

THE UKINHAN WILDS

BOOKS BY ELDON THOMPSON

THE LEGEND OF ASAHIEL

The Crimson Sword

The Obsidian Key

The Divine Talisman

WARDER

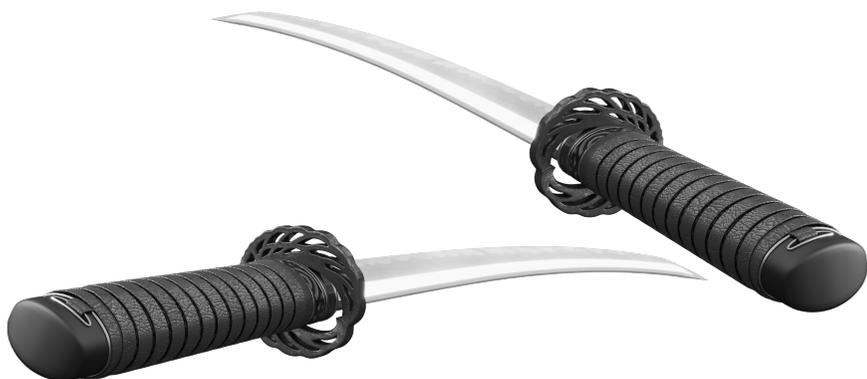
The Ukinhan Wilds

The Blackmoon Shards

The Sundered Isle

WARDER

THE
UKINHAN WILDS



ELDON
THOMPSON



THE UKINHAN WILDS
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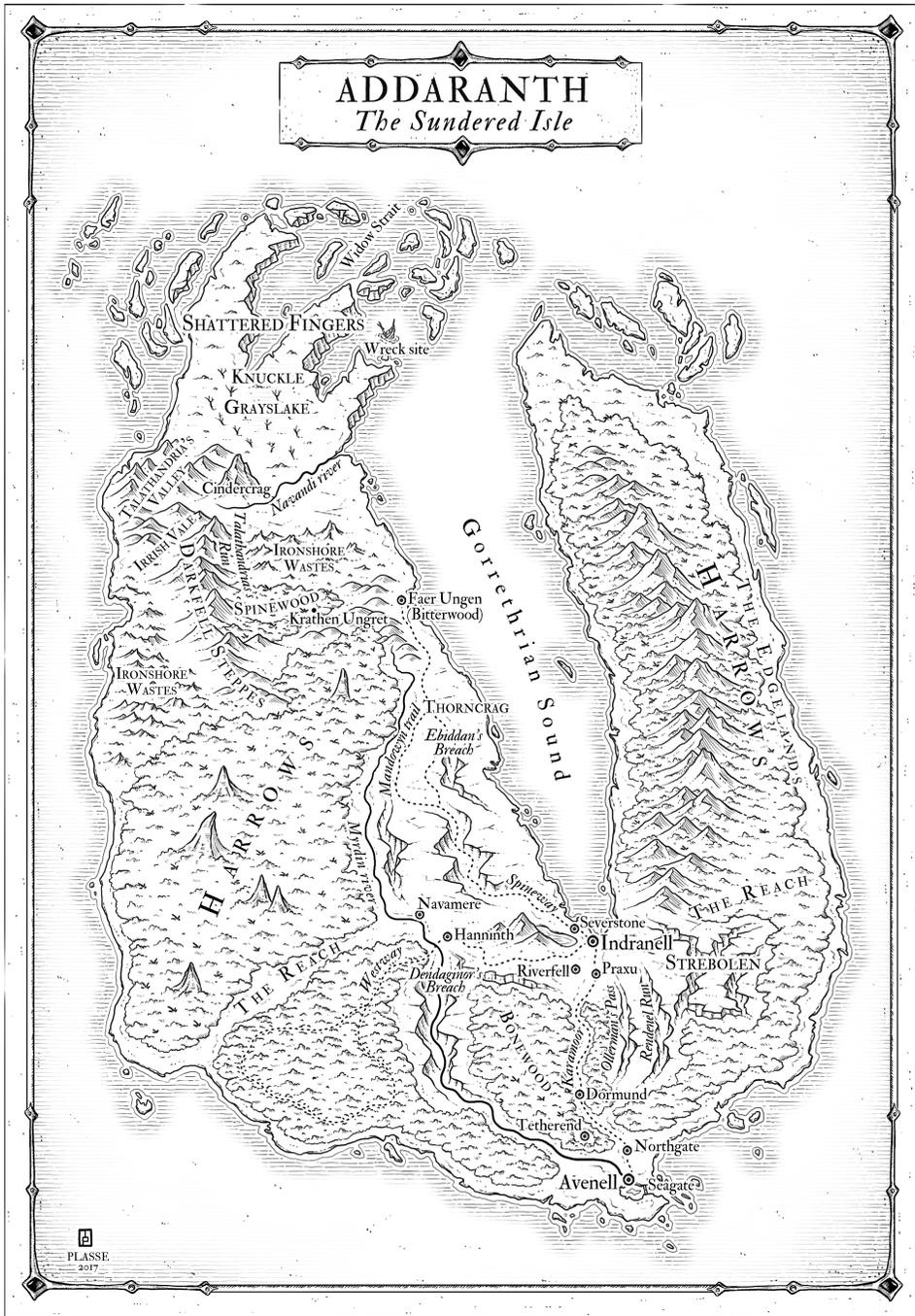
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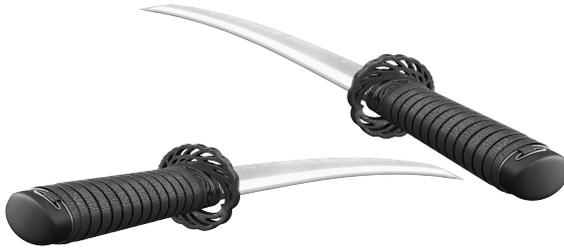
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ADDARANTH

The Sundered Isle



PROLOGUE



THE DARKNESS MOVED, and Ledron’s hackles pricked in alarm. By then, he was already too late.

The blackness grew limbs, springing from the invisible depths of the open cargo hold. A clawed swipe struck Demin, beside him. Ledron sprawled backward, down against the decking. A severed sword arm—Demin’s—hit the planks near his feet.

His lungs drew breath, bellowed a warning. “Groll!”

Demin’s cries were muffled as the mutant’s teeth ravaged his throat. Blood sprayed, black in the mooncast dark. Ledron felt its warm splatter upon his face and brow. He searched for his sword, found it still gripped in his palm. As he looked up again, Demin’s body was thrust aside, and the groll’s baleful eyes fixed on him.

He’d have been dead before he could rise, but the others were already there, converging on the creature with ready blades. The groll hissed at them. It flared, seeming twice their size, then shrank into shadow as the swords began to bite. It was there, and yet it wasn’t, a constantly shifting form almost too quick for the eye to follow.

Ledron scrambled to his feet, heart hammering. He tried not to look too closely at the flayed ruin of Demin’s neck, the horror in his paralyzed gaze . . .

Another of his soldiers fell with a sharp cry. Otho. The Blackfist

dropped his weapon to hunker over his bloody wrist. Bite marks pierced his flesh. Already, the venom sizzled through his veins, crawling toward his heart in darkening streams. His death would be painful, yet quick.

“New moon!” Ledron commanded, and his Shadowguard responded with the desired formation. “Pin it to the forecastle!”

Their execution was flawless. Endless hours of drill had forged movements instinctive and precise. Their courage and discipline would not waver.

But the mutant recognized the tightening noose. It slashed and lunged and circled with increasing desperation. Another Blackfist crumpled, splintered leg bones protruding below the knee. The groll pressed the breach. When a fellow guardian stepped forward to fill it, the groll suddenly reversed direction, slipping instead toward the starboard flank. Nethreal stood his ground, scoring a hit on the mutant’s shoulder.

The groll screeched, but tore its way free.

The Shadowguard shifted as one, mending the broken formation. But they no longer had the shelf of the forecastle to serve as their base wall. The groll backed across the ship’s decking, gaining space.

“Redirect! Full press!”

Ledron himself anchored the charge. Already, the mutant’s wound was healing, its blood filling the gash and curing like mortar. Virgin scales would cover the wound by daybreak. Were it to survive the week, it would not even bear a scar.

Ledron was determined not to allow that. The mutant had surprised them, yes, but his regiment had been prepared for the possibility. The mercenary’s report had proven correct on all counts. And though the creature before him represented his worst fears, he wasn’t about to let it plague his sleep another night.

The Blackfist to his left stumbled, gargling blood. Another, to his right, pitched forward with a grunt. But his men were landing blows now, as well. Ledron heard the hacks and pricks against the mutant’s scaled flesh, and relished the groll’s snarling cries. It was difficult to tell which of them held the upper hand.

Ledron fainted, then executed another thrust. The groll met his

strike, slapping down against his blade. Ledron ducked, felt the swish of a clawed hand graze his naked skull, then drove forward with his dagger, plunging deep into meaty flesh.

The groll shrieked, bringing a fierce grin to Ledron's face.

His grin vanished as the mutant plucked the dagger from its gut and flung it back at its assailants. The blade found Fuldor's thigh and, smeared with the groll's venomous blood, marked the man's end.

Ledron growled and cursed. His muscles burned with exertion. His lungs strained. It was all he could do hold his position, to refrain from flinching whenever the groll lashed out at him. If the creature was tiring, it showed no signs.

Finally, they pressed it from the shadows and into a patch of moonlight, where its mottled hide seemed to shimmer. Another step, and it was backed against the starboard rail. The ring of his remaining Shadowguard was at least three deep. The creature had nowhere to go.

It tossed its head, wailing in fury. A harpoon that must have come from the ship's own lockers pierced its side. The groll seized the shaft and tried to yank it free, but the barbed head hooked against its ribs. A pair of arrows, fired from atop the wheelhouse, struck it in the chest.

Again the groll roared, its all-too-human cries curdling Ledron's blood.

"Finish it!"

The first man to try had his arm snapped at the elbow and his body snatched forward to be used as a shield. An arrow pierced his stomach, while a friendly sword bit deep into his neck. The remaining Shadowguard hesitated but a breath—all the time that was needed for the groll to lean backward sharply over the rail.

Flinging Errahn's body overboard like an anchor, the mutant held fast, catapulting itself over the gunwale.

Ledron rushed forward, his Shadowguard beside him. The black waters rippled and sloshed, reflecting the dim gleam of starlight. He searched a moment longer, jaw clenched, then spun away in disgust.

"First team, all eyes! If it surfaces, kill it!"

He marched back across the deck, careful not to tread on the bodies of the slain. He took note: Demin, Otho, Hamric, Thoros, Fuldor, Errahn. And Inmon wasn't going anywhere on that splintered

stump. Seven lost. Seven of his king's best, against a single adversary. If battle belowdecks had gone as poorly . . .

He caught sight of Jahant, emerging sweaty and winded from the central stair. Ledron lengthened his stride.

"Report."

His lieutenant saluted. "Fourteen renegades slain, Captain. All aboard, save our mole."

"Merrec put their number at a score."

"The weasel tells me Ulfund and four others went ashore already."

Ledron cursed. "And the princess?"

"Drugged, but whole. Trajan wards her now."

"Casualties?"

Jahant inspected a gash on his forearm, as if seeing it for the first time. "Three dead, sir, though Haeg is too stubborn to count himself among them. Half a dozen wounded, but not badly enough to slow us."

Ledron breathed deep, and his stomach roiled. It might have been the smell of carnage mingling with the fetor of the sea. Or it might have been that he had lost half a score—an entire squad—of the king's Shadowguard without achieving his full objective. Until Ulfund and his fellow renegades were brought to heel, they would remain a thorn underfoot. Had he at least been able to finish off the groll . . .

"Too many frayed edges," Ledron muttered.

There were shouts now from the docks. The clamor of their struggle would soon raise an alarm within the city—if it hadn't already. Though he had prepaid Wingport's authorities to have their watch turn a blind eye to this night's incursion, the wharf would soon be crawling with human vultures, come to catch a glimpse of the disturbance. Patrols would be dispatched to restore order. Ledron wished to be well away by then.

Percel approached. "Colven sends report. No trace of the Ukinh, sir."

If only that meant it were dead. His heart still drumming, Ledron took one last look around the moored vessel. "Form up. Three squads. Divergent routes through the city. We sail on the Sparrow's Hour. I want the dawn's light riding our wake."



LEDRON'S GAZE swept the rutted street as he trudged along, senses alert to any approach. His hand gripped the pommel of his sword. The dockside roadway appeared empty in its westerly course. But then, so had the deck of Ulfund's ship, once they had shot the lone sentry hunkered in its crow's nest.

He did not relish having to report to his king that Ulfund had eluded him. And he could only imagine His Majesty's ire when it was confirmed that the rogue company that had made off with his daughter had consorted with a Ukinh. The king tolerated the mutants better than most, but only insofar as they kept to themselves.

Behind him, Nara moaned softly. Ledron turned at once, but found her still unconscious, bundled in her cloak and draped over Trajan's shoulder. The towering Blackfist gave a reassuring nod without breaking stride, which was good enough for Ledron. He cast a quick glance over the rest of his encircling squad. Their vigilant stares probed the night, weapons at the ready.

He reflected momentarily on the missing faces of Haeg and Inmon. As their captain, it had been his personal duty to dismiss them from service. Haeg had been defiant at first, but was eventually persuaded to let his wounds bleed out. Better that than waiting for the rot to claim him. Inmon stood a chance, given a successful amputation, but how long could a proud soldier bear life as a crippled outlander? A dagger across the throat had been the kinder end.

They knew the perils, Ledron thought, but with their final expressions etched in his mind, the sentiment rang hollow.

Ships in the harbor creaked and groaned as the slumbering ocean rose and fell in steady breaths. A nightbird cried as it dove from its roost, toward a flash of sea life in the waves below. Ledron could not wait to be away from this foreign land. A small continent, no larger than their own, yet said to bear forty times the population. To the north, climbing the slopes that overlooked the southside harbor, watchfires burned in hundreds, perhaps thousands, of windows and streetlamps. Hearthfire smoke sullied the skies, like a permanent stain

of soot. In the heavens above this sprawling city, he could scarcely see the stars.

His focus shifted as they approached an alley between a pair of shops shuttered for the night. A diminutive figure, fully hooded, emerged from the shadowed crease. The stranger took two steps before flashing a quick light signal from a tiny mirror. He took two more steps, paused to hold both arms out wide, then crossed them over his chest. Percel, serving point on the near flank, signaled in return. Bows were lowered, and their man approached.

“I was wondering when you meant to rejoin us,” Ledron extended grimly, nodding for the newcomer to fall into place. “You’ve disappointed me, Sallun.”

The fresh-faced youth looked up in surprise. “Sir?”

“Tell him, Merrec.”

Merrec grinned his gold-toothed smile. “Seems a handful of rats slipped right under your nose . . . led by Ulflund himself.”

Ledron frowned at Merrec’s smugness. Did the betrayer fancy himself a hero in this?

Sallun turned to Ledron in horror.

“Did you know of this?” Ledron asked him.

“No! Sir, no. I . . . I sent word as soon as they arrived, and kept sharp watch—”

“A blind lookout, then,” Merrec snickered.

Ledron bristled, but would deal with that one later. “You are only as good to me as your eyes,” he admonished Sallun, all but affirming Merrec’s assessment. “Fail me again, and I’ll have them plucked from your skull by a flock of starving crows.”

“Yes, Captain.”

The youth fell back, a step behind Trajan in the center of their company. In truth, Ledron wasn’t as sore as he pretended. Ulflund was a snake, when he needed to be. It was said he could slither through a cornfield without bending a stalk. An exaggeration, surely, but one who failed to learn stealth did not long serve as Ulflund had in his earliest patrol days, hunting Ukinha along the borders of their wilderness. Had he wanted to go ashore unseen, then he—and those who followed him—would have done so, no matter how many eyes

Ledron had set upon them.

Thankfully, the former Shadowguard captain had chosen not to take the princess with him, else Ledron and his men would still be hunting for her now. Most likely, Ulfund had scouted ahead to secure whatever arrangements he had plotted for her ashore. Ledron wondered if, by now, Ulfund had returned to his vessel to learn that his prize was gone.

“How much farther is our ship?” Merrec asked.

Ledron hissed at him to be silent—if only because it grated on him to hear the conspirator’s voice. *Our* ship? The rat’s greed had aided them in their rescue of the princess, yes. But Ledron was a lifelong soldier, and didn’t like sharing air with those he knew he couldn’t trust.

“I was to receive payment the moment the princess was safely in hand,” Merrec groused.

“You’re fortunate the king’s command wasn’t to flay you on sight.” Had the scoundrel truly wished to serve, he’d have given word of the plot before Nara had departed their shores. Instead, he had left his warning via courier, selling out Ulfund’s crew after the fact. He had claimed in his message that it was too late to marshal a proper pursuit, and that he was setting sail with the other renegades in order to oversee the princess’s safety. But if that were so, why demand payment for his service? “You’ll have your gold,” Ledron promised, “because His Majesty is a man of his word. But not before *I* deem Her Highness to be safe.”

Merrec scowled, yet must have realized what little room he had to argue. Indeed, this opportunistic parlay of his would never have worked with a less honorable lord—or if His Majesty Kendarrion hadn’t wished to interrogate the mercenary about these dealings personally. Merrec had to know that he would be relieved of his commission in the king’s army and made outcast the moment he collected his reward. But even that was better than he deserved.

The mercenary’s sullen silence caused Ledron to brighten inwardly. Despite their losses, the many loose ends, and the long voyage that lay ahead, they had in fact achieved the first phase of their mission. With Nara’s safe retrieval, they had what was most important to their king. All else, he assured himself, was mere seasoning.

The winds shifted, blowing into their faces from the west. Briny gusts gave way to a thickening taste of smoke. Ledron coughed and spat. He could not leave these polluted shores quickly enough. He hastened pace. Without command, his Shadowguard did so alongside.

A strange crackle grew in his ears, overtaking the murmurs of the sea. To the west, around a rugged promontory, an orange light began to rise. Without quite knowing why, Ledron felt his confidence slip.

There were shouts now, as well, echoing from the area of their destination. The unknown crackle grew louder, and with it, the reddish orange halo strengthened, risen up from where an evening sun would normally set.

At last, their road rounded the promontory, bending northward. Through curtains of black smoke, Ledron gazed down upon the wharf with sickening realization.

The harbor before them was astir, its docks swarming with men. Flames lit the sky, devouring sails and rigging and racing with an angry roar up the masts of a clutch of moored ships. At the heart of the blaze, a great bark listed to one side. Its masthead—an image of his queen riding a pod of dolphins—shimmered in a veil of heat.

Lytherial's Chariot.

Despite the efforts of the harbor patrols, the ship would not be saved. Nor did Ledron need to see the bodies to know that all left aboard had been killed. The groll had wasted no time in striking back at them. *Else Ulfund and his rogues*, Ledron thought, but did not believe that to be possible. Only the Ukinh could have sniffed out their vessel this quickly, and wrought such destruction upon it.

It scarcely mattered, the one or the other. The result was the same. Without their ship, they were stranded.

“What now, Captain?” Trajan prompted.

Ledron only shook his head, eyes tearing amid the smoke and cinders as he watched his king's ship burn to its hull upon the shoreline of this forsaken land.