

Cayneian

A man From Blood

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Excerpt for Kirkus Proconnect

Silenced, powerless, all is bequeathed unto darkness. Silence.

Time becomes a slowed procession. Buried. A new life is bequeathed unto the silenced.

Droplets of blackened blood course through stone. Unending, unceasing, the time remains.

Thrashing limbs beat the stone. Muffled screams resonate. Madness. Silence.

The blood, a cold ichor, is taken into the maddened.

Madness gives way to rage, and rage to more screams. Flesh rent from fingers forced through stone.

From Blood, we are all born.

-A poem regarding the ancient ritual of Sang Daemanus

Prologue- The expedition

There was a time when man was powerful, and hungering for more power, he set his wizard's gaze to search for the unknown. A forgotten king learned of an island. It was said no one had ever been there, but that was not the truth.

Before man was powerful, Daemons ruled by flame. Whether it was divine providence from above, the steely determination of heroes, or the Daemons' hubris, they were defeated, driven deep, deep underground.

Time passed. Man flourished. It was forgotten that a Daemon cannot die, and so the residents of an island grew reckless as all those with an insatiable thirst for power do. They stole deep beneath their proliferous kingdom. There, they found flame. The flame beckoned, and the flame promised, but fire devours all.

When the haughty king sent his men on an expedition to that island, his men discovered evidence that it had been very much inhabited. Though no sign of battle was evident, whole forests were cut down, homes sat in disrepair, and ominous clouds covered the skies, but still the expedition trekked forth in search of power for their king.

Every turn held great trepidations for both the soldiers and those brave men whose purpose it was to find the unknown source of power. Starting with an errant bolt of lightning destroying their only vessel, evil quickly reared its head, matters grew out of hand.

The sun set never to rise again. Vile monsters came forth from shadow and feasted on human flesh. The very air poisoned the voyagers' souls, and when they pressed beyond the domain of the sealed, they, too, found Daemons.

It is unclear whether or not any of the king's men survived, but what is known, is that a great wizard begot of great wizards sealed the Daemons away as had been done ages prior. For a time, immense destruction was averted. On the island, the worst of dangers subsided, yet disasters lurked behind darkened recesses.

Like men who hunger for power, Daemons hunger, but theirs is a fierce hunger. From a sealed tomb, one Daemon continued to beckon. It continued to prod at the souls of good men. Good will alone does not stay evil, and even good men fall to bad judgment.

A progression of tribulations accosted those left upon the island. Some settled in as there was no alternative, no escape. It was an awful life, but any attempt at sailing away was met with an untimely demise.

The horrid living conditions broke the spirits of men and even twisted some into monstrous creatures. Thirsting for more power, the Daemon sought out and away from the island by ways of hellish rituals. Upon satiating its hunger, it beckoned once more.

Long before the expedition, one good man was promised a power from blood. Seeking vengeance on those whom had done him ill will, he accepted. The practice of Sang Daemanus came to be.

While only men may undergo this ritual, and the power is nearly without limit, most falter at the very mention. Men brave enough to attempt the ritual normally go mad within days. The indomitable are the sole successors to Sang Daemanus, but they are twisted creatures. Often, they do not return alone.

Only now has it come pass that it was this abominable power which the Council of Five had discovered. It was unfortunate that these wizards, advisors to the king who sent the expedition—though cunning—lacked the practical knowledge required to assuage the soul from evil provocation.

Now, deep beneath the island of despair, the wizards seek only reprisal. A broken kingdom is ruled by fear and hatred. The Daemon calls, and the Daemon burns.

Chapter One- Dark shores

Dysart coughed uncontrollably as he attempted to spew salty water from his lungs. The tide forced him into the rocky shore. Having had no choice but to strip himself of armor after his sloop shattered, he incurred several scrapes. His fresh wounds ravaged by the sea had turned sore before even setting foot on the forsaken island. On hands and knees he looked back at the floating debris, but remnants of his escape vessel. *What a beginning.*

He rolled onto his back—legs still lapped by waves—and with a push of errant, gray braids from his face, he saw the glittering of stars. *Was it not day a moment prior?* His thoughts gave way to anxiety. Flopping onto his side, he heaved the remaining water from his lungs. Then, he heard something in the darkness.

The sound was rapid, repetitive, like hooves. With eyes darting, he glossed over the surroundings for movement. There were freshly cut tree trunks, a cabin in the distance, a worn path through rocky hills. A twitch of the ears accompanied realization. *Bare feet!*

Forcing himself to a knee, he whipped his head to the left. A glimpse of a figure clad in raggedy, dark clothing demanded attention. The rabid attacker hissed and delivered a rising kick into Dysart's flank. A snap followed by the vacuum of wind from lungs ensued. Gasps escaped his mouth while the assailant—frothing at the lips—latched gnarled fingers round his throat.

The two tussled—Dysart coming to his knees, and the rabid man thrashing all about. He brought both forearms from his lap into the attacker's elbows. The man did not buckle, so Dysart struck both palms into his opponent's emaciated chest, and the two fell into water. In the sea, they rolled over sharp rocks. The man came to hold Dysart's face beneath the waves. He scrambled for a stone as salt water rushed into his sinuses.

Once fingers grasped a rough stone, a powerful swing of the rude weapon connected against the wild man's skull. He fell into the water. Dysart burst forth, secured the man's throat with his right arm and beat him in the head until there was nothing left. The sea washed away most of the blood, but a glance at his hands revealed not all of it departed.

Taking a breath, he dropped the rock in the water then sniffed his hands. *This one was corrupted...that sulfuric scent, pungent. What a waste.* He stumbled onto the rocky shore—the restless sea crashing waves behind him—and scanned the dark horizon for the cabin, and then he moved on; bare feet trudging over cold stones. A chill on the night wind brushed over his wet form.

Breathing from his mouth, he was forced to stumble onwards. Adrenaline wore off quickly, and the pain in his flank mounted with each step. He wrapped arms round his torso. Before long, he was shivering uncontrollably.

Roughly hewn logs barely illuminated in the moonless night were close. Another hiss erupted. A man rose from behind an old stump. With arms spread out to the sides, the wild man crashed over the damp soil. Dysart steadied himself for another fight.

Within seconds, the twisted man set upon him. Dysart gripped the wiry creature's jaw and tossed the assailant through the air. Wasting no time, he pounced; repeated blows unleashed a flat, hacking sound. The scrambling man writhed beneath Dysart's weight.

Then, he bit him, drawing blood from torn flesh. Dysart howled from the separation of his meat from bone. Falling onto his rear, he glared at the man with widened eyes. The grotesque enemy stood quickly before thrusting a knee into Dysart's chin.

Three sounds swiftly cut through the wind. Each one stopped abruptly with a reverberating *thwang*. Both Dysart and the wild man held firm. Three arrows protruded from the creature's chest. He slumped to his knees, so Dysart broke off an arrow, stretched the man's neck then stuck the splintered shaft into his throat. A gurgle escaped. A trickle of blood spilled from the wound. Death rattled. Dysart sighed. *A rough beginning.*

"Oi," a man's voice called from the darkness.

Dysart spun round, back towards the cabin. With slacked jaw, he saw a figure approaching slowly. It was a bald man holding a bow. Arrows sat in a small quiver hanging off his hip. With his head cocked to the side, the figure spoke. "A new arrival, eh? Not safe out here...but I suppose you don't need me telling you that."

Dysart stood, and looking upon the man, he shook his head in silent reply.

"You're all wet," the bald man continued. "Boat crashed ashore? That's all right, happens to the best of us...or the worse. Which are you?" Dysart pushed his hair from his face. Gasping, soaked, and freezing to the bone, he remained speechless. "Not much for talking? Perhaps, you don't speak the tongue? No worries, chum. Let me take you inside."

After a motion of the hand to follow, they both trudged towards the cabin. Moments of walking in silence persisted. Before long, they were upon the modest housing. Firelight broke through cracks in the rudimentary, wooden door. The man stopped short.

"No sudden moves, now," he admonished.

Dysart scrutinized him. He was tall and lanky, and clad in an old, dark tunic. It hung a bit loosely. He gave a solemn nod.

"Alright. Good, so you do understand, eh?"

Again, Dysart nodded. They stepped inside. Immediately, the man shut the door and barred it. The cabin was a simple, one-room design. A cot covered in straw lay in one corner. Wooden chairs and a table stood before the fireplace. The spit was devoid of meats. A scent permeated from a boiling kettle; onions. The man motioned to stand by the fire. Dysart obliged. Droplets of blood were still trickling down his arm.

Crackling from the fire gave no pause for silence. The two looked upon each other for a long moment. Dysart was not a young man; the plan to break the blood contract came from careful considerations, meditation, and loss of loved ones; a culmination of years of hard work. He was aged, but he was strong. The resolve of an entire people shone in his eyes.

"So what's wrong with you? You don't speak," the man snipped.

Dysart simply opened his mouth wide to reveal that his tongue was neatly removed. A frown creased the man's sunken jowls while he stroked his chin in wonder. He walked a few paces in thought, passing by a handful of small, stone sculptures.

"Well now...that's a fair reason to be silent, I suppose. Are you an escaped prisoner? We get some of those, you know?" Dysart remained stoic, simply shaking his head. "Well, have a seat. Me name's Talbot."

Dysart eased onto the hard, wooden chair. He removed his tattered, green shirt and held it, balled, to his wounded arm. A glance at his flank revealed a purple blemish.

“Looks broken,” Talbot remarked. Dysart gave a subtle shrug. “You write? I suppose we might communicate in such a fashion.”

The stranger scoured the modest cabin. By the fireplace was a table. A severed pig—more bone than meat—sat atop it. Dropping his shirt on the table, he moved towards the pig.

“Hungry, are you,” Talbot asked, looking for quill and parchment. “I was collecting more wood to roast some ham before I heard your scuffle.”

Dysart ignored the ramblings. He reached into the pig’s abdomen, tore the entrails free then scraped at the emptied cavity with his fingernails. Talbot watched. Fright crept up his spine. Carefully, he reached for a dagger at his waist.

The stranger turned to face the man, lifted his chin, and scrawled a rune onto his throat; the only dry skin on his body. From everywhere at once, a piercing scream resonated until it localized from within Dysart’s a throat. Then, it was a booming rumble. Talbot fell onto the floor, eyes wide in horror.

The brutish man took a menacing step then spoke in a gravelly voice, “Fear not. I bear you no ill will, but time is precious. This hog’s blood is weak.” Talbot exhaled powerfully, pulling himself together before taking a seat. “My name is Dysart. You may know this island was once inhabited by a people called Cayne. You may also know the Cayne awoke a terrible Daemon, Salamandrus, and he brought his evil to the surface. Cayneians guided by hubris entreated a pact. After regretting their contract for power, they sealed Salamandrus away, but he is hungry, and the Cayne are fools.

“Instead of ending their service to Salamandrus, they departed from this place, hoping to retain their power...hoping to be spared his wrath. As time elapsed, and the Cayneians continued their practice of Sang Daemanus, the Daemon invaded the hearts of men of power. Others were drawn here against their will.

“I have arrived to absolve my people. Alas, Salamandrus has wrecked my ship. All my men are dead, all my possessions lost to the sea,” Dysart explained. Talbot remained awestricken. He said nothing. Through clenched teeth, he breathed loudly. “Well then...tell me what you can about this island, as I have never been...nor have those who...taught me.”

Mere seconds after completion of his words, the rune flashed a subtle orange—a dying ember—then evaporated. Talbot, finally gaining a degree of control over his rattled form, nodded accordingly.

“Alright, then. Where do I begin,” he asked more of himself than Dysart. “Suppose I should start with meself. I was one of many born to those who were sent here by the King of Ilteriel. Yep, been here quite a while and thought maybe life would be a bit better closer to shore than the heart of the island.

“Things weren’t so bad, really. I mean, with no sun in the sky, it’s tough to find food. Well, good food; seems like the island likes to keep people barely alive rather than dead.”

Talbot’s eyes grew glassy. The swaying light from the flames gave him a most depressing air. The slight grooves on Dysart’s face contorted as he listened.

“Look, mate, I don’t think there’s any way off this island. No one who comes here, comes here on purpose...’least not since the king himself came, and that was close to twenty years ago.”

They looked upon each other. Dysart gave a subtle motion of his head for Talbot to continue. He grumbled in return then took to the pig.

“Fine,” he said, hacking off chunks of flesh with a small cleaver. “I never heard anything about a Daemon, but I did hear that the expedition, what came before the king, unleashed some awful evil. ‘Course, the story also goes they did so ‘cause they were stuck on the island already, so who’s to say what’s what?”

Dysart lightly tapped his chest twice in reply; the implication being that he knew all too well.

Talbot conceded with a shrug, exhale, and rub at his chin, saying, “Well, chum, what’re you going to do? Walk off into the night? You’ll get killed.”

The warrior stared at him. No expression gave any inclination as to his plans. The silence made Talbot uncomfortable.

“Look...I, uh, I’ve got some old gear you can use...I,” he was nearly on the verge of tears. “Hmph, it was me son’s...I had passed it to him from me father. He was one o’ the guards, what came on the first expedition.”

Dysart maintained his steely gaze on the willowy man. Unable to speak, the long stare gave rise to empathy. Talbot managed a weak smile before wandering over to an armoire in disrepair by the far corner. A moment of clatter ensued while the man rooted out some equipment. He carried the bundle to the table and unfurled the hide. With the clanking of steel, several, useful pieces of equipment were revealed.

“I never knew anything but the horrors of this wretched place. Me father taught to me survive, and I tried to pass such knowledge on to me son,” he trailed off.

Set upon the brown hide, an axe was most prevalent. Firelight glinted off the crescent, steel blade. Alongside it was a set of studded, leather bracers, boots, a dagger, and the belt, which previously held the hide in a bundle.

Dysart grasped the axe. He took a few swings to test the weight. *A good heft for hacking.*

“Right then. Listen, chum,” Talbot’s eyes turned fierce while advising. “There was a settlement not far from here to the east. It’s been a long time since I left for the shore, thinking it might be safer, but I suggest you seek it out.

“If there’s anyone, what might help you find this Daemon, they’ll be there. I can’t begin to imagine where such a creature might reside, though. Chances are you’re stuck here like the rest of us. If you’re right, though, and this Daemon does exist...land a blow for ole’ Talbot, eh?”

Dysart closed his eyes before giving a solemn nod.

“Have a drink before you leave?”

The brute gave no reply. Talbot smacked his lips, snatched a tankard from the table, and filled it with mead. He slid it over, yet Dysart refused it. Instead, he placed the boots on his feet, the bracers over his forearms, laced the belt about his waist, and hung the weapons from his hip. Finally, he placed a hand on Talbot’s shoulder. After a subtle squeeze, he made for the door. Talbot followed.

“Got to lock it after you go, you know? East is that way,” he added while pointing with his head. “In case you’re not certain.”

Dysart removed the bar and handed it to Talbot. With a step into the cold night, he breathed deeply. The door shut behind him. Wood sliding against wood resounded. *East...as good a start as any.*

He marched into the darkness. Low clouds had accumulated during his time indoors. The sky was depressing, ominous. No sounds emanated from the surroundings. Only the soft crunch of brush and rock beneath boots remained regular.

Moments drifted by. Dysart kept vigilant, his eyes scanning the hills in the distance. His ears took note of any discrepancy in the silence. For a while, his breathing—and the occasional rustle of breezes over brush—accompanied his march. *By the Gods, my blood boils for this resolution.*

He sighed from aggravation, yet remained wholly focused on his one goal—to reach the settlement. It wasn't a difficult task, not for Dysart. The first requirement to even attempt the ritual of Sang Daemanus was unconditional determination; the art of holding one's mind still, one's heart steady. Only after proof of such an accomplishment—in his particular case it was standing in a freezing river for two days per his grandfather's request—was a man allowed to move on to the next step, learning the bloodrunes.

For hours, he continued his ceaseless approach. The pain in his flank yet lingered. At least his arm had ceased to bleed. He stopped abruptly. After rolling his head to loosen his neck, Dysart took wary stock of his surroundings. The ground had elevated slightly. The wind grew a little colder, a little stronger. *A scent. What is it? Death?* The island was much more foreign than he'd imagined. He waited a spell. Nothing.

He pressed forwards, and before too much longer, a glow grew visible in the distance. *The settlement? Perhaps it is more lively than Talbot implied.* Dysart quickened his pace.

Chapter Twenty-Eight- Salamandrus

Darkness enveloped the dying Cayneian. Bled by hallowed magic, the Daemonic influences inside his body ebbed away, and his mind grew silent. In the darkness, an orange ember sprouted to life. A subtle, wavering glow gave life to another ember, and another. Behind the embers, a figure started to burn. Slowly, one flame lapped over another until a figure came into view. Like a dream, Dysart observed silently from his half dead state of mind.

In the darkness was a Daemon forged of orange flame. Kneeling with head drooped, and arms, and throat bound by chains of white light, the essence of Salamandrus—an enormous abomination—gave birth to red flesh. The Daemon strode forth from its own flame.

This creature, the physical Daemon, walked freely. Black horns protruded from a flat face. No nose, only long nostrils flaring, spouted flame. An angular mouth comprised of many teeth grinned. The hoofed Daemon approached, tail whipping behind him. Flames graced his wake.

“Hah, ha, ha, haaah,” the Daemon laughed while stretching old muscles. “Dysart.” With a struggled inhalation, the warrior opened his eyes to their fullest. From his side, he looked up at the Daemon. “Now we meet in person,” Salamandrus scoffed as it took a knee.

Dysart tried to come to his feet by pushing off the bloody stone, but his fingers no longer worked. They unfeelingly brushed through the ichor. He was beyond weary, sapped of all strength. He made to speak, but no sounds came. There was no pain, only numbness.

“Oh, do you require assistance?” Salamandrus joked. “Let me help you.”

Salamandrus reached a claw to scoop up its plaything, and wrapped giant fingers round Dysart’s throat. The beast lifted him off the ground. While the man’s feet dangled, more blood poured over the Daemon’s wrist from the gaping wound across the Cayneian’s throat.

“What did you really think was going to happen?” Dysart looked away. Salamandrus grinned, and flames shot from its nostrils. “Before I use what’s left of you to break my binds, let me show you something. I think you’ll enjoy this.”

The Daemon stood, and with black fingernails, Salamandrus pulled aside a flap of flesh from its abdomen. Inside the very creature, many ghostly forms of white gossamer writhed amongst each other. One coalesced into the face of Fausto.

“What have you done, Dysart? Why have you freed the beast?” it cried out.

The Daemon chuckled. Dysart did not so much as stir.

“Perhaps, you like this one...sooo pathetic,” Salamandrus offered. The face of Fausto shifted to that of Lysander. It only mumbled unintelligibly. A once broken mind was now, but a broken soul. “What a wretch. Naturally, it spawned something as poor as you. You are a maggot to me, Dysart,” Salamandrus said, pulling the Cayneian in close. The Daemon’s breath was hotter than any forge. Dysart’s lips burned to a crisp. Blisters spotted his face. “Here is my favorite one,” Salamandrus grinned.

Lysander's visage gave way before Dysart's own face appeared. "Is this what you wanted?" Dysart's soul asked. "Is this what you fought for? What a failure. You don't deserve to exist."

Salamandrus blinked, so caught up in its own display of hubris, it did not realize the warrior yet scrawling with damaged, bloody thumb, over his abdomen. Having purposefully rested on his side to keep his belly from blotting, the last rune, the one for the center of the heptogram, and to finish the summons, was but a word. *Ifritus*.

The runes glowed white hot, and Dysart screamed. The most agonizing pain imaginable ripped him to pieces. Flames spouted from the summons, covering the warrior. The former Cayneian was soon reduced to ash. It fell like sand from Salamandrus's tightening grip. From those cinders an expanding mass of fiery tendrils crawled free.

"What?" Salamandrus choked. "No. Noooo!"

The Daemon tried to leap from the tomb, but one tendril wrapped round hooped leg, and took it to the ground. A Daemon of bright, white flames crawled free from Dysart's flaring ashes. It was a stout monster with horns of fire growing from the base of a hammer shaped head all the way to a squat tail. Towering over the tiny Salamandrus, Ifritus, the First Flame, glared.

"Let me go," Salamandrus cried, scrambling in futility.

"Little brother," Ifritus growled with a voice like thunder. "Thought you made a nice little world for yourself among the humans? Father is displeased."

Salamandrus howled in terror as the flames melted off all the red flesh. A black skeleton was revealed, and it too, rapidly burned away. The white flame strode over to the orange flame bound by chains and ripped it free from magical binds.

The forces sparked and crackled as the chains broke. Free from sanctified will, Salamandrus rushed to fiery feet. The two fires collided, relinquishing their Daemonic forms. Swirling masses of blaze wrapped round and burst into each other. For minutes, the two erupted with puffs, whips, and streaks of flame. There was nothing in the tomb of Salamandrus, the Chamber of the First Blood, only darkness and flames.

While the struggle between two, ultimate powers raged on, the orange one slowly subsided. It fell prey to the first flame; the brightest flame, a pure flame. Finally, only the white one remained, and the form of Ifritus coalesced again. It held a ball of undulating, orange fire in smoldering hand.

Ifritus clasped fingers round the ball, and it popped. A single, orange ember fell to the ground. Then, Ifritus erupted, sailing away, ever upwards, leaving darkness, and the single, orange ember to burn away.

Epilogue

Talbot maintained a slow trudge. Dark clouds overhead brought new rains. Soft droplets dribbled over his bald head. Wondering just what fate had in store for him, the island answered with a violent explosion. He whipped his head round to witness a great geyser of white flames erupt from Castle Golvundehr. Once the spiraling mass vanished into the heavens, darkness returned to the island. Talbot shook his head in wonder.

“Have you done it, Dysart? Are we safe now?”

Something changed. It took a moment, but there was a scent on the winds. Talbot rubbed his face. *This wind is...kind?* Slowly, the lighting round him grew in brilliance. With furrowed brow, he scrutinized the world.

The rains gave out, and he craned his neck to the sky. Clouds whisked away, revealing a blue tapestry. *Never seen it like that before.* He gasped in amazement. Having been born on the island, Talbot never knew the grace of day.

“What, what is this?” Rays of gold broke through the diminishing veil of clouds. Brightness forced his eyes shut. He turned to look away, but the radiance was everywhere. Shielding his eyes with his hand, he tried to observe the yellow, glowing orb in the sky. “Such wonderful incandescence!”

A gracious and generous warmth washed over his skin. Tingling, the hair of his arms stood. The man wavered, gasping while his midsection convulsed. Unable to bear the beauty of day, he slumped to his knees. Tears streamed from his eyes. Talbot sobbed for this first time since witnessing the death of his family.

“Me family...Dysart, you, you’ve done it. May they finally rest in peace,” he cried. “Dysaaart! You magnificent man, you have delivered us!”

For a long moment, Talbot just cried. His arms, ever reaching to the sky for a gentle embrace, shook with tension. When tears of relief and joy subsided, he laughed. From the bottom of his heart, he laughed. Then, he drew the spatha, and sank the blade deep into the ground. Turning his back to Castle Golvundehr, he stood, making his way home to the cabin by the shore.

It was a long journey. With the practice of Sang Daemanus obliterated, the runes upon his gear faded. It took days to reach his home, but they were peaceful days. Birds sang as they flew overhead. Wild animals romped through lush, green grasses. Only once, he feared the world had ended; the first night, when the sun set, and the moon came out, but the following morning, he understood; it was only natural.

Finally, at his run down cabin, Talbot busied himself with an old hobby, sculpting. First, he crafted the visage of his lovely wife then he crafted the happy smile of his son. The days drifted by in quiet peace.

“What better way to show me appreciation?”

From a large slab of stone, he worked feverishly to create a monument to Dysart. For weeks, he fished, hunted, grew crops, and chipped away at the slab until the hero, the legend, Dysart, stood crafted of immortal stone. Talbot even journeyed deep into Golvundehr, unable to fight off curiosity.

He did not find much, aside from old carnage, but he buried the dead, and retrieved Vamvos. By wrapping the ancient artifact in several cloths, he carried it all the way back to the statue, and placed it in the legend’s hand. Slowly, ice formed over his

creation, and the statue of stone became a statue of ice. It was the cold resolve of Dysart, practitioner of Sang Daemanus, Cayneian, and savior of Volgunther.

Much time passed in quietude and loneliness. Talbot wondered just when death might creep up on him.

“Doesn’t matter now. I can die a happy man,” he grinned to the birds chirping in the trees.

Day in, and day out, he never tired of looking at the blue sky. Sometimes, white, fluffy clouds rolled, and sometimes it rained, but it was never the detrimental downpour to which he was accustomed.

One bright morning, something out at sea drew his attention. A large ship came into view. The thought of new people was more than enough to bring him to his feet jumping for joy. When the sloops pulled ashore, Talbot waved overhead, screaming cheers of welcome. Men in leather armoring approached. They had women and children in tow.

“Hail,” Talbot called.

“Well met, stranger,” a man said. “We have sailed here to build new lives.”

“Then, new lives you will build. This is a good place,” Talbot replied with joy.

Discussions of the world at large were traded for legends of the island. Most everyone, especially the children, were interested in stories about the man forged of ice.

“His name was Dysart,” an aged Talbot recounted. “He was me friend. He was a hero. Dysart gave his life, so this island might thrive.”

Months and years passed. Travelers came, and went, but the island grew. Townships were erected. Volgunther was such a lovely place. Due to his knowledge of the island, and great charisma, many people flocked to Talbot, asking him to run for mayor or councilman.

“No, thank you. I belong on the shores,” he always answered with patient stoicism.

Yet, he continued to recount the tale of Dysart, and all the great heroes who fell against the Daemon.

“A Daemon,” a young boy asked. “Is there, really, such a thing?”

“No longer, Renthar, for the Daemon has been defeated,” Talbot replied.

That night, lying awake in bed, the young boy, Renthar, gazed up at the wooden ceiling of his small room. Unable to sleep, he thought ceaselessly about the Cayneian. Then, there was nothing. Renthar fell to sleep, but in sleep, there was an ember. Weak radiance undulated from the ember. The orange light seemed to breathe.

“*Renthar,*” the ember beckoned.

“Yes?”

“*Do you remember this?*”

A scene played out before his eyes. It was the time before his father and uncle set sail. Little Renthar heard his parents arguing, followed by the flat sound of open hand striking flesh. A woman cried out, but he was unable to see her.

“What, what is this?” Renthar whispered.

“*Your father said your mother died of illness. Does this sound like illness?*”

“What are you saying?” the boy demanded.

“*You don’t think your father took you from home to see the world, do you?*” the ember probed. “*You don’t think he loves you...do you?*”

“I—”

“Remember.”

Again the scene played out, only slower, and the ember provided a different perspective. It was that of the boy’s father shaking his mother and slapping her round.

“He killed her, and then he fled,” the ember affirmed.

“N-no, that can’t be,” Renthlar cried.

“Oh, but it is. Tell me, little Renthlar, do you want power? The legend, Dysart, fought those who brought evil.”

A moment of silence prevailed while the boy scrutinized the ember. It glowed softly and continued to undulate, but gave little inclination to its true purpose.

“Yes,” the boy finally answered.

“Tell me you want it. Tell me you burn for it.”

The boy was angry. Thinking his father beat his mother to death then lied was too much to bear.

“I want it. I want power. I burn for it,” Renthlar stammered.

“Yes, I can give it to you.”

“Please, give it to me,” Renthlar pleaded.

“So be it,” the ember conceded. “Know my name.”

“What is it?”

“Salamandrus, the unending.”

The ember erupted in flames.