

RUIN



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The Whitewall siege background featured in this story is the product of explorations on the Yahoo Groups Whitewall discussion list.

Illustrations are 3D models created in DAZ Studio and postworked in Adobe Photoshop.

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An Outlaw Skald's Introduction to the Siege of Whitewall

RUIN

... Oft þæs wag gebad
 ræghar ond readfah rice æfter oþrum,
 ofstonden under stormum; steap geap gedreas.

Words on the wind: Tarsh is fallen, and across the mist-cloaked heights of Sartar, victory chants carry on a chill breeze. Pharandros is captured in Furthest, and the scattered hosts of Empire flee in wanton disarray. Our foodman, it seems, has done well.

*'Tarsh is fallen...
 victory chants carry on
 a chill breeze'*

Perhaps now the ghosts of Grizzly Peak will find the rest they have sought for so long. And yet again I wonder, is this truly an ending, or the birth of an even greater travail? Our runes are cast across a stormy sky.

We first heard tale of our new king's victory at Wilmskirk, where the lawthanes called a market moot and led the entire town in sacrifice. From the shadow of the guild tower we watched as white bulls fell beneath bronze blades, huddled close against Heler's autumn gifting, mouthing the litany of the rite in mumbled Stormtongue.

The crowd was eager, volatile, ecstatic. The godar leading the ceremony urged the gathered tribesfolk to give and give of their power, and though it was but a market rite, shadows of the

Great Before pressed close about us, and we glimpsed gods and daimones towering above the impromptu altar, hungry for the smoke of the sacrifice.

We stood as two among many. The marns of my cloak proclaimed me a Colymar, and so none of the city fyrd looked closely at the tattoos carved into my cheeks and arms. A blessing that, for they ran in the afternoon rain.

The vingan said nothing. Since the death of the queen she keeps her watch in silence. She has taken no vow, save perhaps to herself, but the Red Woman dwells now in her eyes, and Humakt stalks her shadow. Her very breath is vengeance.

Knowing that Jandetin and the Eaglebrowns sought us still, we left as soon as the fragrance of the altar smoke called the gathered tribes to their feasting. On that day of rejoicing, the bronze-bound gates stood open and unwatched.

There were troops on the Karse road, scale and chain clad cavalry pressing north against the threat of early snow. We passed Heortlanders, Esrolian War Women, hero bands, mercenary-bandits ... old enemies united for at least a time beneath a sky-blue dragon banner.

A vingan's anger and a bleeding kingsthane made it necessary for us to seek a more solitary road, and quickly. The brooding heights of Fellmoor beckoned: a country we both knew well of old, a stark upland maze of secret trails that snaked their way in and out of a high king's fastness. Fellmoor, shunned now by the living, haunted by ghosts and the anguished despair of memory yet raw. Few would pursue us there.



And so, as lonely exiles, hunted by those who once shared our oaths in hall, we came again to Whitewall of the Heortland kings. Our journey was a grey day's climb through blistered grasslands and stunted wald. The red moss moaned in the gelid wind, pale thistles shook their lonely heads, and all the while that same

chill traveller whistled about the notches of my battered shield. A solitary alynx shadowed our slow pathmaking with derision.

To Whitewall, a stony waste in the breast of wild hills, prophet of the Moon's ruin, white-ash pyre of heroes, barrow ground of broken dreams.

Whitewall, once-proud stormhold of southland, Helemakt's high hearth, Orlanth's last temple, mountain fastness of the Heortland kings.

We approached the city from the south along the muddy courses of the Peatcut. Skirting the broken timber crescents that marked the remnants of the main Lunar palisade, we dismounted and scrambled up a steep slope. Here, upon a high knoll, Tatius the Bright had once set his silver pavilion to entertain heroes and gods. His peak commanded a view across the broken landscape to the Tor and the great towers and temples of the white-walled city.

All now waste and broken. Silence, for a death-winter season, has settled upon that house of heroes. The angry blast of the wound-wind is fallen to still air. The battle-bold are burned, and the company of the red queen is scattered into exile and death ...

Yet on this very spot great Helemakt once fought the waves! The limestone cliffs all about hold the myriad bodies of sea creatures strange and deadly. Here too Helemakt, the Last Storm—the Fighting Storm!—rose in fury to defend his wytered city from the Crimson Fiend.

Here too, great treachery was wrought as the Lunar Command plotted death against the Air. Here astrologers from the College of Magic watched for signs and shadows and stars, both seen and unseen, here the Seven of Vistur planned the arcane assaults that took such dreadful toll in souls and lives, and here wyvern riders and scorpion mercenaries took their orders to harass the sentried walls by Elmal's brightness and demon moon glow.

In the fading afternoon light, I observed for the first time the great city as our enemy saw it: an unassailable eagle's nest perched high atop impossible slopes, warded by high craft and uplifts of razored rock. I observed too, the immense destruction wrought in the siege's final, terrible days and nights.

All the earth between the knell and the city wall was dead and blasted: a brave and ancient goddess lay silenced now beneath. Tarkalor's Gate still stood, proud and defiant, its iron boards unbroken, but all about lay the charcoaled ruins of Lunar

ramps and siege engines. The great towers of Dalewatch and Shambleshur stood proud, two mighty shields, but nothing remained of the Storm temple save a brace of loyal Umbroli gusting forlornly in slow gyres above broken stone. The rest of the city lay razed and broken, a chaos-blasted ruin, all meteor pit and melted stone, glassy in the dying sunlight, its moon-tainted walls glowing soft red against the gathering shadow.

It had been our plan to seek shelter for the night in the hidden stables beneath the city. Yet as starry darkness took the towered Tor, a growing dread settled about those high wyrded walls. It seemed the ghosts of the fallen yet held the hallowed heights, defiant beyond death, terrifying and unbroken. For a true race of heroes has fallen in this upland fastness. *They were the strong. Not we.*

And I, once their brother, had neither courage nor heart to face them.

*'We came again to
Whitewall of the
Heortland kings'*

Instead, in simple rite, I made an altar and set a red gleed against the boundless dark, that I might honour their memory.

Of the vingan there was no sign. She made rite and altar of her own.

With dark blood from my own wrist I fed the flickering flame, and by the whispering light of eager blaze I sought the faces of the dead. They came, shining like the stars of virtue, pure and bright!

Yet my vision was flawed, they passed before me as though I stood on a rainy hill, by night, in a swirling mist...

'Sarosar! Maldon! Jonrika!'

I saw the bronze-clad heroes who fell before the walls, some renowned in song, some even whose name only the wind knows. I saw the brothers of my clan; I called to them with tears. I saw the sisters of my watch, I remembered how they fell. I saw too the women and children of the city, the cottars and shepherds, the broken, the empty, the ruined.



One by one they came to my cold flame ... Heortlander, Heortling, Far Walker, kahn ... and one by one they turned away. The glowing embers sickened and died: I was left again to brooding memory and darkness.

Warriors went to Whitewall. Here we stood together, the last moot of the free. Here, with ruse and ritual and quest most desperate, defying the world's wyrd, we held an Empire at bay for two long years.

Here we forged a tribe called Hurricane, birthed by a blue arrow, led by a high king's courage, strengthened by a star queen's wisdom, borne upon a desperate storm, forged by feat and fire and the bitter blade-clash of battle.

Here our eyes were opened. Here we forged a new vision, a new allegiance, a new way of living and dying.

Here the world changed, forever. Time and the Great Before came together as one. Here we lived each day within a myth, an eternal story most holy and most real, and one not always one of our own telling.

And yet here our last altar fell, our last temple shattered. Here, the Last Storm was defeated, and an unknown wind was loosed upon the world. Here began the winter of the world's ending, and here, so other skalds sing, were planted the seeds of its birth anew.

Warriors went to Whitewall. Yet for all that we gave, the city lies forlorn and empty, and with the passing years even its name will fade like our dreams in the cold dawn. The very winds hasten its decay.

Everything is change.

We dared so much. We fought like the hurling gales of Sacred Time. But our leaders have fallen now, they feast at higher halls, their courage and struggle is betrayed by treachery and rank ambition. Battle on battle comes anew, blood is poured on blood. The clans rise in greed to the call of the Argrathi.

We that survive from that great testing are few, and weak, and scattered like the leaves of Earth. My own hair is mixed with

grey, my shield trails low, I lift a lighter spear. I sometimes dream that the godar of my heart might yet return ... Broyan ... Kallyr.

But no. No new dawn of the blue arrow shall lighten these or other hills. King Broyan has lain upon the broken shield these several years. And worse, our true Queen is betrayed. Our Starbrow is murdered.

Tomorrow the hoar bite of morning, the slow trail west to dark tribes of an unknown tongue, in the face of a bitter wind, a freezing rain. Tomorrow the clanless emptiness of exile, with no company save a silent fyrdwoman. Tomorrow the promise of pursuit, the backward glance, the reckoning of Eaglebrowns, the certainty of death sudden and inglorious. Tomorrow, the Hurricane.

But tonight, tonight I have memory of Whitewall, and all the joy and bitterness it brings.

After the boasting, the silence.

After the feasting, the flame.

After the altar, the pyre,

Yet after the death lives the name.

So the blue arrow came to the clans, summoning heroes to the high city in defence of their god.

And warriors went to Whitewall with the dawn.

The story's epigram is from an ancient Anglo-Saxon poem usually called 'The Ruin'.

Often this wall

Stained red and grey with lichen has stood by

Surviving storms while kingdoms rose and fell.

—translated by Richard Hamer,

A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse. London. 1970.

