

From Ashes Comes a Sword

Upon the wood, the chieftain lay, a bed of reeds and straw beneath his shoulders and knees. The Velho stood near with torch held high, face illumined in the amber glow of mournful flames. His white beard, streaked with red and gold, hung to his waist, and hooded, gray robes hung from his shoulders to his toes.

“Rise, Toron, lord of rocky shores,” the Velho cried. His clear, crisp voice echoed across the hewn stone all around, as if the spirits of the dead now trod among the pillars, calling to this lord of men, welcoming him into the shadowy halls of night. “A chief among chiefs. Walk with head held high in the shining halls of Aurin. Sail Tahti’s dark seas. Look full on the beauty of Kuun’s fair face.”

Turin drew a long, shaky breath, and he felt his mother’s hand on his back, warm, urgent, firm. And his grip tightened on the broken arrow in his hand.

Be strong now, my son, that hand said. And Turin heard, and he knew the need. Many faces shone here in the dark golden light of the Velho’s torch, faces from his father’s court. Faces who had challenged Toron the Bold, faces who had advised him, shared his food and drink, laughed, wept and roared with him. And now, when once again the sun rose, those faces would look to Turin. Them, he must now lead. Them, he must now protect. Them, he must now command as chief and lord.

“Walk now among your fathers,” the Velho said as the torch began its descent to the straw and reeds beneath Toron’s mighty head. “In whose mighty company, you shall not now be ashamed.”

With a crackling hiss, the kindling came alive with flames, dancing, frolicking in the dark, licking Toron’s shoulders and caressing his cold hair, hair unspoiled with white or gray. His great, golden beard stood proud, concealing the strong cords of muscle that had been his neck. Turin heard the voice of that throat in his heart, singing, laughing, calling, reciting. The flames reached his shroud – a sheet of black canvas, oiled for the flames – but did not bite. The wide, mighty hands were clasped upon the broad chest, a brass hilt between them. Lunastaia, the Redeemer – the sword of Toron.

He bought this land with that sword.

Soon, the flames would heat and blacken the steel, and all its virtue would be lost. Its keen edge would soften. Its strong brass would deform. Its temper would fade, and in the place of an indomitable sword, only iron and rust would remain.

“*Nouse jumalten eteen,*” the Velho said slowly, his knuckles pressed together in one of the holy shapes of his order. “*Ja varaa meille paikka yuhlinnan poydissa.*”

“Keep the sword, Turin,” his mother had said that day, her face and hair shining with the golden radiance of the women of the sea. The sun had been low in the west, bright upon the waves. “Lead with your father’s strength.”

“His strength is not in his steel, but in his blood,” Turin said. “If I cannot lead our people well with such as that, then I must leave his place to one more worthy than I.”

As a tear rolled down Turin’s cheek, he tightened his body to keep it under submission. He would not weep before these men. Tonight, they would see strength. They would see mastery. They would see a chieftain. Turin raised his chin high and let the lone tear fall across his beard. There would not be another.

There he stood as the flames spread and grew and rose and reached their hot amber fingers across the cloth and into the flesh of the great lord of the Pylvas. Beyond the pyre, Turin saw it. There to the south, shadowed by the moon, was the great stone pillar erected by his grandfather’s father, Alvar the Wise. On it were carved masterful figures of men in armor fighting the great battles, men in ships sailing the great voyage, long inscriptions of the great tales of Turin’s people, and many more. A great stone it was, etched in a great history. And greatest of all were the Sons of Alvar: Torvar and then Toron. Alvar it was who led the great passage across the sea and fathered Torvar, who fathered Toron, who fathered Turin.

Alvar found a wide and fertile land, rich in trees and beasts and rivers, and for a time, all his people knew peace. Then came the dragon, and then the dark wolves, and then the war of men. And of all beasts yet to rise against Turin’s people, men were by far the vilest.

Turin’s throat closed as his belly tightened, threatening to turn to sobs. But Turin banished the instinct and pushed it deep inside, forcing his body to remain still, upright, firm, resolute, even as another tear escaped across his face. It had been a man’s arrow that had pierced his father – this arrow, the very arrow now in Turin’s stony fist. It was an arrow that had put him on this pyre, this rancid, burning, stinking, smoking abomination. The stench burned Turin’s nostrils and turned his heart. The sound of hissing and crackling and boiling of wet meat pierced his ears and brought thoughts of vomit into his head. It had been an arrow – an arrow of war, a harbinger of the Black King.

Turin closed his fists and clenched his teeth. His lip twitched as he stared into the hot, golden embers. The thinner sticks below his father’s back gave way, and the body sank joint by joint into the stacked box of logs with a crunch and a cloud of searing sparks, swirling away into the heavens like a million million candles, ready to set the stars ablaze. And with him fell his sword. It vanished into the embers without a sound.

As the body sank into the coals, one by one, the elders cast their gazes at Turin and then departed. Their eyes were cold and empty with grief, yet Turin thought he saw doubt in them, a question. *Can this boy lead our people?*

Turin sat on the stone, the wind cold on his face, the stone hard against his flesh. Tahti’s stars rolled across the sky. Kuun’s face frowned down from the cool surface of the full moon. Aurin’s great fiery eye slept now below the western horizon, but would soon awake in the east.

“You leave me a heavy burden,” Turin said to the bones, as the flames died away and the moon was low in the west. And indeed, his body held fast to the stones, and he was weary.

“It was a very great army,” Toron had said, laid there upon his bed, bowls of cool water all around, and red bandages not a few. “The Black King destroyed our people in three battles. For three battles, they fled before him and were slaughtered. And our lands passed into his hands day by day. But I, I and my mighty hands, I and my strong captains, we rallied the men back to the line, and at the fourth battle, we stood against him as one people, as one man. And our combined strength sent him back into his murky north.”

Yet, in victory, a single arrow brought down the mighty. In the retreat, many archers of the Black King turned and shot darts toward Toron’s army to slow the pursuit, and one arrow by chance struck Toron near the neck. The arrow was wrapped. The army was pursued and routed into the Black King’s foul lands. And Toron was carried home on a litter and then in his bed. He suffered a week and a day, and then passed out of this world.

“He is in Kuun’s hands now,” Velho Gudrun said after Toron breathed his last. “She will carry him to Aurin’s mighty halls.”

And there, at the table of the sun, Toron would feast with his fathers.

But his hand found Turin’s before the end. He grasped Turin’s hand with all his remaining might, and with great effort (for much of his blood by now had left him), gave Turin these words.

“As many,” he said. “Our people will fail. The Black King will drive down like a wave of the sea, a flood, and sweep our people away into darkness. As many, they will fall. But as one, they may stand. The many pebbles of our people must be forged into a single stone that will be able to weather the breakers of the Black King.”

Toron bade Turin swear to forge this stone, and Turin so swore. And now, as the sun rose in the east and set the sea sparkling with gold and white, Turin rose and approached the embers of his father’s flame. There, in the ashes, he espied the hilt of a sword. And wrapping his hand in his cloak, Turin grasped the sword and drew it forth, unsinged and unhurt by the flames. And Turin marveled at it. The steel still gleamed, the edge was still keen and hard, and the brass hilt was still artfully etched and glittering. Only the leather had burned away. So, Turin raised the sword and his eyes high to the heavens.

“Hear me, great king of all kings,” Turin breathed. “Lord of all the earth, incline your ear to my call. My father walked the path of spirits dark and cruel, treacherous phantoms most foul, clothed in garments of sweetness and valor and guile. But you it was who brought our people out of bondage. You it was who delivered us into this new and abundant land. It is you to whom we must give our thanks and our allegiance. As you have preserved this sword, so you have preserved your people in this new land. You have saved us from the heat of the dragon, the fang of the wolf, and the flame of war. Save your people now, and you will have me for a servant all my days. If I must die, let it be for your name. If I must live, let it be to glow and shine your light and your majesty. If I must fight, let it be for your people.”

And a cool wind blew from the east, whispering against the sea and the stones.
And Turin breathed a deep breath over the waves. With a stony smile and strength in his limbs, he wrapped the sword in his cloak and passed down the stone steps into the halls of his fathers, toward the marble council table and the forging of great stones.