

How We Fight

by Shann Ray

HORDES OF MEN desolated, struck down, destroyed, sunken form of skin and skeleton, bare cloth matted to torso, bodycage and hipbone, face and neck darkened, bloating to black, rain the endless dream stuck fast in the stone-dead skull and blood a fine sheen over all, arms and legs tangled, a severed hand, eyes dull white opals half-bled from orbital bones, grey earth below and stink in the air and the near cry of predator birds, birds of unbearable hunger, the sodden smell of open wounds, a flock of day raven far above, black, and in the blackness light, black sky with stars and moon like fires defined wholly apart from one another and only darkness in between, mute beacons, and cold. The sun has gone and there is near silence after seven days of fighting, and in the quiet only the caw of birds and the faint word, like a child's, of those whose breath, impatient, labored, stops, and broken off, takes leave to await them in spirit or etherworld, blood echo in the air, agony awaiting peace on the other side.

Hordes of the first clan in the other clan's darkness, the first and the second come to kill over fear and vengeance and love.

To him all are blind, and all are maimed, and all are dead: save two.

The first man ran north hard under cover of night, fast along riverbed and up ascending the forested bulk of land over land, up rock faces and out upon the serrated edge of snow-laden cirques and down again descending into valley and further down low upon valley floor, then daylight piercing all as he ran through pinch of canyon walls and out again over open plains crumbled at the far edge by timber and stone, down in the night to the crowded heart of the great forest and out and up over a wide expanse of grey rock, bold line of trees along the Big Bend River below, the man running more animal or wind than man, bent to the far place of snow and skyborne earth, bent with abandon toward Ten Mountain House.

Like shadow the second man followed the first, and desired him dead.

To the house of the sun the men traveled, one sighting the mark of the other, depression in snow and bent branch, grasses laid low among that which the wind has lifted and lain down again, dirt, leaves, snow, a hint of wildberry in the air and with it the feint scent of wood smoke. At the fjord of Cemsish-pahvah, behind the cliff wall of Gathsahvah, a valley opened and from the high ridge to the north, the second man, broad-shouldered, hailed the first.

“Hail now, listen! I see you with my own eyes and you are well made and I have great sorrow. For you must die. And I must kill you.”

The voice carried, low and full of feeling, and the first man stopped and paused, and turned his head, and sought the form of his enemy far off among the grey stone. Seeing the foe he put his fist to his chest, then pointed to the sky where a ball of fire burned. He yelled with great feeling:

“I am like the sun. I will never die!”

