Kell's Legend

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Extract

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an excerpt from
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Andy Remic

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PROLOGUE
Slaughter

"I know you think me sadistic. You are incorrect. When I punish, I punish without pleasure. When I torture, I torture for knowledge, progression, and for truth. And when I kill…" General Graal placed both hands on the icy battlements, staring dream-like to the haze of distant Black Pike Mountains caught shimmering and unreal through mist: huge, defiant, proud, unconquered. He grinned a narrow, skeletal grin. "Then I kill to feed."

Graal turned, and stared at the kneeling man. Command Colonel Yax-kulkain was forty-eight years old, a seasoned warrior and leader of the Garrison Regiment at Jalder, Falanor's major northern city and trading post connecting east, south and west military supply routes, also known as the Northern T.

Yax-kulkain hunkered down, fists clenching and unclenching, and stared up into Graal's blue eyes. Pupil dilation told Graal the commander could still understand, despite his paralysis. Graal smiled, a thin-lipped smile with white lips that blended eerily into the near-albino skin of his soft, some would say

feminine, face. Running a hand through alabaster hair Graal released a hiss and gave a heavy, pendulous nod. "I see you understand me, colonel."

Yax-kulkain murmured something, an animal sound deep in his throat. He trembled, in his frozen, kneeling position, and with ice crackling his beard, gradually, with incredible force of will, lifted his blue-hued face and snarled up at the conquering general. There came a crack as he forced frozen jaws apart. Ice fell, tinkling from his beard. In rage, the ice-chilled warrior spat, "You will… rot… in hell!"

General Graal turned, staring almost nostalgically across frosted battlements. He spun on his heel, a fast fluid motion, slim blade slamming to cut the command colonel's head from his body. The head rolled, hitting stone flags and cracking a platter of ice. It rocked, and came to a halt, eyes staring blank at the bleak, snow-filled sky.

"I think not," said Graal, staring down the long line of kneeling men, of rigid, frozen soldiers that stretched away down the considerable length of the ice-rimed battlements. "It would appear I am already there." His voice rose in volume to a bellow. "Soldiers of the Army of Iron!" He paused, voice dropping to a guttural growl. "Kill them all."

Like automatons, insects, albino soldiers stepped up with a synchronised rhythm behind the ranks of frozen infantry at Falanor's chief garrison; white hair whipped in the wind, and black armour cut a savage contrast to pale, waxen flesh. Black swords unsheathed, eight hundred oiled whispers of precision steel, and General Graal moved his hand with a casual

flick as he turned away. Swords descended, sliced through flesh and fat and bone, and eight hundred heads toppled from twitching shoulders to thud and roll. Because of the frozen flesh, there was no blood. It was a clean slaughter.

Ice-smoke swirled, thickening, flowing in the air from a resplendent and unwary city below, beyond the smashed protection of the garrison stronghold. Buildings spread gracefully and economically up the steep hillside from the broad, half-frozen platter of the Selenau River; and as Graal's odd blue eyes narrowed to nothing more than slits, it was clear the ice-smoke was anything but natural: there were sinister elements at play.

Graal strode down the line of corpses, halting occasionally and stooping to force his finger into the icy stump of a soldier's neck. The swirling smoke thickened. Through this carnage, up the narrow steps to the battlements, glided–

The Harvesters.

They were tall, impossibly tall for men, and wore thin white robes embroidered with fine gold wire and draped over bony, elongated figures. Their faces were flat, oval, hairless, eyes small and black, their noses nothing more than twin vertical slits which hissed with a fast rhythm of palpitation. Their hands were hidden under flapping cuffs and they strode unhurriedly, heads bobbing as they stooped to survey the scene. The ranks of motionless albino soldiers took reverential steps back, and whilst faces did not show fear exactly, the albino warriors of Graal's army revealed a healthy respect. One did not cross the Harvesters. Not if a man valued his soul.

The first halted, peering myopically down at Graal who folded arms and smiled without humour. "You are late, Hestalt."

Hestalt nodded, and when he spoke his words were a lazy sigh of wind. "We were preparing the ice-smoke for the city. We had to commune with Nonterrazake. Now, however, the time has come. Are your men ready with their primitive weapons of iron?"

"My soldiers are always prepared," said Graal, unruffled, and he unsheathed his own slender sword. The Harvester did not flinch; instead, a hand appeared from folds of white robe. Each finger was ten or twelve inches long, narrowing to a tapered point of gleaming ivory. The Harvester turned, bent, and plunged all five bone fingers into the corpse of Command Colonel Yax-kulkain. There came a gentle resonance of suction, and Graal watched, mouth tight-lipped, as the body began to deflate, shrivelling, flesh shrinking across bones and skull until the man's teeth were wildly prominent in a death-submission.

Hestalt withdrew bone fingers, and leaving a tiny, shrivelled husk in his wake, moved to the next dead soldier of Falanor. Again, his fingers invaded the man's chest, deep into his heart, and the Harvester reaped the Harvest.

Unable to watch this desecration of flesh, General Graal shouted a command which rang down the mist-filled battlements. Ice-smoke eddied around his knees, now, expanding and billowing in exaggerated bursts as he strode towards the steps leading down to the cobbled courtyard. His albino regiment followed in silence, swords unsheathed and ready, and like a tide,

with Graal at its spearhead, moved to mammoth oak gates that opened onto a cobbled central thoroughfare, which in turn led down the steep hillside into Jalder's central city – into the city's heart.

Two albinos ran forward, slim figures, well balanced and athletic, graceful and moving with care on ice-slick cobbles. The oak portals were heaved apart, iron hinges groaning, and Graal turned glancing back to the tall stooping figures that moved methodically along the battlements, draining the dead Falanor garrison of life-force. Like insects, he thought, and made distant eye contact with Hestalt. The Harvester gave a single nod: a command. He pointed towards the city… and his instruction was clear.

Prepare a path.

Ice-smoke gathered in the courtyard, a huge pulsing globe which spun and built and coalesced with flickers of dancing silver; suddenly, it surged out through the gates to flow like airborne mercury into the city beyond, still expanding, still growing, a flood of eerie silence and cotton-wool death, a plague of drifting ice-smoke shifting to encompass the unwary city in a tomb-shroud of blood-oil magick.

ONE
Death-Ice

Kell stood by the window in his low-ceilinged second-story apartment, and stared with a twinge of melancholy towards the distant mountains. Behind him a fire crackled in the hearth, flames consuming pine, and a pan of thick vegetable broth bubbled on a cast-iron tripod. Kell lifted a stubby mug to his lips and sipped neat liquor with a sigh, feeling alcohol-resin tease down his throat and into his belly, warming him through. He shivered despite the drink, and thought about snow and ice, and the dead cold places of the mountains; the vast canyons, the high lonely ledges, the slopes leading to rocky falls and instant death. Chill memories pierced the winter of his soul, if not his flesh. Sometimes, thought Kell, he would never banish the ice of his past… and those dark days of hunting in the realm of the Black Pikes. Ice lay in his heart. Trapped, like a diamond.

Outside, snow drifted on a gentle breeze, swirling down cobbled streets and dancing patterns into the air. From his vantage point, Kell could watch the market traders by the Selenau River, and to the right,

make out the black-brick bulks of huge tanneries, warehouses and the riverside slaughter-houses. Kell remembered with a shudder how dregside stunk to heaven in high summer – that's why he'd got the place cheap. But now... now the claws of winter had closed, they kept the stench at bay.

Kell shivered again, the vision of dancing snow chilling old bones. He turned back to his soup and the fire, and stirred the pan's contents, before leaning forward, hand thumping against the sturdy beam of the mantel. Outside, on the steps, he heard a clatter of boots and swiftly placed his mug on a high shelf beside an ancient clock and beneath the terrifying butterfly blades of Ilanna. Inside the clock, he could see tiny whirring clockwork components; so fine and intricate, a pinnacle of miniature engineering.

The thick plank door shuddered open and Nienna stood in silhouette, beaming, kicking snow from her boots.

"Hello, Grandpa!"

"Nienna." He moved to her and she hugged him, the snow in her long brown hair damping his grey beard. He took a step back, holding her at arm's length. "My, you grow taller by the day, I swear!"

"It's all that fine broth." She peered over his shoulder, inquisitively. "Keeps me fit and strong. What have you cooked today?"

"Come on, take off your coat and you can have a bowl. It's vegetable; beef is still too expensive after the cattle-plague in the summer, although I'm guaranteed a side in two or three weeks. From a friend of a friend, no?" He gave a broad wink.

Removing her coat, Nienna edged to the oak table and cocked one leg over the bench, straddling it. Kell placed a hand-carved wooden bowl before her, and she reached eagerly for the spoon as Kell sliced a loaf of black nut-bread with a long, curved knife.

"It's good!"

"Might need some more salt."

"No, it's perfect!" She spooned greedily, wolfing her broth with the eagerness of hunger.

"Well," said Kell, sitting opposite his granddaughter with a smile which split his wrinkled, bearded face, making him appear younger than his sixty-two years. "You shouldn't be so surprised. I *am* the best cook in Jalder."

"Hmm, maybe, but I think it could do with some beef," said Nienna, pausing, spoon half raised as she affected a frown.

Kell grinned. "Ach, but I'm just a poor old soldier. Couldn't possibly afford that."

"Poor? With a fortune stashed under the floor?" said Nienna, head down, eyes looking up and glinting mischievously. "That's what mother says. Mother says you're a miser and a skinflint, and you hide money in a secret stash wrapped in your stinky socks under the boards."

Kell gave a tight smile, some of his humour evaporating. "Your mother always was one for compliments." He brightened. "Anyway, my girl, you're the cheeky monkey here! With your tricks and cheeky words."

"I'm a bit old for you to keep calling me that, grandpa."

"No, lass, you're still a little girl." He leant forward, and ruffled her hair. She scowled in distaste.

"Grandpa! I am not a girl anymore! I'm nearly seventeen!"

"You'll always be a little girl to me. Now eat your broth."

They ate in silence, the only sound that of fire crackling through logs as the wind outside increased in ferocity, kicking up eddies of snow and howling mournfully along frosted, cobbled streets. Nienna finished her broth, and circled her bowl with the last of the black bread. She sat back, sighing. "Good! Too much salt, but good all the same."

"As I said, the best cook in Jalder."

"Have you ever seen a monkey? Really?" she asked suddenly, displaying a subtle hint of youth.

"Yes. In the deep jungles of the south. It's too cold up here for monkeys; I suppose they're fond of their bananas."

"What's a banana?"

"A soft, yellow fruit."

"Do I really look like one?"

"A fruit, or a monkey?"

She smacked his arm. "You know what I mean!"

"A little," said Kell, finishing his own broth and chewing thoughtfully. His teeth were paining him again. "There is a likeness: the hairy face, the fleas, the fat bottom."

"Grandpa! You don't speak to a lady like that! There's this thing we learnt in school, it's called eti… ettick…"

"Etiquette." He ruffled her hair again. "And when you're grown up, Nienna, then I'll treat you like a

grown-up." His smile was infectious. Nienna helped to clean away the bowls. She stood by the window for a few moments, staring out and down towards the distant factories and the market.

"You fought in the south jungles, didn't you, Grandpa?"

Kell felt his mood instantly sour, and he bit his tongue against an angry retort. *The girl doesn't realise,* he chided himself. He took a deep breath. "Yes. That was a long time ago. I was a different person back then."

"What was it like? Fighting, in the army, with King Searlan? It must have been so… romantic!"

Kell snorted. "Romantic? The dung they fill your head with in school these days. There's nothing romantic about watching your friends slaughtered. Nothing heroic about seeing crows on a battlefield squabbling over corpse eyes. No." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Battles are for fools."

"But still," persisted Nienna, "I think I'd like to join the army. My friend Kat says they take women now; or you can join as a nurse, to help with battlefield casualties. They give you good training. We had a Command Sergeant, he came to the school trying to sign us up. Kat wanted to sign, but I thought I'd talk to you first."

Kell moved across the room, so fast he was a blur. Nienna was shocked. He moved too quickly for a big man, for an old man; it was unreal. He took her shoulders in bear paws with surprising gentility. And he shook her. "Now you listen to me, Nienna, you have a gift, a rare talent like I've not seen in a long while. The music's in your blood, girl, and I'm sure when the

angels hear you sing they'll be green with envy." He took a deep breath, gazing with unconditional love into her eyes. "Listen good, Nienna, and understand an old man. An unknown benefactor has paid your university fees. That person has spared you a lifetime of hardship in the tanneries, or in the factories working weaving machinery so treacherous it'll cut your damn fingers off; and the bastards will let it, rather than stop production. So, girl, you go to your university, and you work like you've never worked before, or I'll kick you so hard from behind, my boot will come out of your mouth."

Nienna lowered her head. "Yes, Grandpa. I'm sorry. It's just…"

"What?" His eyes were glowing dark coals.

"It's just – I'm bored! I'd like some excitement, an adventure! All I ever see is home, and here, and school. And I know I can sing, I know that, but it's not a future filled with excitement, is it? It's not something that's going to boil my blood!"

"Excitement is overrated," growled Kell, turning and moving with a wince to his low leather chair. He slumped, grimacing at the pain in his lower back which nagged more frequently these days, despite the thick, green, stinking unguent applied by old Mrs Graham. "Excitement is the sort of thing that gets a person killed."

"You're such a grump!" Nienna skipped across the room, and tugged on her boots. "I've got to get going. We're having a tour of the university this afternoon. It's a shame the snow has come down so thick; the gardens are said to be awesomely pretty."

"Yes, the winter has come early. Such is the legacy of the Black Pike Mountains." He gazed off, through the wide low window, to a far-distant haze of black and white teeth. The Black Pikes called to him. They always would. They had a splinter of his soul.

"Some of my friends are going to explore the Black Pikes this summer; when they finish their studies, of course."

"Fools," snapped Kell. "The Pikes are more dangerous than anything you could ever imagine."

"You've been there?"

"Three times. And three times I believed I was never coming back." His voice grew quiet, drifting, lost. "I knew I would die, up there. On those dark rocky slopes. It is a miracle I still live, girl!"

"Was that when you were in the army?" She was fishing for stories, again, and he waved her away.

"Go on! Get to your friends; go, enjoy your university tour. And make sure you sing for them! Show them your angel's voice! They will have never heard anything like it."

"I will, Grandpa." Nienna tugged on her coat, and brushed out her long brown hair. "Grandpa?"

"Yes, monkey?"

"I… I nearly told mam, about you, this morning. About coming here, I mean. I do so want to tell her… I hate keeping secrets."

Kell shook his head, face stern. "If you tell her, girl, she will make doubly sure you never see me again. She hates me. Can you understand that?" Nienna nodded, but Kell could see in her eyes she did not have the life experience to truly comprehend the hate

his daughter carried for him – like a bad egg in her womb. But one day, he thought savagely, one day she'll learn. We all do.

"Yes, Grandpa. I'll try my best." She opened the door, and a bitter chill swept in on a tide of fresh, tumbling snow. She stepped forward, then paused, and gave a half-turn so he couldn't quite see her face. "Kell?"

"Yes, granddaughter?" He blinked, unused to her calling him by name.

"Thanks for paying my university fees." She leant back, and kissed his cheek, and was gone in a whirl of coat and scarf leaving him standing blushing at the top of the steps. He shook his head, watching her footprints crunch through a fresh fall towards a gentle mist drifting in off the Selenau River.

How had she guessed? he thought. He closed the door, which struggled to fit the frame. He thumped it shut with a bear's fist, and absently slid the heavy bar into place. He moved back to the fireplace, reclaiming his abandoned resin-liquor and taking a heavy slug. Alcohol eased into his veins like an old friend, and wrapped his brain in honey. Kell took a deep breath, moving back to the wide window and sitting on a low bench to watch the bartering traders across a field of flapping stalls. The mist was creeping into the market now, swirling around boots and timber stanchions. Kell gazed at the mountains, the Black Pike Mountains, his eyes distant, remembering the hunt there; as he did, many times in a day.

"Join the army – ha!" he muttered, scowling, and refilled his mug from a clay jug.

* * *

Kell awoke, senses tingling, mouth sour, head fuzzy, and wondered not just what had awoken him, but how in Hell's Teeth he'd fallen asleep? "Damn the grog," he muttered, cursing himself for his weakness and age, and swearing he'd stop the liquor; though knowing, deep in his heart, it was a vow he'd never uphold.

Kell sat up from the window-bench, rubbing his eyes and yawning. He glanced right, but all he saw through the long, low window was mist, thick and white, swirling and coalescing through the streets. He could determine a few muffled stone walls, some snow-slick cobbles, but that was all. A terrible white had expanded to fill the world.

Kell moved to his water barrel and gulped three full flagons, with streams running through his grey beard and staining his cotton shirt. He rubbed his eyes again, head spinning, and turned to watch the mist creeping under his door. Odd, he thought. He glanced up to Ilanna, his axe, hanging over the fireplace. She gleamed, dull black reflecting firelight. Kell turned again, and with a crack the window, nearly the width of the entire room, sheared with a metallic crackling as if it had been placed under great pressure. Mist drifted into the apartment.

In reflex, Kell grabbed a towel, soaked it in his water barrel, and wrapped it over his mouth and nose, tying it behind his head. What are you doing, you crazy old fool? screamed his mind. This is no fire smoke! It will do you no harm! But some deep instinct, some primal intuition guided him and he reached up to tug the long-hafted battle-axe from her

restraining brackets. Bolts snapped, and the brackets clattered into the fire…

Ice-smoke swirled across his boots, roved across the room, and smothered the fire. It crackled viciously, then died. Outside, a woman gave a muffled scream; the scream ended in a gurgle.

Kell's eyes narrowed, and he strode to his door – as outside, footsteps moved fast up the ice-slick ascent. Kell twisted to one side. The door rattled, and soundlessly Kell slid the bar out of place. The door was kicked open and two soldiers eased into his apartment carrying black swords; their faces were pale and white, their hair long, braided, and as white as the ice-smoke which had smothered Kell's fire.

Kell grinned at the two men, who separated, spreading apart as Kell backed away several steps. The first man rushed him, sword slashing for his throat but Kell twisted, rolling, his axe thundering in a backhand sweep that caught the albino across the head with blade slicing a two-inch slab from the soldier's unprotected skull. The man stumbled back, white blood spraying through clawing fingers, as the second soldier leapt at Kell. But Kell was ready, and his boot hooked under the bench, lifting it hard and fast into the attacker's path. The soldier stumbled over oak and, double-handed, Kell slammed his axe overhead into the fallen man's back, pinning him to the bench. He writhed, gurgling for a while, then spasmed and lay still. A large pool of white blood spread beneath him. Kell placed his boot on the man's armour and tugged free his axe, frowning. *White blood?* He glanced right, to where the injured

soldier, with a quarter of his head missing, lay on a pile of rugs, panting fast.

Kell strode to him. "What's going on, lad?"

"Go to hell," snarled the soldier, strings of saliva and blood drooling from his teeth.

"So, an attack is it?" Kell hefted his axe thoughtfully. Then, his face paled, and his hand came to the water-soaked towel. "What dark magick is this? Who leads you, boy? Tell me now, and I'll spare you." It was a lie, and it felt bad on Kell's tongue. He had no intentions of letting the soldier live.

"I'd rather fucking die, old man!"

"So be it."

The axe struck the albino's head from his shoulders, and Kell turned his back on the twitching corpse showing a cross-section of spine and gristle, his mind sour, mood dropping fast into a brooding bitter pit. This wasn't supposed to be his life. No more killing! He was a retired soldier. An old warrior. He no longer walked the mountains, battle-axe in hand, coated in the blood and gore of the slain. Kell shook his head, mouth grim. But then, the gods mocked him, yes? The gods were fickle; they would see to it any retirement Kell sought was blighted with misery.

Nienna!

"Damn them." Kell moved to the steps, peering out into ice-smoke. He nodded to himself. It had to be blood-oil magick. No natural mist moved like this: organic, like coils of snakes in a bucket. Shivering, Kell moved swiftly down the steps and ice-smoke bit his hands, making him yelp. He ran back up to his apartment and pulled on heavy layers of clothing, a thick

hat with fur-lined ear-flaps, and a bulky, bear-skin jerkin which broadened Kell from his already considerable width of chest. Finally, Kell pulled on high-quality leather gloves and stepped back into the mist. He moved down wooden stairs and stood on a mixture of snow and cobbles, his face tingling. All around, the mist shrouded him in silence; it was a padded world. The air was muffled. Reduced. Shrunk. Kell strode to a nearby wall, and was reassured by the rough reality of black stone. So, he thought. I'm not a victim of a savage, drunken nightmare after all! He laughed at that. It felt like it.

Head pounding, Kell moved warily down the street towards the market. The cobbled road dropped towards the Selenau River, then curved east in a broad arc and wound up the hill towards rows of expensive villas and Jalder University beyond. Kell reached the edge of the market, and stopped. There was a body on the ground, mist curling around withered, ancient limbs. Frowning, Kell dropped to one knee and reached out. He touched dry, crisp flesh, and cried out, shocked–

Boots thudded at him from the white, and a sword slashed for his head. His axe came up at the last moment, and there was clash of steel. Kell rammed his left fist into the soldier's midriff, heard the woosh of expelled air as the man doubled over. Kell stood, and stamped on the man's head, his heavy boot crushing the albino's skull as more came from the mist and Kell, shock and realisation slamming through him, recognised that he was outnumbered and his brow furrowed and dark thoughts shot through his brain

and his blood was pumping, fired now, a deep pulsing rhythm, and he hadn't wanted this, he'd left this behind and it was back again, drawing him in, drawing him onto the knife edge of–

Murder.

Another sword whistled towards his head, and Kell ducked one shoulder, rolling left, axe whirring fast to embed in flesh. His right elbow shot back into a soldier's face and they were around him, swords and knives gleaming but that made life easier. He grinned. They were all enemy. Kell's mind took a step back and coolness washed his aura. His brain calmed, and he changed with an almost imperceptible *click*. Years fell away like abandoned confetti. He felt the old, dark magick flowing through blood like narcotic honey. He'd fought it. Now it was back. And he welcomed it.

Smoothly, Kell whirled and his axe thundered in an arc trailing white blood droplets. An albino soldier was beheaded, the axe continuing, then reversing suddenly to slam through another's breast-plate, cleaving through steel to shatter the sternum and pierce the pumping white heart within. Kell's fist clubbed a soldier to the ground; he ducked a sword slash, which whistled by his ear, and Ilanna slammed a third albino between the eyes, splitting his head like a fruit. Kell's thick fingers curled around another soldier's throat, and he lifted the lithe albino, legs dangling, and brought him close to his own serene and deadly calm features. He headbutted the soldier, spreading nose across pale white skin, and allowed the figure to flop uselessly to the cobbles. Then Kell was running, pounding through

the market dodging husks of dried corpses, his own mouth dry, not with fear, but a terrible and ancient understanding as the extent of the slaughter dawned on him. This wasn't a few rogue brigands. This was a full-scale attack!

And the enemy, with matching armour, were professional, skilled, disciplined, ruthless. Throughout Kell's recent economic slaughter there had been no panic, no retreat. These were a people bred for war. And yet, even so, Kell had a premonition that he had met only the untrained – the frontliners, the new recruits. The expendable.

Sourly, Kell ran on, and stopped by the edge of the market, leaning against the stall of Brask the Baker to regain his breath. The smell of fresh bread twitched Kell's nostrils, and reaching out, he realised the racks of loaves were frozen solid. And so was Brask, down on his knees, hands on the edge of his stall, flesh blue and rigid.

"The bastards," snarled Kell, and calmed his breathing. Unused to running, and suffering the effects of excessive liquor and pipe-smoking, a decade out of the army, ten years sat watching the mountains and the snow, well, Kell was far from battle-fit. He waited for pain to subside, and ignored the flaring twinges of hot knives in his lower-back and knees, in his right elbow and shoulder, an arthritis-legacy from decades wielding a heavy battle-axe and carving lumps of flesh with solid, jarring bone-impact.

The Days of Blood, whispered a corner of his imagination, then cackled at him.

Go to hell!

Kell glanced up, into the mist. No, he corrected himself. Into the smoke. The ice-smoke.

He wasn't far from Jalder University. But it was uphill, and a damn steep hill at that. Gritting his teeth, face coursing with sweat under his thick hat and heavy clothing, Kell began a fast walk, holding his ribs as he prayed fervently to any gods willing to listen that Nienna was still present in the university grounds… and still alive.