

RIFT FALL

From the Legends of Aylore

By Daniel Camomile

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RIFT FALL

"You must swear it." the voice of the Emissary rolled like thunder through the magnificent halls of the celestial library. With a moment of hesitation, Torvial's gaze shifted downwards to the exquisitely crafted sword he held in his gauntleted hands, its intricate design catching the light. Like something forged from one piece of lightning-infused alabaster, the white blade pulsed with a living energy that made Torvial's own life feel weak and ill-defined in comparison. Apotheosis—the twin sword of its baleful sister, Nadir, which caused this cursed war.

"Apotheosis was not created to remain in your realm. It was made to master rift tears and bring wholeness, but it could be used to evil ends. You must swear to return it to my vaults when the rift tear is closed." The Emissary repeated with stringent intensity. "Lest worse disasters befall your corerealm because of its presence."

Torvial looked up at the solar Priest's emissary. He was a tower of a man, robed in golden light, albeit in the garb of a scholar. Facing each other, the emissary's luminous white hair and pale ageless face stood in stark contrast to Torvial's brown eyes, weathered skin, and silver-streaked black hair. If Torvial had not been diligent in his study of Sulvanarian theology, he might be tempted to worship this divine visage.

"On the lives of the war-dead, I swear it." A twist of fear convulsed Torvial even as he said it, the smell of ink and heady incense turning his gut. He wondered if this was even a promise he could make.

"Then go. Mend the rift—Gladeran's folly. May the blessing of the Priest Arbol and his master be with you and your brother." The emissary bowed.

Torvial returned the gesture respectfully, feeling a bitter stab of sadness at the reminder that he had one remaining brother. He sheathed Apotheosis on his back and turned back to the gothic archway of the rift gate. Torvial could see the edges of the doorway in reality burning gold, framing the seemingly directionless tempest inside. Torvial heaved a shaky breath, trying to keep his head above black waves of dread. Weariness gnawed at him, and the gravity of the situation weighed heavily on his shoulders. If they failed to close the rift tear this time, he knew he would not live to see another chance.

Stepping into the gate, he felt his body seized within the force of the rift between realms and pulled with extreme speed inward. Then, as if waking from a falling dream, Torvial found himself in the cool light of an early spring sunrise, ruddy in the smoky atmosphere. The familiar stench of the besieged city assaulted his nostrils with sulfur and burning flesh, recalling a thousand horrific memories he longed to forget.

"Torvial! Thank Athair you're alive!" boomed the gregarious voice of his larger brother, along with a suffocating bear-hug of plate-armor against armor.

"Yes, Morrowick, but I soon won't be if you don't let me breathe!" Torvial gasped with difficulty.

Morrowick released, still grinning and grasping the shoulder plates of his younger sibling. Torvial couldn't help but mirror a smile. Being melancholic on a sunny day, Torvial appreciated and admired his brother's grounding sanguine nature.

"Everyone was worried you had gotten lost forever in those fey woods—eaten by goblins or something. I'm still not sure I trust the food from that realm, but it's better than starving in a siege. Hey, what is that you have there?" Morrowick gestured to the hilt of the Apotheosis over Torvial's shoulder.

With restored seriousness, Torvial reached for the blade, then glanced right and left. They were standing in a roofless, marble pillared gallery at the pinnacle of the royal palace—the home of the ancient rift gate at Del-Caeum.

Through the pillars and over the domes of the palace complex, Torvial could see the myriad rooftops of the sprawling elder city below, stretching to the high, impenetrable walls that sheltered the surviving people of Caelus. Royal guards stood watch around the pillared platform, dressed in lavish ceremonial crimson and gold garb that showed signs of decay from the attrition of a hopeless war.

"Let's talk somewhere private." Torvial whispered, leading his brother to the stairs. They descended the white-marble stairs, proceeding into a domed multi-storey rotunda, in which they stood in the highest level. Below, at the bottom of the open center of the domed chamber, lay cots and beds on which lay the sick and dying. High above the coughing and groaning masses, the illumined mural of the Lady Paralae gazed down in solemn benevolence.

Feeling satisfied they were safe from prying eyes, Torvial drew Apotheosis from its sheath and held it out to his brother. The sight of the otherworldly object left Morrowick in awe, his jaw dropping in astonishment. He reached for the angelic blade, then hesitated, as if his hand could detect heat radiating from it.

"I thought you were gathering food... not... where did you find this?" Morrowick stammered in hushed reverence.

"I was given it... by the Emissary of Arbol." Torvial replied in a whisper.

"Arbol? How did you... I mean... is this what I think it is?" Morrowick continued, drawing in his hand and taking a safe step back.

"Yes, brother. Apotheosis. The key to sealing the rift tear... to ending this endless war."

The hopeful light that had sparked in Morrowick's eyes dimmed, his expression sinking into cautious contemplation. In a sober tone, Morrowick said,

"Little brother, if this truly is Apotheosis, the sword of Holy Light, then you had best take it back to the halls of Arbol."

"You can't be serious!" Torvial lashed out, immediately biting his tongue. Continuing in an earnest whisper, he said, "Brother, this is our only chance. If I don't seize this opportunity, another will never come."

"You don't know that!" Morrowick replied, forgetting to keep a confidential volume, "You don't think I want to end this infernal war? The war that took our brothers from us! It was a blade like that which started this. Imagine if it fell into the enemy's hands! The damage it could unleash!"

"That's just it! The blade will suffer few to carry it." Torvial said with growing enthusiasm. "It will only allow those in-step with the Vei to wield it with power. All others it resists. Brother, it wasn't our intention to find it, but somehow, it found us. A gift from the Priests themselves!"

Morrowick continued to gaze at Apotheosis with trepidation. Glancing up at Torvial, he said,

"Tor, you are wise in things of lore—I must concede to your judgment. But I am wise in battle, so hear me. An assault on the rift tear is folly. Hundreds of thousands of Gorgol, Orc, and Helion stand between us and the rift. Remember our brother Pyrieth, how he was cut down by ten giants at Sulveroc! And Nolvo, and Ulvard, and the others! Only you and I remain to grieve them."

"But we did not have Apotheosis at the head of our armies." Torvial retorted, gripping the sword tighter. After a pause, he let out a disappointed sigh, adding, "But I see your point. It still won't be enough. A frontal assault will draw all the malice of the nine infernal kingdoms. And the more we kill, the more will pour through the rift tear. Battle is futile."

Morrowick nodded and paced thoughtfully, grooming his bushy black beard with his coarse fingers as he murmured,

"Yes, for every infernal creature we slay another is spawned within the rift to support their forces... unless..." Morrowick continued, turning again to Torvial with a flash in his eye. "Unless we open a second battlefront."

Torvial furrowed his brows, sheathing the holy sword again as he replied.

"Now you're talking folly. Two fronts would only divide our forces and weaken us. It makes the rift no more vulnerable than before."

"You misunderstand me, brother." Morrowick interjected with a grave smile.

A dawning horror turned Torvial's expression as he said,

"You're not talking about a second battlefront in the core-realm, are you?"

"Listen to me. You know as well as I do, there is more than one way into the nine infernos. That rift tear is a door to the deepest ring of the infernos, but the top rings remain unguarded." Morrowick continued, becoming impassioned, "Put aside your emotions and tell me rationally that an assault from within the infernos would not divide their forces, choking the rift tear, giving you time to close it forever with that sword."

Torvial said nothing for a moment, his expression becoming burdened as he scoured his mind for alternative strategies. Morrowick was right—he was the wisest in battle.

"Rationally...you would die." Torvial said, his voice stiff with suppressed emotion, "And the cost of another champion is not something our world can endure."

Morrowick smiled with compassion on his little brother. Torvial looked away shamefacedly, a tear having broke free despite his best efforts. The older brother clasped his brawny hands on Torvial's comparatively small shoulders as he said,

"Brother... our time here is over. The world may just have to learn peace without the sons of Sivius to guard it." Pressing his broad forehead against Torvial's, Morrowick recited a line from the Sulvanarian creed, his voice becoming thick with emotion, "Those who would live must die."

Torvial clenched his jaw and shut his eyes tight, wishing he could think of another way. No epiphany came, except the remembered next line of the creed,

"In-step with the Vei, to die is a march."

They spoke the ending line in solemn unison,

"Death is never the end."

A brief sensation of falling and a sound like crackling lightning announced Morrowick and his cohort, armed for war. The visceral shock to Morrowick's body caused by traveling through a fissure in time and space had knocked him breathless, and it took him a moment to collect his senses.

"So, this is the infernos of Malaccadia?" said Yongamhan in his thick eastern accent. Yongamhan was one of Morrowick's most trusted knights, but he knew little realm lore.

"No, the first ring of the infernos begins a mile under your feet." Morrowick chuckled, "What you see are the surface lands of Malaccadia, the realm of glory and victory. Before we start our attack on the infernos, we will need the aid of the Great Ones—those who inhabit this land."

"And where are they, my lord?" Yongamhan asked, respectfully.

Morrowick stood upright and took an inventory of their surroundings. They were standing on a frost-scored stone peak with a panoramic view of a jagged mountain range of enormous slanted plates of rock. An eerie yellow light bathed the barren landscape, like half-sunlight during a partial-eclipse. A bitter wind stung Morrowick's face as he turned toward what he thought must be the sun. He was wrong.

In the east, atop an impossibly high mountain, Morrowick beheld what they had come for. A golden citadel of domes and towers, blazing with glorious

light. From where they stood, Morrowick could see a rough path carved along a stone ridge leading toward the mountain.

"We'll find them there, at the Unbroken Halls. They are the Great Ones." Morrowick replied with gravity in his voice, "Those who passed from our realm to Malaccadia will not have forgotten our need. They will answer our call to assault the infernos, or forfeit their honor. Rally the men. It's a day's journey to the foot of that mountain."

Taking what spartan provisions they had brought through the rift gate, Marrowick's cohort set out on foot. Morrowick knew travel in a realm populated by supernatural giants and legendary monsters would be challenging, even on a carved road. Stone steps loomed up like sheer walls, or dropped like levels in a quarry, making traversing the road slow and daunting work.

On either side of the rugged causeway, steep slopes descended into black fissures of rock and gaping burrows of tunneling monstrosities. Now and then, as if treading the surface of an active volcano, tremors would vibrate the stone under their steel-shod feet, and the sound of shifting and crashing rock would echo through the stone valleys. Morrowick had witnessed first hand the devastation a Torgong Worm could reap in the core-realm, and now that they were within the titan's natural home, he knew the odds were not in their favor

But never did they lay eyes on a living creature during their journey across the mountains, save for the eagles that circled overhead, and even they appeared monstrous in size. Though the hours dragged on, and the sun itself had long since set, the light from the celestial city lit their way in perpetual twilight. A dismal dread hovered over Morrowick, building the nearer they drew to the mountain. The cohort traveled in silence.

After what must have been an entire day in their realm, Morrowick saw they were near the steep walls of the holy mountain that soared up in front of them. The road under their feet became paved now with iron-framed paving stones, leveling for a half mile before it started ascending alongside the

mountain like a trailing vine. Morrowick felt a rise of tentative hope dispel his gloom as he noticed a row of armored men and women standing in the road not far off.

Morrowick muttered a prayer under his breath as they proceeded.

"Are these the allies you spoke of, my lord? They stand unnaturally tall. Are they some race of giant-folk?" Yongamhan said, coming alongside Morrowick, his hand resting cautiously on his hilt.

"Not giants. Fully grown is a truer description of the Great Ones." Morrowick said with a smile. "If you and I should die today, I expect we might become like them. Courage and virtue of heart in our realm translates to physical stature here. You will find nothing is half-way in Malaccadia."

"So the legends are true..." Yongamhan said after a reflective pause, "Malaccadia is the afterlife for those who die courageously in battle. The eternal home of warriors."

"The Great Ones of Malaccadia are not warriors on battlefields only, you must understand. It is the realm of those who gave their lives for the truth. Both martyrs and war-heroes fill their lofty halls." Morrowick replied, "But this is not their home—it is a station. They can still die by the sword, and of all the evils of the realms, that is not the worst here. We must hope the possibility of death will only be an encouragement to them."

"Leave, core-dwellers!" came a thunderous voice from the gathering ahead, "Our sun will melt your thin flesh when it has risen. Return when you have passed the trials."

Halting momentarily, Morrowick glanced at his battle-scarred longsword and yearned for Apotheosis, something he could raise as a token of his merit. But that blade was in the hands of Torvial, who even now must be leading Caelus' armies out to begin the journey to the rift tear. If Morrowick could not barter a deal with the Great Ones, Torvial and all the armies of Caelus would be walking into a bloodbath.

Morrowick raised his open palm in greeting to the sentinels, declaring loudly,

"We have passed all the trials but one, and for that we require your aid."

They did not respond. A desolate wind howled, throwing swirling coils of frost over the pavement. Morrowick could feel the latent fear of his men behind him. Had they come only to be turned away? He sucked in a deep breath, summoning the last fiery embers of his courage. Morrowick proceeded forward, leading his cohort nearer to the waiting Great Ones who stood still as statues. He would have their help or let his blood be spilled on their threshold. He continued in a commanding voice, fully aware of his audacity,

"Frail has the hand of Malacan become! A house of hypocrites, not heroes! The core-realm writhes in torture while you hide in your golden halls."

"Insolent youth!" The sentinel erupted, his voice resounding in the crags and canyons, "You know well, son of Sivius, that your realms' trials are not ours to abolish. Die there in glory and return to my mountain."

Morrowick's cohort slowed their march, the weight of the Great One's words filling them with dismay. But Morrowick did not break stride as he continued,

"This is not our trial, but yours! It is the infernos of your realm that burn and defile our lands. Or did you not know? A rift tear in the lowest underworld of your realm has been pouring out demons and titans into the core-realm. The blood of our dead cries out to heaven while your halls lay idle, bursting with our slain heroes. To refuse our call would be to undo yourselves. Or is it not a blasphemy to hide and cower from evil in Malaccadia?"

Morrowick had walked within a stone's throw of the sentinels before stopping. He stood resolute under their scrutinizing eyes. Even in his full plate armor, Morrowick appeared like a child before these giants of strength. There were ten of them, each twice the height of Morrowick, all of them clad in elaborate, perfectly sculpted translucent white and crimson armor, as if carved in marble and frozen fire. Though slightly luminous, their skin and physical appearance were not much different from those of the core-realm, marked with blemishes and imperfections. But in all their countenances there lay a profound and unshakable clarity, such as Morrowick had never seen in all the realms. Yet still, there was a coldness there Morrowick had not anticipated.

The sentinel who stood at their head as speaker was greater in stature than the rest—a mountain of unshakable courage. Although the head sentinel appeared in the full flourish of youth, something in his eyes hinted to Morrowick that this was the eldest of their company.

After a long icy silence, the sentinel reached to his side and drew an enormous red-steel scimitar, imbued with a dense network of engraved runes. Morrowick could hear the rattle of armor behind him as his soldiers all reached for their weapons. The Great One spoke in a lower tone now, eyeing his perilous sword,

"Do you know who I am, child?"

Morrowick did not move, trying hard to think as a swell of fear threatened to cloud his mind. He remembered something he had been taught as a boy, not in history or lore, but in a bedtime story. It was worth venturing a guess.

"Genrune the Red. Lord of Malaccadia and emissary of the Priest Malacan."

A hint of surprise came over Genrune's face.

"You know your realm lore. What would you have the Lord of Malaccadia do for you, son of Sivius?"

"Assault the infernos with us. Attack the underworld of your realm." Morrowick replied without hesitation. "The Priests have entrusted the blade Apotheosis to my brother. With it, he will seal Gladeran's Folly, the rift tear in our realm, and end this war between realms. Striking at the infernos from

Malaccadia should give him enough time. But we need your help to stand a chance."

A wry smile appeared on Genrune's lips as he replied,

"A very innovative battle strategy, young master Morrowick. But it has been long since the Great Ones challenged the gates of the nine infernal kingdoms. We have had peace on the surface these past years. There are now few of us prepared to die and continue the purifying journey."

"Then let those prepared come die in battle, and let those not ready forfeit their place in your halls, Genrune. Or do you intend for this to be their final resting place?" Morrowick replied again, having a sudden pang of uncertainty about the motives of the Great Ones. He had thought to stir their valor by exaggerating their isolation from the war, but it was becoming clear there was little untruth in Morrowick's words.

The great ones were hiding—something unthinkable! A dread-provoking idea entered Morrowick's increasingly uneasy mind. If the Great Ones were hoarding immortality, their enemies would not be the infernos, but rather those who dared to challenge their solitude.

Morrowick considered unsheathing his sword, but grit his teeth and thought better of it. He had backed himself into a corner, with no strategic possibility of overcoming ten Great Ones. There was no way out now. Morrowick stood still, disguising his fear, waiting for what Genrune would do.

The grin faded from Genrune's lips as he dropped his gaze from his bloodred sword. His expression became grave, and with heavy limbs he let the end of his blade drop and tear through the rock-paved road by its own weight. Faint, guttural rumblings vibrated the ground under Morrowick's feet, where the chaotic underworld a mile below waited.

"You are brave, son of Sivius... and your words could cut stone." he added, soberly, "We will do battle with the infernos. I pray we may repay our debt of honor with the heads of ten thousand demons." Genrune turned his sword skyward and clashed his divine, gauntleted arm against his breast. The other

nine did the same in a thunder of crashing Malaccadian steel that shook the ground. In harmonious unison, they chanted words that conjured his brother's face before Morrowick's mind, leaving him choked with emotion.

"In-step with the Vei, to die is a march! Death is never the end!"

"I pray I may see you again, Torvial." Morrowick breathed.

Like an explosion of lightning shattering a dry tree, Apotheosis clove the spine-covered demon in two. The ruined monstrosity lay twitching on the scorched earth for a moment at Torvial's feet, then evaporated into smoke and ash—the fiendish trick of every slain devil of Malaccadia. Torvial knew the loathsome creature would only appear again in the infernos, in a constant cycle of death and perverse rebirth. If Morrowick failed to establish a second battle front there, Torvial might find himself slaying the same demon again within the hour.

In a momentary respite between combats, Torvial stopped to catch his breath. He stood upon a barren hillside, far from the royal palace. Torvial overlooked a vast, hazy hellscape that had once been lush vineyards and farmland. In place of an idyllic countryside lay boundless tracts of blackened earth, dotted with the hideous ramshackle camps and forts of the infernal kingdoms that had invaded the core-realm. They built their hive-like shelters and defences out of wood, bone, and rubble—like insects intent only on consuming and spreading. In the despoiled land below where Torvial stood, the battle for the realms raged—his own beleaguered armies against the diabolical hordes of another world.

A wholesome and unexpected sound met Torvial's ears through the din of war. The calling of seabirds. Looking into the far horizon over the whole deathly scene, Torvial could just make out the trace-edges of the ocean, a vestige of the old world unmarred by the ravages of Malaccadia. At that moment, Torvial caught sight of what they were after, situated on a desolate

hill of stone roughly a mile away. A colossal gothic arch of blackened stone, burning from within like a window into the fires of the underworld.

"The rift tear... Gladeran's folly." Torvial said under his breath, "Morrowick, you had better be successful in your quest."

"My Lord, Torvial!" called out a young mage of his army standing near. He was spying out the rift tear using a quartz-infused brass lens. "The onslaught is diminishing! They are ceasing to pour through the rift tear. This has never happened!"

A smile of wonder spread undisguised on Torvial's face, as he said in a hush of awe,

"Praise Athair... I knew you of all people could do it, Morrowick." Then, with a fierce surge of energy, Torvial cried out for all his army standing nearby to hear,

"This is the hour we came for! Do not hold your lives dear now!"

Torvial called for his horse and swiftly mounted as the horn-blowers signaled with rapid blasts for the remaining cavalry to assemble. One by one, the mounted knights fell back from the battle to take their positions in a wedge formation at the foot of the hill in front of Torvial, while fresh cavalry came up from behind. While they gathered, Torvial whispered heartening words to his mount, stroking the horse's muscular neck. Sitting upright in the saddle, Torvial muttered one last prayer to prepare himself for what he knew may follow in the following minutes.

Then the dreaded moment came. Torvial extended his arm upward, lifting the formidable length of Apotheosis over the heads of his eager cavalry. In the lowland ahead, Torvial could see the depleted ranks of demons attempting to regroup. They would not have time to assemble an adequate defense. This was the moment to strike.

"For our sons and daughters!" Torvial yelled, spurring his horse forward.

The roar of the riders and the sound of a thousand ox-horns vibrated the air like the announcement of a divine judgment. Torvial lifted himself by the stirrups as his horse galloped down the slope, leaping over the fallen and kicking up clouds of ash. The wretched smell of the fowl dust stung Torvial's nostrils and gave a fierce clarity to his mind.

As the front wedge of cavalry reached the bottom of the hill they picked up speed, charging head-on into the disorganized ranks of devils. If successful, the first division would carve a path through the front line and give Torvial's riders a strong chance of breaking through to the rift tear. Then it would only be a matter of piercing the cursed portal with Apotheosis and the job would be done.

Torvial felt his spirits lift as the first division of cavalry collided with the enemy, a sulfuric cloud of evaporating demons rising from under their raging hooves. Fury and adrenaline drowned whatever fear lingered in Torvial's body, his muscles tensing as he raised Apotheosis. But his horse never reached the battlefront.

Without warning, the ground under him convulsed as an immense black shape exploded out of the hillside, throwing boulders, horses, and riders like toys. Torvial felt himself violently thrown out of the saddle, and for one disorienting moment he saw the earth turning over on itself like surface foam on an ocean wave. Then, with a blunt impact, everything went dark.

Coming to his senses after a bewildered moment, Torvial found himself half-buried in a mound of displaced earth. He coughed and spluttered, noticing the spray of his saliva was red with blood. Attempting to move, he struggled with the heaviness of the heaped earth. Gritting his teeth and trying again harder, he let out a gasp as a fiery twinge of pain shot up from his ribs. A sudden wave of helplessness washed over Torvial as the gargantuan shadow of the thing that had emerged from the earth glowered over where he lay.

Four long, angular mandibles and rows of serrated teeth in its gaping mouth identified the hulking monstrosity to Torvial. A Torgong Worm from the deepest inferno of Malaccadia—a colossal burrowing serpent bred from the

unhinged fantasies of an apostate principality. The hideous titan reared its armored carapace, glaring with eyeless menace down on Torvial's immobilized body.

Even as Torvial prepared himself to be destroyed by the crushing weight of the looming horror, power surged through his arm. He glanced to his side where Apotheosis protruded from the blackened dirt, its blade burning like the morning. Torvial found with surprise that he could lift his arm and the sword from the earth. With an electric wave of energy, Torvial effortlessly freed himself from his partially buried tomb and stood upright, taking the sword with both hands. It was time to put the legendary weapon to the test.

Torvial charged toward the Torgong Worm even as it let out a bone-shaking bellow, like the hollow sound of a tremendous trumpet. The gargantuan mass of the creature craned forward to strike the ground where Torvial had lain, but the warrior was too fast for the monster. The earth rocked as it rammed its burrowing head into the earth in Torvial's wake, its snake-like body arching over him.

Disregarding the creature's head, Torvial sprinted towards its midsection, which was still on solid ground. The body of the Torgong Worm had the breadth and strength of a stone fortress turret, and Torvial knew from legend no mortal weapon could pierce its steely hide. But Apotheosis was no mortal weapon.

With all his strength, Torvial swung the blade of holy light with a diagonal swipe against the belly of the worm. The edge of the sword ravenously split the outer carapace and bit through the monster's flesh. The white blade emerged from the creature's body, sizzling and fuming with vaporizing black blood.

The body of the colossal worm writhed with sudden aggravation, nearly crushing Torvial before he could leap out of the way. In the same leaping motion, he turned and swung the sword horizontally across the Worm's flank, creating a deep fissure that exposed its raw ribs. Finding his footing, Torvial flew at the damaged titan. With a forceful thrust, the sword sank deep into the

open wound. The Torgong Worm released a guttural roar as a viscous black liquid began to ooze from the slash. Giving the blade a sharp twist, Torvial wrenched the sword out. The creature lay dead.

Panting hard, Torvial glanced down at himself, realizing only now the extent of his injuries. The armor had been torn from his right flank, and in its place he could see a mass of mangled red. He shuddered, glancing from his deathly injury to the divine blade in his hand, pulsating with life-giving energy. Only his connection to the Vei and the power of Apotheosis kept him alive. By the sheer will of that benevolence, he would have the strength to finish his quest.

The emergence of the Torgong Worm had created a clearing in the surrounding battle that continued to rampage on all sides. Torvial gazed up the slope of displaced earth beneath him and realized his fight with the worm had led him closer to the entrance of the rift tear. Torvial sucked in a shaky breath as he looked up at the immense archway ablaze with infernal fire—the beating heart of the war. But the way was not yet clear for Torvial to deal the final blow.

Charging down toward Torvial from the arch were a dozen nine-foot-tall visored knights in spike-covered armor. Each wielded a menacing glaive twice their height. From the looks of it, they were the last guardians of the rift.

His mortal life forfeit, and the end of his sufferings at hand, the joy of battle fell on Torvial with one last rush of vitality from Apotheosis. With an effortless swipe of his sword, Torvial cut the blade from the first giant's glaive, then swept the staggering giant's head from its shoulders. Even as the first giant clattered to the earth, the second made its attack. Its strike fell fruitless on the divine blade, and with one fluid riposte, Torvial slew the second giant. One after the next Torvial cut down the giants, even as he felt his life leaving him. Finally, one giant remained, barring him from the threshold of the rift tear.

Torvial paused, breathing hard, his head swimming with the final swells of borrowed life. He glimpsed behind the diabolical opponent the cavernous

expense of the deepest inferno, where all the hordes of Malaccadia had flooded into the core-realm. As Torvial gazed inside, he knew with a pang of sorrow that Morrowick's second battlefront had broken. Another inexhaustible army of demonic warriors was rushing toward the momentarily empty rift tear. Within moments, they would reach it and come through, and all the sacrifices of the sons of Sivius would be fruitless.

"I will enjoy killing you, Sivius." the giant taunted in a hideous voice.

Brandishing Apotheosis and adopting a powerful stance, Torvial conjured the face of Morrowick to his mind, whispering,

"I am coming, brother."

Torvial rushed at the remaining giant, which bellowed out an animalistic roar. With strength Torvial had never known himself to possess, he swept the weapon from the giant's hands and, in a single calculated movement, impaled the creature through its chest. Pushing the howling monster back, Torvial could feel the heat emitting from the rift tear. He pushed and pushed until he was nearly within reach of the swirling membrane of the portal. With frantically grasping hands, the giant wrapped its powerful fingers around Torvial's throat. But it was too late.

Forcing the blade completely through the giant and piercing to the other side, Torvial drove the blade into the rift tear. Instantly, there was an explosion of light and a sudden peace—like the first light at the creation of the world.

The petals of the pale-blue aster in Telbajorn's hand dazzled in the noonday sun. A cool sweet sea breeze wafted over his boyish face. He took his time to breathe it in.

"Why white moon flowers?" Gaedia asked childishly, breaking the melancholy silence.

Telbajorn let out a long sigh and gazed up at the quiet, towering structure of the empty archway, completely black against the bright, cheerful blue sky. He knelt and placed the little flower with the others, along with wreaths, handwritten notes, and silver trinkets amassed around the stone slab of the tomb at the foot of the dormant arch.

"They're not called moon flowers, Gaedia. They're Sulvan Asters. Mother says they symbolize the beauty of change. They were the flower of father's patron Priest, Sulva. This is where he died."

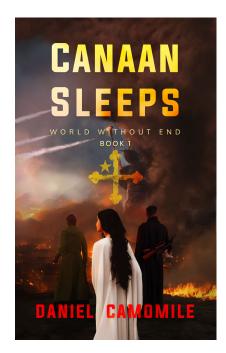
"Oh." Gaedia said, falling silent. The echo of a tolling bell reached them from the nearby town chapel, mingled with the cries of seabirds. Gaedia spoke again,

"But... this doesn't feel like change, though. It hurts too much to be beautiful. It feels like an ending."

Telbajorn turned with a sympathetic smile to the little girl, saying.

"But this isn't the end. Don't you see?" he let his hand come to rest on the hilt of the white sword hanging from his side, "A new world is about to dawn."

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