

honed like a common double-edged sword. I held it up in the sputtering light; it looked like nothing so much as a sword blade chiseled from some kind of slate, roughly the same width and thickness as that wrought from steel which hung at my side. The cross and pommel were of aged steel, and the leather that wrapped the handle was quite old and somewhat worn, but the sword's heft, far lighter than a metal blade, convinced me that it would surely shatter if plied in combat.

"I don't understand," I began, gripping the handle.

Menalkoric looked round him a moment and then returned his gaze to me. "Draw your sword and strike this stone here," he said, indicating one of the hard corner stones of the fireplace behind him.

"And blunt my sword's edge?" I retorted. "Why should I do such a thing?"

Menalkoric gave a faint smile but said nothing, instead taking the strange stone sword and, with one swift, powerful stroke, proceeded to drive the blade into the center of the ingle-stone. The strange blade bit deep into the dense rock of the fireplace, and I admit that I started in shock. Drawing back the blade, Menalkoric stood aside as I looked at the mark it had left. Not only had the stone blade cleaved a notch into the hard rock several inches deep, but around that cut the very substance of the ingle-stone was crumbling into powder as I watched, leaving a wide gap.

"What manner of witchcraft is this?" I exclaimed, a tingling running up and down my spine.

"Not witchcraft," Zadeshkem broke in. "That sword is the Sacred Destroyer, the Bane-of-All," she breathed with reverence. "It is the Sword of the Temple of Talmol, passed down through century upon century, the oldest relic among the treasures of Can-Beshar. It is spoken of in our scriptures," she brushed caressing fingers along its length, "where it is said to have come from a time before men or gods, when beings neither flesh nor spirit trod the earth. The hilt has been replaced many times, but the stone of that blade is like no other known to the world—its bite wreaks destruction and decay to all things."