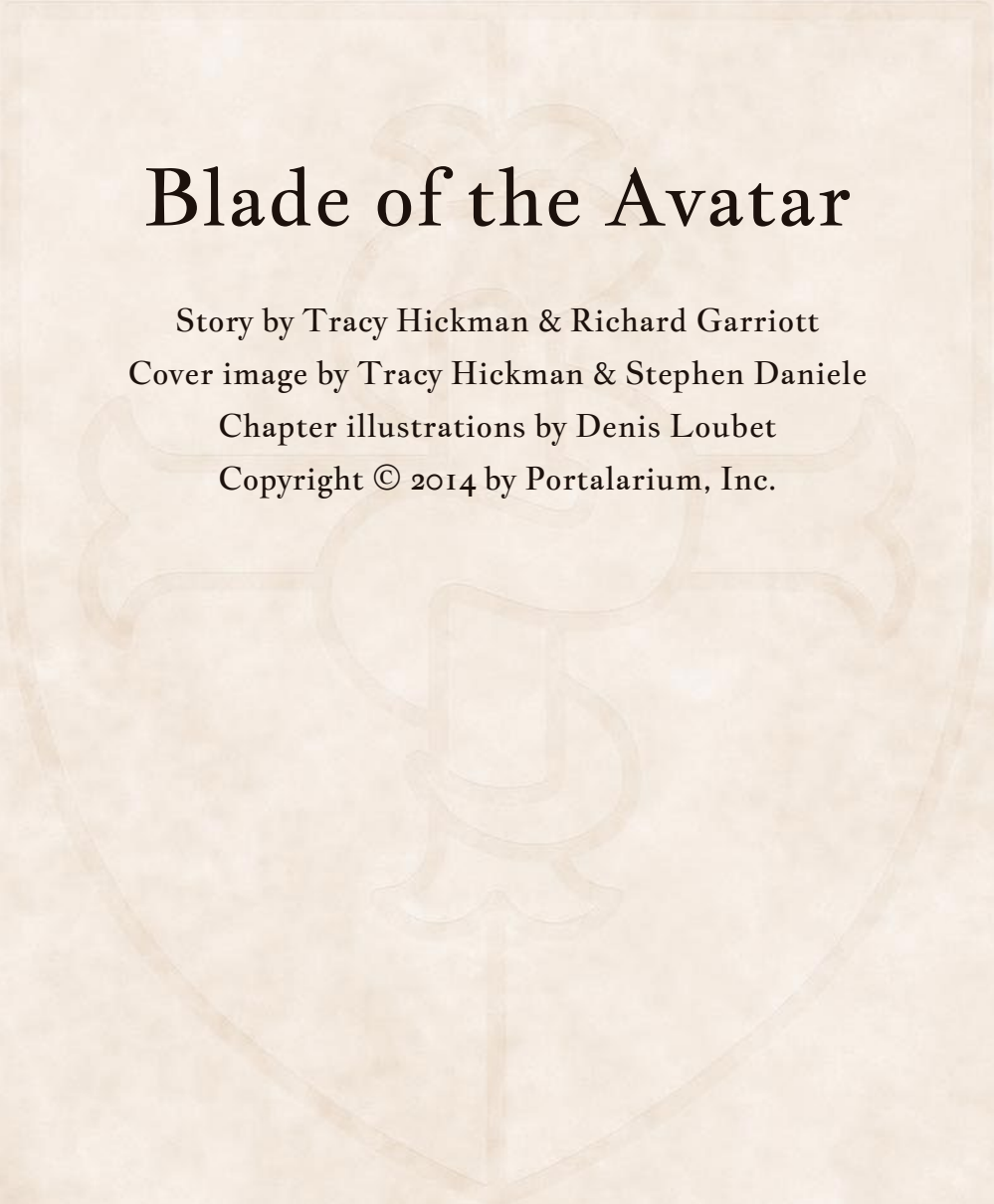


Blade of the Avatar



Tracy Hickman
and
Richard Garriott

A Shroud of the Avatar Novel



Blade of the Avatar

Story by Tracy Hickman & Richard Garriott

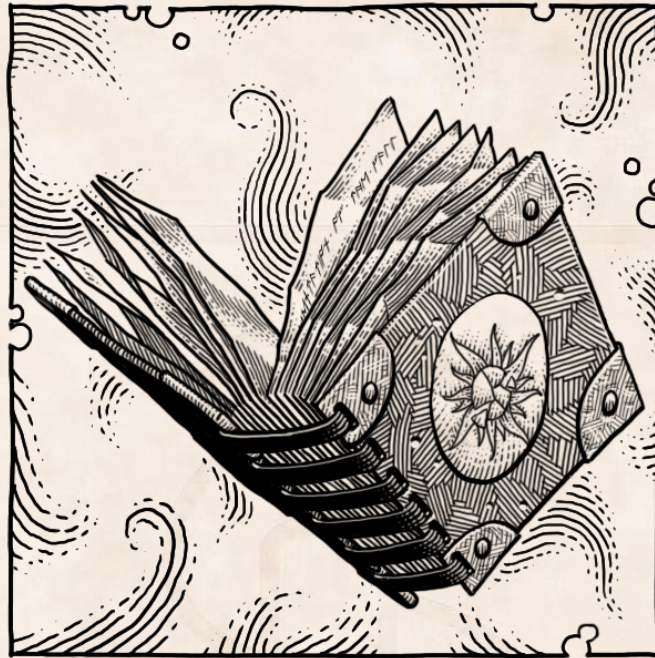
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Prologue: The Destiny Pool

The end is the beginning of us all. Hear the soundless lamentation of the ages lost! The past is hidden from the eyes of the weary, blanketed beneath ash and tears. The old world is passed away, its mountains shaken, its rivers torn from their courses, its plains rent with fire and the shining towers of man tumbled to ruin. The orb of night is broken, its black shards tumbling from the dome of night to fall as judgment's cruel, black rain. The music of daughters fails to resound, the proud boasts of men are as dust in their mouths and fear reigns in the dark silence that follows. The flesh is turned to dust and all that we once were is forgotten and lost in the shuttered past.

Where now are the virtues of the world now fallen? Were they taken from us or were we taken from them? Were they abandoned or were we orphaned by them? Was this not the blade of too fine an edge that cut between the light and night; between me and thee? Avatars of our dreams or nightmares, did you steal away from us in the night or did we lose you by the wayside, sightless in our pride?

How, then, are we to look forward when we cannot look back?

Only in the obsidian darkness can we comprehend the bright truth. The Fall has sown the seed of our redemption, that we may harvest its fruits, harness its might and rise again from the blanketing ash of a past that has been cut from us as sharply as a malignant growth.

Tomorrow is to be forged anew from a molten chaos by those who seize destiny's hammer and strike with uncompromising will.

- Lamentation of the Fall by Sariah the Blind

The man reluctantly closed the thin metal sheets of the small book. Each page was slightly bent and wavy from use and the edges were slightly rusting despite his constant care. They were bound by six wide leather thongs along the left edge and a thick cover of tooled leather after the style of the northern Grunvald binders and was barely larger than the size of his hand when he closed it. Still, the rune letters engraved on each page were as clear to his eyes as when he had first stolen the volume as a young boy. He no longer remembered where he had stolen it or even why it had seemed important to him at the time. He had not even known how to read then, an orphan of a village on the River Meino just outside of Rhun.

He had survived on magic. He had a natural talent for conjuring and shaping that was of no small use to the farmers that kept him fed and sheltered in exchange for his urging their crops to grow or coaxing a troublesome boulder out of the way of their plow but it was not until this book that he felt there might be more to his life than surviving.

It was this book that had been his companion in learning to decipher the meaning from the runes with the help of the occasional minstrel that might mistakenly pass by such an inconsequential place. It had changed his life in such profound ways. He ran the fingers of his right hand over the tooled leather artwork of the front of the book as though caressing the cheek of a lover.

If, indeed, he had ever loved at all.

“Only in the Obsidian darkness can we comprehend the bright truth,” he murmured.

He believed that it was the book that had led him to cross the Vaughan Mountains and into the Grunvald plain. It brought him to the first of the Shard Falls. The shining crystalline stone, black and enormous, stood plunged like a dagger into the vast flatness around it. Everywhere else into the distance the grass was brown in the cold winter air but around the Fall were a variety of plants and animals and even what the young man had thought were both plants AND animals weaving and reweaving themselves into strange and wondrous forms only to shift again into new shapes both chaotic and ordered at once.

It was the heart of a magic the likes of which the young man had never before experienced and he was drawn to it without ever once questioning the

wisdom in doing so.

The man had had a name in that time before but he decided that like the world in his book, his old self should pass away and a new self take its place. So he abandoned his name and became, instead, simply 'the Obsidian Eye.'

In the years that would follow he would come to believe that the wild magic surrounding the Shard Fall had all been a sign to him of bringing order out of chaos. He embraced the magic and its intoxicating power. Over time, more and more men and women with the gift were drawn to him as his reputation spread, each learning and expanding upon the craft of Obsidian Magic but tempering it all with the glorious book in his hands as a touchstone to order amid the chaos.

"It has shown me so many things," he said as he gently set the book down on the stand next to the high-backed chair on which he sat. It was in the center of a room whose walls could not be seen in the opaque darkness around him. He knew the place well for it was his own chamber deep beneath the fortress of Desolis — a ruin from before the Fall which his young order of sorcerers had claimed for their own. It was near enough to the Shard Fall that magic could be wrought here and far from the prying eyes of the petty warlords that were constantly battling each other in the wake of the world's collapse. He turned to face the floor before him. "And now we shall see even more."

In the floor before him was set a circle of stones around a dark, still pool. There was not a ripple in its surface and it looked to be of infinite depth.

The Obsidian Eye cocked his head slightly to one side. "Markus? Are you ready?"

"Ready, my Master," came the answer echoing through the chamber. Markus Dirae was an acolyte among the Obsidian Sorcerers, and the Obsidian Eye knew he was far too lowly among the ranks of their order to attend him. Undoubtedly, the nervous Markus was more perplexed at being here than any of those of higher rank and status who had thought to be here in his stead. The Obsidian Eye smiled. The presence of Markus was a matter of destiny.

"Attend me." The older sorcerer's whisper carried throughout the hall. "We have never before looked into the Destiny Pool but is not a thing created

such that it might be used? It is time we know our fates.”

The Obsidian Eye stepped down from his throne to the edge of the pool. He heard Markus take up his stylus behind him. There were several soft-clay tablets arrayed on a table next to him within easy reach.

The Obsidian Eye reached down.

Was this not the blade of too fine an edge that cut between the light and night; between me and thee?

He stopped his hand short of the mirror surface of the pool.

“Have you read *The Lamentation of the Fall*, Markus?”

“Yes, my Master,” the acolyte answered at once. “We all have, Master.”

“Of course,” the elder sorcerer sighed.

He extended his hand and touched the surface of the pool.

The placid surface erupted at once into a frothing, roiling madness. The Obsidian Eye stared at it for a moment and then began to speak. His own voice came to him as from a distance, being everywhere in the hall and nowhere at once — outside of himself.

“The world is fallen... fallen into chaos...” he heard himself say.

There was a dim awareness that Markus was inscribing runes into his tablet in some far away place.

* * * * *

The world is fallen; fallen into chaos.

Men reached up in anger and shattered the sky.

Its blackness falls to earth like a rain of dark glass;

The ordered customs and rows of society are shattered.

All men stumble

in the blinding light of a blood red dawn.

Sightless who will not see.

Deaf to the truth they will not hear.

Mewing and wailing of and for themselves.

They kill with discordant and untamed shouts
The melodic order of their better selves.
Yet from the Obsidians' fall shall arise
Seen only by the ordered Eye
The blade which shall render order in their midst;
Silence the voices who screech outside the ordered tune;
Darken the eyes of unwelcome vision;
And bring one vision, one voice, one song
To a world reborn in perfect twilight.
Supreme and ordered once more in its flawlessness.
Of one thought and purpose born and died.
Until only the night remains.

- *Prophecy of the Obsidian Eye*

* * * * *

The Master sorcerer withdrew his hand from the pool.

“Master?”

It was Markus behind him near his chair.

He could not stop it from shaking.

“Master?” came the voice more urgent this time.

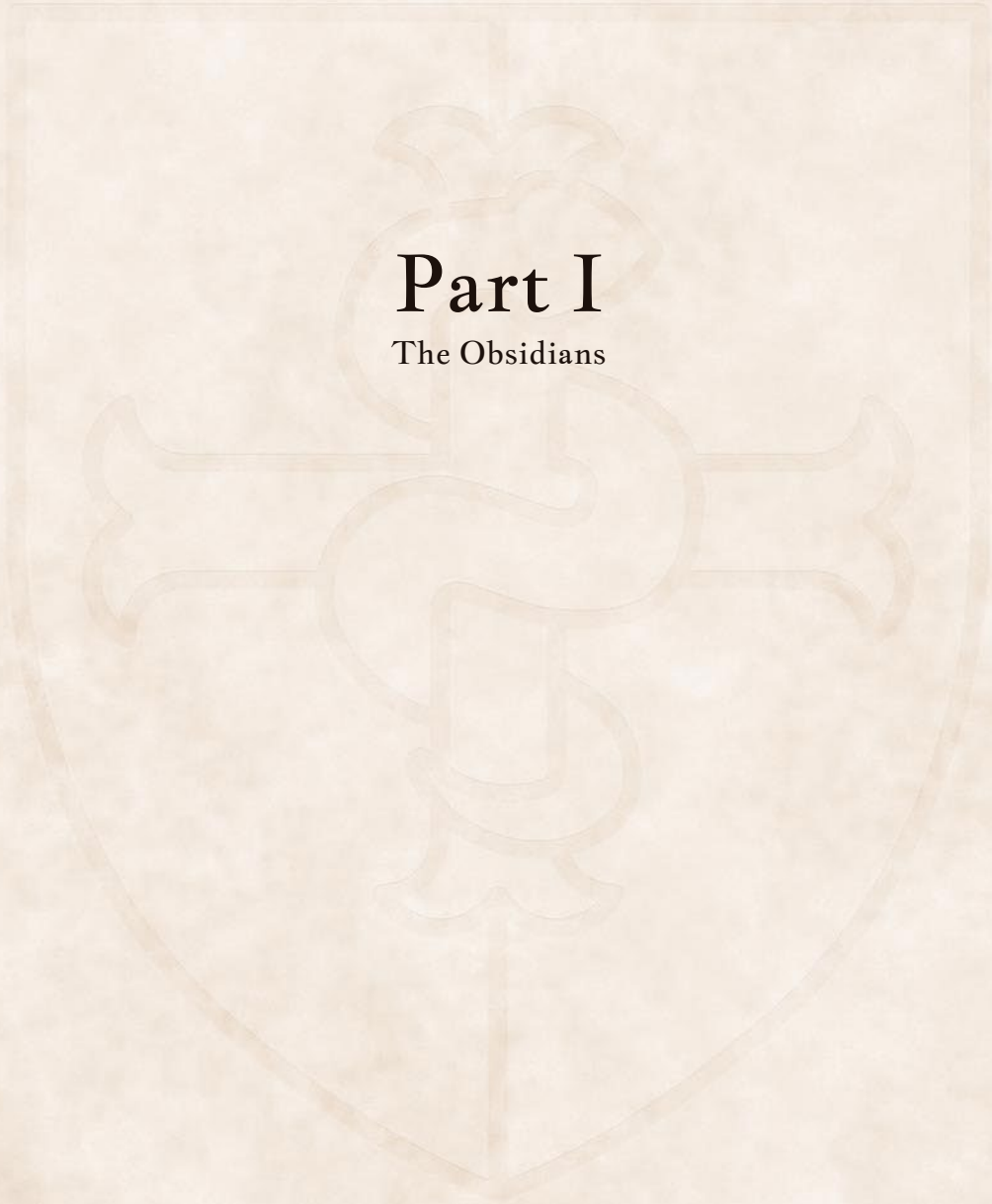
“Yes,” the Obsidian Eye answered hesitantly.

“What... what does it mean?”

“It means the world must be ordered,” the Obsidian Eye said with a smile as he gazed at his still shaking hand. “And that it is our destiny to order it.”

Part I

The Obsidians





Chapter I: Midras

Aren Bennis, Captain of the Westreach Army of the Obsidian Empire looked out for the heads of his archer ranks toward the remains of the city of Midras.

“Why does bringing order demand such a mess,” he mused as he scanned the splintering stockade wall for the remaining defenders behind it. “Such a beautiful, glorious mess.”

The city -- or what passed for a city in these times, Aren corrected himself ruefully -- lay under the pall of a large column of smoke billowing from the still burning barracks on the far side of the city. The smoke rose to mar the otherwise clear sky overhead. Aren could see the forward lines of battle against the stockade wall that stood between him and the interior of the city beyond. This was the third breach in the defenses he had commanded that day. Parts of the city were already being looted because of his two previous successes. Now, once more at his orders, the satyrs had regrouped into a concentrated force and were tearing down another section of the defensive wall. The fauns were grouped here as well in support of the satyrs, their special song loosening the mortar between the timbers. They had been the key to the fall of Midras, penetrating the timbers that stood against them in a number

of places. It allowed the main force of human warriors to sweep through the breach and collapse the city defenses. Now the city had fallen to them as the captain knew it would.

The captain knew nothing of the city's history nor did he particularly care. He could see that there were walls and columns in various places about the city which predated the Fall. One area of these on the eastern side looked as though the ruling warlord of the city was trying to restore it to some semblance of its original form. Now the building was a ruin again following their assault. The warlord had been dislodged. Blood soaked the ground and the city was being pillaged. Securing the city from vengeful pockets of warriors, still under the mistaken belief that they could still win a victory through resistance, would be difficult and long — Aren had seen that time enough before — but the rule of order and law under the Obsidians had once more reclaimed a part of the world from ignorance and the petty squabbles with its equally petty neighbors.

Aren smiled.

It was a beautiful day.

“Captain!”

The call came from behind him, barely carrying over the clash of steel, the death-cries and the battle shouts that filled the air. Aren turned only slightly in response, not wanting to miss the battle raging before him. “What is it, Halik? I’m a little engaged at the moment.”

Halik saluted after the manner of the Obsidians, slamming his fist against the center of his breastplate. “General Karpasic sends his compliments...”

“Nik, General Karpasic *never* sends a compliment,” the captain observed with his eyes still on the battle. “At least not without demanding payment for it.”

“Of course,” Nik replied with a shrug of his steel pauldrons at both shoulders. Halik had dark, close-shorn hair and preferred to keep his face shaved bare. His dusky complexion only made his smile brighter. “Did you think our glorious commander would send me out here just to tell you how pretty you are?”

“So you’ve come to tell me the general thinks I’m comely?” Aren snorted.

“Now we both know how much that’s worth!”

“So you’ll be asking me for a receipt?” Nik flashed an easy smile as he patted down the breastplate. “Oh, must have lost my parchment and quill during the battle. You’ll just have to take my word for it then ... the general sends his compliments and you’ll owe him for it on account.”

Lieutenant Halik was wearing his full battle armor as he approached. Aren looked him over once with approval. The Lieutenant wore the armor of a Westreach warlord that looked nearly identical to Aren’s own; blackened plates trimmed in bright silver with blood-red accents.

Aren smiled at the memory of the original design, when he had first seen the sketches made over a year ago by General Karpasic. The helmet looked like it had more horns and spikes sticking out of it than a thistle. The shoulder pauldrons and gardbraces were similarly sculpted into spikes and points and, it seemed, at every other available point. It looked impressive and fear-inspiring, but it was completely impractical in battle. A warrior would not be able to exit his own tent in such a ridiculous contrivance, let alone engage in combat. True, an enemy’s weapon could easily get caught up in the pointy bits and he might even do himself harm should he be so foolish as to impale himself on his opponent. More likely, however, the enemy weapon would simply do more damage by directing the blow *into* the armor rather than *away* from it. Aren managed to work with the armorers and in the end, convinced Karpasic that a design with fewer spikes and more deflecting curves would be more effective. The one concession was a single large and spikey gardbrace attached to the pauldron of the right shoulder, which became a symbol of rank among the warlords based on the shape and design. Aren made certain that the gardbrace could be detached during combat. Warriors could then at least shed this spiked contrivance when necessary. Only General Karpasic’s armor was ornamented with six such ornate gardbraces with three at each shoulder. Aren knew that they were showy and practically useless -- not unlike the general himself.

Aren smiled with satisfaction as he saw that Halik’s armor was stained and a number of blade strikes marred the finish. Aren had no use for army staff that kept their armor bright.

Which explained why his own armor was so badly damaged.

“I’d rather not owe the general anything for his compliments, on account

or otherwise. You don't suppose that the general would consider our ledger balanced now that I've taken the city for him?" Aren mused as he turned toward a message runner who was rapidly approaching from his left.

"No more than he credited you with the previous two cities, or any of the engagements in between," Halik rejoined. "His ledger is a bit one sided."

"Elf of Blood-cleaver Legion reports that the tower ruin on the left flank has been occupied by enemy archers, sire!" the runner reported slightly out of breath. "The elf requests the captain order the support of the west-flank archer units for his assault to retake the tower!"

"Tell the elf to pull his forces back westward along the battle line until they are out of range of the tower," Aren said pointedly to the runner. "He is to support the breaching force until we're through the stockade wall."

"But, sire," the runner replied, his eyes blinking nervously as he spoke, "the elf said he has orders from the general to take the tower and eliminate the threat."

Halik rolled his eyes.

"What the elf has not appreciated is that we don't *need* to take the tower," Aren replied, his voice attaining a dangerous, calm quality as he spoke. "If we isolate the tower by breaching the wall first, then we completely take them out of the battle and make them irrelevant to our victory. Tell the elf, further, that he *will* take the tower as instructed by the general — but only *after* the wall is breached and the city is secure. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sire!" the runner replied.

"Then get back to the elf with my orders before he charges the tower without permission and gets a lot of my forces killed without reason."

"Yes, sire!" the runner said again with more conviction before turning and running westward back into the conflict.

Halik cleared his throat loudly. "The general sends his compliments and requests that you..."

"Nik, my time is occupied at the moment with keeping this army together and seizing the city," Aren said as he rubbed his tired brow with his fingers. "What does the general want?"

“Simple,” Halik sighed. “He asks that you accompany me to the command tent.”

“The command tent?” the captain could barely accept the possibility. “When?”

“Now.”

“I’m conducting the battle right now!”

“And your fine work is appreciated so much,” Halik nods, “that he wants you to stop doing it and report in person on how well it is going.”

Aren closed his eyes, trying to keep his temper in check. “He means it, doesn’t he?”

“Oh, yes,” Nik nodded. “And, uh, we’re already late.”

“Captain Hart!” Aren yelled.

Hart was Aren’s second in command of the assault. Aren believed that what Hart lacked in creativity, he made up for in determination. Though they were of equal rank, Hart always deferred to Bennis’ judgment on the field of battle.

“Yes, sire!” Hart reported.

“You are in command,” Aren said as though the words tasted of bitterness in his mouth. “Continue to concentrate on breaching the wall, then have the force move into the city in pursuit of the defenders once the breach is complete.”

“Yes, sire!”

Aren turned to Lieutenant Halik. “Let’s go. Hopefully this won’t take long.”

“You never know with the general,” Nik observed.

“Yes, you never know,” Aren sighed as he turned away from the battle and stalked off toward the north.

* * * * *

The column of smoke from the city was far behind them to the south as

Captain Bennis and his companion approached the Westreach Army encampment. The sentinel guards recognized them both at once and let them pass the sentry line unchallenged. They both moved quickly between the warrior tents, mess kitchens and weapon smiths, toward the oversized tent near the center of the camp.

“How are the second version elves in combat?” Halik asked as they walked toward the general’s tent.

“Somewhat better than the first versions,” Aren observed. It was good to talk about anything except the general and the meeting that was coming nearer with every step. “But they are still a problem.”

“I thought the improved eyesight and reflexes would be an advantage,” Halik said. “And their tactical savvy should be something you above anyone would appreciate.”

“I do like the idea of their being able to demonstrate independent action as commanders of small units, but they’re still too aggressive,” Aren said, shaking his head. “That and they’re completely unstable. I’m getting reports daily of elves abandoning their commands, forming independent cells and then attacking both their enemy and their own troops.”

“How many elves do you have?” Halik asked.

“Eight,” the captain replied. “It’s all the Obsidians would send us and I’m just as glad. I try to keep them separated in different groups as much as possible. It seems to help. I am more impressed with the satyrs and the Fauns. At least they follow orders. The satyrs have limited use and have to be caged once the battle is over. The Fauns are easier to manage, although you have to goad them into the fight. At least they have a calming influence on the satyrs. We were fortunate to figure that out.”

“It’s a mixed bag,” Halik agreed. “Do you think these ‘crafted warriors’ are ever going to make a difference?”

“Is that what they’re being called now?” Aren smiled. He could already see the guards standing to either side of the command tent’s entrance. “I thought ‘monsters’ was the accepted term among the rest of the army. The Obsidians may have a talent for crafting life into more useful shapes, but I’m not certain that their efforts to create new forms of life are paying off on the battlefield.”

“You mean like the undead?” Halik almost laughed.

“Now there’s an example of misguided thinking,” Aren grimaced as he replied. “Sure, one could easily think that an army of warriors who were already dead would be invincible. The Obsidians let loose their great magic and now the dead spring up where we wish to serve our cause. No one considered that the dead hate all the living and would attack both sides when the magic called them back to life. We only recently gained any semblance of control over them, only to discover that the dead are as stupid as posts when it comes to anything outside their own life experience. You can’t command them or direct them to where you need them to go. As a weapon, they’re nearly useless.”

“The Obsidians have promised that the next incarnations of their wizardry would be functionally better,” Halik said though his tone belied his doubt.

“As they always do,” Aren chuckled. “They love to shape new creatures first and then promise to fix the monsters later.”

“Don’t you have a friend among the Cabal of Obsidians?” Halik asked. They were approaching the enormous tent of the army command. Pennants were flapping from the tent poles, clearly demonstrating who General Karpasic was holding court within. “Perhaps you could ask him when we might get a version of these creatures they like to summon that is actually useful in battle.”

“Assuming that I actually *have* a friend among the Obsidians,” Aren replied as he stopped just short of the tent entrance, “would you really think it wise to ask a mutation sorcerer why the magic of his cabal is so flawed?”

“Don’t want to be transformed, eh?” Halik laughed.

“I’d hardly be able to serve the Empire as a frog, would I?” Aren said. He cast a cynical eye on the tent flap of the entrance. “Are you coming in with me?”

“In there? I’d rather hit my own head repeatedly with a large rock,” Halik said raising his eyebrow. “You wouldn’t make that an order, would you Captain?”

“No,” Aren sighed with resignation. “But that large rock is sounding very attractive right about now.”

Aren stepped inside the tent. He was momentarily blinded as the brightness of the day gave way to the dim confines of the command tent. His eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness inside.

General Milos Karpasic sat on his ornate chair opposite the entry flap. It was like Milos in a way, Aren thought: so large that its usefulness was literally outweighed by its inconvenience. The general had the porters for the army carry the monstrosity everywhere the army went and insisted on it being set up on its matching carpet almost before the tent pegs had stopped ringing from being driven into the unforgiving ground. The army did not eat until the general's 'throne' was settled. The chair itself was designed to fit on a large wooden dais which elevated the eye level of the general above anyone who stood before him. Milos claimed that the presence of the chair struck awe in the hearts of those who came under the rule of the Obsidians, and that it was a symbol of inspiration to the troops under his command. Aren thought it simply demonstrated the arrogance of the man who preferred image over substance and truly believed there was no difference between the two.

The vision he presented now confirmed every opinion Aren had of the general. He sat wearing his 'battle armor'. The gardbraces mounted over the pauldrons on either shoulder were oversized and completely impractical; their sweeping points threatening to poke out the general's eye if he moved his head too quickly to either side. The ornate filigree on the breastplate shined even in the dim light within the tent with the fanciful image of the head of a one-eyed dragon. Every inch of the armor gleamed, and not a single scratch could be seen anywhere on its surface. His helmet, also forged to look like the head of the same one-eyed beast, sat on a stand to his right which he had designed especially for the purpose. The black armor was framed by a luxurious crimson cape attached at his shoulders and flowing over the frame of the throne.

As for General Karpasic himself, he had a square face and at first glance, no neck. He looked as though he were trying to pull his head back down between the shoulder gardbraces of his armor. His black hair he coifed back from the low slope of his extensive brow, and his dark beard and mustache were trimmed into a very controlled Vandyke-style. He looked back at Aren with small, dark eyes and a playful smile though Aren knew fully well how quickly that placid facade could be turned into tempestuous rage.

“Captain Bennis!” the general’s voice boomed so that everyone else in the tent could take notice that Aren had come at Karpasic’s whim. “A triumph for the Obsidians once more! Have you brought us all news of our victory?”

Aren turned slightly, noticing that most of the command staff was standing near the sand-table set up on the left side of the tent. Aren sighed inwardly. Schnell, Odman, Gerald, Gorn... each of them should have been at their commands at the front, maintaining control over their forces still assaulting the city. But instead, they had all been summoned, just as he had been, to the general’s tent.

At least Aren was pleased to see that Syenna was there as well. The Midmaer woman was tall and sharp featured, with almond shaped eyes that seemed to take in the world at a glance. Her skin was deeply tanned. She wore leather breeches -- much to the disapproval of the general -- and dressed more like a man than custom of the Midmaer region usually dictated. She had long, honey-colored hair, bleached nearly white by the sun, that reached her waist in a long, tightly woven braid down her back. Syenna had been the scout for the army of the Westreach since they rescued her from the trade caravan in the western Grunvald. Much to Aren’s delight, the woman proved to be not only familiar with the land but remarkably knowledgeable of the region’s stories and people. She also was the one person in the entire force that would argue with him when she thought Aren was wrong.

And, thought the captain with a rueful smile, Syenna always thought Aren was wrong. Their arguments were the one pleasure with which Aren indulged himself. The captain nodded his acknowledgement to Syenna and accepted the slight dip of her chin in return.

“My Lord General,” Aren said, turning toward the throne and the occupant that demanded everyone’s attention. “The legion under my command is engaged against the guardians of the city. We were breaking through the stockade battlement when the general summoned me here.”

“Then our victory IS complete!” the general insisted with a wave of his thick hand.

“No, sire, our victory is assured,” the captain sighed. Aren played politics well, but it was not a game he enjoyed. “It is not yet complete. I must beg your leave to return to my command and oversee the general’s full victory.”

“Nonsense, Captain!” Karpasic chuckled as he waved a dismissive hand. “The Priestess of Midras is dead and the guardians of her order are all dead with her. The wall has fallen and the deed is done. Now it is time that we revel in the spoils of our triumph!”

“Sire, there are still significant pockets of resistance in the city.” Aren knew it was probably a hopeless argument, but he had to try. “There are any number of places among both the newer buildings and the far more extensive ruins where smaller, independent pockets of Midras guardians could remain hidden.”

“Insignificant rabble,” Karpasic wrinkled his wide nose in disdain.

“The Guardians of Midras are a well-trained and disciplined cadre of warriors devoted to their Priestess and their city,” Aren pressed on. “They are far more cunning and skilled than the general defenders of the city and will continue to be a source of danger to our occupation until we deal with them.”

“They are defeated and dispirited rabble,” the general sniffed. “They are of no concern.”

“Nevertheless, sire,” Aren continued, “I would recommend that you permit me to organize a number of smaller units to methodically sweep through the city...”

“What are you doing, Bennis?” The general’s demeanor had changed in an instant. He cast a baleful eye on the captain.

“Sire, I am trying help you to victory in occupying the city of Midras...”

“Are you deliberately trying to make me look bad?” Karpasic frowned.

“No, sire!”

“This isn’t all about you, Captain!” the general spoke in low, pointed tones. His small eyes seemed almost feverish as they stared back at Aren. “Do you think the Obsidian Army of the Westreach has the luxury of waiting for you to ‘sweep through’ the city? There are objectives to be met! Schedules to maintain! The Masters of the Obsidian have expectations of us all, Captain, and they will NOT be disappointed!”

Aren held his silence. He knew better than anyone the expectations and objectives laid out by the Obsidians for General Karpasic and his army. This

tantrum had less to do with Aren and far more to do with the general himself. It was a tempest he had weathered before.

“Our victory IS complete, Captain Bennis, because I declare it so!” The general was in full rage now. “These people are under the benevolent rule of the Obsidians as of this moment, and no one, not these barbarian guardians you are so afraid of, nor even my own quivering command staff will make it otherwise!”

“Yes, sire,” Aren replied with all the self-control he could muster. “My apologies, sire. I should not have doubted you.”

“Quite right, Bennis,” the general replied. “Let that be a lesson to you all!”

Aren had to find a way out of the tent before his bile rose in his throat. “You summoned me, sire? To what purpose do you require my service?”

“Yes, well,” the general fumbled his words for a moment as he settled back into his throne. It came to him at last, and the thought of it made him smile. “As our victory IS complete, I believe it would be in the best interest of our warriors for us to hold a March of Triumph!”

“A ... parade, sire?”

“No, Bennis, not a ‘parade’,” the general repeated. “A March of Triumph. We will march our triumphant army in formation down the widest street of Midras, so that its inhabitants can fully understand the might and glory of those who have liberated them from their oppressive priestess and her false teachings. It will also lift the spirits of our warriors to hear the accolades of freed citizenry. What do you think of that, Bennis?”

“As thoughtful and brilliant a plan as you have ever made, sire,” Aren forced himself to say with a straight face.

“I’m glad you see it my way,” the general smiled again. “You are to go out at once and find a suitable street for this celebration within Midras, and then report back here to me so that we can plan the elements that will make up the celebration of my victory.”

“But my command is still engaged in breaching the northern wall of the city,” Bennis said. “Perhaps Captain Schnell is more suited at this moment to...”

“Am I not clear, Captain?” Karpasic glowered. “I mean for this to happen now, and I mean for you to do it. Your little monsters and men will manage without you.”

Aren drew in another breath to respond but decided against it. Instead he asked, “May I have the assistance of Syenna? She may be helpful in discovering the most advantageous place for the general’s processional.”

“Syenna again, eh?” The general cast a leering gaze toward the tall woman. “You seem to require her skills more often of late, but I could hardly deny you the use of her. Just don’t get lost for too long among the ruins, Captain. I’ll want your report back here within the next two hours ... a most detailed report, understand?”

“Yes, sire,” Aren glanced at Syenna. “Then, as time is pressing, may we have your leave to go now, sire?”

“Yes,” Karpasic replied with a casual, dismissive wave. “Find a proper setting for our triumphant march, Captain. Our warriors deserve it.”

Aren turned hoping Syenna was at his heels.

He could not leave the tent quickly enough.



Journey to the world of Shroud of the Avatar: Forsaken Virtues, a computer role playing game created by Lord British (aka Richard Garriott), creator of the genre defining Ultima series of computer games, Starr Long, director of Ultima Online, and Tracy Hickman, author of the Dragonlance series. It combines rich story, like those of the single player Ultimas, with deep and varied multiplayer experiences, like Ultima Online.

Players will adventure in an interactive world where their choices have consequences, ethical paradoxes give them pause, and they play a vital part in weaving their own story into the immersive world and lore surrounding them. Play options will include solo, friends only, or open multiplayer via the Selective Multiplayer system. Players can specialize in a wide range of combat and non-combat skills, provided by a robust, classless skill system, and full-featured crafting and housing mechanics.

Shroud is crowd funded and that allows the developers to work directly for, and with, the player, versus working for a large publishing corporation. Shroud is also crowd sourced so players can submit Unity compatible content (art, sfx, music, world building, etc). Once submitted content is approved the submitter can choose to be compensated in real or virtual currency.

Built using the Unity Game Engine, Shroud of the Avatar will support Win/Mac/Linux for official launch at the end of 2014. Backers gain early access at the end of 2013.

More information at

www.shroudoftheavatar.com

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