

An ancient blade pierced The Revenant's chest and cracked through his sternum. He woke from his stasis. His heart didn't beat, he did not gasp for air, but The Revenant had done neither in centuries.

He tried opening his eyes, but the dirt that had settled and packed over his lids for the past year was heavy and undisturbed. A high-pitched, muffled voice above him spoke with a hurried and nervous cadence.

*That pitch is strange, he thought. My memory always has its holes, but this doesn't seem right. Who is that?*

Shovels broke dirt around him and crunched the dry ground. Pockets of entombing soil grew lighter. He wriggled his legs lightly, shifted the loam and disturbed the grass roots that surrounded him.

Two others' rough grunts paired with the excavating strikes. The first voice was still there.

*Feminine. Hard to tell anything else.*

The Revenant tried to remember a woman. Only one came to mind. A pale facade flashed into his head. Jet hair surrounded her face and draped past a tight noose and purple armor. Her long, two-handed sword was almost as long as she was tall.

*Olarion.*

His blood boiled at the thought of her name.

An ancient memory flashed through his mind—the first night he had defended Rothorn. The sky was deep blue like a raven. A crescent moon hung overhead. Olarion fashioned a knot around his neck that matched her own—

the holy symbol of The Hanging Man, God of Death. The unbreakable knot sealed the magic which warded death.

His slow and slight wiggling strengthened in his rage. He fought against his earthly constraints. His legs flexed and shook. He tossed his shoulders. He jerked his neck back and forth and his stag-like antlers—another affliction of his curse—wrenched pockets of dirt from around him.

*If I get my hands on that poor excuse of a knight, I'll have her head.*

He convulsed more and with each passing second, between his maddened efforts and the excavators above, he was closer to his single night of freedom.

Finally, a spade struck near his chest, and excavated a massive heap. He loosened his arms bit by bit. The Valley's dirt crumbled to his sides. The earthy prison faltered. His arms and shoulders finally broke free. The cool air swept over parts of his chest and fingers.

With a jolt, he sat up and the embedded blade moved with him. Dirt still blinded him. He ripped the weapon from his chest, unstapling him from the ground.

He could not forget *Vow*. *Vow the Unweighted Blade* was a consolation prize for receiving Olarion's hex and being the first defender of Rothorn. It had a mind of its own and controlled its own weight, growing light on the defense and heavy as it swung in attack. It was the only constant in his existence.

Still buried at the waist, he cleared his eyes for several seconds and opened them.

He was face-to-face with a woman, her face pale, but freckled and hair golden. She wore a noose around her neck and a crimson robe with pink trim.

“Who the hell are you?” The Revenant spat. Seeing the robes triggered a remembering synaptic snap through his brain. They were clean and priestly.

*I should have figured Olarion wasn't here. Never is. Only that wicked Selevar. She's probably off doing nothing since that's all she's good for.*

The young woman said nothing—her eyes wide and unblinking.

Dirt rained from his antlers and dusted his shoulders with particulate. The dark soil peppered his light brown skin.

The Revenant looked from the woman to the two other people there. They were both men with shovels, one on each side of him. One had a great, red beard that sat against his potbelly stomach and the other was slim, auburn haired with broad shoulders and a defined jaw. They looked vaguely familiar.

He returned his attention to the woman.

“You aren't Olarion,” The Revenant said flatly. His rage had transmuted to confusion. “Who are you?”

“No, my name is Diana,” she said. Her voice was soft with uncertainty. She looked down at a small book and paged a few leaves with her thumb. “I'm Waker of Rothorn—the Waker of The Revenant.”

The Waker was the priest who raised The Revenant each year. On the Night of the Blood Scythe, two spirits returned to the Valley, and two spirits fought under the russet moonlight. One had to prevail. For the people of the Valley, the Revenant had to triumph.

He had won every other time, else he wouldn't keep waking. While technically immortal, The Revenant could be slain, and if he was it would be his end. It was also prophesized he could not walk the Valley other than during the Blood Scythe, else the magic would fail, and he would finally die.

*To cease waking*, The Revenant pondered, *now there is a tempting thought*.

"You're not the Waker," The Revenant said. Recognition of the robes finally clicked. "The Waker is a man—oh what's his name? Walker? Wilson?"

"Wattworth," Diana said pointedly.

"That's right, Wattworth! Where's Waker Wattworth?"

The image of the old man teased his mind. Any traces of memory of him were faint, but the feelings his name invoked were strong like the hug from a longtime friend.

Wattworth was one of the few good things he could remember—or at least remember enjoying. The years he woke to the man's face blended together.

"He was unable to make it this year. I am Waker in his stead."

The Revenant scowled. Wattworth was the only Waker he could remember—the first and last face he'd see on the Night of the Blood Crescent.

"Well, where is he?"

"He's in town," Diana replied and nodded to her right. The town of Rothorn stood, illuminated by lit braziers and hearths shining through windows. An obelisk floated in the middle of town. "He's resting."

People talked, sang, played music, and were cleaning up a feast. Children ran, screaming joyfully.

“Doesn’t look like anyone else is,” The Revenant protested.

The Revenant propped himself up and prepared to stand. The three people surrounding him went to aid him, as if he were a fallen geriatric.

He shooed them away.

“C’mon, now,” he said with a grunt. He stood, stepped out of his shallow grave, and looked down onto Diana and the two men. His knees ached dully. He swayed like a spindly sapling and gained his balance for the first time since his awakening last year. The scars that tied his body together tugged and stretched awkwardly like a poorly hemmed shirt. The twinge in his back that he had woken up with previously had disappeared. He recalled the sharp pain it had caused when he swung his sword.

*Glad I’ve had some time to recover. Didn’t have much of a choice though.*

The Revenant remembered so few things. The powerful magic that affected him had also afflicted a type of amnesia. His name, the one he had during life, was gone—he only knew The Revenant. If he had a family, the one he knew was long gone. But he couldn’t forget the things that cursed him—the things that stripped him of humanity.

He leaned over and grabbed the sword on the ground with two hands. A rosy vaporous gleam wrapped around the claymore’s black, four-foot-long blade and foot-long grip and blade. It was light and still wet with the oil Diana must have anointed it with for the ceremony. The blade grew heavier in its rightful

wielder's hands. At the ends of the cross-guard, two stylized nooses curved up toward the blade tip.