

# CITY OF SCARS

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THE SKULLBORN, BOOK I

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Released by Darker Sunset Press

## Prologue

*(Year 10 of the Rift War)*

Corgan stirred from his dreams and woke to the taste of blood. Distant voices clawed at the edge of his thoughts, forgotten songs from his childhood.

It wasn't quite dawn. Charcoal clouds stained the crimson sky. The canyon wall marking the northern edge of the Heartfang Wastes was just a jagged line on the horizon. Low vapors curled across the ground, a blend of mist from the Moon Sea and smoke from Jlantrian border towns put to the torch.

The dying campfires cast flickering light on his men's faces. They camped on an island of dry land in the muddy fields, in the shadow of a looming hillside covered with blade grass and red soil. Several Silver Company soldiers had woken as Corgan had, pulled from uneasy slumber by a disturbance at the edge of camp. Corgan followed their gazes.

A filthy wall of smoke loomed over the camp, dripping blood like rain. Rot stench emanated from the brume. The gory mist washed over Corgan's face and soaked his beard with the sickening touch of something wet and freshly dead.

"Colonel Bloodwine!" someone called, but it was difficult for him to tell who. There were only fifty-seven soldiers left in Silver Company.

The camp came alive with the sounds of clanking armor and cries of alarm. The fog loomed over them as if it were ready to pounce.

"Get moving!" Corgan shouted. "Now!"

Corgan grabbed his long-hafted sword, clenched his teeth and stood up. His hauberk shifted painfully against his undershirt. As unwise as it was to sleep in chain-and-plate there was little choice in the Heartfang Wastes, where you rested in armor if you hoped to ever wake again.

The men hastily packed their belongings, rounded the few remaining horses and fled from the devilish fog. The roiling mist seemed to extend for miles. Ambient light from within the smoke cast a sickly red glow upon the ground.

"Use the mist's light!" Corgan shouted. "Save the torches! Let's go!" Corgan was about to call for Sergeant Joth before he remembered Joth was dead, along with the rest of his sergeants.

"We shouldn't have camped for so long." Jonas had a way of making every word seem scornful. The dark-skinned Den'nari ranger was Corgan's advisor in matters of the Veil and the Company's only reliable source of information on the denizens of the Heartfang Wastes, so while few of the other soldiers liked him they all heeded what he said. "The Vampire Mists seek blood. They were bound to find us eventually."

"Well there wasn't much we could do then, was there?" Corgan said with more of a snarl than he'd intended. "The men needed rest." He gathered his bedroll. "If we move fast enough we shouldn't lose anyone."

Corgan waited near the smoldering fires as his men cleared the camp. The earth darkened beneath the presence of the baleful Mists. A few tendrils of blood fog slithered across the ground like snakes. Animalistic growls churned deep inside the fumes.

He hollered at his men to forget the tents. The roiling blood smoke steadily gained ground as the Company moved out, and Corgan watched, tensed, ready for the vapors to suddenly spring forward like a hunter cat done toying with its prey.

“Colonel!” Jonas called out. The Den’nari stood at the edge of the hill. “We’re clear!”

Corgan nodded. He was alone in the campsite, a hundred paces away from the edge of the seething red mass. It swirled and broke like a storm of blood and milk. He heard whispers, the same razor voices from his dream.

*You’re not getting me today*, he thought. He left the camp behind and stayed just ahead of the fog as it rolled forward like a diseased and deliberate tide. Corgan rounded the hill and fell in with his men.

The new day broke. Silver Company kept a good pace, and within the hour the unholy mists faded into the distance behind them. Corgan’s heart never stopped racing. He kept looking back over his shoulder.

The rendezvous point was still miles away. The Company pushed deeper into the dismal plains known as the Heartfang Wastes. Boots slapped in the mud. It started to rain, and the dank water flowed through their dirty and mottled hair and into the chinks in their cold armor. Pallid faces and blank eyes stared straight ahead.

Corgan looked at Jonas. The Den’nari’s green and black leather armor lent his gaunt frame the illusion of bulk. His dark hair was long and unbound, and his angular face looked like it had been chiseled from stone. His *raak’ma*, a twin-bladed scimitar used almost exclusively by the Den’nari, was strapped across his back with its central hilt bound in leather. When Jonas looked back at Corgan his green eyes were cold and determined. Neither of them had any misconceptions about where they were going, or what waited for them there.

The soldiers moved like metal ants. They marched through the steady drizzle of freezing rain. Corgan’s thinning hair was pasted to his scalp, and his body shook from the cold even though he sweated like a stuck sow under his armor.

He looked around at his men. The soldiers of Silver Company were of every age. Locke, the youngest, was barely sixteen, while Abras was the oldest at over fifty. Their once proud faces had lost all color and life, and their skin looked as trod upon as the dead earth. Once gleaming armor had been beaten, muddied and stained with rust. The waters of war had saturated them through to the bone and corroded their souls with fear.

He was so tired. His back ached, and his bones were frozen and brittle, but he carried on, just like his men, cold and aching and barely alive.

Corgan remembered telling one of his soldiers – he couldn’t remember who – that no place was closer to hell than the once-proud city of Savon Karesh. It had once been an architectural beauty, a place of significance in the western Jlantrian Empire, but the war had made it a broken shell. Months of siege by the Blood Queen’s hordes – ravenous armies of Tuscars, Arkan and Voss – had devastated the city, and by the time the attack had been lifted Savon Karesh’s water channels were filled with blood and filth, many of its gleaming white walls had fallen, and its once pristine streets were paved with the dead.

But there in the Heartfang Wastes, with its stark and bloody ground and the cold dead rain, Corgan wished he could find whoever he'd talked to about Savon Karesh and take it all back. Any city, even a ruined one, was paradise compared to the Wastes.

Corgan sat on a low stone and greedily ate the last of his rock-hard jerky. They'd been marching for half-a-day, and he'd ordered the Company to rest. When the air was clear the vast plains stretched on for as far as the eye could see, but most of the time the Company wandered through a world of fog. Dark soil bled brackish water like ooze from a cracked pore, and the silver sun hovered low behind inky clouds.

The soldiers sat and ate jerky and dried sausages and drank from waterskins. Some paced back and forth, their weary eyes on the horizon.

The air always smelled gruesome in the Heartfang Wastes, like rot. Freezing wind pushed hazy vapors across the festering landscape. Though not dangerous like the Vampire Mists the Heartfang's pervasive smoke made it difficult to navigate the alien environment. Even when the air was clear Corgan and his soldiers faced the inherently difficult task of traveling an uncharted region with few physical markers aside from mud and bones.

It had been several months since Corgan first stepped foot in the Heartfang Wastes, and after his first tour he'd hoped never to come back. And yet there he was, trapped with the remains of Silver Company, men he'd only served with for barely two months before they'd been deployed to help launch the assault on Chul Gaerog.

*How can the Tuscars survive here?* he wondered. The creatures were legion, a barbaric and savage species without subtlety or guile. They also weren't alone. Three evil races served the Blood Queen: the Tuscars, the horrific Arkan, and the black giants called the Voss. As if that wasn't bad enough, Vlagoth had also secured aid from the northern Empire of Gallador, pressuring the central lands of Jlantria and Den'nar with a two-fronted assault. The Heartfang's mists helped obscure her forces between their brutal attacks on Jlantria's southern borders, and the dark magic of the Arkan and Voss lent her armies near unstoppable might.

Merrick and Jonas sat nearby. Merrick was a mountain of a soldier with long dirty-blonde hair and a face like cracked granite, a blacksmith's son from a tiny home in Ral Tanneth. He'd once had the wide-eyed eagerness of youth, but the war had quickly ground that away and replaced it with exhaustion and fear, like it had with all of them.

"How are you doing, lad?" Corgan asked Merrick. His voice sounded hoarse.

Merrick looked up from the ground. He'd been sitting with his arms folded across his knees and his eyes down. "Sir?"

"How are you doing?" Corgan asked again with a smile.

Merrick's brow furrowed. "I'm fine, Sir." He hesitated, perhaps measuring what would be appropriate to say to his commander. "Tired." He looked as exhausted as everyone else, and the sunlight bleeding through the crimson clouds lent his skin the complexion of uncooked meat.

"You and me both, son," Corgan smiled. "You and me both." He looked out to the wastes. "This place wears on you."

"Sir, can I ask you something?" Merrick said after a moment.

"Of course."

"What happened here?" he asked. "To the Wastes, I mean? Were they always like this? Or was it the Tuscars doing?"

“The Tuscars didn’t come to the Heartfang Wastes until after the war had already started,” Jonas said, his eyes still shut. His tone was slow and articulate, and everything that came out of his mouth sounded like a reprisal. He sat cross-legged on the ground, his hands to his sides and his eyes closed. Everyone in Silver Company was uneasy around the Den’nari advisor, who easily stood out from the others with his dark skin, the runic tattoos on his face and arms, and his strange weapons, chief among them the *raak’ma*. Jonas was aloof and haughty at the best of times, and the fact that Jlantria and Den’nar had been bitter enemies for hundreds of years prior to the war certainly didn’t help anyone’s impressions of him. He was the only non-Jlantrian in the Company. “They descended from the Skull of the World at the Blood Queen’s behest. It was the first time they’d ever come this close to humans.” He opened his eyes and looked off to the distance. “No...the Wastes were dead long before the Tuscars came here and claimed them as their home.”

Corgan chewed on a piece of jerky. It tasted like salt, and little else. “Then what made this place into such a lifeless shitfield?” he asked. “What happened to whatever *used* to live here, before the Tuscars?”

“No one knows,” Jonas said. “It has been dead here for a very long time.” He took a sip of water from his flask. “Even before the Blood Queen started the war, her presence was felt in the Wastes. This is where she was born, but the tendrils of her foul presence had reached this land long before that.” He looked at Corgan and Merrick. “The Heartfang anticipated her arrival before she even existed.”

Corgan licked his dry lips. “And how does that work?” he asked.

“If I knew that – if *anyone* knew that – perhaps we wouldn’t be here now,” Jonas said. “But you and I both know the Blood Queen’s war against the Empires was a long time in the making. Maybe longer than any of us realize.” Jonas rose, picked up his weapon, and walked away.

Merrick looked confused, and frightened. He turned his eyes back to his food.

Corgan watched Jonas. The Den’nari had different beliefs regarding the Blood Queen’s origins and heritage than the Veilwarden Houses of Jlantria did, and while Corgan found some of Jonas’s views borderline heretical he had to admit something about the man’s words rang true.

*This was a long time coming.* He’d been brought up fearing the Black Dawn, the end of days. Part of him believed that time was now.

A chill wind whipped out of the west carrying the scent of burning pitch. Corgan heard wolves in the distance. His fingers were chilled to the bone, and cold mud had caked to his face.

The Company rested as best they could. They even conversed and told stories and wrote letters to their loved ones like they’d actually be delivered someday, even though they all knew that was unlikely to happen.

*Masks,* Corgan thought. *Masks we wear to hide us from the cold truth. Because we’re all going to die.*

Corgan still felt the icy touch of the rain long after it stopped. *Goddess, I miss home.*

In spite of their best efforts several of Corgan’s men had been infected by the Vampire Mist’s blighted touch. Four soldiers were dead by midday, and two more were too weakened from the blood-draining sickness to continue on foot. There was no one to properly care for the dying men since the Company surgeon, Mavalth, had died several days ago, and one of the newly dead was Kraig, the only other soldier among them with medical expertise.

The Company only had a handful of horses left, but Corgan ordered two of the mounts to be used to carry the dying soldiers: Carak and Turvan, both from the city of Grath. Everyone knew the loss of the mounts would only be temporary.

The marshy soil gradually gave way to crusted dark earth which flaked and cracked under their boots. The unmoving sun was a stain in the wounded sky. A grimy taste clung to the back of Corgan's throat, and his hands had gone dry and chalky where the mud stuck to his skin. Muscles ached deep in his legs, and his mind drifted while they marched.

*Four more soldiers are dead*, he thought, *and two more will follow shortly*. That meant they were down to fifty-one men from over four hundred, and they still had an eternity to travel. *Goddess, what did we do to deserve this?*

"Sir?" Apart from the monotonous stamping of booted feet and the chink of armor, Merrick's voice was the first sound Corgan had heard in quite some time. The boy looked pale and haggard. "Sir," Merrick said again, "I hate to ask this, but...how long till we reach Chul Gaerog?"

A sensation of dread crept up Corgan's spine even from hearing the name of that place. The Black Tower. The Blood Queen's redoubt. The place where the war began, and hopefully where it would end.

"I'm not sure, lad," he said. "Maybe another day. You should check with Jonas."

"Sir..." Merrick said hesitantly. He was a big man, but he spoke softly, and he often stammered his way through sentences rather than speaking them. "Do we have enough men? We lost so much of the Company back at The Throat ..."

"We're going to Chul Gaerog," Corgan said plainly. "Even if you and I are the only ones left, and you have to carry my decrepit old ass over your shoulder. But we're going to Chul Gaerog."

"Sir...yes, Sir"

"Enough 'Sir', all right? Call me Colonel Bloodwine. Or just Corgan. I hate that 'Sir' nonsense."

*We can't go back*, Corgan told himself. *Hell, we wouldn't make it back*. They were several days from the edge of the Wastes no matter which direction they travelled, but hopefully they were less than a day out from Chul Gaerog. It came down to a choice of turning back and dying slow or pressing on to die fast.

"Can I speak frankly, Sir?" Merrick said. Even when he tried to be quiet he had something of a booming voice.

"Only if you stop calling me 'Sir'," Corgan laughed.

Merrick smiled nervously. "Colonel...I have to wonder how much good we can do at Chul Gaerog." He stared at the ground as he marched.

The boy was right, and Corgan knew it. Still, every available soldier not already engaged with enemy forces was bound for the Black Tower. He only hoped the other Companies hadn't suffered the same severe casualties his had. His men had been ambushed, cut off and separated from the rest of the White Dragon Army, and now they were all but stranded in the Wastes. They'd tried without any success to locate friendly forces. There just *had* to be more of them out there in the Heartfang – theirs was just one of a number of Companies organized as part of the offensive against the tower, the last major strike meant to cut the heart from their enemy. But being alone for days on those dismal plains had made them lose hope they'd find anyone else in those skeins of black fog. All they could do now was press forward.

They'd never considered turning back. It would be treason and blasphemy, and there was too much at stake. The only thing to do was keep going, even if the way forward meant death.

What horrors he'd seen. Men who shot fire from their eyes. Heads ripped from bodies at the whispered commands of black warlocks. War machines fueled with blood. Everyone knew tales of foul Arkan sorcery swallowing up towns, Tuscar war beasts bigger than sea galleons, cruel Vossian siege fortresses secretly constructed beneath human cities. Corgan believed every one of those tales as surely as he believed in the One Goddess herself, for he'd seen proof of many of them, and he'd seen other things, darker things.

*Things no man should ever see.*

Somehow the united forces of Jlantria and Den'nar had held their ground against the Blood Queen's hordes in the south while also contending with her Galladorian allies to the north. Now, after a decade of fighting and with Gallador's unexpected fall, they'd finally managed to drive the Blood Queen's forces back into the Heartfang Wastes. There was still hope.

*It's just hard to believe it when you're walking through this.*

"It's almost over," Corgan said, his eyes straight ahead. "There's no way to know how *anyone* will fare at Chul Gaerog." *I just know we have to try.*

"Yes, Colonel," Merrick said after a moment. He looked disappointed, but more than that he looked embarrassed.

"It's all right, son," Corgan said.

Merrick nodded and fell back in with the others.

A low howl rang out from the distance. Dripping red clouds hung low in the sky. They walked in silence. Another howl came, and then another. Silver Company marched on, their eyes glazed, their feet as heavy as stones. They eventually stopped to bury the bodies of Carak and Turvan.

They were careful so as not to overwork the horses. Sweat slathered across the beast's necks and flanks, and though there was little fluid to spare Corgan ordered they be watered regularly. Someone's life could depend on them later.

Corgan walked ahead of his men. Pain pulsed up his shins with each step, and his shoulders ached like someone had strapped lead weights to his back. Every fiber of muscle in his body begged for rest as he marched across the ebon landscape. Dull sunlight pained his eyes.

He needed sleep. The sight of his men shuffling along and holding their blades like they didn't know how to use them filled him with dread, but Corgan moved through the waking nightmare with grim resolve. There was, after all, no way to wake up.

Jonas fell in time beside him. Corgan hadn't seen him approach, but he rarely did. Jonas's face betrayed no emotion, and of all of the men of Silver Company he showed the least signs of pain or fatigue. He was a bit thinner than when he'd first come under Corgan's command, but aside from that the ranger appeared no worse for wear. The Den'nari people were like that – their soft words and mystic ways concealed what a hardened folk they truly were.

"We don't have anywhere else to go," Corgan said, so quiet that at first he wasn't sure if Jonas had heard him, but after a moment the other man nodded, so Corgan went on. "We won't make it out of the Wastes. We're too far in. I was hoping we'd run into some of the other Companies by now..." Corgan ran his gloved hand over his face. He had to stay awake, stay alert. "Maybe we're the only ones left," he laughed.

"I doubt that," Jonas said.

"It was a joke," Corgan sighed.

"It wasn't funny."



That itself almost made Corgan laugh. "I want to go home," he said, and he regretted it almost instantly. That wasn't something to be said in front of one of his men, especially not to an outsider who didn't even share his religious beliefs. "She has to die," he said. "The Blood Queen has to die. Otherwise it will just start all over again, and sooner or later she'll win." He took a drink from his water flask. His lips were cracked and grimy.

"You're doing the right thing," Jonas said stoically. His voice almost sounded approving. "The men will do their best. They're tired, they're afraid, and they have their doubts, but they're only human. And that's what this is all about."

Jonas quickened his pace, and left Corgan alone.

Corgan thought of Ral Tanneth.

The waters of the Grey Sea softly collided on the distant shores, and the shadows of birds soared low through the silver sky. The city's domed rooftops glittered copper and gold; arched bridges ran between the towers. Robed citizens wound their way through the streets, going about their business without any knowledge of the Blood Queen or the war, because none of that had happened yet. The only fighting was on the far side of the Empire, minor border skirmishes or maritime engagements against Gallador or Den'nar, nothing on the same level of devastation and loss to come in the next few years.

The memory was vivid. Corgan smelled berries and heard the music of strings, felt the warm sun on his face and the cool and misty air. That was how Ral Tanneth had been, before the war.

Corgan had also been different. He saw a younger version of himself, with a full head of black hair and a proud posture, his face chiseled and clean-shaven. What a sight he must have been now. He hadn't shaved in months, and he bore several ugly scars, but beyond those physical differences he was a different man now, worn thin and beaten by the hammers of war. He saw it in the others, as well, especially Merrick, who'd once shone so bright he might have been chiseled from the sun, but who now held the look of someone trying not to see what lay directly ahead, whose eyes always searched for something that wasn't there.

Corgan had been in love once, to a girl named Tyrene from a small village somewhere north of Irontear. At least it felt like love, but they'd never really said the words. They hadn't been able to spend much time together thanks to Corgan's constant duties, but they made what time they had count: sitting by the stream, making love in inns or by the river, walking long walks and talking of little things.

*I miss you so much.*

He hadn't seen Tyrene since the war began nearly a decade ago. For all he knew she was dead, along with so many others.

Corgan silently damned the Blood Queen, with her cabals and armies and monsters. Jlantria and Den'nar might only temporarily hold the advantage over her and her demonic brood, but it was the first glimmer of hope they'd had since the fighting had started.

He just prayed he'd live long enough to see her die.

The day wore long. Corgan lost track of the hours as they marched.

The clink of armor and barding filled his ears. Corgan gazed through drifts of red smoke and watched the vacant horizon. He smacked his lips in thirst. He was just about to reach for his canteen when a tremor shook the ground. It might have been thunder.

A wide patch of dark soil collapsed under a half-dozen soldiers. Screams of panic filled the air. In moments the open space where they'd stood was filled with dirt and blood.

Corgan, Jonas and a few others ran to help, but they only made it a few steps when the earth around them erupted in blasts of scarlet mud. Loose bits of metal and flesh fell like grisly rain.

Mandibles emerged from the ground, jagged ebon chitin greased with blood. Ominous clicking sounds echoed up from the depths. A glistening black beetle easily ten feet wide rose from the rain-soaked earth with surprising speed. Its dark shell looked like iron.

Corgan drew his double-length blade from its scabbard. "Careful!" he shouted, but it was too late. Locke charged the beast's flank, and the insect turned and impaled him on one of its pincers. The boy wasn't dead – blood spurted from his mouth as he futilely stabbed at the beetle with his short blade, unable to reach the insect's body. Arrows bounced from the creature's carapace. A pair of men moved in with axes and hacked at the spindly legs.

Locke flailed and screamed as mandibles pushed through his back with a sickening crunch. Corgan watched in horror as the boy was stuffed into the beetle's gaping maw like a wad of wet parchment. Blood and bits of bone sprayed from the sphincter-shaped mouth.

Corgan ducked beneath the beetle's mandibles and drove his blade into one of its black eyes, splattering it like dark jelly. He cried out as his arms were caught between the pincers. The beetle's maw was inches from his face.

Jonas's *raak'ma* severed a mandible and sent it to the ground. The beetle convulsed, and Corgan ripped his sword free. Black ooze ran down his chest. He brought the point of his blade lower and threw his weight behind it. The gooey flesh between the beetle's sclerites popped.

The beast's body sank to the ground. Fatty black liquid covered Corgan's armor. The pain and exhaustion of the past several days came rushing back at him, and Corgan had to lean down and steady himself before he fell over.

"*Nek'dool*," Jonas said.

Corgan had heard tales of the giant insects, creatures made large and powerful by the corruptive magic of the Heartfang Wastes. He took a step back and shook his head to clear it of muck.

"Do they travel alone?" he asked.

"No. The Tuscars use them as mounts." Jonas was looking around on the ground.

"Jonas, what the hell are you doing?"

"Searching for what they're guarding here," he said. Jonas's eyes caught on something. "Look! The runes!"

"What...?"

Corgan looked down. Faint black markings spiralled across the ground, a dizzying explosion of semi-concentric rings crudely arranged into the semblance of a jagged claw. The runes hadn't been carved into the ground so much as burned, a scar which tarnished the landscape.

"What the hell is it?" Corgan asked.

A surge of panic worked its way through the ranks. His men looked around, ready for another attack.

"Corgan...we've found something..." Jonas said. Corgan had never seen the Den'nari so animated. The expression on his leathery face was a mix of exhilaration and terror. "We may have found the key to beating Vlagoth!"

"What are you talking...?"

Corgan was cut off by a shrill scream. Weapons rang from their sheaths. Mud and dirt blasted through the air.

More *nek'dool* rose from the ground. Mandibles snapped and great legs cleaved into crusted earth. Their black eyes reflected the faces of Corgan's terrified men.

Cloaked figures crouched low in leather saddles strapped to the beast's back. As each *nek'dool* rose its rider cast off its cloak. They were tall and broad-shouldered humanoids with grey-black flesh and boar-like tusks. Their large white eyes had no pupils, and their mouths were wide, almost simian. Each Tuscar yielded a *shek'tar*, an iron spear with one side of the shaft set with a long and razor-sharp blade. They angrily beat the backs of their weapons against the chests of their dirty bronzed armor as they bellowed out monstrous roars.

Though outnumbered the Tuscars fearlessly guided their massive insectoid mounts right into the Silver Company's ranks, trampling and hacking men down.

Adrenaline rushed through Corgan's veins. He howled at his men to rally. Their final battle had begun.

Corgan fell to one knee. He floated in a storm of steel and blood. Armored men and Tuscars crashed into each other. Metal shattered and gore rained down. His ears rang with the sound of blades and dying men. Corgan parried another blow and shockwaves from the impact rippled down his arms.

He battered a *shek'tar* aside, dove forward and grappled a Tuscar with one arm around its waist. They crashed to the ground, clawing and stabbing at one another. Weapons fell. The Tuscar's fangs hovered over Corgan's face. He smelled rancid cold breath and stared into eyes like angry moons.

The Tuscar slammed its knee into Corgan's back. Pain shot up his spine. Corgan ripped his curved dagger from its boot sheath and drove it into the Tuscar's stomach, again and again. His strength faded as ebon blood flowed over his hands. It took the Tuscar far too long to die.

Corgan groped around, found his sword and rose to his feet. Tuscar howls and clanging weapons echoed through his skull. Red sunlight faded in and out as he spun around in a circle and tried to get his bearings.

More Tuscars leapt over their fallen as they closed in for the kill. Bodies were everywhere, crumpled and bleeding. All the *nek'dool* and horses were dead, and his men used the corpses as cover while they fired on Tuscars with their bows and javelins. Other men from the Company valiantly held their ground and took on their attackers man-to-man. They were a handful against a legion.

Jones brought a Tuscar down in a whirl of razor steel. He paid his wounds no heed as he wiped his *raak'ma* clean on a Tuscar's leather shirt and returned to the fray.

An iron sphere flew past Corgan's head. The Tuscar who'd thrown the missile wound another into a long leather sling, but before it could release the shot one of Merrick's throwing axes took it in the back of its head. The lad only had a moment to draw his larger crescent-bladed axe before another Tuscar rushed at him. Two more charged at Corgan, their *shek'tars* soaked with blood.

*Where are they coming from?* Perhaps two dozen Tuscars had initially rose from the ground on their *nek'dool* mounts, but he and his men had battled three times that many, and still they came.

Corgan scanned the area every chance he had. He looked at the pits the *nek'dool* had created, but they were empty, and didn't seem to actually lead anywhere. There was no apparent origin to these endless hordes: they just appeared from nowhere, wave after relentless wave.

He ducked beneath the razor-edge of a *shek'tar*, swung his blade and took off his attacker's leg at the knee with a sickening squelch. Another Tuscar crashed into him, and a spear tip buried itself in Corgan's shoulder. Darkness and pain swam over him. He grabbed the blunt side of the shaft in his off-hand and cleaved the monster's skull in two.

The *shek'tar* came out of his shoulder easily enough, but the left side of Corgan's body was numb. Jonas dealt with another pair of the barbarians, but three more came at him. Five more soldiers from the Company fell, but Merrick and another man whose face was so drenched with blood Corgan couldn't even recognize him quickly exacted revenge.

Corgan turned and saw a Tuscar appear from thin air, right at the far edge of the runes cast on the ground. The creature charged at him from out of nothingness.

*There it is.* Corgan sliced the Tuscar's head clean from its shoulders, cried out in rage and charged at the point where the Tuscar had appeared. After ten paces the air shivered around him, lost its form and became fluid. Corgan passed through a molten reflection of where he'd stood. Liquid rubbed against him, but his skin remained dry. The world bled.

He took another step, and was gone.

*A girl's face. An angel of blades. The tree.*

*"This is only the beginning."*

Corgan fell forward and coughed up a mouthful of blood. Every muscle strained with effort. He pushed his body up from the ground with his one good hand; the other had been smashed to a pulp. One of his eyes was sealed with blood and swollen skin. His guts dangled and scraped against the ground.

The world turned bright as Corgan passed back through the bloodstorm barrier, away from the halls of Chul Gaerog and into the Heartfang Wastes.

Something pressed down on his back and buckled his knees. His body and mind swam through pulsing waves of hurt. He pulled himself closer to the light. Blood pooled on the ground.

The weight on his back released as his vision faded. He heard a voice. Fire and thunder crashed through his mind. Presences tugged at him like dark hands in the water.

Something turned him onto his back. The echoing voices from the dark were still there, distant sounds from the nadir of some black well.

"...happened to him?"

Whoever spoke was close.

"Corgan?" Was it Jonas? "Colonel? Can you hear me?"

Corgan tried to speak, but all he could do was cough. More blood burst from his mouth.

"Goddess," Merrick said, "I can't stop the bleeding..."

"Hold it tight!" Jonas yelled. Corgan sensed them leaning over him as he lay there. There was no other sound but the steady trickling of his blood. "Hang on, Colonel."

"Where did he go?" Merrick asked Jonas.

Corgan tried to remember, but it was so difficult to think. Horrors flashed before him.

*A girl's face. An angel of blades. The tree.*

He slid closer to a cold black place from which he'd never return.

*"This is only the beginning."*

"Dead," he managed to cough.

“Not yet,” Jonas growled. “Hang on.”

Corgan opened his good hand and showed them his trophy from Chul Gaerog: a clump of fine golden hair mottled with blood.

“She’s dead,” he coughed. “The Blood Queen is dead.”

The war was over.