

SHADOWBANE

Shadowbane.

A famous name, and a grim one. The sword that broke the Elvish Empire, with a blade to cleave the World. The greatest weapon that shall ever be forged, Shadowbane bears a bright name, a name of hope. And yet, dark omens have gathered about that hallowed blade from the time of its forging. Legends coil and twist around it like thorny vines, crowned with fierce blossoms, red as blood.

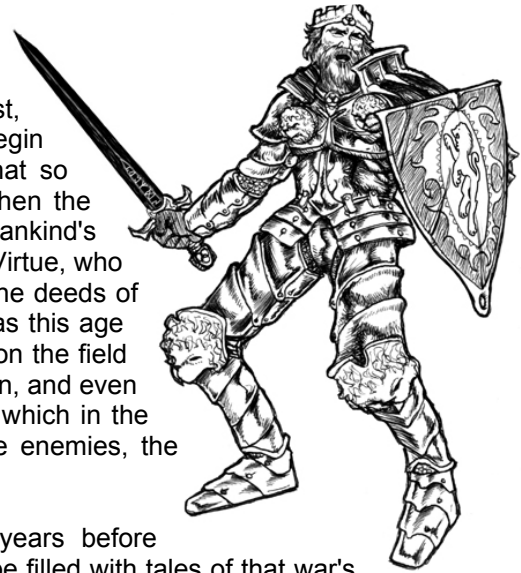
It is said that giving a sword a name gives the blade a soul as well, and that named blades carve out destinies of their own choosing. Such weapons, it is whispered, have the power to change the World. Men should be wary of named swords, for it is said that sometimes the mightiest Sword wields the Man, and not the other way around. Aye, all of these things are said of swords with but one name. Shadowbane must then truly be both great and terrible, for it has not one name but many. Light Bringer some have called it, also Beacon Blade, Second Sun, King Maker, Morning's Star, God's Hand, the Sword of Thuring, Wyrms' Killer, Paladinsword, and Bere Gund's Prize. These are its glorious names, but the blade has garnered dark names as well: King Breaker, World Cleaver, Maker's Maimer, the Sword of Vengeance, Shining Slaughter, Traitor, and Cambruin's Bane. Here is a blade that has carved its destiny into the face of time. All the children of the World live in the shadow of this mighty sword, and we who struggle in this Age of Strife dance upon its edge.

Three times Shadowbane's light has shone in our World, in three different Ages. Three Wars have turned their course when Shadowbane was drawn in them. In all that time, three great Sons of Men have borne the blade in battle, as have two Elves, and one God. You may think that you know of Shadowbane, but no doubt you only know the ending of the story. Yes, Shadowbane slew the High King at Kierhaven, and dealt the stroke that brought the Turning. But how came Cambruin to bear the mighty blade? Why was it forged, and why did it turn so cruelly on the hand of him who wielded it? To know all these answers you must hear the Legend of Shadowbane, a tale as long and grim as Time itself. Listen to this chronicle of glory and despair, and you shall hear within it all the tragedy of our Sundered World told plain.

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The Age of Kings

Better to begin near the end, where memories are freshest, before working backward into the mists of time. We shall begin with Shadowbane's third coming, in the Age of Kings that so recently and darkly ended. This was the Age of Men, when the Ten Kingdoms of old stood as the pinnacle of young Mankind's achievements. It was the age of the High King, the Fire of Virtue, who fought not for power but for Justice. His great Code and the deeds of his shining Champions united the Sons of Men. Glorious as this age was, it was also an age of war. Cambruin won his crown on the field of battle, and fought long, bloody fights with Orcs, Northmen, and even Giants. Yet all these wars pale beside the War of Tears, which in the end was the undoing of both the High King and his dire enemies, the Elvish Host.



The War of Tears had raged for three times twenty years before Cambruin even won his crown, and entire volumes could be filled with tales of that war's deeds, both glorious and foul. Some say 'twas the folly of Cambruin himself that brought the final wrath of the Elves upon his High Kingdom, while others whisper that Valdimanthor the Elfking was filled with spite and envy when he beheld the splendor of Cambruin's court. Some say that spellbound Oracles and Genies whispered dire prophecies to the Elfking, who raised the bloody sword of War to destroy Cambruin before he could bring about the Turning. Many believe that the bitter war was the All-Father's final punishment for the Elves, visited on them by His will to repay their great treasons of past Ages. Perhaps all these tales are true, but who can say? Only a handful of those who saw the beginning of that terrible war lived to see the ending of it, and many of those died in the Turning. Many are the legends and chronicles of that dark struggle, and they need not all be recounted here. But hearken, and learn how Cambruin came to bear Shadowbane, the Sword of Kings, King Maker and King Breaker. That tale is wed to the story of Caeric Blackhammer, the First Paladin, noblest of Cambruin's Champions, who alone achieved the Quest for the Sword.

The Tale of Caeric Blackhammer and the Quest for the Sword

Ignobly born yet blessed with a heart and soul as pure as any Archon's, Caeric was born the son of Goerin, a humble blacksmith, and spent his childhood days working in his father's smithy, forging weapons for the endless wars that plagued his people. In the summer of his seventh year the boy's life changed forever when he saw Cambruin and his Champions riding through his village on the way to battle. Thinking the shining warriors were angels, Caeric was overjoyed to learn that they were but men, and vowed to join them when he came of age. Five years later Caeric left home to seek the King, wearing armor forged by his own hand and carrying only his hammer for a weapon. He met the haughty Knight Sir Rovennor upon the road, and the Champion told him, jesting, that fifty victories in battle were required before a squire could be dubbed a Knight. Prompted by Sir Rovennor's jest, Caeric bested a full fifty Knights and Warlords, armed in every battle only with his hammer and his unyielding Virtue. Caeric bound each Knight with an oath, demanding that they go to the court of the King Cambruin and pledge their fealty to him. After sending the fifty vanquished foes to Cambruin, Caeric finally came to the King at Caledorn. Cambruin knighted Caeric on the spot, naming him one of his Champions. So knighted, Caeric took up a sword and served his King with much honor and glory. "Blackhammer," the name Rovennor had given Caeric in jest, became a title of great honor, and many of Cambruin's bravest Knights strove to follow the boy's worthy example.

Caeric Blackhammer stood proudly at Cambruin's side when he was crowned High King, and served as his most trusted Champion for nearly twenty winters. Caeric was renowned through all the High Kingdom for his valor and skill at arms, and his name quickly became legend. Never did he lose in battle or joust, no matter how great the foe, for his Virtue gave him the strength and fortitude of an Archon, without limits. But the High King had not reigned long before fortune turned against him. In the tenth year of the High King's reign (which was also the one thousand and seventy-sixth year of the Age of Kings) the War of Tears, which had ebbed in recent times, began anew with redoubled fury. For a score of years Valdimanthor the Elfking had waited, brooding on his cold throne and gathering his strength. His Magi spent months working the mighty spells that restored the ancient bindings the Elves had held over their darkest creations, the bestial Minotaurs of the Utter North. Armed and equipped with the finest creations of Elvish smiths, Valdimanthor's host was nigh invincible. Without warning the Elfking unleashed his hosts upon the High Kingdom, and all the realms of Men shook before that terrible onslaught. Even the strength of Cambruin's Champions was for naught against the fell might of the Elfking, and all of Cambruin's power was blunted by fey trickery. Sorcery and treachery were the weapons of the Elves, and defeat followed fast upon defeat. Cambruin began to fear the worst, and grew rash and quick to anger. Sickened to the soul by the suffering of the people and the land, a great despair fell upon the High King. Even the magic and wisdom of Zeristan the Wise could not turn the evil tide. Many Knights turned grim and spiteful, but Caeric remained ever hopeful. In the fifteenth year of the High King's reign, Cambruin made his winter court at the city of Melissar, his Knights wearied from long months of march and battle. All seemed hopeless, until the Feast of St. Lorne on Midwinter's Day, when a great wonder was visited upon the court.

The High King and all his Champions sat at table on the eve of the Martyrdom of Saint Lorne, and a great gloom hung over all the hall. The feast had barely begun when all the doors and windows of the hall slammed shut of their own accord, and the coals in the great fire pit were quenched, plunging all the company into darkness. The Knights rose to their feet and drew their swords, fearing ambush or treachery. Then legend has it that the sound of a great music came to their ears, like unto the singing of the Archons. A light sprang forth in the darkness, so that the King and all his Champions were bedazzled thereby. As they blinked in wonder, they saw that the light streamed from the image of a great sword, hanging in the air. The mighty blade's hilt was wrought of gold and platinum, and its darkened edge was terrible. The spectral sword appeared above the seat of Cambruin, so that the King was most bathed in its light, and then a voice, high and clear, rang through above the music.

"Mighty King, will of the All-Father on Earth, take heart in this, Man's darkest hour. Yea, a great blight is upon the land, a shadow whose power none can resist. But know this, there is a light within the darkness, and that light shines still. Look upon this blade, and know that you behold the Shadowbane, the Blade of Destiny, lost to the shadows of death and time. If you would preserve all that you have wrought, look to the Sword for your salvation. The return of the sword shall rekindle the hope of the World, and with it you shall conquer any foe. But beware, for the road is long and dark. It winds through the Lands of the Living and the Dead, from which no mortal has ever returned. Only the greatest of Knights may attempt this perilous quest, for if their valor and virtue prove unworthy, death shall be the least of the woes they shall suffer."

After the vision faded, a great wind blew through the hall, the windows flew open again and the fire roared back to life. Cambruin was much roused by the vision, and asked which of his Champions would follow him on this mighty quest. The Champions all spoke as one, but then an ancient voice rang out, ancient and powerful as the North Wind. "Beware, my liege," said Zeristan, aged counselor to the High King, "for all the High Kingdom is locked in deadly war with the legions of the Elves. 'Twould not be meet for you to ride far afield, not now, when the final battle looms before us." Cambruin reluctantly agreed, but allowed that any of his Champions who would do so should have his leave to undertake this quest in his name. Again as one the Knights raised their swords to pledge themselves to the Quest, but again Zeristan interrupted. "Noble Champions, be warned, for Shadowbane has a grim and dire destiny. An age ago a mighty curse was laid upon this blade, and any man or woman who bears it shall die upon its edge. To fail in

this quest means certain death, so choose wisely! 'Tis no dishonor to stay and fight at the side of your King, for if Cambruin fall before the sword may be recovered, the quest will be in vain." And with those grim words many of the Knights lowered their swords, renouncing the quest. Of all Cambruin's Champions, three times three stood fast: Sir Gerriant the Brave, Sir Mardiock Wyrmslayer, Sir Rovennor of Alvaetia, and five other Knights of lesser name and glory. The ninth and last to stand was Caeric, who knelt before the King and humbly begged leave to seek the sword. "You shall be sorely missed, you who helped forge my kingdom," Cambruin said, "but I send you gladly, for I deem that if any man living may achieve this quest, it shall be you." "T'will be the All-Father's doing, not mine," Caeric answered, and made ready for a long journey.

And so the Nine, the greatest Knights ever to serve a King, rode forth upon the Quest for the Sword. Many are the tales of that long Quest, both grim and glorious, and the deeds of the Questers are renowned by all, even unto these dark days. But alas, every Knight that rode forth save one was doomed to fail, and while some returned to rejoin the High King, their spirits broken in defeat, the Quest was the doom of brave Sir Giroise, and Sir Rovennor, and others besides, whose loss the High King long repented. Theirs are stories for another day. Only Sir Caeric Blackhammer, the Paladin, would see that grim quest to its end, and achieve Shadowbane after many long and terrible trials.

The road was long and hard, for Shadowbane lay in the dread realm of Ithriana, Lich Queen of the Unholy Legion, lost in the Mists of Death. Unto the ends of the World did Caeric ride, through lands left barren by the War of the Scourge, where mighty beasts born of Chaos lurked, and sorely tried Sir Caeric's strength. Caeric endured three great Tests, a test of his might at Castle Mourvais, a test of Faith at the Perilous Abbey, and a test of Loyalty when he was forced to leave Heloise, his true love, to continue his quest. At last Caeric rode into realms unknown to any of the Sons of Men, dark realms which teemed with hideous beasts. There his lance was shattered, his warhorse slain, his sword broken, and his shield rent asunder. Long he wandered, lost in the wastes, until a dark mist enfolded him, and he came to the land of Shadow. There the Dead awaited him, and fell upon Caeric with a fury unimaginable. But ever the Knight stood his ground, armed only with the hammer that was his namesake, and though chilled unto his soul by the foul wrath of the undead, his virtue never waned, but bore him through the unholy hosts alive.

At every turn, however, the Knight was weakened by another wound, and before long Caeric halted, for he had not the strength to walk the Dark Road any farther. As Caeric reached the limits of his strength, a light shone out even in that uttermost darkness. Teluranel, Archon of Grace, came unto the beleaguered Knight. The radiance of all the stars shone in his face, and the wind from his wings was like a dream of Spring in that dead land. "Good Knight, holiest and most righteous of the Sons of Men, I am come to aid thee." the angel said. "I can bear you from this dire place, back to houses of healing and comfort, where your strength may help Cambruin in his hour of need." "I can not," Caeric answered, "For I should rather die ten thousand times than break mine oath to my King. If thou art a true Archon, and not some glamour sent to deceive me and lure me to ruin, give me the strength to finish this great Quest, that I might so serve my King and kindle hope again in the weary World." "I shall do it, if it be thy will." The Archon said. "Know that you shall finish your great Quest, but know also that if you lift the sword you seek in battle, you must surely die." Caeric smiled, and answered, "I have no life but that which I pledged to Cambruin's service. I will gladly die twice ten thousand times if I might fulfill my duty to the High King, and give to him the sword that shall gain him victory."

"So be it then, noblest of men. The choice is yours." The Archon answered, and Caeric's soul was filled with grace and holiness, so that he shone like a beacon in that darkest of realms. And his strength was redoubled, and all his wounds healed, and thus was Caeric reborn the first Paladin, with the power of the Archons surging in his veins. No soulless servant of the Dark could stand against his righteous fury. Caeric's hammer felled a legion of phantoms, wraiths, and mighty wights, and at last he found Shadowbane, the Sword of Destiny, lying in a shallow grave. He took up the sword and slew the dread Lich Queen herself, breaking her deadly spells forever. And so it

came to pass that Caeric Blackhammer rode beyond the bounds of the World into the Lands of the Dead and then returned, and Shadowbane came with him.

Alas, he had been too long on his quest. Caeric raced back to find Heloise and her people, but he was too late: in Caeric's absence dark enemies had slain fair Heloise and all her folk, hanging their bloody bodies from a tree for the crows to feast upon. Weeping, Caeric took down his love from that grisly tree, and donned his lady's scarf, soaked crimson with her innocent blood. And so Caeric had passed the Test of Loyalty, yet failed his heart's true love. For the rest of his days Caeric wore Heloise's crimson sash as the badge of his failure. Even as he mourned his love, Caeric realized that Fate was not yet done with her cruelties: the Paladin had achieved his mighty quest and found Shadowbane, but hundreds of leagues still lay between him and the High King. Alone in the wilds, Caeric prayed to the All-Father and the Archons, beseeching them to send him a steed. For two days Caeric went afoot, and on the third day his prayers were answered.

Dire indeed was Cambruin's need, for Valdimanthor had sent forth all his Minotaurs in great battalions, strengthened and driven into a deadly rage through fey magic. Of the Nine Champions who had ridden on the quest, five had been cruelly slain and three more had returned humbled. Only Caeric's fate remained unknown, and even Cambruin feared the worst. Again and again Cambruin had sallied forth his great army to meet them, but each time the Minotaurs were like tall cliffs matched against the tide – Cambruin's army crashed and raged upon them like waves, but the cliffs remained after the thunder and fury. Cambruin had withdrawn the last of his strength to the city of Rengest, which was built atop a great hill not three miles from the Elvish ruins of Vodiranon. The Elves and their foul servants ringed the great hill, blocking all escape, and rejoiced, for they reckoned that the hour of their victory was at hand. Even against these terrible odds Cambruin stood determined, however, and the strength of his courage lifted up the soul of every man in his command. Every yeoman, soldier, and Champion was ready to die in the coming battle, but all were resolved to make the Elves pay dearly for their victory.

The hosts assembled, facing each other across the fields of Rennelind, even at the dawning of the day. And as the cock crowed the dawn, it seemed that a star appeared, low in the sky, that glimmered more brightly than the first glimmer of the Sun. And the Elves rejoiced, for the Morningstar was dear to them, and a tidings of good fortune, and all Valdimanthor's host raised their voices in a mighty song, which Cambruin's Men trembled to hear. And the host of soldiers began to quail in fear, but Cambruin knelt and prayed to the All-Father. And all his men prayed with him, each hoping to die well in the great king's service. A hush fell upon the field, and it seemed that Cambruin's doom was at hand. But just then Zeristan stepped forward, with eyes keen as any owl's, and pointed to the sky. "Soldiers of the High King, rejoice!" he cried, "Rejoice and ride to victory! The hour of your deliverance is at hand! Shadowbane is coming! Shadowbane is coming!" And all looked, and saw that the star was no star at all, but a mighty horse, pale as silver, soaring upon great white wings, racing toward the field faster than the wind. And astride that blessed steed sat Caeric Blackhammer, Caeric the Blessed, First among Paladins, and Shadowbane was in his hand, its glimmering hilt outshining all the stars of morning. The Elvish ranks paused, uncertain what fate lay before them, and Cambruin signaled the charge. Thus the Battle of Rennelind was joined, and the course of the War of Tears altered forever.

The High King stood at the center of the fray, where he was beset by the Elfking himself, surrounded by the mighty Blade Weavers of his Royal Guard and a throng of Minotaurs. Cambruin's sword was taken from him, stripped away by the wicked, curved longblade of King Valdimanthor, and a savage Minotaur broke it in his mighty hands. Caeric sped to the High King's aid, but the arrows of the Elvish Archers flew swift as lightning, and smote his winged steed, killing it beneath him. As the winged horse and mighty rider plummeted toward the field, Caeric threw Shadowbane, and it spun through the sky end over end like a bolt of fire, a Comet of Doom. And for a moment all the fighting stopped as the soldiers of both armies stood transfixed, staring in wonder at the blade's flight. Cambruin reached skyward, and called the name of the All-Father, and the sword fell into his grasp. Shadowbane's hilt shone with the light of a thousand suns, and its dark blade swallowed every shadow, leaving only radiance and light. In that moment all the

spells of the Elvish wizards were undone. The Minotaurs were driven unto madness, for Elf magic that had bound their wills frayed like withered silk and fell to nothing. Cambruin swung, and Valdimathor wept, for he knew his doom was at hand. The King moved to block Cambruin's stroke, but Shadowbane shattered Imdralar, the Elf-King's mighty blade, and swept on unimpeded, cleaving Valdimanthor's head from his body in one stroke. And all the Elves wept and fled the field while the Minotaurs ran wild, fleeing in terror or falling upon their former masters with all their fury.

So was Cambruin victorious upon the field of Rennelind, and the strength of the Elvish Kingdom was broken forever. And though Caeric was sorely wounded by his fall to earth, he soon recovered and stood again at the side of the High King. All Men rejoiced at Shadowbane's return, and named it King Maker, Morningstar, the Paladinsword, and the Beacon Blade. And all the Elves held it in terror, and fled before Sillestor's Blade, Ithriana's Bane, the Sword of Vengeance. Never again would the Elves gain victory against Cambruin upon the field of battle, though the War of Tears was still far from over. Listen then, to the final parts of the Legend of Shadowbane, a tale both dark and dolorous.

The Day of Woe, the Fall of the High King, and the Wounding of the World

Twice, the ancient legends say, Shadowbane had vanished into darkness, and twice had it returned, borne in the hands of a Hero, to turn the tide of a great war. Once Shadowbane was in his hand, the High King Cambruin rode to victory after victory, and even greater glory and worship were heaped upon his name. Great praise was also given to Caeric Blackhammer, the First Paladin, who fame and glory were second only to the King's. Dozens of Knights lived by Caeric's example, all of them wearing red sashes in the likeness of their leader. So the Paladin's badge of shame became a symbol of high honor, one the Knights of the Sash wear to this day. Strive as they might, none of these Knights, however virtuous, could ever match Caeric in grace, and the Blackhammer remained the only true Paladin.

Even as his armies surged on to the inevitable triumph, King Cambruin was troubled by the shadows of the past. Three times Zeristan bid the High King cast Shadowbane into the sea, and thus escape the sword's deadly curse. Three times Cambruin refused. "This blade was wrought at the beginning of Ages to destroy evil, not good," he told the Wizard, "and as for the curse, I am neither man nor woman. I am the King." Zeristan pressed no further, but a great dread lay heavy on his heart. Alas, the Wizard's fears would bear fruit all too soon.

Other shadows grew, and even on the brink of triumph, Cambruin's court was wracked by new tensions. Proud Knights who had been warlords before they bent their knees to the High King resented the glory that clung to Caeric, a baseborn boy. They chafed under the pious teachings of the Paladin, and feared that the Knights of the Sash would be given the lion's share of the glory when the war was finally done. Knights that Caeric had bested in jousts and battles began to whisper that the Paladin was a cheat and a fraud, and began to question the worth of the Code. The High King managed to quell the strife, but the discord that had been born of the Quest for Shadowbane took deep root. And so it came to pass that one of Cambruin's own, a villain so black his name shall never again be uttered by any child of the All-Father, turned from the path of goodness. This darkest of Knights became The Traitor, whose pride would break the World.

Long did The Traitor conspire with the Elves, even as Cambruin prepared for his final victory. Far to the windswept North, Kierhaven, the last great fortress of the Elves was besieged and overwhelmed by the armies of the High King. The battle was terrible, and there the legends say Caeric himself was slain. Some say that mere chance brought the mighty Knight down, while others whisper that a gang of envious Knights abandoned Caeric in the thick of combat, betraying him to ruin. Zeristan feared the curse of Shadowbane had finally done its work. Though the Paladin had fallen, the battle was won, and the last stronghold of the Elves was broken.

After the battle, Cambruin raced through the forest, chasing the fleeing remnants of the Elvish host. Sir Gerriant the Old was also with them, as was that Other whose deeds have blotted out his name. Gerriant had come to doubt The Traitor's intentions, though the High King had never feared one of his own might betray him. Thus the Traitor led the two down forest paths pre-arranged, to a glade before an ancient oak tree. There an Elvish assassin lay in wait, armed with arrows enchanted for death and ruin. But Gerriant saw the archer even as he took aim, and threw himself at the High King, shoving him aside. Thus did Sir Gerriant take the arrow meant for his liege, and the chill of Death grasped his heart. Cambruin, knocked off balance by his loyal servant, dropped Shadowbane to the ground, and the Traitor saw his opportunity. He took up Shadowbane, the Sword of Destiny, and stabbed Cambruin through the heart. So mighty was his traitorous stroke that blade pierced backplate, man, and breastplate besides. The High King was driven back and pinned to the mighty tree, and his heart's blood ran out upon it and seeped into the ground. So Cambruin died, betrayed, and Shadowbane's curse was fulfilled once again.

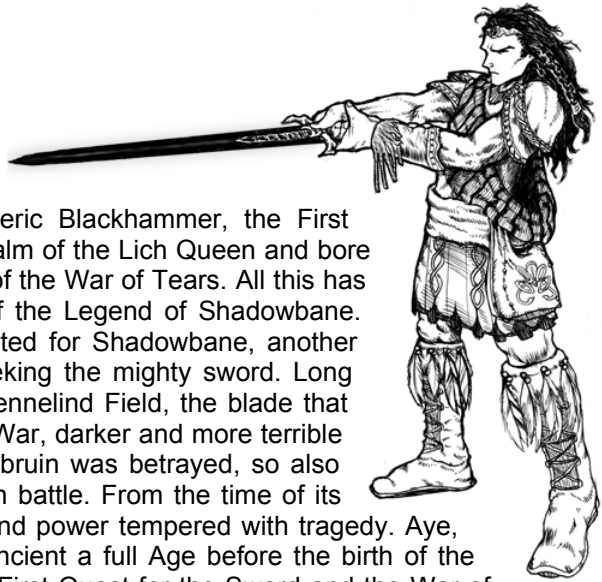
And as it was writ in the Book of Swords, that Woeful Stroke did sunder the World and bring about The Turning. For that oak upon which Cambruin died and which Shadowbane pierced to its heartwood was the First Tree, the World Tree, where the All-Father himself had awakened Braialla at the beginning of the World. The King's blood soaked into the wood, and as it drank the blood of the All-Father's divine Champion, the Tree turned unto stone. The skies darkened, the World trembled, and all was sundered. The doors of Heaven and Hell closed fast, the Sun turned a sickly crimson, and even Shadowbane's hilt shone no longer. Bitter tears flowed from the eyes of Gerriant the Old, and so he died, the last man to meet true death from that dark day to this. So ended the Age of Kings, and began this Age of Strife.

And so ends the legend of Shadowbane. But this portion of the tale still begs many questions. How did Shadowbane, most perfect of swords, come to be cursed? Why did the Elves so fear it? How came the shining blade of light come to rest in the dark hands of Ithriana the Lich Queen?

The answers to these questions form another tale, a story as long as the one just finished. To learn the truth, one must go back to the Age of Days, and hear the tale of Beregund Bladeseeker, the first Son of Man to find and wield Shadowbane...

The Age of Days

You know now the sad tale of Cambruin, who bore Shadowbane and died upon the point of that selfsame sword. You have heard how Caeric Blackhammer, the First Paladin, found the sword of power in the black realm of the Lich Queen and bore it back from the shadow of Death to turn the tide of the War of Tears. All this has been told, and yet it is only one small portion of the Legend of Shadowbane. More than a thousand years before Caeric quested for Shadowbane, another great hero roamed to the ends of the World seeking the mighty sword. Long before Shadowbane's power won the battle at Rennelind Field, the blade that Bards call Lightbringer turned the tide of another War, darker and more terrible than even the War of Tears. Alas, even as Cambruin was betrayed, so also was the first Son of Man to wield Shadowbane in battle. From the time of its forging, Shadowbane has always brought glory and power tempered with tragedy. Aye, the tale of Shadowbane was already long and ancient a full Age before the birth of the High King. Would you know the epic story of the First Quest for the Sword and the War of the Scourge? Listen then, and remember.



Shadowbane's dread light flared in the World for the second time during the Age of Days, which began and ended with the All-Father's greatest triumphs. For truly, in that Age the Gods themselves still walked the face of the World, and all the World's Children were mightier than they are now. Many are the legends that linger of that time, some glorious, some terrible. It is written that the Age of Days began when the Giants, wrought by the All-Father's own hand, smashed the Runes of Power they had carved into the Cliffs of Fate, thereby setting Time and Destiny into motion. It was only then that the All-Father fashioned Man, greatest of His children, and His design for the World was finally achieved.

The First Men, the Titans, founded the Blessed Realm of Ardan, a paradise the likes of which shall never again be known in this World. Few legends of Ardan now remain, how the first realm of Men prospered, and was broken through the treachery of the Elves. The Titans were undone, and their children, the Sons of Men, were weakened by foul sorcery and made to work as thralls of the Deathless Empire. The Chronicles of the Kings tell how those men relearned speech and language from their cruel masters, then escaped to learn justice and war from the noble Centaurs. In those days the great war between the Giants and the Dwarves began, fought over possession of the precious Runestones, and that Age saw also the birth of the Northmen. Many great heroes, chieftains, and kings lived in those days, but their deeds must be recounted elsewhere. For nearly all of the Age of Days Shadowbane lay far from the hand of Men or Elves. The mighty blade was hidden deep in the earth, safe in the care of the Dwarves. Shadowbane remained there until the War of the Scourge, the terrible war with Chaos that ended the Age of Days and elevated the Sons of Men to their rightful destiny at last.

Much is written elsewhere of the beginnings of that horrible War, how the wicked Elves of the deserts, long forgotten by their kin, came to worship the Dragon, and plotted to destroy the World. The Elves of the Deathless Empire punished them for their treason, and named them Irekei, the Outcasts, and waged bloody war upon them for five generations. And so again Elf slaughtered Elf, and the bitter conflict ranged across the surface of the World until a mighty wizard of the Irekei opened the Chaos Gate, dire artifact of some forgotten bygone Age, in one last act of terrible retribution. All the Hosts of Chaos flooded into the world, vast armies of misshapen spawn led by the great Darklords themselves, and they ravaged all that lay within their path.

So began the War of the Scourge, the direst conflict in all the History of the World. Yet even in this dark hour hope was reborn, for the Elves, Men, Centaurs, and even the Giants joined

together in a mighty alliance to save the World, forgetting the enmity that had divided them since Time began. So all of the All-Father's children stood as one for the only time in the History of the World. Alas, even all their might together could not stem the foul tide of Chaos. Battle after battle was lost, and many heroes whose like shall never again be seen died in that terrible conflict.

Beregund was such a man.

The Tale of Beregund Bladeseeker and the First Quest for the Sword

Beregund, the Bladeseeker, son of Beredir, was a mighty warrior in that time, the oldest son of the greatest chieftain of the Gorthini, the Hill People. It is said that he stood taller than most Elves, and that his hair was as black as the breast of a raven. He was a clever man, quick of wit and strong of limb, who none could hope to match in cunning. Raised for the hunt since childhood, Beregund was a master of the spear, and the keenness of his eye drew the envy of eagles: no prey could hope to escape whenever Beredir's son put arrow to bowstring. His happy childhood ended quickly, for not even the far roaming Hill Peoples could escape the ravages of the War of the Scourge. On the slopes of Mount Kenderun the valiant Hillmen met the hordes of Vesheroth, the Faceless Horror, most wicked of the Dark Lords. And so the Gorthini fell, rent by the claws of the darkspawn, or withered by the foul touch of their dread lord. Beredir was slain, and though Beregund tried to avenge his father, his spear was sundered on the Dark Lord's hide and Beregund fell senseless, and did not stir until after the battle was long over.

When Beregund awoke, he saw the bodies of his father and all his kinsmen, and raged against all the Fates that his beloved people should die so cruelly. Just then, a lone figure wrapped in a dark cloak came over the bloody field, and regarded the hero in silence. "Who now are you?" Beregund asked, and raised the point of his broken spear, "Some wraith come to claim the last of the Gorthini? Go back to your shadow, for I have no time for Death whilst my father lies unavenged." And the cloaked figure drew back its hood, and lo! There stood an elf woman, her hair like threads of shining silver, her eyes the deep violet of dusk. "Stay your hand, mighty son of Beredir," spake she, and her words were like a music that overwhelmed Beregund's soul, calming him. "Yours is not the only father slain in this Dark War. I am Ithriana, last daughter of a King of the Deathless Folk, and I have wandered long in search of a hero. Would you truly avenge the deaths of your people, no matter the cost?"

"I would," said Beregund, enchanted by the maiden's beauty and enraptured by her voice, "I swear it." And so she led him from that fell field unto her secret bower in the nearby wood, and there told him many things.

Beregund learned of the Elder Days, of the glories of the Deathless Empire so long gone, and of the great sword, Shadowbane, the Blade of the Sun, that no eyes had seen since before the Titans first arose. Here was a weapon that could kill even a Dark Lord, a sword that could turn the tide of the War of the Scourge. Here was a fitting instrument of vengeance. And Beregund vowed to take up the quest for this mighty blade, that he might avenge both their slain fathers. Where the blade might be found even Ithriana could not tell, for she knew only that Thurin the Smith had borne it away from her people. Beregund was undaunted, and made ready for a great journey. Ithriana gave mighty gifts to Beregund, to help him in his quest: a fine bow of yew wood whose string was woven from her silver hair, and a quiver of arrows that burst into flame in flight. She gave him also a dozen silver apples, so nourishing and fine that a single bite of one might sustain a man for a week with no other food. Her final gift was a pair of boots, fashioned of deer leather and lined with eagle's down. As long as he wore them, Beregund could run with the speed of a stag flying from the hunt, and almost never tire. Beregund thanked the silvery maiden for her gifts, and pledged to return to her, for Ithriana's beauty had kindled a fierce love in his heart. His word given a third time, Beregund departed and began his long quest.

Long was Beregund's road, and the deeds of his great quest are well remembered in song and legend. What mortal man shall ever match his strength and courage? For three full years he raced across the ravaged World, and dire were the perils that beset him. Three great tests awaited the hero: a trial of wits, of strength, and of courage. In the Uttermost North he found Ymur the Old, who Cuthric King of the Northmen had blinded in a vengeful rage. Beregund used all his cunning, and tricked the ancient Giant into telling him of Thurin, and he learned that Shadowbane was kept in the Halls of Haganduur, guarded by the Dwarves, Thurin's stone children. At the last the Ymur told the hero the grim destiny the Giant had read carved on the Cliffs of Fate: that a mortal Man was destined to free Shadowbane from its dark prison, but that he would meet a cruel end, slain by treachery. Beregund killed the ancient Giant, as had been foretold, and fearsome though Ymur's four sons were, they could not match Beregund's swift feet or withstand the power of his enchanted bow.

From the uttermost North, Beregund's road led to the steaming jungles of the South, where he sought out the ancient Furies of the Amazons in the heart of the steaming jungles. The ancient storm witches knew the way to Haganduur, but the price of that secret was high indeed. In the heart of the Black Fens of Viriang, among sunken ruins more ancient than any Elf, there lived a Terror few had seen and lived: Naargal, the Ebon Serpent, who the Amazons called the Silent Terror. The Furies demanded the skin of the foul beast in return for the knowledge Beregund sought, and long did he wander through foul marshes and fetid fens before he came to the Nameless Ruins. There, in the midst of hideous effigies carved into stone, the great black serpent found Beredir's Son, and fell on him in a silent fury. Beregund nearly died in the coils of that great serpent, but the Bladeseecker's strength could not be overcome. Beregund's hands held the head of the mighty snake, and kept its venom dripping fangs from their mark. The hero squeezed with all his strength, and he crushed the life out of the snake that had crushed so many in its scaly vise. Beregund gave the snake's hide to the Furies, as they had demanded, and in return the witches told Beredir's Son of the secret way into Haganduur. The first hall of the Dwarves had no doorway that looked out into Sun or sky, the Furies whispered. Haganduur could only be reached by through ancient tunnel, a secret road hidden in the deeps, that the Dwarves had delved long ago. That road ended in the ruins of Kolddovor by the Western Sea. Beregund left the jungles and swamps behind him, and sped on his way.

Through blighted battlefields and plagues of demons Beregund raced to those ancient ruins, and on his winding way met Zaeristan, the Wise, Lord of the Owls, greatest Wizard ever born to the race of Men. The same Zaeristan, you ask, that would serve as counselor to the High King Cambruin a millenium later in the Age of Kings? The very same! For Zeristan was already as old as the hills and trees when Beregund met him on his way, and it is said that he has learned to cheat time itself. The Lord of Owls knew of Beregund's errand, and had long waited for Shadowbane to return into the World. Much aid did Zaeristan offer the mighty Hillman, for wise was the Wizard in ancient lore. He warned Beregund of the Doom that had come to Kolddovor: a mighty Drake, spawn of the Dragon itself, the deadly terror Brakaladur, whose gaze was death. To aid the hero in his quest, Zeristan gave unto him a helm of brass, the ancient helmet Glimring, enchanted long before the first morning. Beregund gave the Wizard many thanks, and sped on his way. At last Beregund came to Kolddovor by the Western Sea, and sought there the entrance to the Hidden Road.

In the deepest vaults of the tumbled ruins of that Dwarvish stronghold, Beregund finally found the Drake, sleeping on a bed of plundered gold and shattered stone. Even asleep, the sight of wyrmiling was terrible enough to put any lesser Man to flight – but Beregund was no such Man. His courage bore him past the Terror, and his enchanted boots bore him through Brakaladur's vault without any sound or trace. Long Beregund walked in darkness along the Dwarvish road, then donned the magic helm and entered into Haganduur, the oldest and greatest city of the Dwarves. Where Kolddovor had been abandoned, Haganduur was full of Thurin's sons, and Beregund became the first Son of Man to set eyes on a Dwarf since before the fall of Ardan. Many were the guards and sentinels that paced the halls, but Glimring's magic let the

Bladeseeker walk unseen through those ancient mazes and mansions. The halls of the Dwarves were wondrous and vast, and Beregund quickly found himself lost in an endless labyrinth of forges and great halls. But Beregund was clever, and listened to the Dwarves around him, hiding in shadowed corners and sustaining himself with Ithriana's silver apples. After a span of some weeks Beregund learned the Dwarvish speech, and from overheard conversations among the dour Dwarves learned the way to his final goal. At last Beregund came to the Armory of Thurin and crept inside, unseen and unheard by the Dwarvish guards or their magical watchbeasts of stone. There the hero took up Shadowbane, and bore it in secret from the Halls of Haganduur. The Dwarves had lived in secret for centuries, not venturing in the Roofless World of sky and sun since the Wars of the Stones. The Sons of Thurin never suspected that anyone could find their secret realm, and so their precautions were undone. By the time the blade's theft was noticed, Beregund was at the far end of the hidden road, back in the cellars of Kolldevor.

Here the hero faced his final trial, for in his haste, Beregund had let slip the cloak he had wrapped around Shadowbane, and the light of its bright hilt shone free. Brakaladur awoke the instant the blade's light came into his hall, and the Terror's keen eyes and keener nose pierced the magic helm's enchantments, for not even Glimring's magic could keep its wearer hidden from the ancient Drake. Long did they fight, ancient Hero and hideous Drake, and ever the beast sought to strike Beregund dead with the terror in its eyes. But never was a braver man born in all the history of the World – Beregund looked into the wyrm's dreadful eyes and stood fast, unafraid. Glimring's magic, old and strong, was proof against the Drake's hellish breath, and the beast's armor, harder than ancient granite, was as clay beneath the edge of Shadowbane. Three times Thurin's blade smote the Terror, and its fiery blood ran down upon the ancient stone and plundered gold, melting and ruining them. Finally Beregund cleaved the Drake's foul head from its body, and though its blood was hot as the touch of flame, Beregund emerged from the battle unharmed. And so it was that Beregund, bathed in dragon's blood, emerged from Kolldevor with Shadowbane held high in one hand and the Drake's fell head in the other. A new mantle he wore, of scaly Drake's hide cut from dead Brakaladur. Beregund's long quest was at last achieved, and he ran back into the realms of Men, howling for vengeance.

The bards and troubadours recall the terrible siege of Vodiranon, where an Elvish legion and their Human allies fought for five whole years against the direst horde of Chaos. On leathery wings the demon spawn attacked the defenders from the air, while hideous things burrowed into the city from below, and tainted mockeries of worldly beasts, twisted into terrors by the touch of Chaos, swarmed the walls. The Faceless Horror Veshteroth led the terrible siege, and his mighty incantations turned the sky black and tumbled down the ancient walls that had withstood even the tremors of the Dragon's rising.

But just as all seemed lost, Beregund appeared, running faster than the wind, with Shadowbane held high, blade black as night, hilt shining like a fallen star. And the Demon host quailed, and the besieged defenders rejoiced, for they knew their salvation was at hand. Beregund sped like a flaming scythe through the terrible horde. No blade or dart could pierce his Dragon Cloak, no spell of ruin or madness could best Glimring's magic, and no creature born of Chaos could endure the touch of Thurin's wondrous blade. So Shadowbane was finally raised again in battle, and nothing, not even Veshteroth itself, could taste its edge and live. Beregund avenged his father atop the rubble of the ancient walls of Vodiranon, and the dying shriek of the Dark Lord sent his twisted hosts fleeing in terror. And so the Elves sang in joy at the Second Sun's return, and mighty Lords and Kings of Men knelt down before Beregund their savior. As one they called for him to lead them to victory against the black hosts of Chaos, but Beregund refused. The hero was haunted by the words of Ymur the Old, and in the eyes of the Elf-Lords Beregund saw only avarice and envy. Zaeristan the Wise was there, and counseled Beregund to bear the blade to glory, but Beregund refused even his advice, fearing the treachery the Giant had foretold. So Beregund left the fields of Vodiranon, and returned to the place where his quest had begun. Of the three oaths he had made to Ithriana, the last remained undone. And so Beregund ran back to the Silver maid's bower, to deliver the news that both her father and his were avenged.

Great was the hero's joy at seeing his love's fair face again, and a long time in the telling was the hero's glorious tale. Joyous was the reunion of the two lovers, and joyful were their celebrations. Ithriana finally bade her love drink some Elvish wine to celebrate his victory, and Bere Gund took the cup gladly. No sooner had he drunk than he felt the venom burning in his blood, and Bere Gund knew he was betrayed. For lo, this Elvish woman was the falsest creature living, the granddaughter of Sillestor himself, who had sent Bere Gund on his quest so that she might steal back the mighty sword, her long lost birthright. "And so at last I shall have my vengeance, mortal Man," she said, "for it was your Maker who slew my father, not the spawn of Chaos. The Sons of Men shall pay dear for the sins of their Father. You shall be but the first to die."

Ithriana expounded all her dark designs as Bere Gund felt his life slipping from him. Armed with Shadowbane, Ithriana would scatter the hordes of Chaos, destroy the weak Humans, then rule over all the World as a grim and terrible queen. All this Bere Gund heard, and his heart was filled with wrath. He rose to his feet, but his strength failed him, and he fell again to the floor. As the poison boiled in his blood, he uttered a mighty doom: "Oh false traitoress, hear these, my final words. I, who have conquered Giant and Drake, Demon and Serpent, I, who brought the sword Shadowbane from the darkness back into the light, I, Bere Gund son of Beredir, place my Blood Curse upon this wicked blade. It has betrayed me as surely as it betrayed the hand of its maker. I name this blade "Traitor" – let it be the death of any who wield it, from this day unto the ending of the World! In the name of the All-Father, so let it be! Die, foul woman! Die and be damned!" And thus Bere Gund died, and the Dragon's blood that stained his brow glistened as he uttered his fell curse.

But Ithriana never heeded the last words of Bere Gund Bladeseeker, and rode instead to find her people. Alas, her doom was sealed – no sooner had she joined her kinsmen than all the Elflords fell to bickering over who was most worthy of bearing the great blade. The Lords of Men were filled with rage as soon as they saw Bere Gund's blade in Ithriana's hand, and left their former allies to their fate. The Elflords squabbled and bickered amongst themselves. For Ithriana had many brothers, and none of them could bear to see their younger sister rule. Pride spawned envy, which begat treachery, and soon the blades of the Dar Khelegur were turned upon each other, not the enemy. And so the campaigns of the Elves flagged, and their armies hesitated. Alas, they hesitated too long. The forces of Chaos saw their opening, and struck.

As soon as the mighty deed had been done, word had reached the Dark Lords of Veshteroth's death. At the news the masters of the dark hordes trembled in their fear, knowing that none of their power could match this blade of dark and light if it were turned against them. In desperation, they planned to withdraw into the void, until spies whispered to them of the dissention that was tearing apart the Elvish Host. The Chaos Lords threw all of their might upon the hosts of the Dar Khelegur, and wove mighty spells to blunt the edge of Shadowbane forever. Ithriana and all her legions were slain in the onslaught, and so complete was the onslaught that the Elf Queen's stronghold was never seen again. The Silver Maid and all her captains arose again, dead, dark, twisted, and horrible. Was it the foul magic of Chaos that raised them up again as dark undead? None can say. Some have surmised that their greed and malice drove them into life beyond death, or perhaps it was Bere Gund's curse, fueled by the blood of a Dragon-kin. So they died and were damned, and while the War of the Scourge ground on they lurked in shadows. Mighty were the magics that the Dark Lords wove about Ithriana and all her kin, and so deep was the Shadow that fell over them that her fortress did vanish altogether, swallowed by an evil mist. Thus it was that Shadowbane returned too briefly to the World, and was all too quickly lost again.

Long after the shameful death of Bere Gund the War of the Scourge ground on, devouring lands, lives, and noble heroes in its bloody maw. How much sooner could that mighty conflict have ended if Bere Gund had heeded the Owl Lord's counsel? How many of the dead, mighty and humble, soldier or innocent, would have been spared their cruel fate and lived out full lives? How much that was fair could have escaped destruction? These answers lie beyond all reckoning, for

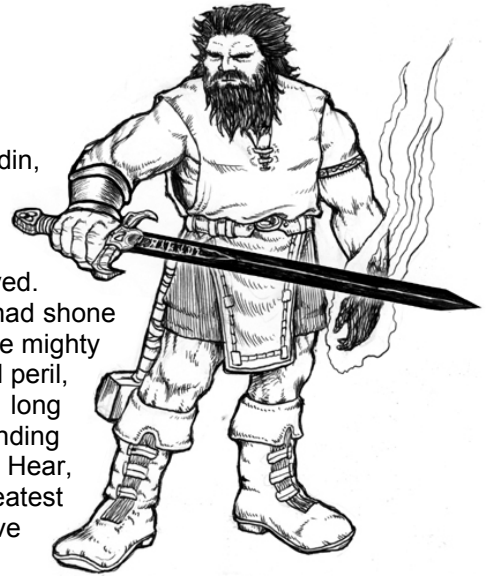
Beregund met the fate that was written for him, and Shadowbane would remain unseen until the Paladin's fateful quest, a full Age of the World later.

So ends the tale of Beregund, the grim chronicle of his triumph and his undoing. But there are many questions still unanswered – why did Ithriana lay claim to the blade? How, why, and when was Shadowbane forged? How did the Elves come to lose the sword of power, and how came it into the Dwarves' keeping? To answer these riddles we must look back even farther, back to the Age of Twilight, before the birth of Men, Time, and even the Sun. Back in that time before Time the greatest chapter of Shadowbane's long chronicle was written, a story of terror, hope, glory, and sacrifice...

This story, too, shall be told.

The Age of Twilight

You have heard the story of Caeric Blackhammer the First Paladin, who brought Shadowbane out of the Darkness to aid his King. You have also heard of Cambruin the High King, who Shadowbane both saved and slew. You know the tale of Beregund Bladeseeker, who won Shadowbane at great peril only to be betrayed. Their stories are the stuff of legends, and yet Shadowbane's light had shone for countless years before it ever came into Beregund's hand. Three mighty Sons of Men have borne the shining sword through quest, war, and peril, yet Shadowbane was not forged for Men, but for the Elves, long long ago, after the fall of the Kingdom of Twilight. You know the tragic ending of the Legend of Shadowbane, now you shall learn its beginning. Hear, then, of the peril that drove Thurin the Shaper to forge the greatest blade that shall ever be, and how pain, sacrifice and treachery have hovered around Shadowbane from the time of its forging.



A Dark Beginning: the Tale of the Dragon

No Human can remember the beginning of this story, for Shadowbane was fashioned before the first Sons of Men beheld the dawn. The saga begins in the Age of Twilight, before Time and before days, when the World was young, and bathed in eternal twilight, lit by the glimmering stars and the mingled light of two Moons, one of Gold and one of Silver. It was during this timeless age of peace and beauty that the Dragon, most ancient of evils, Terror of Terrors, stirred from its long sleep deep under the ground. None, not even the All-Father, can say how long the Terror had slept there, but its waking was a calamity the likes of which the World had never known. Thurin the Shaper and the All-Father Himself were there in the dark when the Dragon stirred, and fought the beast when it awoke. So terrible was their struggle that the earth heaved and cracked, and all the bright cities of the Elves were unmade in a whirlwind of destruction. So did the Elves come to first know death. King Gilliandor, Lord of the Sidhe, First King of the Elves and oldest Child of Braialla, met his doom when his mighty palace, taller than the trees, was shattered and fell in upon him.

At last the Horror burst forth from the deeps, and the force of its rising toppled mountains. The Elves were filled with rage and despair, and all the might of the Twilight Kingdom rushed forth to meet the Dragon on Hennan Gallorach, the Field of Sorrows. All the sons of Gilliandor rode at the head of the army, weeping tears of rage for the death of the father, and singing fell songs of death and vengeance. What army shall ever match the power of that Elvish host, mighty in arms and in magic, the firstborn of all the peoples of the World? All the light of the stars glimmered on their armor as they came, and a bright flame shone in all their eyes. As one the host attacked, the great Blade Weavers unleashing their dance of fury as deadly arrows filled the sky, thicker than raindrops in a storm. Fire and lightning exploded forth, along with all the sorceries the greatest Magi could muster. But the Dragon was untouched, and roused itself, larger than the mightiest of mountains, and its vast wings blotted out the sky. The Terror laughed, and all the Elvish host quailed in fear. The Dragon's wrath fell on the Elves like a cyclone upon a wheat field. Much of the great host was slain in a brief instant, smashed by the shock of the beast's woeful tail, spitted upon its teeth, or seared to ashes by the fumes of its foul breath. The shattered remnants of the greatest army ever known fled in terror, crying that the Doom of the World was at hand.

It was then that the All-Father and Thurin emerged from the earth, and attacked the beast with all their might. Even Thurin's great axe, which had been the bane of a Chaos Lord, could not rend the Dragon's hide, and the All-Father's mighty fists could not dent the Dragon's scales. Though His blows were for naught, the All-Father's assault stilled the Dragon's fury for a moment. The

Terror turned from its slaughter and regarded the All-Father. Its eyes met His, and the Beast spake: "I know you, Son of Lion," it hissed with a voice that was Death itself. "You are a fool to rouse Me from my slumber, for now you and all your Children shall bleed for it." The beast turned from the fleeing Elves and smote the All-Father, lashing Him with its terrible claws. Dismayed, the All-Father leaped into the sky, hoping to draw The Dragon after Him and trap it in the Void, far away from the newborn World.

Yet the Dragon followed Him not, but instead breathed deep, and let fly all the flame from within its foul heart, rushing forth with the fury of a volcano. So fierce was its fire that all the fleeing Elves that looked back were struck blind by the radiance of the Dragon's breath, and in the wake of its deafening roar all the World fell silent. But the All-Father was swift, and evaded the hellish blast. The flames reached high into the sky, even unto Vollianth, the Golden Moon, which bore the full brunt of the Dragon's fury. The moon kindled, and thus was born the Sun, which burns to this day with the blinding flame of wyrmsbreath. In that moment, our World was changed forever.

Volliandra the Golden Lady, Goddess of the Golden Moon who the Elves named Gwergelind, Mother of Dreams, was consumed in her palace by the hellish flames and died in hellish agony. Malog her husband, the Companion to the All-Father known as the Warrior, was also there on Vollianth when it changed from Moon to Sun, and as he tried to shield his beloved from the flames they burned him unto the bone, disfiguring him for all eternity. And as Volliandra died her sister Saedron felt her pain, even in her palace of ice on the Silver Moon, and the torment drove her mad. So was one of the Gods themselves slain, and two more nearly unmade. Malog fell from the inferno, a blazing comet with a tail of flame, and plummeted into the sea where the fire was quenched. So great were his wounds that he never joined the fateful battle.

The light of the newborn Sun shone full in The Dragon's eyes, and dazzled them. And so the All-Father dove down and grappled with the beast, and His strength held the Dragon fast. The Terror unlash hurricanes with the thrashing of its wings and sought to crush the All-Father in its dreaded coils, but still He held the Dragon at bay.

Just then the sound of a mighty horn echoed over the Hennan Gallorach, and the All-Father laughed even as He struggled, for He knew aid was at hand. And so it was that Kenaryn the Hunter came to the Field of Sorrows, his ebon steed running faster than the wind. Drawn from his Long Hunt by the tumult of the Dragon's rising, a rage was in the Hunter's eyes, and the point of his great spear flashed in the light of the new Sun. Even Thurin smiled to see his trusted companion. Kenaryn uttered a battle cry, leaped into the air, and smote the Dragon full in its great eye with his dreadful spear. Callanthyr was that weapon's name, the Spear of Kolaur the Dark Lord, which Kenaryn had taken as his prize when the All-Father and His Companions defeated the hordes of Chaos before the World was made. Born of Chaos and enchanted with power beyond reckoning, Callanthyr's point bit the Dragon, and sank deep. So even The Dragon was wounded, and knew pain at last. Its foul blood flowed forth, black as deepest night and bathed in sanguine flame, hotter even than molten steel. The Dragon shrieked in pain, and its thrashing was too great even for the All-Father to hold. The metal shaft of Callanthyr snapped in Kenaryn's hands, and the Dragon fled back beneath the ground into the deeps, back into its foul lair. The Terror fell again into a deep slumber, from which it has never stirred. There the Dragon lies still, bleeding its foul blood into the cracks of the deeps, the point of the Demon Spear still lodged in its eye. So shall it lie until the last days, when all the World will be unmade and even Death shall die.

On the surface the All-Father and His Companions looked in wonder upon the newborn Sun. All were wearied by the great battle, and the All-Father's wounds were grievous indeed. Kenaryn mourned the loss of his mighty spear, won in battle against the Hosts of Chaos, and Thurin's axe had melted at the touch of the Dragon's blood. And yet, the three Gods were filled with joy, for the Doom of the World had been averted. And so all the Elves emerged from hiding, there beneath the newborn Sun, and praised the name of the All-Father, who had driven this terror from them. But one mighty Elf-Lord, Sillestor of the Endless Wood, was dismayed. "This new Sun brings light unto the World, and its light is good and fair. Yet even in this light, a shadow broods in my heart.

For how can I know that this Terror will not rise again, to wreak an even greater havoc? All our sundered cities, even if they reach their former glory, will stand ever in the gloom of a Lurking Fear. How shall we escape this shadow?" The All-Father was silent, and thought long. At last spoke Thurin, the Shaper, Father of the Dwarves. "Fear not, forest child," spake he, "for though this fell beast casts the Shadow of Doom, it has kindled the Sun, greatest of lights. So shall it kindle another light to drive away all shadows." And Thurin took up the broken shaft of Callanthyr and went back into the earth, to the mansions of his children. There he began his greatest work.

The Blade and the Hilt: The Forging of Shadowbane

For four Ages of the World the Dwarves have labored in the deeps, and every day they sing the tale of Shadowbane's mighty forging.

Fresh from the Field of Sorrow did Thurin return to the Halls of Haganduur, the greatest stronghold of his children, and stood before his mighty forge at the core of the World. To him he called the seven Forge Masters, oldest of all the Dwarves, greatest in skill and craft of his children. Long they worked, grinding adamant, truesteel, and truesilver from the Bones of the World, and stoking the fire in Thurin's forge until it shone as the newborn Sun.

Thurin melted the shavings of those mighty metals, and fusing them into a new metal altogether. Into the mixture Thurin cast the shaft of Callanthyr, which had been wrought in the Void of Chaos out of dark elements outside the Universe. The alloy which was born in Thurin's forge was never given a name, and never again has the World seen its like. Thurin sang a great song as he worked, and put all of his strength, the strength of Earth, into the metal. And at the last, when the blank was made and the mold broken, Thurin took the metal to the First Anvil, and set to forging a great blade. So strong was the brand that Thurin's hammer could barely dent it, even when it shone white hot. And so Thurin took his forging hammer in both hands, and all the seven Forge Masters held the tongs, for it took the strength of all seven to hold the blade in place against the force of Thurin's blows. A thousand thousand times the blade was hammered, then heated, then folded asunder and hammered again. And all the while the Dwarves watched, and learned, and sang songs praising their father's craftsmanship.

When at last the mighty blade was finished, Thurin picked it up in his bare left hand and wandered far in the deeps, the hot steel shining like a torch. Finally he came near to that cave where the Dragon lay, wounded, bleeding from its eye. Thurin found a stream of the Dragon's blood and dipped the blade in to quench it. The touch of the white hot steel had not caused the Shaper the slightest harm, but the blood of the Dragon was too much even for Thurin's fortitude to withstand. The foul blood burned Thurin's hand unto the bone as he held the metal in, but never did the Shaper wince or flinch. As so was Thurin's left hand scarred, and he did go forth after with that hand gloved. Thus quenched in Dragon's blood Thurin drew out the great blade, and the metal was charred, black as the deepest shadow.

Once the mighty blade was finished, Thurin sent his children to seek Malog throughout the deeps, while the Shaper himself remained at Haganduur and wrought a great gift for his brother Godling. The Dwarves wandered far, and finally found Malog lying wounded in a cave by the sea, writhing in pain, hiding his ruined face in darkness. Thurin went to his brother, and learned how terrible Malog's wounds had been. The Warrior also told the Shaper of the crushing sorrow that lay upon his heart. "My bride is cruelly slain, and the Golden Moon that my heart so loved is no more," the Warrior said, "what cause have I to live now?"

"Life is its own cause." the Shaper answered. "I was never blessed with a wife, so I cannot fathom your distress. You live, brother. Let that be your comfort, for as long as you live, Volliandra's memory shall endure." And then Thurin gave to Malog the mask that he had wrought, a wondrous gift of gold and silver. "Wear this, my brother, and not a creature in the World can deny that you are the handsomest of the Gods." Thurin's words and his gift brought comfort to Malog's troubled

soul, and he gave the Shaper a gift in return: a lock of Volliandra's golden hair that the warrior had clutched tight in his hand even through the inferno. It was the only fragment of the golden Moon to survive the Dragon's Wrath. "Your gift does me great honor, brother," Thurin spake, "and I shall use it to avenge the wife you have so cruelly lost."

Thurin took his leave of Malog and returned to Haganduur. At his forge he took the lock of the Goddess' Hair and spun it into wire, bright and fair yet harder than steel. Thurin melted the wire in his forge and fashioned a hilt for his masterwork, cruelly barbed yet fair to behold. And as he worked Thurin sang mighty spells that coiled around the hilt, spells of Light, of Law, and of Power. When the work was done Thurin joined the hilt to the blade, and the gold shone forth with the mingled light of the dead Moon and the newborn Sun. Seven Runes of Power were graven on the blade, each the life's work of one of the seven Forge Masters. Thurin honed its edge on the Bones of the World. The darkness of the blade was balanced by the radiance of the hilt, and the Chaos stuff of Callanthyr was bound forever into a new form, ordered by the Shaper's will and vision.

At last the mighty effort was finished, and the time had come to test the blade. Thurin took the sword and held it high, then brought it down upon his great anvil, the heart of the First Forge. And lo! There was a flash like lightning and a shock like thunder, and the World itself did tremble. The Dwarves were hurled from their feet, and when they rose, they saw that the shining blade had cleaved through the entire anvil, wrought of solid adamant, and cut even through the great granite stone beneath it! The Dwarves wondered at the power of this mighty blade, and finally Thurin spoke, breaking the heavy silence.

"Never again shall I make so wondrous a work," spoke Thurin to his children, "and never again shall I put hammer to an Anvil. I must go now. Mine hand is ruined, my forging days are done." And the Dwarves mourned this news, but Thurin spoke further. "I bid you, good my children, to remember well all that I have taught you, and to build new forges. In them craft more great weapons like this one, so that the children of the All-Father might prevail against The Dragon should the Terror ever rise again." And so Thurin drew out the blade, took it from the forge, and walked out of the Halls of Haganduur. And ever after, from that day before days unto this, Thurin's children have worked in the shadow of the First Anvil, forging mighty weapons at their father's command.

And so Thurin came again to the surface of the World, and found the lands withering in the heat of the New Sun. Long he sought the Elves, and found them at last dwelling far from the Plain of Sorrows, where the trees still stood thick and twilight still ruled. There came he at last to Caras Gallinon, the New City, where he found Sillestor seated on the Throne of Stars. Sillestor welcomed Thurin with great ceremony, and told him of the strife that had befallen the Elves in the days since the Dragon's defeat. All of the heirs of the First King had fallen before The Dragon's wrath, and where at the World's flowering there had been one mighty folk, now four of Elves nations vied for mastery. Thurin cared little for the intrigues of the Elves, however. The Shaper told the fair king that he had come to keep his oath, made at Hennan Gallorach beneath the newborn Sun. And then Thurin drew forth the sword, with blade was dark as midnight and a hilt that shone with the Sun's brilliance, and all the Elves were struck dumb with wonder.

"Here is the greatest blade that ever shall be forged," Thurin spoke, "a light to hold back the Shadow of Oblivion. To a sundered weapon of Chaos I have brought Order, and what I have wrought cannot be unmade. All the strength of earth and wrath of fire is bound within its edge. Tempered in the Dragon's Blood, its light is the light of the Golden Moon, which the Dragon's fire destroyed. Its edge will cleave the flesh even of that great Terror. Stand in the shadow of fear no longer, fair Elf Lord. Now you and your folk are free."

Sillestor rejoiced, and took the blade. "Shadowbane I name you," the Elf-King said, "may you be the doom of all that is evil." And so Thurin left the Elves, and wandered long both on the World and under it.

A Fell Reckoning: The Treason of the Elves

That race of Elvenkind that Sillestor ruled came to call themselves the Dar Khelegur, the High Lords of Ice, for they made their kingdom in the far North where the winters are long and the winds are cruel. And always did Sillestor bear Shadowbane, carrying it as an emblem of his kingship, and his people called it the Second Sun, the Light within Twilight. This was an era the Elves recall as the Times of Parting, when the folk of the Twilight Kingdom were divided into four great nations, each with its own dreams and desires. The Dar Khelegur were ever the greatest and mightiest of the Elvish peoples, and their wizards delved long into the deepest secrets of creation and destruction. Slowly they grew decadent, and their hearts turned wicked. Sillestor dreamed of restoring the glory of the Twilight Kingdom, lost when the Sun was kindled. So Sillestor led the Dar Khelegur into a bitter war with the nations of their kinsmen. Ever did Sillestor bear Shadowbane at the vanguard of his army, and neither the mightiest Warriors nor the strongest Wizards could withstand him. So was a weapon of hope turned to slaughter, and the blade fated to destroy evil destroyed much that was beautiful and fair. Only one Elf nation escaped Sillestor's ambitions, the Khalinviri, the Children of the Sun who by choice stayed in the searing deserts that grew under the newborn Sun, still fixed in the sky. Sillestor crowned himself ruler of the Deathless Empire, the second great kingdom of the Elves.

Long did the Deathless Empire endure in that latter part of the Age of Twilight. It is told how as their memories of the Dragon faded, many Elves of that mighty kingdom began to spurn the name of the All-Father, blaming Him for first rousing the Terror, or for not defeating it sooner, when so many might have been saved. For the birth of the hateful Sun they blamed Him too, for the Elves mourned the death of the eternal twilight and missed their beloved stars. Some went even so far as to claim that the Elves were not born of His blood at all, and all Elvenfolk therefore owed this great Vagabond no honor or obedience. Thus began the Great Betrayal, when the folk of the Deathless Empire abandoned the All-Father's great temples, and instead worshipped the Beast Lords: cunning Wolf, mighty Bear, wicked Serpent, and many others whose names have been forgotten. Their Magi pierced the veil of Chaos, and trucked with Demons called from beyond the Void.

The All-Father is just, and wise, and generous, but even to His patience there is an ending. At last He returned to the lands of the Deathless Empire, and he chided the Elves for their wicked ways, commanding them to return to the path of righteousness. But the Elves mocked Him, and called up the avatars of the mighty Beast Gods, so that they might rend Him to pieces or drive Him away forever. To the All-Father's aid came Kenaryn the Hunter, and all the Centaurs with him, and thus was joined a bitter conflict. The All-Father called down his host of Archons to subdue the strength of the Deathless Empire while He fought the great Beast Lords with his bare hands. So Avatar fought Avatar, and the Maker of Men subdued the Lords of the Beasts one by one. This great war is remembered as the Time of Taming, one of the greatest conflicts the World has ever seen. And Sillestor bore Shadowbane into the fray, and the blade was so mighty that not even the Archons could withstand its fury. Loromir, Archon of Peace, was slain by Sillestor's hand, and all peace died with him. There are those among the Wise who believe that all of the strife, pain, and war that has troubled our broken World was born in that instant, and that since Loromir's death true peace is impossible.

The blood of an Archon was still hot on his hands when the mighty Elf King turned upon the All-Father Himself. The All-Father saw Sillestor not, for He stood locked in deadly combat with Wolf, most clever of all the Beast Lords. Sillestor raised Shadowbane to strike down the Father of the World from behind, but suddenly Thurin was there, Thurin the Strong, most loyal of all the All-Father's companions. Thurin blocked Sillestor's stroke with his left hand, the very hand that had been maimed when Shadowbane was made. The enchanted blade bit deep, and severed the maimed hand at the wrist. So it was that the hand of the Shaper was twice betrayed by that which it had wrought. And again Thurin made no noise and winced not, but took Sillestor by the throat

with his right hand, and squeezed with all his strength, and held him until the Elf king, senseless, dropped Shadowbane unto the ground. Then Thurin took up Shadowbane and in one mighty stroke cleaved Sillestor's head from his body. Only then did he speak: "Foulest of traitors, you bade this blade be the death of all that is evil. And so it is."

Thus did the All-Father prevail against the great Beasts, and against the treachery of His first children. When the fight was done, He rebuked the Elves for their wickedness, and judged them unfit for the mastery of the World. So He departed to fashion Men, his true children, and left the Elves to repent their sins. And Thurin bore Shadowbane away, proclaiming that none in all the Deathless Empire was fit to bear it. Many Elves returned to the All-Father's worship, but still there lingered some whose hearts were filled with spite at their defeat. So the Treason of the Elves was broken, and with it the power of the Dar Khelegur. The Sea Elves, the Gwaridorn of the West, came to rule the Deathless Empire afterward. Giliander the Bold, named for the First King of the Elves, wore its crown of truesilver. Mighty as Giliander was, so was he proud, and he did not heed the words of the All-Father. When at last the All-Father created the first Men, who lived as Titans in the Lost Realm of Ardan, the Elves, jealous of their younger brothers, made endless war upon them, and finally cursed the First Men with a plague of madness. Hurling into the pit of ignorance, the Sons of Men became as beasts, and were enslaved. Long is that tale, and hateful in its memory, but it need not be told here.

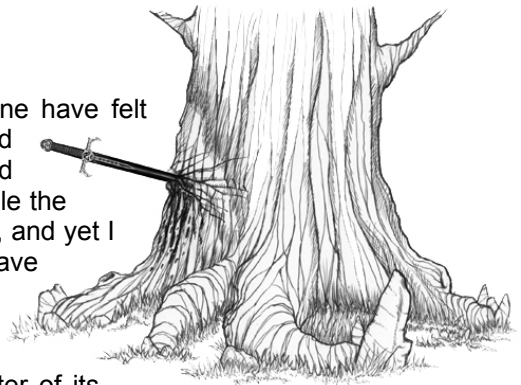
As for Shadowbane, Thurin bore it way from the field of the Taming. The Shaper returned to the realms of his children, and gave them the sword to hold in trust. The Dwarves rejoiced at the return of their father, and took Shadowbane and placed it within a great armory, filled with the weapons they had dutifully forged since Thurin had departed. The seven Forge Masters showed their teacher how they had grown in their craft, and fashioned for Thurin a hand made of silver, strong and fair, to replace the hand he had lost. Thurin was glad, but never again did he return to his forge. At last Thurin departed again, to walk down roads that none may name. And so the Dwarves held Shadowbane, and it shone in the darkness of their vaults for an Age of the World, lost to the hands of Elves or Men until Beregund the son of Beredir crept into the Halls of Haganduur like a thief and stole it from its guardians, bearing it away to a grim and glorious destiny.

Now you have heard the legend of Shadowbane, from its end unto its beginning. Three times has it vanished into darkness, and twice returned, borne by a hero.

There are those who say that the final chapter of Shadowbane's saga has yet to be written...

The Unknown Future

For three great Ages of the World, our History and fortune have felt Shadowbane's edge. Nothing under Heaven has escaped its searing light: Gods, Dark Lords, Archons, Kings, and Heroes have all been humbled by Thurin's great blade, while the fate of the World grinds slowly on. You have heard the tale, and yet I see you still have questions. Nearly one hundred years have passed since the Day of Woe, when Cambruin's sword became his downfall, and the bane of all the World. In all that time, what has become of the sword? What does the future bode for Shadowbane, and how will the next chapter of its saga affect the sundered World? There are no certain answers to these questions, but that has not stopped legions of the wise and curious from speculating. Such is the stuff of rumor and theory, prophecy and legend...



The Age of Strife and the Final Destiny of Shadowbane

Shadowbane has not moved since the Traitor dealt the Woeful Stroke: it remains locked in the stone bark of the Tree of Life, which the Elvish Sages of old named Yllgandir. In the confusion following the sack of Kierhaven and the tumults of the Turning, those of Cambruin's Champions that still lived searched for the High King with dread in their hearts. Finally, as the skies darkened overhead a group of Knights led by Sir Mardiock the Gallant, came upon the Stone Tree and found the Cambruin's body there, pinned to the eldritch oak with the blade of Shadowbane. The sword had passed through the High King's heart, and though each Knight tried with all his strength, none of them could pull it free. Hesitant at first to strike the tree, desperation finally led them to try to crack the stone bark and free the blade, but none of their blows so much as scratched the alabaster tree. The Champions prayed to the All-Father for guidance, but received no answer.

After three days of waiting, Zeristan came upon them, and bid the Champions consign Cambruin to the flame. At the Wizard's advice the Knights built a pyre around Cambruin's feet and burned his body. The flames consumed the High King's mortal remains, but did no harm to Shadowbane or the transformed tree. Afterward, Zeristan bore away the High King's arms, ashes and bones, and entombed them in a hidden place. Rumors abound that Cambruin's tomb has been plundered in the years since, and many Cathedrals claim to hold one or more of the High King's bones as holy relics. The Champions then tried to return to their homelands, but found all the roads blocked, for the Turning had broken Aerynth into fragments, each drifting on its own course through the Void. The rest of the World waited nearly fifty years to learn the High King's fate, when the new science of Traveling finally unlocked the Runegates. The few Knights who survived and remained true to Cambruin's Code have searched ever since for Cambruin's heir, but their quest has so far been in vain.

In the troubled decades that followed, countless Warriors, Heroes, and Questers journeyed to the ruins of Kierhaven, making pilgrimages to the Tree of Stone so that they might see the blade, and some risked their lives and souls by trying to draw Shadowbane from the tree in hopes of mending the World. Tyrants, Knights, Warlords, Bishops, even Magi have all tried without success. Thirty years ago the processions to Kierhaven ended abruptly when a mighty Drake took the ruins of Kierhaven as its lair, and now the way has almost been forgotten. The last quester bold enough to make the journey returned with a strange tale: the Tree, he raved, was gone! Where once there stood Mount Telorinadreth, with the ruins of Kierhaven and the Stone Tree upon its lower slopes, now there is only a yawning chasm. Magi theorize that the fragments of the World may be breaking again, and that Yllgandir and Shadowbane may be lost somewhere

in the Void. Some have lost heart at the notion, lamenting that Shadowbane's light has at last gone out, while others stay true to their faith, and keep the flames of Hope burning. Shadowbane passed from the face of the World once, they reason, and was brought back by Caeric the Paladin. In time, the Third Quest for the Sword will begin, and the World is only waiting for a Hero to accomplish it.

If Shadowbane still exists, and if a way to the sword could be found, what will happen if it is finally drawn? Speculation has continued unabated since the Turning. Will Shadowbane's light drive back the darkness that has engulfed the sundered World? Many think so, but what of Beregund's Curse? Some believe that the curse is broken, washed away by the blood of three monarchs (Ithriana, Valdimanthor, and Cambruin himself). Others speculate that the Turning has rendered the Curse moot: what Hero need fear death in this Age, when Spirit returns so quickly to flesh? Few who now seek the blade fear Beregund's Curse, and as the years pass some wonder if the entire tale of the Curse was not invented by the Elves, or by Zeristan, who hoped to steal the blade away for himself.

From the day of the Turning, rumors and legends have sprang up among the commonfolk, and have only increased since the Stone Tree was lost. The tale of the Lost Child is the most common and most popular. Many think that only Cambruin's rightful heir can draw Shadowbane from the tree, and that when that Hero comes the High Kingdom and all its Laws and justice will finally be restored. The new High King will call the All-Father back unto the World, and He will walk among His children a third and final time and repair the broken pieces of the World. A new Age of Paradise will begin, and the sins and follies of the past will finally be undone.

Other tales are far less hopeful. Some believe that pulling Shadowbane from Yllgandir would be like pulling an arrow from a wound, and that the blighted World would only bleed more for it. Others believe that Beregund's Curse endures unbroken, and that Shadowbane cannot be pulled from the Tree of Life at all. The sword will remain there until the End of All Days, when the Dragon shall finally rise from its wounded sleep and take its vengeance. Terror, fire, and madness will consume the World, and all of the All-Father's creations will be destroyed. Thus the folly of Men and Elves will have undone all of Thurin's designs, for the one weapon that might have saved the World will sit idle while all that is Good or Evil perishes. Light and Darkness, Good and Evil, Law and Chaos: just as the struggle between these primal forces has steered Shadowbane's history, they dominate the blade's suspected futures as well. Perhaps all of these notions are flawed, and the truth will never be foretold.

What is Shadowbane's final destiny? The All-Father alone could say, but His voice has long been silent.

