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The Stormcaller

Tom Lloyd

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

In the dark corners of the night he dreams of the silent palace by the shore: a place where harsh sunlight and leaden shadows are cast over the white marble of its corridors. Without the cries of seabirds or the whistle of wind over flagstones the silence here is profound, broken only by the occasional faint break of a wave on the rocks outside and his own hurried heartbeat.

He finds himself in an immense hexagonal hall, looking down at incomprehensible script carved into the floor. The strange words corkscrew slowly in from a dark doorway to the foot of a spiral staircase, the hall's only other feature. It rises up from the floor, twisting thirty yards up through the air, then somehow fails to quite meet the hall's flat ceiling, stopping less than a yard short.

Prayer or curse, he follows the oblique path of writing around and around until finally he reaches the staircase. Each step has a symbol cut into its centre, runes he has never seen before. After a pause he places his foot squarely on the first and continues in that way, eyes moving always to the next shape, until he reaches the top. The air feels thinner up here. It looks a dizzying drop to the floor below when he leans over the balustrade. Then he squeezes through a hatchway in the ceiling and finds himself staring up from the floor of a cavernous domed shrine.

The palace is a shell, an unfinished work of altarless temples and blank crumbling memorials. In every direction he can see high halls, empty of everything but countless statues carved from the same ancient stone as the walls. Through the vaulted windows, even the waves lapping at the sun-blasted beach appear unreal. He has never ventured out to dip his fingers in that ocean, or tasted the salt on the air or felt the touch of the sun on his skin.

Drifting down the yard-deep steps of an oval assembly hall, he feels

exposed and vulnerable. An old woman once told him that the Gods decide your fate in such a chamber; they argue and debate over your birth until the course of your entire life is set. But there are no compassionate voices to speak for him here, no sound other than that of his bare feet on stone, muted, like the echo of a dead song.

He knows where his path will eventually take him. It's the same place every time, but still he walks through unknown rooms and down hanging walkways, always hoping that the next turning will be the way out. Once more he finds himself in a gigantic chamber, where a stretch of wall fifty yards long has been savagely ripped open. Picking his way over the rubble he enters the forest of statues inside. Monsters and heroes stand in stony readiness, waiting for the day they will be revived for some final cataclysm. A terrace lies through the pillars on the other side of the immense space. After the miles he's walked, another few hundred yards is too far for his legs to carry him. Fear liquefies his muscles and drags him down to hide behind the heel of some brave dead warrior, watching and waiting.

He sees a large man standing in the centre of the hall, terrible and powerful, as if the greatest of these statues has somehow come to life. He knows the man will die – that enormous strength means nothing to what stalks this place – even before a black-armoured knight appears from nowhere to attack the man. He sees a huge fanged blade tear at the man's flesh, watches it sever the head. Terror smoulders deep in his gut: he knows the blade will one day rip into his own frail body. And then he sees something horrific in the killer's face – the curse he shares. The palace fades. The blood pales. All that remains is the burning light of that gaze.

Isak lay motionless, tracing the familiar cracks and veins in the roof struts while his legs protested the lack of space in the cramped caravan. These dreams, though infrequent, had haunted his nights for as long as he could remember. Even though he was, in all other things, a stoical youth, they could still reduce him to a cowering child. The visions were so real he sometimes woke retching in dread. Shame crept over him at the thought. He was older now, old enough to be called an adult, and yet his dreams frightened him more than any man could. For a time he remained still, tracing the grain of the wood above to calm his pounding heart.

The clutter and dirt were reassuringly normal, and welcome for once.

Finally sitting upright, Isak stretched and massaged the sleep from his long limbs until the tingle of a jolting wooden bed had receded. He tugged his ragged shirt into some semblance of order and pushed long fingers through his black, matted hair. He ignored the worn, filthy shoes that lay discarded in one corner. Looking out through the rear curtains he could see the warm weather continued. A scavenger bird hung limp in the deliciously blue sky, while swallows swooped and rose after the last of the morning's prey. Back home, summer would be long dead, but here it took the Land longer to accept that autumn had arrived. For the moment, insects and beaming flowers still reigned.

Through the fug of the enclosed room came a faint breeze, bringing with it a scent that was as different as the weather. Here the warm smell of clay-rich earth and wild thyme pervaded everything, though the damp resinous odour of home lingered in his mind. The dark loamy soil of the Great Forest to the north bore no resemblance to this sticky red dirt. They still had far to travel; he guessed another week at least would pass before the view started to change, so until then, he'd just enjoy the weather.

Isak poked his head out to where his father, Horman, sat with the reins swinging casually from his hand and one leg braced up over the footplate as usual. Dressed in similarly rough and patched clothes, Isak's father bore little resemblance to his son beyond the dark hair and pale complexion common to all of their tribe. He was smaller, with a scrappy beard that failed to conceal his perpetual scowl; Horman looked aged beyond his physical years, as if spite had drained his youth as well as his joy. Rusty earth stained his breeches and loose shirt. His black eyes flickered at the sound of Isak's movement, but narrowed when he saw his son's face. He flicked up his coiled whip, but Isak dodged out of habit and it caught only air. There was nothing he could do to avoid the look of resentment that followed.

'So you decided to stir at last? It must be three hours since dawn. You're here to work, not to spend the night running the wilds. Sometimes I wonder why I keep you around at all.' His father hawked and spat into the parched dust of the road, then returned his gaze to the distant horizon.

Isak answered bitterly, 'And then you remember that I'm as good as a slave to you. In any case, it's not as if you could manage yourself.'

This time the whip was wielded with purpose; Isak's retort was rewarded with an angry welt down his cheek.

'Shut your mouth, unless you want worse. And don't think you're getting any breakfast, not when I had to set the traces myself this morning. You didn't even catch anything last night – you're even more useless than the rest of your damn kind.' Horman sighed. 'Merciful Nartis, save us from white-eyes. No doubt Carel's fool enough to feed you, so get out of my sight or you'll get more of this.' He twitched his whip and returned his attention to the road.

Isak vaulted the rail and leapt effortlessly on to the dusty ground. It was only as he trotted past similar wagons, ignoring the stares of their occupants, that he realised the pace of the whole train had been increased. They were two weeks behind deadline. Obviously the wagon-master preferred to punish the horses for his own drunken stupidity.

A long-dead river had carved this mighty path through the Land, stirring life for miles around, but that had been in another age. Now the summer heat baked everything to the same dusty brown and it took an effort to find the hidden beauty of this place: the strange nocturnal creatures, the scented mosses concealed under rocks, the camouflaged plants bursting with colour underneath. All Isak's father saw was the desiccated channel they drove down. It was too much effort to drag his damaged leg up the bank so the only things to break his horizon were the twin mountains to the south.

Isak ran over to one of the lead caravans and leapt up on to the driving seat with the carelessness of familiarity. The driver, like Isak himself, was a man apart from the rest of this inbred community. Carel made no comment other than to smile wearily at Isak's arrival. His crinkled face belied his strength and age – Carel was close in years to Isak's father, but where bile had aged one, experience had marked the other.

His black hair, now heavily seamed with white, was long, plaited three times and tied back with copper wire, which declared to the world that he was a mercenary – but the white embroidery on his collar and the white leather threaded through the plaits set him above being a mere sword for hire. Carel – Sergeant Betyn Carelfolden – was a Ghost, a legend within their small group. He had retired from the Palace Guard of Lord Bahl, the Lord of the Farlan, a handful of summers after Isak's birth. Membership of that élite regiment guaranteed a position in society that could not be bought. Everyone respected the Ghosts of Tirah.

'Horman not in the best of moods today, then? Here, take the reins, I could do with a break.'

Isak took the reins from Carel's hand and watched as the man stretched, then fumbled for his pipe. The horse, unimpressed, snorted scorn at its new handler.

Carel was the only person in the wagon-train to treat Isak as if he were normal. Being born to parents who had been servants on a Suzerain's estate, coupled with years of hard soldiering, had taught the mercenary to look beyond appearance, something for which Isak was always grateful.

'He's never in the best of moods,' Isak grumbled. 'Yesterday he pushed a knife right into my hand, just for touching that green ring of mother's.' He held up his hand, displaying the ugly, dark-red scab.

'Well then, you deserved it.' Carel wasn't going to let his fondness for the boy stand in the way of a lesson. 'You know perfectly well what that ring means to him. Just leave her things alone. It's all he has left. At least you heal much faster than the rest of us. Be grateful for that.'

'He has more of her than I do. All I have is the blame for her death.' Isak sighed.

'And such is life,' replied the mercenary without a trace of sympathy. He was Isak's friend, but that didn't mean Isak got special treatment. 'You are what you are – that in itself is enough for most, and more for Horman. He really loved your mother. Why antagonise him?'

There was no reply. Isak just sat there looking sullen, unable to admit defeat.

'Fine, enough talk of your father. Are you looking forward to joining the Palace Guard? After Silvernight you can take the trials without your father's permission.'

'What's the point?' Isak ran a fingernail along a groove in the wood. 'I'll never be a Ghost – why would they want someone like me?'

'You won't be an outcast all your life, I promise you that. Do you think I would bother to waste my time teaching you to fight despite what that lot think?' Carel jabbed a thumb back at the wagons following. 'These people aren't like most Farlan. You might never be popular, but the tribe has a use for you, sure enough. I've fought side-by-side with your kind, and there's far worse than your childish temper in the ranks of the Ghosts – men who'd have been hanged years back if they weren't so happy to be in the front line. You're all a dangerous lot, but

you've more of a mind than most and the Swordmasters will see that. Just remember me when you become General Isak.'

The veteran smiled and Isak smiled back. Carel didn't suffer fools or time-wasters. There had to be something to his words, or all the hours of drilling and sparring would have been for nothing. Isak knew he could best Carel with a weapon – even a weighted training stick against a sword – but that wasn't the problem. All white-eyes were preternaturally fast, and strong, but it was this very power that scared normal people. Isak had had that demonstrated to him almost every day of his life.

Carel insisted there were others like him in the Guard, but no one ever saw them. If it were true, clearly they were not trusted with keeping the peace on Tirah's streets; they were used only in the slaughter of battle.

'I suppose you're right,' Isak admitted. 'I just daren't allow myself to hope. But I'll take any chance to get away from this lot, even if I have to break Father in two to do it.'

This disrespect earned him a clip round the ear, one that would have been painful to anyone else, but Isak bore it without flinching. Every child in the train had felt the back of Carel's hand at one time or another, but it made no difference: they all loved him – and his stories. But no one else in the train understood Carel's obvious affection for the wild white-eye, and all Carel would say was that in Isak he recognised the angry young man he himself had been.

The wagoners were a community held together by blood ties as much as poverty. Most of the year was spent on the road and even in Farlan territory they kept to themselves. The caravan was the only home Isak had ever known, but it was not where he was welcome; only in the wild places did he find some comfort of belonging. The presence of others always reminded him that he was blessed and cursed in equal measure – and that men feared both. White-eyes were born to be protectors of the Seven Tribes, but jealousy and fear had demonised his kind and now many saw them as symbols of the Land's polluted soul.

Carel grimaced at the boy. 'You're as sulky and bad-tempered as your father. I think you've inherited more than you lot normally do.'

'Perhaps he's just particularly unpleasant,' retorted Isak sourly.

'Perhaps so, but he's not too bad a man to others. Your problem is that you have the look of your mother. He sees her in your face, and

that brings out the worst in him. If you didn't get at him so, you might not have to spend your life trying to stop yourself fighting back.'

Isak turned his head sharply to meet the mercenary's knowing expression. As he looked into those dark eyes he saw the twinkle of humour that had brightened his childhood and relaxed. Carel might be the only one who could see his internal struggle, but he was also the only one who understood it.

'White-eyes are pretty much the same, whatever the tribe,' he continued, tapping out his pipe on the rail beside him. The curl of a smile hung on his lips as he fixed a fond gaze on the youth. 'You remember I told you about Sergeant Kulet? Now that one was a bastard, the worst white-eye I've ever met. Man killed his entire family when he was sixteen – well, 'cept his mother of course, but we can't blame any of you white-eyes for the size you were as a baby. The ones to blame are the Gods, and most folk aren't that stupid.

'Anyway, the Swordmaster wasn't allowed to execute Kulet. The high priest of Nartis stepped in and said a birthmark on his face showed Kulet'd been touched by Nartis.' Carel gave a snort of scorn. 'Touched by a daemon more like, if you ask me, but that birthmark was as blue as a temple door, no doubt about it. We kept him just drunk enough to spend most of the day telling jokes – the bugger could make me laugh even more than your foolery can – otherwise he'd get bored and start a fight in the barracks. But when you saw him on the battlefield – well, merciful Death! If you had Kulet next to you, you were glad. He fought like a man possessed, never gave ground, never left the man next to him vulnerable. You knew you were safe in his lee.'

Carel took a long pull on his pipe, then tapped Isak on the head with it. 'Smile; you're one of the blessed. You're all violent, insolent, brooding and heartless. You make the best soldiers because you're twice as strong and half as caring. Don't take that wrong, you're like a son to me, but I've known many. Behind the eyes you've all got something barely under control. P'raps it's worse for you – your father never was good at taking orders either – but no white-eye was ever as meek as a lamb. Obey your father till the spring and then you're free, I promise. Just keep your temper until then.'

'I hardly feel like I'm blessed.'

'Ah boy, the Land is harsh. It's a cruel place and it needs white-eyes to tame it. The Gods knew that when they made the first of you to be born. The last of the Farlan line was their model, and scripture tells

he was no court jester.' Carel clapped a hand on Isak's shoulder and tugged him round to look him in the eye. There was an almost wistful tone to his voice when he spoke again. 'Our Gods might be great and powerful, but they've never needed to be subtle.'

Isak recognised the words: an old soldier's favourite mantra.

The veteran smiled. 'Come on now, get that scowl off your face. The lecture's over.' He put his feet up and leaned against the wooden frame of the caravan, content in the sunshine that they wouldn't see for months once they arrived home.

Isak shifted in his seat and settled down for a long and uncomfortable day. As his mind wandered, he tried to count the months until he reached adulthood. Whether he was good enough to join the Ghosts or not, next year he would be able to do as he pleased; not to be dragged back like a rogue mule when he left. His father had made the most of the law regarding childhood, but he couldn't hold on to Isak forever.

Becoming a Ghost was still a dream to Isak, but one thing *was* sure: he could better Carel with a sword. He had nothing more to learn. If the Swordmasters were like the wagoners, he would go elsewhere – perhaps become a mercenary like Carel was now and travel to distant cities. Many of his kind did that, and some never found employment to be proud of, but white-eyes didn't become hermits and live in quiet humility. Their nature was not so peaceful.

Isak was still lost in daydreams of military glory when a sound up ahead broke through his reverie. Heads appeared from almost every caravan and wagon in the train, anticipating something to break the monotony of the journey. The spiced breeze was still detectable, but it did nothing to cool faces red under the onslaught of the sun. Most people wore wide-brimmed hats of some kind, but Isak rarely bothered. His skin was as fair as anyone's, but it never peeled or burned, just as any injuries healed quickly. In those ways he *knew* he was blessed. It was the rest of it that made people nervous.

Off to the left Isak saw a pair of wood pigeons perched on a branch, eyeing the wagon-train with lazy interest. He started to reach for the crossbow slung behind him, but stopped when the sound came again. It was a voice calling. He pulled himself to his feet on the wooden seat for a better look.

From his vantage point Isak could see a horseman approaching, plaits swinging in the air and a spear held aloft. The signal asked for

Carel had spotted the rider too and had already slipped on to the back of his own steed, which trotted patiently alongside the wagon. The stock pony was nothing like as impressive as the horses he had ridden in the Ghosts, and it bore little decoration bar the tattoos of breed and a charm to Nyphal, the Goddess of travellers, but it had served well over the years. With one hand on the pommel of his sword, Carel indicated for Isak to rein in before urging his stock pony forward.

The wagon-train ground to an eventual halt behind them as an uneasy silence descended. This was untamed land for the greater part, and people mixed curiosity with caution. As Carel reached the horseman, figures appeared from behind the bend in the road. Six men were coming towards them, five of them the train's guards, mounted on stock ponies like Carel's own, and one man, a stranger, on foot. The five on horseback towered above the newcomer, but they looked curiously cowed in his presence.

Carel stopped and dismounted once he was past the lead wagon. While he waited for the man to reach him he looked around, scanning the terrain. He didn't see anyone else, but he kept his hand on his hilt as the man approached – he appeared calm, but a stranger alone and on foot was more than unusual out here.

Isak found himself digging his nails into his palm in apprehension. The stranger was taller even than Isak, who himself looked down on the rest of the wagon-train occupants. He was clad in black from head to toe, and the hardened leather and heavy, scaled armour he wore showed that he was not a native of these warm parts, where the guards wore little or no protection. Despite his height, the man was clearly not Farlan, nor from any other tribe Isak had seen on their travels.

Worryingly, the man had his sword drawn, yet Carel paid it no attention. He left his own weapon sheathed as he moved in close to speak to the man.

Isak realised suddenly that his attention had been caught by the blade itself, not the man who held it, which went against *everything* Carel had taught him. *The sword tells you nothing about what your enemy is going to do; keep your eyes on it and you'll watch it all the way into your belly.* Even knowing this, he couldn't tear his eyes away from the weapon: its shape and colour were unlike any he had seen before. Faint bursts of light pricked the black surface so gently that he almost

dismissed them as fancy. Just the sight of that blade made Isak shiver, as if some primal fear stirred inside.

The stranger said something, too quietly for Isak to hear.

'We're just traders returning to Tirah. We don't want trouble, but we are prepared for it.' Carel replied in a loud voice, so that those wagoners with weapons would reach for them. Isak could see that Carel looked puzzled, and a little apprehensive: this situation didn't make much sense – who travelled alone and on foot out here? Was this an ambush of some kind? He glanced back inside Carel's caravan to make sure that the mercenary's spear was within reach.

The stranger was hairless, and terribly lean, but there was no sign of illness; rather, he had about him an unnatural vitality. Pale parchment skin looked stretched to fit the skull underneath, and his eyes were completely black. For the first time Isak saw why people feared the differences in his own face.

'There is one here who is not like you, one who should come with me.' The man spoke clearly this time.

'We have a white-eye with us; what of him? He's young. What use would you have of him?' Carel sounded dismissive.

'He should come with me to seek his future.'

Carel stepped back, away from the stranger. 'You think I'm just going to hand him over to you? You look like a sorcerer to me.' He took hold of the charm around his neck, carved with the rune of Nyphal, protector of travellers, and muttered a short mantra under his breath.

'Get back into the wagon, Isak. Keep out of sight,' hissed Horman, a concerned look on his face. He had approached Carel's caravan out of sight of the stranger; now he motioned his son off the driver's seat. Isak climbed down quietly and slid back into the dark interior without a word while his father cocked his crossbow.

'What does he want with me?' he whispered.

'I don't know, but whatever it is, I'll give you to him if you don't shut up.' Horman scowled at his son and turned his attention back to Carel.

Isak did as he was told, fearing the stranger and his father's anger equally. Horman had never been a patient man; he blamed much of his misfortune on his supernatural son, from the inevitable death of his wife giving birth to Isak to his exit from the cavalry following an accident. Horman had no tales of heroic battle and near-fatal injuries

overcome with which to enthral his grandchildren by the fireside. Instead, he had lost his livelihood thanks to a simple drill manoeuvre gone wrong the day he learned of his wife's death. Now even ants crawling on the supplies were Isak's fault.

The stranger looked over at the wagons, his eyes moving down the line until Isak felt his gaze lock on to him. Suddenly a cold presence was all around, as if bitter winter had just invaded, and Isak fell back in surprise and alarm. He felt a surge of panic at the alien mind filling his thoughts and, inexplicably, hatred beyond anything he'd ever known before. In the next instant, the contact was broken off, so abruptly that Isak flinched in surprise.

'He'll kill me,' Isak moaned, his hands trembling uncontrollably. 'He'll kill us all.'

Horman turned with a frown and gave Isak a clip around the head to shut him up. 'He'll have to get in line then, now quiet!'

Isak ducked down as the stranger's gaze rested on the western horizon for a moment before turning back to Carel. 'My name is Aracnan. I am just a mercenary, like you. My task was twofold; the second part was to deliver a message to the boy if he would not come. Tell your men to put their bows away. My employer is more powerful than you can ever imagine. Here is the message.'

Carel found his hand full, and then Aracnan leapt up on to the rocky bank above him. It was a jump far beyond the capability of any street acrobat, but he landed so lightly that not a stone nor chunk of dirt was dislodged on to the stunned men below. Then he was gone.

They tried to track him, but once they had scrambled up the bank they couldn't even guess at which direction Aracnan had taken, and the ground held no clues that any man had walked there. Finally, unwilling to waste much more time chasing ghosts, the wagon-master called off the futile hunt and they recommenced their journey in near-silence, everyone lost in their own thoughts.

Isak jumped when Carel leaned over to whisper in his ear, some hours later, 'Nyphal was looking down upon us, I'm sure; I felt her presence.'

'Was that what I felt? A Goddess?' asked Isak, unsure whether he would have described what he had felt as divine.

The mercenary nodded, his eyes fixed on the western horizon, where the Gods lived. He'd seen Aracnan's anger, contained though it was, and had no doubt the Goddess had intervened for them. 'We'll

stop at the next shrine and sacrifice there. I'm not sure what Aracnan wanted with you, but he meant you no good – of that I'm certain.'

He kept his frown for a moment, then shook it off and nudged Isak with a laugh. 'The Gods were looking down on you, boy, so maybe they've plans for you after all. You might find out there are worse things in life than bales of cloth.'

Isak sat with his lips firmly set, determinedly looking north to the cool, wooded valleys and mist-shrouded mountains the tribe called home: the land where the God Nartis raged in the sky above a city of soaring spires and the dark-haired Farlan tribe; north, to the Lord of Storms.