

THE FIGHTERS

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

GHOSTWALKER

**ERIK SCOTT
DEBIE**



30 Tarsakh, the Year of the Serpent
(1359 DR)

He ran through the woods, jumping at every snapping twig, every moving shadow. The height of the moon told him it was midnight, but the youth cared little. His clothes had been torn to ribbons in his desperate flight, and his flesh had been scratched brutally by the shrubs, branches, and rocks.

The youth would do anything to avoid his pursuers.

Cruel faces, real and imagined, greeted him at every turn, and sometimes a fist lashed out and sent him sprawling. He always got up again, his head ringing and his vision swimming, only to run on, mocking laughter echoing behind him. They were playing with him, as a cat toys with its prey, allowing him to run and to think he might escape, but ultimately wearing down his nerves—and his fragile resolve—to nothing.

“Oh, Ri-in,” a voice came, “here little Rhyn!”

Startled, Rhyn Thardeyn stumbled, tripped, and fell with a cry down a rocky hill into muddy water. He struggled to rise and squeaked despite himself when fiery pain shot through his right leg, and he collapsed again. He heard their voices steadily approaching and was nearly petrified with doubt and uncertainty, unsure of which direction to run—or even if running had any purpose.

The youth was thinking about how to drag his twelve-year-old body along when he heard footsteps among the trees. He froze.

“Why do you run, lovely boy?” a sharp voice called sweetly. “Come—come dance with me. I’ll teach you how.”

“Ugly little goblin’s get,” a gruff voice joined the first. “Come an’ face us like a man. We won’t hurt ye . . . much.”

He cowered, hiding deep in the shallows, coated in mud. He saw two forms run by—the two men who had shouted. They seemed oblivious to his presence.

Fighting to calm his breathing, Rhyn hummed a merry tune over and over again in his head. Everything would be all right. Everything . . .

Rhyn heard a splash in the stream behind him. Slowly, he turned to look.

A young boy with curly ebony hair waded there, dressed in rich silks.

Rhyn looked, pleading, into the boy’s eyes, and saw there unwillingness, even sympathy. The boy was not to blame for the sins of the father.

“I’ve found him!” shouted the boy. It was a condemnation.

Then they were upon him, rough hands clutching at his arms and his broken leg. He screamed and cried for his mother, but it was no use.

They threw him down in the circle of trees and lay into him with hobnailed boots. The kicks broke ribs, arms, and his uninjured leg, and when he tried to rise, the pain drove him back before the brutal men could punch him down once more.

Finally, the beating stopped. Rhyn looked up with bleary, red-filled eyes.

"You're going to die now, boy," a thick, slurred voice said. A huge man with a heavy wood axe loomed over him, patting the massive weapon.

"No, no, let him dance with me first," the thin man said. A rapier gleamed in his hand, and he whisked it through the air. "I will enjoy tracing his red trail, watching his broken moves. Come dance with me, boy—I'll be the last thing you ever see."

"If any o' us gets him, it'll be me!" said a bearlike man with a wicked grin. "I'll grind his bones an' tear his flesh with me teeth!"

Moaning, Rhyn tried to curl into a ball, away from them, away from the world of pain.

"Now, now, gentlemen," said the leader in a sonorous voice. He was the one Rhyn feared the most—the one behind this, the one who commanded the others. Rhyn just wanted to get away from him, the man he had once wanted to become.

"Please . . . please m-my Lord Greyt. . . ." he managed through cracking lips. His voice was broken and slurred with pain.

His pleas went ignored. The man bent low over Rhyn and slipped a silver ring onto his finger.

"We have a job to do, and we shall do it." He flipped his rapier idly in the moonlight. "One blow at a time. Don't worry about killing him—'tis *my* ring. Death won't spoil our fun, or his pain. Let us hear him sing."

Mocking, lyrical words. . . .

"Aye," said the woodsman, "me first."

The axe came down and Rhyn screamed as it cut into his shoulder.

"Then me," the thin man said before the bearlike one could speak. The rapier pierced Rhyn's arm, bringing with it razor-sharp pain.

"My turn!" the bear man spat.

The boy prayed he was far enough gone that he would not

know pain, but when the spiked ball of the man's weapon slammed into his chest, he felt every shattering rib.

Rhyn moaned as darkness closed in. Blood trickled from his mouth.

"Good work," the leader said. Somehow, Rhyn could still hear. A rapier gleamed golden in the moonlight. "Now, let us teach him a new song."

The boy stood over Rhyn, his eyes filled with fire. Anger? Rage? Indignation? Rhyn had thought there was softness there. . . .

Then he passed out, whether for a moment or an eternity, he did not know. He felt someone reach down and pull the silver ring from his finger—the ring whose magic had kept him alive through this torture.

"A horde of good it will do you now," said a soft voice.

Arguing broke out in the darkness. Lord Greyt was angry. "That was never our bargain!"

Whispers.

"Damned if you will have this boy!" Rhyn heard someone shout.

A cold finger ran down his cheek—the touch of death.

Then a sharp pang ran through his chest, a blade pierced his throat, and he started back into the world of misery.

"Let's hear you sing now," the soft voice said.

Rhyn opened his lips, as though to oblige, and only a bloody rattle emerged.

Angry shouts erupted and a scuffle ensued. Something small and metal, like a tear, fell against his left cheek and rested next to his eye.

"Whether you will it or no," whispered another voice in his ear.

The world went black.

24 Tarsakh, The Year of Lightning Storms
(1374 DR)

Shivering, the courier pulled her cloak tight around herself, warding off the chill of the Moonwood night. At least the stinging drops no longer slapped down on her—the forest canopy caught much of the rain. She rode slowly down the road to Quaervarr so her mare could avoid stumbling on unforeseen rocks and sticks. Her parents told her spring was coming, but it was definitely taking its time. Chandra Stardown couldn't stand the cold, and she prayed to Mielikki and Chauntea that the warmth would come soon.

She clutched the leather case strapped around her stomach protectively, just to reassure herself it was there. This was not Chandra's first assignment, so negligence or jitters would not be excused. Grand Commander Alathar had said this message was important, so it wouldn't do to

lose it en route. If she wanted a promotion, perhaps even membership in the famous Knights in Silver, she could not fail.

As she rode deeper into the shadowtops and firs of the Moonwood, the storm passed. The cold, however, grew no gentler. Chandra longed for the Whistling Stag, where she could order a room and a long, hot bath with the silver her father had loaned her.

Abruptly, Songbird, Chandra's mare, neighed and tossed her mane. She stopped all forward motion and pranced in a circle.

"What is it, girl?" Chandra asked, running a soothing hand along Songbird's mane. "Did you see something?"

Chandra looked around, but didn't see anyone. The trees loomed forbiddingly beside the trail like towering mountains hiding unseen dangers in their heights. She looked up, wary of an ambush by gnolls or even elves, and clutched her silver short spear tightly. Even though the real threat of the Moonwood—the People of the Black Blood, a cult of werebeasts—had been chased away months before, Chandra's father had wanted her to be prepared. The courier was far from a capable fighter, but any werewolf would think twice before it charged onto a silver spearhead.

There was something out there, something that had frightened Songbird, but Chandra didn't see anything out of the ordinary. The forest was peaceful.

Somehow it seemed almost *too* peaceful. The birds had stopped chirping, and there were no sounds of rustling leaves or lonely crickets. Absolute silence reigned.

The hair on the back of her neck rose and Chandra had the unnerving sensation she was being watched. Was she being hunted? Surely no werebeast would dare. . . .

Another cold sensation ran through her—this one very different. She was suddenly intensely conscious of the blood pumping through her veins and the breath passing through her lungs—more so than she had ever been before. Trembling, she became aware of a ghostly presence, one

that touched her soul with tenuous fingers and probed at the vibrancy within her, seeking, perhaps, to explore.

Or to feast.

She had heard legends about a ghost who haunted these woods, but she had always dismissed them as mere fancy, as children's stories told by young men who wanted to weasel their way into awed young ladies' beds.

Until now.

"Chandra . . ." the wind seemed to whisper.

Chandra dug her spurs into Songbird's side and the mare gave a fierce neigh as they burst into a gallop. Chandra no longer cared about the rocks and twigs—Songbird could handle herself. Indeed, the mare seemed just as terrified as she was. All Chandra cared about was getting away from that awful feeling, that ghostly chill that had come upon her. She flicked the reins and shouted to Songbird, urging her on to Quaervarr.

As such, she hardly even registered the click of the cross-bow until a bolt sprouted in her right shoulder.

Gasping in surprise and pain, Chandra jerked in the saddle, slamming her head into a low-hanging tree branch. The impact hurled her off Songbird's back, and she landed with jarring force on the ground. Fortunately, the trail lay muddy with rain—else, her back might have snapped from the impact.

As it was, Chandra sat stunned for a moment. Then a ringing broke out in her head, an ache tore her backside, and the sucking pain of the bolt in her shoulder cried for attention. Her leg was twisted as well. Hot blood flowed into her eyes, and the world was cast in crimson. She wiped at her face, clearing the sticky stuff as best she could, but more oozed from the cut on her forehead.

Then she remembered Songbird, galloping on ahead of her.

"Wait!" she tried to cry out, but the choked sound that came from her throat was more a gurgle than a word. Chandra tried to push herself to her feet, but horrible pain lanced through her and she collapsed to the ground again with a short scream. Dragging her broken leg behind her

and wincing from the darkwood shaft in her shoulder, she crawled along the trail after Songbird.

Right up to a pair of black boots.

Chandra looked up at the man standing over her. Cloaked with a cowl that covered his face, he seemed a pillar of black. A sheathed sword hung from one hip.

“A-ah,” Chandra started to choke out. “H-help . . . m-me . . . P-please. . .”

The man may have smiled at her, but she could not see through the black hood pulled low. He bent down and ran one cold finger down her cheek.

She thought she could hear her name on the wind.

Few heard Chandra’s scream, except for unthinking animals, and even they recoiled.



It was a cold evening after the rain passed—the last great chill of winter—but the darkness was warm with cheer.

Hundreds had crowded into the plaza of Quaervarr for the largest gathering in months. Children huddled with their mothers, trying to pull as much of themselves into the warmth of their parents’ cloaks as they could. Fathers and unmarried men mulled around in the town square, working to light the fires before dusk, trading hearty jokes and even more raucous laughter. Even the grumpy ones could hardly keep smiles off their faces. Fine, fey eyes twinkled and a scattering of elf faces seemed to glow in the falling light of the setting sun. The men finally got the fires lit, and flames danced up, hissing and crackling. Children laughed and squirmed, escaping possessive mothers.

Tonight would mark the beginning of the Greengrass festival which would end with the dawn of spring seven days hence. Cruel winter would leave behind the frontier town of Quaervarr, and the rebirth of all growing things would see the people of the Moonwood in higher spirits. True, the winter frost would not actually leave until summer, but

there was a noticeable difference between winter's cold and spring's cool.

Lord Dharan Greyt had always preferred the spring.

Gold-haired, clad in a rich crimson doublet, and wrapped in a violet cloak with gold lining, the Lord Singer of the Silver Marches cut a dashing figure as he stepped onto the wooden stage in the square. A one-eyed wolf, his family seal, grinned from the velvet of his cloak. At once the crowd went silent, waiting to hear him speak, but he merely looked out at them, a sea of blank faces.

All of them looked expectant. All expect one: the handsome, dusky face of Meris, framed with ebony curls and sitting atop his white-cloaked body. Meris looked on in bemused contempt. Greyt suppressed a smile. Much of the rabble was hopelessly bewitched at the sight of the Lord Singer, but not Meris. He was greater than any of them.

Greyt was pleased. He expected nothing less from his favorite—and only living—son.

Straight-faced, he tossed back his cloak and drew forth his gleaming golden rapier with a flourish. The crowd was stunned and drew back in awe.

“Well met, my friends!” His voice was rich and melodious, as though he sang a tune with every word. “Spring is coming—let's come to an accord!” Greyt spun his sword once with dazzling finesse and stabbed it into the planks at his feet where it stood, quivering. The audience gasped. “To live by art instead of the sword!”

Greyt smiled as he pulled his golden wood yarting from beneath his cloak. He strummed a perfect chord on the gilded instrument.

The crowd erupted into cheering as the Lord Singer began a raucous and comical story about a wandering lady, a dimwitted squire, and the dragon he had lost. The lewder adventures drew shocked gasps from the younger ladies, roaring laughter from the men, and giggles from more than a few older women. Mothers, stifling guffaws, remembered themselves and covered their children's ears.

Greyt saw two of his closest friends—Drex Redgill and Bilgren Bladefist—in the back of the crowd, roaring drunk, alternately shouting challenges to young rangers in the square and making lecherous comments to serving wenches. Just like in their adventuring days, Greyt mused.

The Lord Singer saw Bilgren shove one man down and steal his sweetheart—or strumpet, as the case may have been. Greyt decided it was time to change key.

The song took on an epic tone as he began a ballad of battles. Greyt sang of Quaervarr's victory against Fierce Eye's giants in the Year of Moonsfall, 1344: he sang of the glorious defense and of the heroic Raven Claw band—his own adventuring group.

Meanwhile, he plied his bardic magic through the music, creating curtains of flame and illusions of brave knights, fierce giants, and dancing dragons to amaze the crowd. Drex and Bilgren calmed and joined in the singing, lending their slurred voices to the cacophony. Even the sneering half-elf Torlic, the only other surviving member of the Raven Claw band, watched from the edge of the crowd. The people cheered, enraptured. Greyt almost enjoyed it.

He sang a third ballad, this one again about Quaervarr: the well-known legend of the Ghostly Lady who haunted the Dark Woods to the west. It had started one night over a century ago—a night of fire and death woven by a beautiful angel of fury. The druids of the Oak House—an order recently established at that time—had fought her and ended the threat with her death, but the town thrived on stories that called her alive and well, or perhaps undead and well, haunting the woods. More than a few children—and some who were older than children—shivered at Greyt's tale and smiled all the wider for it.

There was a moment of silence. The yarting fell still, and the people grew silent. After allowing the tension to build, Greyt began the story of Gharask Child-killer, the mad lord, his own father, and the tragic disappearances fifteen years before, when nine of the town's children had fallen to the mad hand of—

Greyt's fingers faltered and his voice cracked for the first time in thirty years as a bard.

A cloud uncovered the moon and he saw a figure clad all in black watching his performance as it walked over the crest of the hill at the edge of town. The figure wasn't just watching him, though—it was staring right through him. Even at a distance of nearly a quarter of a mile, Greyt could feel that gaze, palpable and fierce, boring into him, seeing through his art, and searching his very soul.

"A ghost that walks. . . ." he breathed. The legend of Walker of the woods had long been the subject of hunters' whispers and boys' blustering—but it was just a ghost story. Nothing more than foolish child's play.

He blinked, and the dark figure was gone as though it had never been.

The Lord Singer realized he had paused for a full breath at his father's name, and the villagers were looking at him in shock. He gave a little shrug and tried to begin again, but he had lost the note. He flashed a dazzling smile, bowed, and proceeded to hurry off the stage to uncertain applause. Meris was there, smirking, and near him the sharp-eyed Torlic, but Greyt skulked past. Speaker Geth Stonar, mopping his thick forehead, moved to stop him, but the bard stormed on.

His mind reeled. He wanted to dismiss the incident as a mere trick of the light, or the result of too much wine, but those had never broken his song before. Perhaps he was just getting old.

It began to rain, a bitter, cold cloudburst, and Lord Dharan Greyt shivered.



The streets emptied soon after the rain began. The few hundred citizens of Quaervarr dispersed into the town's several common rooms to celebrate with ales and friends or scurried back to their homes, where they might celebrate in a more private, intimate fashion.

For Drex Redgill, the latter was the case. Roaring drunk, the man bid farewell to his friend Bilgren and staggered home with his squire and servants, eagerly seeking his room and the half-elf lass hired for the occasion. His was a large house in the south part of town, girded on every corner by watchtowers and guards.

The stranger knew this because he watched it all from the shadows.

Walker considered the scale of this duel. Guards didn't make for a fair confrontation. Of course, once Walker penetrated the house, the scales would tip in the other direction. Did two inequalities make equality? He did not care. Fairness seemed like something his father would scold him about. If Tarm could speak, that was.

As for how to get in . . . There was only one way in.

"Cold as winter," he whispered. His voice was a deep rasp.



The guards started when a man dressed in black melted from the shadows a short distance away and took a step toward them. A sweeping, tattered cloak fanned out behind him. Dark, rain-slick hair that might have been brown fell to his shoulders in a ragged mass. His collar was pulled up high, obscuring his mouth. But more than anything else, he wore resolution around him like a mantle. The intensity of his deep blue eyes was chilling. This man seemed a demon in flesh.

"Oi, where did ye come from?" the scarred one asked. "Ye don't be no friend o' Jarthon, do ye?" The second, much younger guard shook himself from his stupor and hefted his halberd.

The phantom man planted a fist in the first man's face. Blood burst from the guard's nose and he staggered back. The young man let the halberd fall from his cold fingers in surprise. The weapon clattered to the ground with a loud rattle and he grabbed for it with an oath.

The scarred guard yanked out a sword and thrust, but the phantom slapped the blade away and punched the guard hard in the stomach. The older man went down to his knees.

“Gods be curs—” the guard managed. Then a foot met his face and ended his obscenities.

The younger guard, eyes wild with terror, managed to draw his short sword. As if he had sensed the blade, the dark man turned toward the guard, throwing his cloak out wide.

Shaking, the guard thrust blindly into the shadow.

To his surprise, the blade sank home, drawing blood, and the phantom staggered and fell to the ground. The guard’s blade went with it, red fluid leaking around the sharp steel.

The clouds chose that moment to release their rain.

It took the younger guard twenty breaths to steady himself. He was too terrified to be ashamed, shaking like a goblin before a dragon.

The other guard, recovered from the stranger’s attack, slapped him on the side of the head. “Oaf!” he shouted at the boy. “Ye didn’t ’ave to kill him! How’re we going to explain this? A drunk wanders up after the party an’ ye spit him? Are ye stupid?”

“But . . .” the youth stammered as his scarred companion knelt to examine the body. He had never killed a man before. “I didn’t mean—”

“Oh, ’tis sure ye didn’t *mean*,” the older guard mocked. He felt at the dark man’s throat. “Damn. ’E be dead.” He reached out and punched the youth’s thigh. “Idiot! At least help me dispose o’ the poor bastard, aye?”

Together, they hoisted the dark figure up and dragged him to the alley near Drex’s house, where they unceremoniously dumped the body. The youth started off, shaking, but remembered and reclaimed his short sword, yanking it from the dark man’s belly. The blade made a sickly squishing sound coming out of the flesh. The youth wiped it on the dead man’s cloak.

Not much blood. The man didn’t seem to bleed much, now that he was dead.

The older guard drew the man's silvery sword and stuck it in the hole in his side. The handle was bitterly cold, and the blade seemed almost translucent in the moonlight, prompting both guards to make the warding gesture of Silvanus.

An accident, a passerby would think, with Tymora's blessing. Lord Singer Greyt would be another matter, but he need not know.

"C'mon." The scarred guardsman spat at the youth. "Come, afore someone be seein' us."

They left the body slumped in the alleyway and hurried away.

The rain chilled to the bone.



Walker waited until they were gone before opening his eyes. The sword—his sword—in his side hurt, but Walker was used to pain. He grasped the sword hilt and pulled the weapon out. The wound began to mend, thanks to his ring. He rubbed the silver wolf's head with its single sapphire eye and empty socket. At least the guards had not noticed the shine of silver and taken the ring from his cold, "dead" finger.

"Still as death," Walker said quietly as he sheathed his sword.

He had almost achieved his goal. The wall of the house of Drex was not an arm's length away.

Closing his eyes and laying his hands upon the stones, Walker allowed himself to slip into the Ethereal, where he existed but could barely feel his body. Only the heat of his hate differentiated him from the icy darkness. The world became dusky, shapes and objects mere blurry masses, and the moonlight turned into a soft, muddy radiance. He let his body relax, felt his weight lighten, and he could feel a gentle tug, the pull toward somewhere else. . . .

Walker tapped into powers few could understand and even fewer dared touch and walked into the wall.

And through the wall.

In a heartbeat, he was inside Drex's mansion. He let the ghostly power slide from him but maintained his focus. His body became heavier and he could feel the air around him. He sensed the warmth radiating from a distant hearth, where a fire still smoldered. He was tempted to move toward that heat, but he put the ache aside.

He would not fail in this. He could not fail.

He moved through the hallways as a black fish moves through a dark stream. Two servants passed, carrying a basket of woolens and a platter of empty plates and tankards respectively, and Walker did not hinder them, hiding against the wall with ease.

As Walker turned a corner, a guardsman carrying a candle almost ran into him. "Wha—" the man started.

Walker's sword was out, darting for the guard's life. Light from the spilling candle flashed along its mithral surface, dazzling the guard. The man stumbled back and set a hand on his own weapon, but before he could draw he stopped, shuddered, and slumped down, gagging. The dying guard glimpsed the dagger standing out of his throat then stared at the gleam of Walker's mithral blade, still distracting him even after the real attack had come.

Walker whispered an apology over the body—the guard had not been his target. He knelt and recovered his knife with a quick jerk. Blood splashed on his cloak but did not discolor the black.

Black absorbs blood, Walker mused wryly. Black covers all things and hides all hurts.

Drex's bedchamber stood within half a dozen paces. Though he had no foreknowledge of the house, he could recognize the grunting and yelping sounds coming from behind the door easily enough. With a dismissive shake of his head, he turned the handle, silently opened the door, and slipped into the warm room.

Drex was in bed, and he was not alone. Walker averted his eyes and drifted silently over to an axe on the mantelpiece.

Rain pounded on the wooden roof overhead and on the shutters. A fire was sputtering and dying on the hearth, and he could feel the enticing heat as he neared it. Walker had known so little warmth that he found it succulent, fulfilling, and altogether intoxicating. He could have forgotten his purpose and just sat, watching the fading flames spark and flicker. They called to him. . . .

But the voices he heard were those of spirits rather than flames, hissing whispers of unwanted memories of pain and hatred. The fragments of words cut like knives.

He stood, tall and slim, and pulled his cloak around him. Lightning flashed and thunder growled outside. He waited, motionless and prepared. It fell to his enemy to make the first move. Drex would notice his presence when he was no longer distracted.

Soon enough, Drex's eye happened to wander the room and alight on Walker. Or, rather, his looming shadow on the wall.

"Who's there?" Drex stuttered, shoving the lass away.

Walker didn't answer. He merely stood, blending in with the surrounding dark, but Drex met his terrible gaze and the rest of the world seemed to slide away.

Drex sat bolt upright in bed, startling his courtesan. "Who in the Nine Hells are you?" he roared, now angry. The older man was from the south, by his accent. Walker remembered that.

And more.

A memory washed over him: *Pain, blood. Drex's laughter. Swords . . . death. . . .*

"I am tears on the mountain," Walker said. His voice was a rasp, a deep, throaty whisper. "I am the chill in the night. I hunt with the spirits, and I walk with the dead . . . as will you." He put his hand on his sword hilt. "Soon."

Drex shivered at the intensity of that glare, but he sprang from bed all the same. He yanked the blanket with him, revealing the cowering woman, who screamed and curled into a ball. He wound it around himself to cover his nakedness.

In truth, Walker did not care. He kept his arms crossed and his gaze level.

“Pretty speech,” Drex chuckled. His hair was gray now. Different. “One of Greyt’s ’prentices, eh?”

Walker felt a flicker of irony, but the feeling passed. His neutral frown was hidden behind the twin flaps of his high collar. Lightning flashed again. Drex was approaching fifty now, almost double Walker’s age. They stalked around each other.

“Sounds like something out of the Singer’s songs, lad,” Drex said. “So what, you barge into my room in the night to tell me a children’s rhyme? You think I’m in the mood?” He laughed and gestured to the terrified woman.

“Apparently not,” Walker replied in a monotone. He remembered the axe, the blood running down his chest and arms, the murderers standing over him. . . .

“Then speak, boy.” Drex’s voice became irate. “Speak quickly. As you can see, I’m occupied at the moment.” The woman had rolled off the bed and was hiding beside it. “What is it you want?” he demanded.

“Your life,” Walker replied.

Drex froze, staring at the ghostwalker in outright shock. His expression turned to one of anger, then disdain, then contempt.

“I have no time for the games of Dharan Greyt or that bastard son of his,” said Drex. He spat at Walker’s feet, then reached over and hefted the great woodsman’s axe from the mantelpiece. “Now get out, or I’ll send you out . . . in several small bundles.”

“No,” Walker said. “You will not.”

Drex slashed his axe at him in reply, his shout slurred with too much ale.

Walker sidestepped and brought his arm around with a snap as though embracing Drex, allowing the axe to swipe past and the drunken lord’s momentum to carry him staggering toward the opposite wall. The heel of Walker’s hand darted for Drex’s back and should have put him down, but the lord dived, rolled,

and came up, his axe slashing across in a blur. Walker fell back, and the blade tore a long gash through his cloak.

Drex kept up the assault, egged on by the ripping of fabric, and reversed his slash.

Dark cloak trailing, Walker leaped horizontally over the flashing steel and rolled away from the deadly side chop—even when half-drunk, Drex was fast—and the steel burst wood chips from the side of a desk. Walker came up with his hand on his sword hilt and his knees bent. His hard eyes cut into Drex's watery ones. The lord was growing sober.

"You move like Torlic," growled Drex as he pulled the axe free, splintering the hardwood desk. "All jumping an' twirlin' like a lass."

"Torlic," repeated Walker, the name crashing against his mind like a wave. Torlic. . .

Seeing his opponent distracted, Drex slashed low.

Walker leaped, his black boots clearing the glittering steel by a hair's breadth, and turned in the air, lashing out with one foot. He caught Drex on the chin and sent him staggering back a few steps. Walker landed with a creak of wood even as Drex crashed backward into a nightstand, spilling several tankards and a pouch of coins to the floor.

The woodsman felt at the blood coming from his split lip and looked at Walker in surprise. Then his face twisted in outrage. "You're going to die now, boy!" Drex growled.

Walker shuddered, a memory flooding through him: Drex's face, red with blood that wasn't his, laughing at those same words. Walker's eyes narrowed. The world slowed as a dead calm flooded his limbs.

You're going to die now, boy!

"I remember you," he pronounced, as though intoning an elegy. "Standing over me. . ."

"As I will be in a moment," Drex growled. His words spoke of confidence, but his eyes held doubt.

Walker drew his sword, letting the mithral glow with silver fire. The weapon seemed ghostly, almost translucent, though surely it was a trick of the light.

“The time has come for a reckoning, Drex Redgill,” Walker said softly. A familiar bleak power filled him—a terrible emptiness in which nothing existed.

Nothing but vengeance.

The axe darted, but Walker flowed out of the way. It missed cutting through his floating cloak by a breath. Drex reversed the blow, but Walker almost lazily swept his long sword down, catching the axe and throwing it back as though Drex were a child. The lord roared in frustration and slashed at him again and again, but Walker turned it aside each time.

Each time, he felt the pain of those first blows, struck so long ago. . . .

After the fifth chop, Walker countered, his movement casual but blindingly fast. The sword seemed to snap into his left hand, startling Drex so that he missed the parry. Walker’s blade slashed a line across Drex’s naked torso.

Pained, the lord grunted and slashed, but Walker easily parried and countered, stabbing Drex in the thigh.

The warrior slashed again, hit nothing, took a third cut to his belly, and roared.

Drex chopped high to low with his axe. Walker parried it high and the blades locked. Drex punched Walker’s shoulder, but the dark man shrugged off the blow, shifted the sword to his right hand, and answered with a left hook to Drex’s jaw. The lord staggered back, Walker chopped at Drex’s weapon, and the mithral blade cut through it like paper, laying the axe blade in two.

Drex looked as though he would have said something, but Walker sliced open his throat. Blood splattered the half-elf courtesan’s face. Without a word, Drex slumped onto his belly.

Lightning crackled and thunder roiled. The man in black stood over him and reached a tentative hand up to touch his own shoulder.

The woman whimpered. After a heartbeat, Walker regarded her.

Then he vanished as lightning struck.