

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

# Barbarian: Wayfarer

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Fear

His dead sister came at sundown. Always at sundown.

As the sky bruised and the shadows grew long into night, he stood to watch the sun disappear behind the mountains. This was when the whispered sound of the evening breeze would crumble into the slow, shuffling rasp of feet. Her feet... cold and white, frayed tendon and cracked bone worn bare over countless miles of frost-rimmed rock. It did not matter how far Kehr had traveled that day, how many rivers he had forded or cliffs he had scaled. She came at sundown.

The large man busied himself with the fire as the shuffling drew closer. Tinder had grown more plentiful as he had descended into the Sharval Wilds, and Kehr tried to find some comfort in the thought of warm food after weeks of dried venison. It was a futile attempt at cheer, as he knew it would be. The limping footsteps always brought a seeping chill, a liquid sense of ice and horror that rippled and lapped against his skin. They came to a stop in the darkness just beyond the firelight.

Kehr did not want to look up; he did not want to address her. But she wouldn't leave until he did. He waited as the fire built up to a crackling blaze, and then he straightened, sighing heavily into the cold twilight air.

"Say your words, Faen. Say them and go."

She took a dragging step into the firelight, then another. Kehr stared into the flames, felt his hand move to the tender scar on his chest. One more step, and she was across from him. A log in the fire shifted, popped, and sent embers floating upward. Kehr forced his gaze to follow the bright specks, to lift from the fire and regard this thing that had been his sister. He owed her that.

The heat was already thawing her pale flesh, and the sickly sweet smell of decay grew strong. Following after her brother these long weeks had wrought havoc on Faen's gray, shambling form, and Kehr barely recognized her.

Her eyes were black pits, sunken shadows in place of the cornflower blue he remembered. All that remained of his sister's golden tresses hung in matted ashen clumps from the sides of her skull, and the sodden weight of one of those tangled clots was pulling the skin loose. He watched as the yellow flesh tore, dropping rotted tissue and hair to the ground in a wet thump. Her thin limbs rattled in the wind, skeletal knobs protruding from damp parchment. Kehr wondered if Faen still felt anything. She leaned forward to point at his chest with a bony, trembling finger.

"Kehr. Kehr Odwyll."

How could she speak with that ruined mouth? The collapsed jaw, the black tongue so swollen and stiff that it pushed through her tattered cheek? How could she be here, shaking with morbid anger after being buried under the broken granite face of Arreat these many years? Kehr knew he should not have returned, knew there was no atonement for him in these fractured lands. He had not been able to find his way to the wooded canyons of his people and had spent long days wandering aimlessly through strange and jagged hills. The valley of the Stag tribe had been a place once green and welcome and familiar. Now everything was changed. Everything was lost.

But Faen had found him. Had found him and followed him as he ran.

"Kehr Odwyll. Traitor. Traitor!"



Sister

The morning sun came too soon, and the fire had failed to keep the chill from Kehr's bones. He pushed his thick bearskin cloak aside and rose, stretching his full eight feet of scar and muscle. Over the years, Kehr had adopted the practice common in the Skovos Isles of removing hair from both face and head with a sharp blade. The custom made sense in those warm summer lands, had made him seem less an outsider. But here the cold wind felt foreign on his naked skin. It had taken only a few weeks under these winter skies for Kehr to yearn for the untamed beard and long tresses of his youth. He ran rough fingers over the stubble on his jaw and wondered if Tehra would recognize him.

Thoughts of his mistress still brought a sick pang that burrowed through his chest. It wasn't sorrow or guilt or pining—not entirely. It was the pain of a mistake swaddled in calloused tissue and regret, a mistake that could never be changed, could only be wrapped more tightly in an effort to numb the hurt or at least distance it. Kehr shook his head.

The journey back would be a long one. The Gulf of Westmarch lay beyond the Kohl Mountains to the south, and from there Kehr knew that he would be able to find passage around the peninsula on a trading barge. Merchants were always willing to hire muscle to watch after their cargo so they could visit the brothels along their route. Kehr spoke the trading languages of Therat, Lut Gholein, and the islands; he could easily convince a potential employer that, in spite of his size, he was not one of those wild primitives from the Dreadlands but a more civilized breed of sellsword. After that, it should be easy sailing down past Westmarch and Kingsport, then to Philios. And there... well, there she awaited his return. There were rolling hills and light music; there were wine and meat and laughter and warm, slender arms. There he could forget duty and the cold, grinding sense of regret.

Why had he come here? To find his people? To beg their pardon? Well, they had found him. Or at least Faen had.

Kicking dirt over the smoldering remains of his fire, Kehr tried to push the memory of last night from his mind and focus on the coming trek. The peaks ahead were formidable, but they were forested, inhabited, alive—a welcome change from the dead... a welcome change after the past few weeks. Kehr's hand went to his chest.

He was not betraying anyone this time, he told himself. He was not shirking his duty, for those who marked such things were gone. He was leaving an empty land that no longer held claim to him. Kehr had hoped to make amends, to find some way to end this gnawing guilt. Instead he had found echoing silence and a cold new dimension of disgrace that twisted in his gut with each visit from Faen. The same thought sounded over and over in his head: he was not betraying anybody now. Not this time.

Beyond the next rise, Kehr knew he would come across the winding hunter's track that he had followed two months ago on his journey here. Then it would be a simple case of joining larger trails that crisscrossed up the north face of the Kohl until he reached the Iron Path.

The Iron Path. It was an ancient road, the crumbling vestige of a lost empire that had stretched from the deserts of Aranoch to the Frozen Sea. Paved with broad rust-hued blocks of ferrous shale, the Iron Path ran wide and true from the frosty reaches of Ivgorod, across the spine of the Kohl Mountains, and down to the western foothills of Khanduras. Once a vital thoroughfare for trade and imperial troops, it made passage through the tall, serrated mountains a matter of weeks instead of months. Best of all, the path fell into disuse long centuries ago. It was now largely abandoned and forgotten; northern kings, chiefs, and warlords had few dealings with their neighbors in these chaotic times. The destruction of Arreat had wrought fear into the hearts of the surrounding nations, and most chose to close their gates, strengthen their walls, and let the world grow savage at their borders.

This meant that the path would be empty of travelers and bandits. Although Kehr could handle both, he preferred to walk in solitude. Lifting his massive greatsword, Scorn, across his shoulders, he turned and strode toward the waiting hills.

Ten days of hard travel passed. Ten sunsets, ten more visits from his sister. One of her arms had been chewed off by scavengers, and her skull was now bare, yellowing bone. But it was still Faen. Still her voice. Still her condemnation. He wondered if he would ever grow accustomed to the revulsion, to the horror of her presence. He wondered if he should.

Kehr worried that Faen might follow him across the Twin Seas, that she might pursue him clear to Philios. There was an idea in the back of his mind, one that fought to be heard: what if he struck her down? What if he drove his mighty blade through her, rendered that trembling frame into a pile of splintered bone and spoiled flesh? Would it free her from this torment? Would it free *him*?

Kehr pulled the bearskin tight around his shoulders. No. He could not do this to Faen, to his sister. He had earned her words, earned her hate. He was worthy of these stripes.

Shaking the darkness from his head, the large man took solace in his long strides and the earth pulling past his feet. Whether it was from his need to leave these lands or his desire to return to a more welcome clime, he was traveling this leg of the journey at an impressive pace. The Iron Path was just ahead, and he knew that his gait would grow quicker once he reached that even paving. Soon this would all be forgotten. Soon this would be behind him, and maybe Faen would remain here in the frigid bleakness, where the dead belonged.

Kehr sighed, tried to turn his thoughts toward wine, sunlight, and the measured sound of waves against sand. His stomach growled. He had eaten the last of his dried meat two days ago, and game was scarcer than Kehr had hoped. His focus had been on leaving this land, on leaving his fallen home with as great a speed as he could muster. Some effort, he realized, must be made in finding food.

In five breaths, his reverie was cut off by a scream... then *screams*. They were coming from the road ahead, just through a copse of the hardy scrub oak that rimmed the Iron Path at these lower altitudes. Kehr crouched low and stepped away from the trail he had been following, circling around the trees to get a better vantage.

They were refugees; that much was obvious. Men, women, children—dozens of thin, unwashed peasants in threadbare clothing, carrying their few belongings in baskets, in satchels, even wrapped in

blankets. Like Kehr, the refugees had assumed that the road would be vacant. Unlike him, however, they traveled heedlessly. They had formed a straggling line along the path with no thought of prowling beasts, bandits, or worse. And there were many things worse than bandits in the surrounding mountains.

Kehr smelled them before they came into view, and his stomach turned. Khazra. Shaggy, misshapen fiends twisted into a perverse crossing of man and goat. Often traveling in packs, khazra were broad and muscular, their long arms corded with tangled sinew that slid and bunched beneath a coarse, filthy pelt. The goatmen's legs bent backward at a bestial angle and ended in cloven black hooves. Khazra shoulders were a gathering of taut animal brawn, tortured veins culminating in the jutting, nightmare head of a large goat buck with inky slit eyes and curling horns. Kehr had faced these beasts before—several times in his southern wanderings—and the memories tasted of bile. Khazra bore tangible, reeking witness to the vile work of demons in men.

Kehr spied a pair of the goatmen moving along the road with hungry intent as the refugees scattered, screaming. Already, a score of bodies lay strewn across the path, frail clumps marked in red. More khazra slunk from corpse to corpse, stripping the dead of their meager rags. Kehr felt his unease building into anger, but he swallowed it. This was not his fight. Not his duty. It would only slow his journey, and there was little he could do at this point. He owed nothing to these peasants, these fools who had traveled on an open road without weapons. Kehr had no vigil here.

He was about to turn and circle back around when he saw the woodcutter. Dressed in homespun brown, his pack of tinder littering the worn pavement, the man had attracted the attention of the fiends. He stood alone with his simple axe held high as they surrounded him, laughing with those mewling, fleshy voices. The goatmen were armed with rough pikes and spears, and they alternated jabbing at the poor man whenever his back was to them. He was spotted with blood in a dozen places. The other refugees took the opportunity to escape into the nearby trees, abandoning the woodcutter to what promised to be a long and agonizing death. He spun to counter a vicious thrust, and Kehr saw what he carried in his other arm. It was a child.



## Life

Aron had given up hope, unsure if he could hold the axe steady for another second, when a roar shivered the air. The monsters turned in bleating surprise as a storm of rumbling steel fury burst through them. Staggering backward, Aron lifted his axe and pulled his arm more tightly around the girl, praying that this new demon might perhaps bring a quicker death.

Then the goatmen in front of him fell apart, dropped into spurting pieces, and Aron saw this latest threat. His breath escaped him.

It was a *man*. A giant of a man who towered over even these hulking things. A man who stood dripping in hot blood that steamed in the cold morning air. He wore a bearskin cloak across mountainous shoulders, and his legs were girded with piecemeal armor of mismatched plate and mail. Heavy oxhide boots. Chest bare and scarred. Thick hands, knotted and rough, were wound around the haft of a terrible weapon that matched his size. It was easily three times the length of Aron's axe, forged of angry black metal and notched along both sides of its uneven blade. It was a coarse and brutal tool of death, held aloft as though it were part of the man's own arm.

This could only be a barbarian. Aron had heard tales of barbarians even in his remote village on the eastern foothills. Tales of gigantic savages who guarded the sacred mountain and ate those who chose to trespass. But never had he imagined the truth: that such incredible strength could exist in a living, breathing mortal. Such feral quickness and power bent to the will of a man.

The khazra who had been stripping the corpses down the road now dropped their scraps and made shrill calls, pillars of vapor lifting from between yellow goat teeth. More khazra appeared on the side of the path; those who had chased the fleeing refugees into the brush had returned at the sound. Aron



counted seven, eight beasts in total, their courage building as they bleated in response, eyeing their lone target. Heads lowered, they gathered into a brutish cluster and charged.

The barbarian took a breath through his teeth, shifting the massive blade so he could extend a hand to Aron.

"Your axe."

Aron hastily handed it to the man. It seemed such a frail thing in that meaty paw. Raising it to his eyes, the barbarian nodded approvingly.

"Sturdy. Not meant for sticks."

The goatmen began to gain speed, their hooves hammering sharp beats on the stone. This barbarian wished to discuss a wood axe while death bore down on them? What kind of madman was this?

"Yes... I mean, no, no—it belonged to my father," stammered Aron. "He was a militiaman with the—"

In one fluid movement, the barbarian lifted his arm and then hurled the axe forward. Aron watched as it spun end over end, a steel blur that smashed *through* the skull of the nearest khazra and buried itself in the chest of the one behind him. The first creature tumbled ahead, the grim mess above his shoulders spouting dark blood, while the second tripped into him and was still. The remaining monsters slowed, spreading to encircle their target as they drew close.

Aron scrambled toward the fallen body of a creature who had attacked him earlier, hoping to grab his spear and perhaps help this barbarian make a valiant stand before they were overwhelmed. The large man snarled and kicked him in the hip, knocking him over. Aron rolled to protect the child, looking back in fear.

"Stay down."

Aron ducked low and kept his arm tight around his charge. She had stopped crying, which worried him, but perhaps it would be better if she had fainted. The goatmen had surrounded them, and foam ran from the beasts' craggy mouths. They were furious, and Aron knew from recent, horrific experience that they would take apart their prey with carnal zeal. The barbarian pulled his blade in close, arms bent, and Aron could see his muscles bunch with latent force.

The goatmen's patience broke, and they attacked with mewling cries. Aron glanced up and saw the barbarian close his eyes, and—by the Burning Hells!—*he smiled*. Then the big man leaned back, and the smile twisted into a sneer as he spun in a black arc toward the coming fiends. Aron cringed as the heavy weapon hummed over his head in a wash of cold air. The monsters had been deceived by their foe's inhuman reach, and the nearest four were caught within the fatal moaning crescent. It didn't cut—it *smote* through the beasts without pause, severing spines, shattering bones, tearing flesh, and splattering a crimson spray over Aron, filling his ears, nose, mouth, and eyes with hot, salty red. The woodcutter rubbed blood from his face, coughing. Where four goatmen had been, eight limp, quivering shapes were now spread over the road. The barbarian was down on one knee, breathing hard, his arms bent around to the side where the blade had lodged deep into a block of the paving shale. The two remaining khazra, cleverer than their brethren, had waited for the barbarian to commit himself so, and they crowed as they drove toward his blind back.

Aron tried to shout, tried to warn the man of their advance, but he choked on curdling blood. The barbarian crouched low and then surged upward, hefting his sword and the massive stone in which it was embedded out of the ground, swinging around in a curve and smashing into the oncoming beasts. The rock hewed through their meaty forms like a hammer through lard, mashing them flat and cracking asunder with a mighty boom. Wet shards the size of fists whistled past Aron's shoulders.

And then... it was done. Silent. The barbarian stood triumphant in the mountain air, a chiseled god of blood and death and rage. Aron had never seen anything so terrifying, and he feared what the arrival of this imposing figure could mean. He watched as the man turned and shouldered his weapon to walk a short distance down the road. Was he leaving? No. He bent down to pull Aron's axe from the gore-soaked chest it had rent, and then he returned. He extended the haft and nodded.

"The path will be safe for you now. Khazra do not come twice against a stronger foe. Word travels quickly amongst these scavengers."

Aron reached out to take the axe and stopped. The bundle in his arm was still. Still and growing cold. Only then did he notice the dark, wet mark where a spear had passed his defenses.

Aron dropped his head.

"No... no, no."

Weeping, he held her tight and stumbled to his knees. The barbarian watched and thought he understood.

"I saw how you protected her, woodsman. You could have done no more to save your child." He spat, nodding toward the refugees quietly returning to the road. "You did a father's duty."

"No," said Aron, his voice breaking. "She is not mine. I tried to carry her to safety when the goatmen attacked, when her parents were killed. She is not my daughter."



## Death

Kehr walked with the refugees. They had pleaded for his protection, offered him food and a few pieces of silver in exchange for his company. The barbarian had taken their meager payment and curtly agreed to escort them. As far as Kehr was concerned, the poor folk were already dead, or they would be once their path diverged from his. He was just sharing the road, but he would fight for these people until the Iron Path dipped into Khanduras. Would Faen still pursue him if he traveled with others? He hoped not, but he decided to spend tonight's sunset alone so they could not hear her; there was no point in frightening the refugees any further. Regardless, it would be some small comfort to walk amid living voices for a time. For their part, the peasants kept their distance from the man, unsure of their silent companion but unwilling to fall too far behind his long strides.

"You are a barbarian, yes?"

It was the woodcutter. Kehr had lost track of the man after he had left to bury the unknown child, and the barbarian had not heard his approach just now. Increasing his pace, Kehr grumbled assent.

"I thought so. Who else could match blows with these monsters? Who else could wield a farmer's plow like a falchion?" The woodcutter shook his head, smiling.

Kehr frowned. Perhaps he was wrong about the comfort of living voices. It had been long weeks since he had last shared words with a man... or had them shared *at* him at such measure. He wondered if conversations had always seemed so light and empty. That said, he was impressed with the woodsman's perception. Scorn had indeed been forged from a plow blade. Kehr rolled his shoulders, heard the thick leather straps securing the weapon to his back creak under the strain.

The peasant took a few quick steps ahead, trying to catch Kehr's eye. "I doubted at first. You lack the wild beard and locks mentioned in the tales..."

He cleared his throat.

"If you do not want to speak, I understand. I wanted only to thank you."

Tilting his head in a bow, he let the barbarian stride past. Kehr continued on, but almost against his wishes he found himself intrigued by this woodcutter. Here was a man who had stood to defend a stranger's child when others ran, a man who had chosen to express gratitude while others cowered. Such mettle was impressive, especially among the common folk. Kehr turned to see where the woodcutter had gone, and the barbarian was startled to find him only a few paces behind.

"You tread softly, woodsman. You learned this while hunting trees?"

The smaller man laughed; it was a surprisingly warm sound in this place.

"We did not have these *khazra* in the woods when I was a boy, but that did not mean it was safe to go stomping about. It is hard to gather tinder when running from bears."

Kehr nodded. The explanation made sense, but he suspected there was more to the woodcutter than he let on. Some men kept secrets, the barbarian knew, and looked away.

"This is the first you have seen of the goatmen?"

"Well, never in these numbers. Over the last couple of years, we saw them from time to time, scavenging in herds of three or four, usually at higher elevations, where their hooves allow them to move at great speed. We considered them dangerous, but they tended to shy away from armed men on level ground. But now... now they are everywhere along the Kohl, from the peaks to the foothills."

He tightened his grip on the axe, and Kehr could see dark thoughts pass over the woodcutter's eyes. "They... they seem to have organized themselves. Never before have they shown such coordination,

such initiative. They began attacking the more remote villages. Seven days ago, I spotted a horde of the monsters moving up the valley toward our township of Dunsrott. I was able to warn my people, and we grabbed what we could, slipping away as the sun fell. Following the Iron Path, we joined with others. Others with the same tale.

"We are the vanguard"—the woodsman swept his arm around to indicate the pauper's caravan straggling behind him—"of what will soon become an unending line of displaced folk looking for refuge if something is not done to stop these attacks."

This claim gave Kehr pause.

"Nothing will be *done* about the khazra, woodsman. These mountains are borderlands; no king rules them, and no king protects them. Get your people down from the Kohl, down to safety. And then stay there."

The smaller man slowed as he took in what Kehr had said, and he set his mouth in a grim smile. He seemed to come to some decision, and he reached out his hand.

"We are mountain folk, but that does not mean we are fools. Our intent is to follow this road and then continue down to the lowlands of Westmarch... and there we will start anew, I suppose. My name is Aron."

The woodcutter—Aron—kept his hand extended until Kehr finally growled and snatched it in his own calloused fist. The barbarian gave a perfunctory shake, then let go.

"I am Kehr Odwyll, last of the Stag tribe."

"Last?"

"My people are no longer. Arreat took them in her fury."

"I am... I am sorry. I can imagine no greater loss than to be separated from your people. That is why, regardless of the danger, I sojourn with these." Aron gestured toward the refugees.

Kehr and the woodcutter walked a dozen steps more.

"But..." mused Aron, "how did you survive the destruction? News of the mountain's ruin reached even my humble village. What miracle kept you alive?"

Kehr did not answer. He fixed his eyes on the Iron Path and lengthened his stride until he had outpaced Aron. Some men kept secrets, the barbarian knew, and looked away.

The sun was getting lower in the sky, and the ragged caravan at Kehr's back would soon be setting up camp for the night. The peasants were far behind him now, but still the barbarian climbed into the rocks away from the road. It might not be necessary... but he had to be sure.

Faen came that evening. Her jaw had been lost in the journey, leaving her black tongue dangling wet against the tangled cords of her throat flesh. But her words were the same. The horror was the same. Kehr had hoped that traveling with these people would turn her away. He had hoped that protecting them would redeem him in her sunken eyes. He had even hoped—dared to hope—that she was somehow all in his mind, a result of his festering guilt. Yet the cold felt so sharp and liquid, crawling up his arms, his shoulders. That was real. The icy heat of Faen's staggering rage was undiminished.

Kehr knew he would spend the evenings of this journey apart from Aron and his people.



Traitor

Kehr had been wrong about the goatmen. He staved off another two attacks the next morning, and three more refugees died in the bloodshed. Seven khazra decorated the Iron Path with their corpses, and Aron began to worry about how many curved horns lay between him and Westmarch. The khazra would try quick ambushes whenever the barbarian moved too far ahead of the group.

Their fears amplified, the peasants now walked in a huddled band just ten paces behind their protector. Aron followed the small caravan of twenty souls, his axe drawn and ready, and a few of the hardier men and women gathered arms from fallen pursuers. This formation proved effective against the cowardly beasts, and there were no more attacks that day.

Kehr helped the refugees erect a defensible camp, and then—despite their protests—he left them as the sun slid behind the western peaks. He claimed that he wished to survey the surrounding hills, to study potential attack locations for the coming day.

Aron could tell that Kehr was lying. And he saw dread in the barbarian's face.

But Kehr returned not long after dark, much to the relief of the refugees. Aron sensed that something dire had taken place; the barbarian had brought a *coldness* back with him, a palpable chill that went deeper than the mountain air. It was as though the fading sun had pulled the heat and life from Kehr Odwyll, dragging them away as it had fallen behind the Kohl. The woodcutter judged it wise to stay quiet around the large man.

Aron handed him a sizeable portion of the food the peasants carried. The mayor's frowning widow had allotted the barbarian's share as the hungry refugees had looked on. Kehr took the offering without



question, setting to it with silent intensity. Aron wondered how long the barbarian had gone since his last meal. And he wondered if the berries and small game the caravan gathered along the road would be enough to both sate Kehr's needs and allow the refugees to arrive in Westmarch before starvation set in.

Aron had spoken with the widow, a pinch-faced dowager named Seytha, when Kehr left at dusk. He had told her that the barbarian was not deliberately attempting to harm them; he was simply unaccustomed to traveling with such needy, unprepared charges. Despite his taciturn ways, Kehr had shown that he was committed to seeing the peasants to the end of their journey. The woman was unconvinced and had only looked through Aron, staring at the path ahead.

The woodcutter took watch that evening with Daln, the swineherd. Armed with a crooked shovel, the old man had proved he was tougher and more resolute than many younger men. Daln had a stutter and seemed to be in a constant state of disbelief. After his threescore years of life within the same square mile of Dunsmott, this journey was harrowing and incomprehensible to him. There were no attacks that night, no signs of goatmen for the first time since the peasants had abandoned their homes. Daln asked, in his staccato words, what the barbarian had done at sunset to frighten the monsters away. He asked if Kehr had called down some icy god from the Dreadlands to protect the refugees. Aron told the old man to keep his mouth shut and his eyes on the road. *One does not question the branches of a fallen oak. One just collects them and is thankful.*

Two days became four, and then four more. The attacks were fewer but did not cease altogether. Aron could see the caravan's pursuers, usually a pair of scouts following along the peaks at either side of the road. Occasionally these khazra were joined by another two, and, encouraged by their numbers, they would abandon any attempt at secrecy. Aron felt this to be nearly as unnerving as the outright assaults: the constant presence of beastly shapes silhouetted against the ridgeline, the tapping sound of hooves on rock, the wind carrying the monsters' greasy calls across the way like the smell of spoiled meat.

Kehr's demeanor began to thaw as the Iron Path started its slow descent into the foothills, and Aron found the barbarian more amenable to conversation as long as the woodcutter kept his comments brief... and his questions few. Kehr seemed to find some comfort in talking of his people, and Aron learned of the Stag tribe, of its vigil, the sacred charge to protect Arreat. He also learned how this vigil

had brought Kehr's people meaning, how it had sealed their connection with the animals of the mountain. It had been a covenant shared by all the barbarian tribes, the source of their spiritual strength.

In return, Kehr learned of the woodcutter's upbringing in the rustic mountain village of Dunsmott. Aron and his brother had been raised by their father after their mother had succumbed to illness. Aron's father, a veteran militiaman, had known almost nothing of non-military matters, so he had trained his sons to be soldiers. It was a harsh life. So harsh, in fact, that Aron's brother had run off north to Ivgorod to study with the monks, never to be heard from again. His father passed away not long after, handing down a humble cottage in the woods, a worn axe, and little regret. Aron was grateful that the old man hadn't lived to see his beloved Dunsmott surrendered and ransacked by these unholy beasts. It was a small blessing, a *kaelseff*. Aron often used these words, these pieces of the old tongue. Kehr scoffed at what he considered to be an affectation, at the woodcutter's "simple reverence for words from a useless language." Aron took no offense. He just smiled.

"Names have power, Kehr Odwyll," he said. "They have power to bind us."

Kehr grumbled and pulled his bearskin tight around his chest.

The party had gone several days without an attack, and spirits were lifting. Khazra scouts still followed at a distance, but everyone had grown accustomed to their presence and looked forward to the hopeful prospect of leaving them behind as Westmarch grew closer. Kehr predicted that it would be another day or two before the caravan was out of the mountains. Aron prayed that foraging would be more fruitful once the refugees reached the lowlands. He and a few of the hardier men and women were now giving their daily meal to the barbarian. Their stores were almost depleted.

The woodcutter's stomach growled as Kehr drew up and called a halt for the day. Aron leaned wearily against a boulder at the side of the road while others scurried to make camp. He noticed that the only people with any energy were those who had been fed: the young, the old, the wounded... and the barbarian. Aron knew that he should talk with Kehr, see if he could help him understand how things were being rationed. He decided to broach the subject tonight when the large man returned from his evening solitude.

Eyes locked on the sinking sun, mouth drawn in a grim line, Kehr kept his thoughts elsewhere. He finished his meal without a word and then set off on his nightly journey toward the fading light. After a full day's travel, there was still purpose in the barbarian's pace, the long strides that meant no man should follow.

Aron didn't have the vigor to pursue even if he wanted to. Lightheaded from hunger, he was startled when a woman's voice called out from behind him.

"Kehr Odwyll! If you should cross paths with one of your khazra tonight, please bring it back. Some of us perish for want of food and would not turn from eating the more goatish parts so that we may have the strength to walk the rest of the way!"

The barbarian came to a stop. Aron turned to see who would say such a thing. Perhaps hunger had made her thoughtless? It was Seytha, who served Kehr from the caravan's vanishing stock every night. She stood with her hands on her hips, her courage betrayed by a wet gleam in her eye.

Kehr had his back to the refugees, who had fallen still. His voice echoed up the canyon walls.

"Do the people of Dunsmott regret my service?"

Aron stumbled toward the barbarian, hands wide.

"No, Kehr! She did not mean—"

But Seytha spoke again, and it was clear that she had been chewing on these words all day. "We are starving in your shadow, barbarian. What does it matter if we die by a goatman's blade or by hunger?"

Aron heard angry murmurs of agreement, the sound of people who were tired and hungry... He cringed at what was starting to build into a rant against their protector. The woodcutter turned and faced them, trying to stem the tide before it got out of hand.

"This has been a hard journey for all of us, Seytha. The food must go to him because he needs the strength to stand against our attackers. Once we are out of these mountains, we will be able to hunt and—"

"We won't survive another two days if we don't find more to eat!" Her tone cut through the cold air like a knife. There were some gasps, and more voices were raised in anger. Daln pointed his shovel at the barbarian, who was now facing them.

"Why doesn't he bring us back s-something from his n-nightly hunts?" came the old man's warbling query. "We are not feeding him to ab-b-bandon us when he pleases. His d-duty is to keep us *alive!*"

Aron had been watching Kehr's response to the angry crowd. He seemed to be cut from stone, only flinching at one word: *duty*. Aron could see the muscles tighten in the big man's jaw and neck, the barbarian's breath misting the air in dangerous, smoldering clouds. Kehr turned toward the woodcutter, his voice burning like hot coals.

"I have been sellsword for sultans, for warlords, for merchant princes throughout the southern isles. Never have I bared steel for so little." He spat on the ground. "You people should have died on these mountains and will surely die when you reach the lowlands. Westmarch has khazra and worse. I should have left you on the Iron Path when I saw you. It would have been a mercy."

Desperate, Aron spread his arms.

"Please, Kehr. Forgive their hasty words; they are frightened and hungry and know not what they say. Do not leave us!"

Kehr Odwyll caught himself for a moment, his eyes resting on the forlorn man.

"You will live if you leave them behind, Aron. You have the skills to survive the journey. But if you stay with them, you will die with them." Then the barbarian strode into the waning light, accompanied by the pitiful pleading of the refugees. Aron turned toward his people and hefted his axe against his shoulder. Never had it felt so heavy.



Brother

Kehr walked until the sight, the sound, and the smell of the pathetic commoners had disappeared into the growing shadows. The barbarian's blood boiled in sullen anger; his fists clenched, knuckles white. Did those fools not know who held their lives in hand? Did they realize how much they had slowed Kehr's journey, how they had cost him days of travel for a pittance of dry bread? How dare they?!

The sun crept quietly behind the mountains, and the barbarian's rage was scoured with bleak frustration. Roaring, he pulled Scorn from his back and, gripping it with both hands, flung it into the darkness.

"Come, Sister! Come and speak of my betrayal! Come with your black tongue and name me!"

He fell to his knees, and the shadows stole around him. Kehr closed his eyes as footsteps drew near. His sister would come whether or not he was protecting half-witted peasants. *What use is there in—* Kehr's breath froze in his throat.

The footsteps were many, *too many*, clicking sharply against the Iron Path.

"I am not your sister, but I name you," came a voice, low and thick. *Bleating*. "I name you fool and prey and, yes, traitor."

Kehr leapt to his feet and was knocked backward. The barbarian rolled and tried to come up, but several goatmen caught him in their fierce grips. He shook two of them off but was then hit from behind, and he lost feeling in his legs. More khazra piled on top of him, and everything started to go black.

"Enough! Bind the man. Bring him here!"

Kehr heard the clinking of chains and felt cold manacles pinch tightly around his wrists, cutting his skin. He was kicked, bitten, pulled roughly to his feet. A rib snapped. Blood ran down his back, his arms. Sounds, pain, anger—they all seemed to come from a distance.

"This road is ours, this Iron Path. You abandoned your sheep too late, barbarian."

Kehr lifted his head, blinked the hot wetness from his eyes. Before him stood a monstrous khazra twice the size of the largest goatman he had ever seen. Despite the haze of blood and pain, Kehr was surprised. This misbegotten thing was an abomination even by khazra standards. Hulking shoulders wound into broad arms that reached the ground with thorny knuckles, gray-violet skin scarred with vile letters, runes, and other characters that writhed across the tortured flesh with ersatz life. Instead of two spiraled horns, *four* sprouted from the knotted skull, branching forward like thick wooden tendrils and arching around the jutting jaw with an obscenely gentle curve. The horns were heavy, girded with iron, and carved with the same markings that decorated its skin. Dense black hair, matted with blood and crude dyes of green and brown, carpeted the legs down to cloven ebony hooves adorned with rugged nails. The monster raised its head back with a bleating laugh, and Kehr cringed; he saw flat, simian dugs hanging like dried fish, pierced with dull copper rings. This khazra was female.

She reached out, dragging her rough fingers across the top of the barbarian's head, his cheek, and his neck with clumsy tenderness. Kehr choked in revulsion. She chuckled, her fingers catching on his scarred chest.

"I am not the only one marked with godwords, eh?" She spoke in fetid tones that curdled around him, her breath sour and moist. She traced the scored lines running over his heart, marks he had kept hidden beneath his cloak.

"Ha! Do you not read?" And here she stepped back, lifting her arms to display her vibrant scars. "*My words bring strength. My words bring command and fire and power from our dark master. He who charged me to take this road scrawled these words across my flesh and made me queen!*"

"But *you?*" she chortled. "You bear *this?* Ha! Ha!"

In the growing shadow, Kehr saw that the matriarch's markings did indeed give off an arcane light, a violet shimmer that danced just outside his blurred focus. She motioned to one of the goatmen behind him.

"Bring the others. Do not kill them yet. I wish for the sheep to see their coward protector!"

There was a mewling reply, and Kehr hung his head. *The others? Have the refugees fallen so quickly?* This question was followed by another thought, swift and sharp. *Of course they have.* He had abandoned them. Another betrayal.

More and more goatmen arrived. Two dozen, three. Each showed obeisance to the matriarch, to the vile queen. Some brought bloody sacrifices, unrecognizable and dripping parts of beasts or men, which she sniffed and either stuffed down her toothy mouth or threw back. The smell of filth and goat blood filled the air.

Meanwhile, the khazra holding Kehr's arms hurled him to the ground and dragged him until he was lying at her cracked hooves. She squatted and caressed his body, hissing and dispensing edicts to her fawning subjects while they built a roaring fire in the center of the road. She crooned softly, and her horned nails scratched along his spine. Again, Kehr felt breath hot on his neck.

"You..." she whispered, "you might serve as a satisfying mount for a time. A chained barbarian pet will make a fine trophy for the queen of the Bone clan."

Kehr tried to spit, but his mouth was dry.

There were cries in the distance, horribly familiar. He heard Aron's voice raised in anger, then pain. The khazra parted, and the refugees were herded into view. They were terrified; some were sobbing. Aron was pulled behind them by two goatmen, bloody and unarmed, still struggling. A tall black-horned khazra—one obviously favored by the matriarch—came before her. He carried Aron's axe in his hands.

"This one. He... he fight. He kill some of us." The goatman's words were hard to understand, his speech slurred and slow from using a language not intended for his long bovid jaw and teeth. He lacked his mistress's intelligence, magically induced or otherwise.

The matriarch chuckled.

"Ha! We have found another wolf amongst the sheep! Bring him to me."

Aron was shoved forward, and he stumbled to his knees. Kehr could tell that the woodcutter's arm was broken by the way he held it, and his mouth was trickling blood. Aron dragged himself to his feet, and then his eyes met Kehr's and went wide.

"What? I thought you escaped. How did they—"

"Ha!" cried the gloating matriarch, delighted. "He begins to doubt now."

Aron was staring at the monstrous shape of this khazra queen, but her words shook him. His eyes darted back down to Kehr, where he lay prone at her hooves. She laughed again.

"Your protector? Your savior? This coward, he knew you were doomed. He took your food and then ran when he saw the ambush was upon you. He saw us and threw away his sword!"

Aron drew a shaky breath.

"No. No, he protected us. He... he slayed your—"

"Useless scouts. Weaklings. Drudges I sent to keep you moving on the road. Keep you moving to *me*."

She reached down to stroke Kehr's shoulder lovingly.

"Your easy faith in this traitor, so like your kind. No wonder these mountains, they cry for my whip, cry to shrug free of these mice *infesting* every canyon. They beg to be the throne for the Bone clan."



The goatmen cheered, and weapons were raised in unison. The matriarch knew how to stir her people.

Aron was angry, his pain now forgotten. He stepped toward Kehr, fists clenched.

"You starved us for this? You feigned honor and courage for our bread only to run when real danger loomed?"

Aron spit on Kehr in a wet trail of blood and saliva.

"Sultans? Lords? You betrayed our trust for your khazra whore!"

The matriarch guffawed. Kehr struggled to sit upright.

"No. Woodcutter. Aron. I guarded you well... I did not know this—"

The queen grabbed Kehr by the wrists and yanked him to his feet. Her sorcerous tattoos shimmered with vicious light, feeding arcane strength into arms already craggy with muscle. The barbarian gasped as he was lifted into the air, arms stretched tight out to the sides, the long chains dangling from his manacles like metal ribbons.

"Look, little man. Your protector is marked! Ha! You ignorant hill folk had a warning writ clear across his chest. This one is named traitor!"

Aron narrowed his eyes. The woodcutter was trembling with rage. "Kill me if you will, khazra. But I would have this traitor's blood."

Now the matriarch's laughter grew to a howl, and the other khazra joined in with milky chuckles.

"Yes! Yes! Kill this barbarian, little man. Kill him, and perhaps I let you go to spread word of the Bone clan in the lowlands.

"Gherbek!" she called to her favored goatman. "Give the woodcutter his axe. Let him cut us some branches!"

The khazra slunk forward, extending the weapon. "Something for you, weakling," he crooned.

Aron took the axe with his good hand and used it as a cane, limping toward the barbarian. Kehr could see he was gravely wounded; the woodcutter's own blood ran down the shaft and the blade, leaving pools on the ground behind him. The matriarch lowered Kehr into Aron's reach as if she were offering a toy to a child. Aron raised his axe and placed the edge shakily against the barbarian's chest.

"This scar," he growled to Kehr. "Were you marked for a traitor? Tell me true, barbarian. Tell me true this one time."

Kehr dropped his head. His voice was low and heavy with shame.

"Yes. I abandoned my people while they warred with the reavers of Entsteig. I left my duty, and I left to follow a woman—the daughter of a passing merchant. I am a traitor. A coward. Worse, the Stag tribe was brought down with Arreat's fall before I could return and beg forgiveness."

Kehr lifted his face, a face tight with grief.

"When I could not find them, I marked *myself* a traitor, woodsman. Cut my own flesh. Scored it with a knife white-hot from the fire. Still they curse me for returning; still they reject my penance. My dead sister... she haunts me every night at sundown. They will not forgive. They never will. I do not deserve their pardon."

The barbarian closed his eyes. "And I do not ask for yours."

Aron's expression grew distant. He seemed to hear words from years long past, words that sounded hard and true, that cut through the animal laughter filling the air. Only Kehr heard his whispered response.

"Names have power, Kehr Odwyll. This witch is wrong about mountain folk. Our forefathers were the first to pen the ancient letters you bear on your chest." He leaned forward. "I know your mark, barbarian. I knew it the moment you arrived, but I also saw your courage. And that is another sort of truth."

The woodcutter pushed against the axe, and the blade bit into Kehr's skin. The barbarian gasped.

"This axe is anointed with my own blood," said Aron in a clear, loud voice. The matriarch laughed in surprise. "And with it I change your mark."

The blade drew a red line through the middle of the scar.

"Now it names you brother."

The matriarch hissed and dropped Kehr to the ground. She lunged forward and delivered a sharp kick to the woodsman. Aron flew backward over the bonfire in an arc of blood and torn flesh rent by the nail-studded hoof. He landed in a heap on the other side and struggled to rise.

"Little fool!" growled the goatmen's queen. She was livid that her entertainment had been spoiled. "You think to craft godwords with your simple axe? You think such power can be wrought without terrible cost, without agony, without dark covenants?"

She reached down, lifted the barbarian by the manacles again, and began to pull his arms wide. The colored runes around her own thick arms rippled and danced while Kehr's muscles stretched in taut relief.

"I will pull him apart like *bread*," she howled, shaking the air, "and choke your people with the pieces!"

There was a crack as bone slid out of joint, and Kehr groaned.

Aron lifted his bloody head and reached to the tortured barbarian.

"You are forgiven, Kehr."

The goatmen laughed. One of them stepped up and drove a spear through Aron's back. The woodsman was still.

Suddenly, a piercing, braying cry tore the night sky. The khazra went silent. Scores of black slit eyes turned to the matriarch.

She stood trembling, her crooked teeth clenched, breath coming in labored, panting moans. She lowered her horns and dug her hooves into the cracked ground, but... she could not move her arms any farther apart. The matriarch hissed as Kehr began to slowly, inexorably bring his arms together, and hers as well. Straining against his efforts, she lifted the barbarian higher.

Kehr curled his hands around to grip the fingers locked around his wrists. Too late, she tried to release her hold on him, but she was caught.

"No!" she whined through bared teeth, spit frothing down her chin. "My... my strength defies yours! You... you cannot *do* this!"

Her muscles bulged obscenely as he drew her arms together. A shoulder popped, and the matriarch threw her head back with another screeching cry. The barbarian was bending her arms around himself at a vicious angle, and she could not wrench loose from the wringing embrace. The surrounding goatmen milled about nervously as their queen's cries took on a plaintive, pathetic tone. Twisting to free herself, she lurched ahead... and the barbarian found his feet.

Now she was his.

Leaning down, Kehr used the creature's momentum to pull her over his shoulders and into the bonfire with a crash. Panicked, the other khazra scattered as burning branches fell among them. The barbarian roared to the empty sky and flung his arms wide. The manacles snapped from his wrists and dropped to the ground, chains ringing down around him like broken bells.

Squealing, the matriarch staggered upright, a smoldering silhouette black against the flames. The barbarian charged and leapt into the fire, knocking the monster backward and grabbing a hold of her tangled horns. With a cruel twist, he tore them from her head and raised them high. He then swung the curling knot down as a club, beating at her scorched form to the sound of cracking bones.

The night trembled as her wails tempered the writhing smoke with agony. The Iron Path shook in harmony with Kehr Odwyll's blows, and ancient magic resonated through the mountain's spine, accepting the barbarian's fury. Accepting his sacrifice.

It was hours before his rage had ebbed. The sun rose in docile silence, soaking the peaks in red.

Stepping from the pyre, Kehr dropped the gory mass to the ground and scanned the stained stretch of the Iron Path. No khazra remained or would ever return to this place. The refugees were not far off. Kehr saw they were huddled around Aron's stricken figure, motionless with fear.

"Gather what food you can scavenge," the barbarian rumbled. "Our destination is two days distant."



### Vigil

The setting sun colored the valley of Westmarch in warm autumn hues. Kehr paused his sharpening of the simple axe, stood, and turned to watch the fading light, the evening breeze threading through his long graying hair with familiar care. He counted in slow breaths as the sun slipped behind the mountain.

The only sounds were those of birds returning to their nests. No footsteps. No words. The horizon kept its covenant as he kept his vigil.

More folk would be coming, the endless line of refugees that Aron had prophesied, treading the Iron Path as dark forces rallied to take the Kohl Mountains. The Bone clan had dwindled, but there were things worse than khazra in these peaks. The commoners needed their protector, and tales had spread from Westmarch to Ivgorod of the Iron Wayfarer, the guardian of the path. Kehr put his hand to his chest and set off down the road again. The refugees would need their brother.