

**Rek** the Warrior drove his steed through the treacherous slopes of the Krikton Hills, fully aware that his journey may bring forth an infestation of evil that would devour his homeland of Maktear, and perhaps the lands beyond. But an awareness of the perils ahead did nothing to sway him from his course. Rek was a mercenary with perversions far more profound than the common sadist; he could slay a child or a feast-prepped swine with equal detachment. By no accident had he acquired such titles as Rek the Heathen, and Rek the Remorseless.

But savagery such as this would be needed in the Krikton Hills; a passageway no sane man would follow. If not for the insidious quest that propelled him, he would not consider returning to this land of miscreants. He knew the Kriks all too well; they were a loathsome people who had propagated themselves through generations of incest. They were repulsive, savage, and imbecilic, but they were perfectly suited for his purpose.

It had been nearly nine months since Rek's last visit to The Krikton Hills; a deliberate act of self-serving violence that would not be forgotten by the indigenous members of The Hill's clan. A visit that Rek knew could lead to utter catastrophe.

But Rek moved on, fearlessly pushing his mount upwards through an unforgiving torrent whose drops fell through the gusty storm as if they were aimed straight at him. His steed, a beast as seemingly indifferent as he, carried on through the muddy trails with no sound to distract it other than the expansive drops that pelted off its master's armor. Rek's suit was a monstrosity that struck fear in his enemies a full battle-field away. Shoulder spikes, horns and tilted facial slits made him look more demonic than human, suiting his lust for violence quite fittingly. Customarily, he did not travel in full suit, but it would take more than inclement weather for him to part with it on a day such as this. Whether it was the impending onslaught that awaited him, or the culmination of months of trepidation gearing towards this day, Rek chose to hide his face.

While swaying in his saddle during his ascent up The Hills, his mind sifted through the myriad of barbaric trials that contributed to the repute he held in the land of Maktar. And even though he could scarcely recall the lurid details of the endeavors that kept the peasants of his country awake at night, the upcoming engagement with the Kriks sat uneasily with him; he had never done something as deliberately cruel as what he was about to do this day.

By the time he arrived at the crest of The Krikton Hills the storm had subsided. He encountered a cluster of grass huts and mud-packed dwellings, smoke rose from the largest of the set. He dismounted quickly and drew his full length broadsword before his feet hit the ground. He marched quickly towards the door, refusing to allow a weak conscious to deter the fulfillment of his task. He kicked open the door, sword in hand, ready to announce it was he that should be feared, and not the contrary.

But his grand entrance was wasted on an empty hovel. Grass and mud walls supported a shabby bamboo and bark roof that leaked at the edges. An assemblage of chairs and tables surrounded a fire in the middle of a dirt floor. Perched over the blaze was a boiling potbelly cauldron supported by an iron tri-pod; its contents likely responsible for the stench that stole his appetite. At the back of the dwelling was a door that lay fully open, teasing his curiosity, compelling him to ask why they would vacate their food and shelter with such haste. Rek crept through the hut towards the doorway, his sword tip well ahead of him. As he neared the exit he began to hear screams, faint at first, then louder; they were that of a woman. He quickened his pace and shot out the back door where he found a gathering of Kriks standing in the woods at the edge of a small pond. In the middle of them, spread upon a stone slab, was a woman amidst the anguish of labor. She was a haggardly looking creature, surrounded by company equal to her unsightliness. They turned to take notice of Rek, parting themselves in a way that allowed the woman to see Rek in the distance. When she saw him she let out another scream, separate from the ache of contraction, bloodcurdling and vengeful it pierced as she pointed at Rek, identifying him to her brethren.

Rek recognized her as well, ‘damn’ he cursed, ‘she was early’.

Instantly, two of the men charged him, brandishing a club and a fire poker. The Krik’s may have been savage, blessed with brute strength, but they were poorly trained with skills that wouldn’t rival the youngest of warriors from the blood clans of Maktear. Rek charged the man with the club, plunging his blade into bare throat, interrupting the Krik’s battle scream. The club bounced harmlessly off Rek’s helmet. The Krik fell to the ground with both hands at his throat, unable to contain the spillage.

Rek exchanged blows with the other man who swung the fire poker with admirable intent, until Rek ducked a thrust that sent the man off balance. With the Krik's midsection fully exposed Rek sliced clean through to his middle. He dropped to his knees, clutching his abdomen to keep his innards from spilling out while looking up at Rek with a hollow gaze that implied his worthless life didn't merit the anguish of a death scream. He fell to the ground without uttering a sound.

Rek turned towards the woman just in time to see the child emerge. He had seen the likes before with cattle and horses, but never a human. It seemed just as vulgar, in particular the after-birth. The mother's screaming came to an end, replaced by that of the infant's, and just like that there was another life in the Krikton Hills. But Rek hadn't come here to witness the miracle of birth, nor the impending moment of endearment that was destined to follow, a sight he had no stomach for, but a deed that would bring an end to his nine month quest. He had to act now if he wanted to enjoy the spoils of his scheme. He approached with his sword held high but The Kriks formed a barrier between him and the mother. Rek didn't come here this day to slaughter an entire clan, but he would not be denied the reward that awaited him. As he strengthened the grip on his hilt, the elders behind the barrier picked up the child, but instead of welcoming the infant they tore it from the mother's reach, separating it from its cord before passing it around amongst themselves. Rek stopped and watched as they stared and poked at it, shaking their heads, submitting their disapproval. *'How hideous would this child have to be to not meet the standards of these degenerates'* Rek thought.

They showed it to the mother and even she turned away. Without discussion, one of them took the babe and flung it towards the fire; it landed just short of its mark on the fringe of the flames. Rek tore open his visor to confirm what he had trouble believing. Indeed this people must be dissolute to send a child towards an agonizing death without it knowing the warmth of its mother's touch or consideration from its own kind. A woman moved towards the child to further it into the flames when Rek intervened.

“Stop!” he commanded.

The woman held up as Rek burst through the blockade and scooped up the child. Convinced it should die, the haggardly female rushed the warrior, only to get impaled with a foot of Rek's blade. The others closed in on him, weaponless, but fearless just the same. Rek killed every one of them with a single sword hand while the newborn, clutched in Rek's other hand, became spattered with the blood of his traitorous clan. The only person left yet to kill was the mother, the final ploy in the culmination of Rek's act of darkness. She held her arms and legs up to protect herself as Rek approached, instinctively knowing that there was more to his purpose than to simply abduct the child.

Her hands and feet flailed in the air while she uttered incoherent pleas for her life. Rek stood over her, quickly raising his sword, then stopping as he looked down upon the grisly looking woman, naked and bloody, begging for her life. Had he been more familiar with the sensation he was experiencing he would have known to attribute the word *remorse* to it, but it was a sensation, that until now, he was completely alien to. His sword shook in his hand, and the weakness disgusted him. Craving an ending to this repulsive moment he brought his blade down upon the woman's neck, but he was distracted by mission so his stroke was untrue. Instead of severing the head, the broadsword only cut half way through her neck, tilting her skull at an unnatural angle. Rek pulled back, appalled at his lame effort to kill the woman. He raised his sword to strike, and again his deliverance was untrue. But she fell to the ground. Rek studied her, believing her to be dead, until he saw her eyes blink. In a rage of panic he struck again, but missed the original wound once again, creating another right beside it that also failed to sever the head. Rek screamed with rage, sickened by his ineptness and the vile sight before him, he brought down a myriad of strokes, hacking away at the mother's head, spraying blood dozens of feet in every direction, until finally the head rolled away. Rek was panting harder than ever before, but this was no time to console himself; he had to complete the final step of the ritual. He moved the baby into position, holding it under the woman's neck, soaking it in the rush of its mother's flowing blood. Until now Rek hadn't the chance to look at the child, his son. He stole a quick glance at it, pulling back sharply when he did. It was diminutive and horrid to look upon. Its cheeks were hollow and the whites of its eyes bulged like they were ready to fall out. *'How could a child of mine be so damned ugly, blasted Kriks.'* But Then Rek realized that throughout this entire vile

event he hadn't once heard the child speak. It just sat there in his hands, content, as if it was embracing the warmth of its bath; Rek's hands started to tremble. When it was aptly drenched, Rek curled it in his arms and headed towards the back door of the hut. Once inside he found a soiled rag on the ground and quickly bundled the child.

Time was precious and Rek had none of it to waste. This child may have been unwanted amongst its own kind, but Rek knew of a place where its life was of great value. He barreled through the front door of the hut, returning to his horse, pausing to look once more at the child. It looked back at Rek without a tear or a peep, even though coarse wool rubbed against its burnt skin.

He covered it back up, mounted his steed and headed back down the trail.

He rode as hard as he could, knowing the child wouldn't survive without food and proper care. For hours they beat down the main road on steel shod hooves, spit and snot spewing from the beast's face. Then suddenly Rek yanked the reins and they sharply turned south onto an unworn path that was barely visible amidst the overgrown foliage. Rek ignored the overhanging trees that swatted his helmet as he begged more and more of the tiring steed that fought to abide its rider's charge. On they went through the poorly traveled path and its myriad of turns, until finally their destination loomed.

Buried deep in the woods, surrounded by swamp, was a judiciously sized castle bearing two towers; one with a peak and the other an observation turret. What brick was not covered in vines was black as night, as if it had been charred with fire. Rek looked at the soggy ground before him and saw no wheel ruts; no one had left or entered in quite sometime. He held ground for a brief moment, questioning the sanity of his mission; then quickly determined that he had come too far to not see it through. After dismounting and removing his helmet he ran to the front door: a large two piece metal gate that looked more like the entrance to a dungeon than a home. He banged on them until they slowly opened inwards, seemingly on their own. A stench of damp mould, suiting the blackness inside, barged into his nostrils like an unwanted guest.

Rek stood there for a moment, unable to recall his last encounter with fear. Then the darkness within broke as a figure embracing a candle approached, stopping a foot from the entrance and the dim sunlight that breached the doorway. Rek could see nothing but an outline of a face; he spoke to break the unnerving silence. “The... The Mage please,” Rek pleaded. “I’ve come to see The Mage.”

But there was no response. Rek stepped a little closer and opened the bundle. The figure leaned forward to see the child, exposing his features in the candlelight for a brief moment. Rek wheezed at the sight of the pale skinned man who was remarkably stout for a person of such severe age.

He said nothing as he turned and walked inward, gesturing for Rek to do the same. When they were inside the figure raised a hand to stop Rek, while he continued on into the darkness. Rek ignored his surroundings, denying his curiosity in fear of what he might see.

Moments later, the candlelight reappeared down a distant hallway. Two sets of shuffling feet competed with the thud of Rek's heart. The figure with the candle drifted off to the side to leave Rek face to face with The Mage. He was dressed in a black robe, tied with a black cord that draped his waist like a dead snake.

His age was hard to guess; his wrinkles were profound yet his hair was jet black, draping well past his ears. Candle light flickered off his facial rings; two in each ear and one in his chin that dangled a hand span below. "Do I know you?" he asked, in a voice that was coarse as wool rope.

"I am uncertain, my lord. My name is Rek. I've brought something I trust is of great value to you." Rek opened the bundle and held it out for him to see.

"Of what purpose would an ugly child provide me?"

Rek's eyes widened to their peak, his hands trembled, sensing The Mage's impatience. "But, my lord, this child fulfills the requisite of the ritual, a child of rape and blood. I took the woman myself."

"Against her will?" The Mage asked.

"Yes, I swear, it was savage, my lord."

"And the blood it is covered with, where did it come from?"

"From the mother's head, flowing and fresh." Rek answered anxiously, but still he could see The Mage was not impressed.

"I'm afraid you have wasted your efforts, Rek. Too many times a child of this fate has come to me, only to disappoint me with death or failure. I shall not endure this again. Take this ugly child away," The Mage said.

Rek was distraught, standing there holding the child, realizing the futility of nine months worth of anticipation.

“Hold!” The Mage ordered, just as Rek was retreating. “What are those scars upon its head?”

“Those are burn marks, my lord.”

The Mage stepped forward, “And how did the child obtain these?”

“The clan of Kriks, of which it was born into, discarded it into the flames upon the moment of its birth. I intervened to save it.”

“And his mother, what of his mother?” The Mage asked urgently, “did she feed him, did she touch him, has he been contaminated by her suckle?”

“This child has known no love or touch of warmth from its mother, this I swear.”

“And what of you, Rek, do you care for the welfare of your son; do you have family of your own?”

“I have never cared for the outcome of my seed before. But if forced to, I would kill a bastard just as easily as any other wretch who would side itself between myself and my pursuits.”

The Mage smiled grievously. “Then you have done well, Rek the Warrior; I shall keep the child and bestow upon you ‘The treasure of the Blood Ritual.’”

“Thank you, my lord.”

The Mage took the child from him, careful not to touch its skin.

“May I ask what the reward, that’s been spoken upon for eons is, my lord? Is it treasure, gold, power?”

The Mage turned back to Rek, smiling, provoking a grin from Rek in return. “I would not insult you with a reward of such paltry means, Rek. For the service you have provided you deserve a prize that is far more momentous than earthly treasures.”

Rek’s eyes widened in anticipation, his smile grew from ear to ear, his fingers began to flicker.

“What I bestow upon you, Rek, is eternal servitude to the Usurper of Belth.” Rek’s eyes remained wide, but his mouth fell agape as he failed to comprehend the consequence of his prize.

“Self-serving actions such as these can only find reward in the kingdom of Belth, at the left hand of The Usurper, whose presence you have helped to fulfill this day.”

“I...I don’t understand.” Rek pleaded.

The Mage smiled at him again, “You see, Rek, in order for the ritual to be fulfilled... the father too must die.”

Rek put his helmet on and began to back out of the castle entrance, his hand moved to his hilt. The Mage slowly followed, smiling at Rek’s efforts to protect himself.

“Besides, Rek, your endeavors, although self-serving, could one day be construed as heroic.”

“By who, my lord?”

“By the child,” The Mage answered, as he shuffled closer to the warrior.

Rek froze as he watched The Mage raise his free hand. Gnarled fingers, poised like they were broken, were aimed straight at him. Rek stared fearful for a moment, then staggered sideways before flipping off his helmet. “My eyes!” he yelled, dropping to his knees.

“I am sorry, Rek the Warrior, but if this child is to fulfill the role for which you saved him, then he cannot know the affable sentiment of a savior. Your intent was righteous, but to complete its discharge, you must die.”

Rek opened his mouth to coax a scream, but it never came. His hands wavered over his eyes and throat as if he wanted to clutch them, but they ached from a pain he knew he couldn't relieve.

Then Rek went still, his mouth lay open, and his hands fell at his side as an image of the son he delivered into a damned life flashed briefly through his mind.

Then, the deep red blood that had gathered in his skull, burst a horse-length away from his eyes. Rek collapsed in a pool of his own blood, the only puddle remaining in the castle's courtyard.

The Mage eased his way back into the castle, studying the child as he did, then he turned to his servant.

“He's near death, get him some goat's milk, treat his wounds but be sure to wear gloves. This child will never know the warmth of our touch. He shall sleep in the solitude of the castle's depths in the room next to The Book.”

“The Book of Being, my Mage?”

“Its emanations will enrich the child; he will need its strength for the path I propose for him.”

“Will you teach him the ways, my Mage?”

“He will learn the elements of dark magic, the merits of torture, and the means to prolong his life, as you and I have done. He will learn to ignore the gods that other men choose to worship. As an apostle of The Usurper he will need to be powerful. The Grand Spirit will surely bring forth a virtuous entity to oppose him.”

“What sort of opposition do you foresee, milord?”

“I do not know, The Grand Spirit works in mysterious ways; a charmed artifact, a weapon, a being worthy of contestation, it could be anything. If this child lives, I will teach him everything I know, and name him Maeldroth. He shall be a bringer of death, a catalyst to the end of life as it is known. But if he dies,” The Mage took a shallow breath, “he shan’t be missed.”