



TREATISE ON THE DANGERS OF THE ARCANE

OR, HOW NOT TO BE TURNED INTO A CHAIR



GHOSTS OF VELEN SUPPLEMENT

As told quietly by Pipkin Tallfellow, merchant of Oakbottom, over a
Sunrise Lager in 1492 DR

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OR, HOW NOT TO BE TURNED INTO A CHAIR





MY NAME IS PIPKIN TALLFELLOW. I AM EIGHTY-five years old. Before I say anything else, I am not insane, as many would have you believe. I insist that you place both hands where you can see them and count the chairs in this room. Count them aloud. Do not trust the number

you remember from when you entered. Memory is the first thing it alters, and by the time you notice the extra chair, it has usually learned enough of you to answer when your name is called.

I was born among the vineyards of the Purple Hills in 1407 DR. The land had already suffered more than one ending by then. Adults spoke of those endings only after the shutters were barred, because they believed calamity could hear its own name and return to whoever uttered it. As a child, I thought this cowardice. I know now that they were trying to teach us the oldest courtesy owed to the dead: never invite home what killed them.

The **Sothillisian War** began in 1370 DR, thirty-seven years before my birth. My mother was a girl when the first refugees reached the hills. They came out of Amn and down through Tethyr in files that stretched beyond sight, walking beside carts that carried no possessions, only the wounded.

The Ogre Mages, Sothillis and Cyrvisnea, had driven armies of goblins, kobolds, ogres, hill giants, and the evil god Cyric's faithful through the south. Survivors said the ogres kept prisoners alive in wicker cages beside their cook fires so the smell of roasting meat would soften them before questioning. And if it did not, the smell of them cooking would surely loosen the next tongue. Children were returned to the roads with their parents' wedding rings threaded through their cheeks. Some had been taught to repeat Murannin prayers in voices too hoarse to sound human.

Murann became the heart of that monstrous realm in 1371 DR. The conquered city became a black mouth on the coast, fed by slaves, tribute, and bodies. Nelanthor corsairs closed the harbor while Sothillisian troops closed the roads. Those who escaped told of doors marked with blood so the occupiers would know which homes still contained someone strong enough to work.

By the war's end in 1374 DR, Murannin had not been destroyed. It had been acknowledged. Evil had survived long enough to acquire borders.

That same year brought **The Tearfall**. Dragon eggs descended across Faerun in a rain of fire that continued so long people forgot the color of an empty night. My mother remembered the sound most clearly: shells breaking on stone, wet and heavy, followed by the thin cries of things that had fallen from the heavens before they were ready to hatch.

Some eggs burst open on impact. Others lay warm in the fields for days, shivering when anyone approached. A farmer near his village split one with an axe and found a scaled infant inside with its wings folded around a human face. It opened its eyes, called him Father, and bit through his wrist before the second blow fell.

Eleven years later, in 1385 DR, **The Spellplague** came. Blue fire passed through flesh without consuming it. It did not burn houses so much as reconsider what a house was. Doors opened into organs. Wells developed pulses. Shadows detached themselves and waited under beds for their owners to sleep. The one source of all magic; The Weave, had broken. All of the pieces did not fall cleanly. They entered soil, blood, stone, and memory.

The worst years eventually received a proper historical name, as if calling them **The Wailing Years** placed a lid over what happened. It did not.

My mother carried proof beneath her ribs. The mark was blue-black, roughly oval, and soft when pressed. Something inside it shifted away from her fingers. She showed it to me when I was nine and made me promise that if it ever reached her heart, I would burn her before she began speaking in another voice. The mark never grew, but sometimes I saw it open while she slept. There was no eye beneath it, only a damp hollow lined with tiny white shapes that drew back whenever candlelight touched them. She died an ordinary death many years later. I thanked every merciful god I knew while I washed her body.

The Purple Hills of my childhood bore quieter remnants. One vineyard produced clusters of translucent grapes with small molars instead of seeds. A stream reflected a sky no one standing beside it could see. Those who drank from it dreamed of drowning in a black sea, and several woke with pondweed packed behind their teeth.

A shepherd lost six sheep near an old spellscar. Three returned. One wore the shepherd's face. The other two spoke with his voice and begged him not to kill them. He killed all three and buried them under the floor of his barn. For the remaining seven years of his life, something beneath that floor bleated under every full moon.

We were taught not to follow lights between the vines, not to answer voices inside the treeline, and to count our fingers after every thunderstorm. If a relative returned from a journey, we asked a question only that person could answer and watched the reflection in the window while they replied. If the reflection answered first, the door remained barred. These customs were not superstition. Superstition is fear without evidence. We had graves.

Life slowly returned to some sort of normalcy. In 1424 DR, when I was seventeen, what was left of Cape Velen declared its independence from Tethyr. Murann and the territory claimed by Murannidin had strangled the land routes so thoroughly that the peninsula had become an island unto itself, cut off from the civilized lands. The bells in our village rang when the news arrived. Some called it freedom. My father called it an amputation performed because the rot had climbed too near the heart. Sixty-eight years have passed, and the scar has never closed.

I married Celandine, raised our daughter Merla and our son Tobin, and spent decades persuading myself that survival eventually becomes safety. The fields yielded ordinary grapes. My children grew without marks beneath their skin. We kept no enchanted objects and invited no spellcasters across our threshold. When thunder rolled over the hills, I still counted their fingers after they slept. They mocked me gently for it. I would give anything to hear that mockery again.

On 19 Kythorn in 1480 DR, Admiral Aldric Thorne's Marines entered Velen and **The Night of Blood** began. The fighting lasted beyond the night that named it. Hundreds died before Duke Calchais fell and Thorne took the crown. I did not witness the palace assault, but a sailor who had fought there slept in our house months later. He said the gutters ran red down Captain's Cliff and the city's ghosts gathered along the streets to watch the living repeat them. Some of the dead rose before their bodies cooled and resumed the last motions of battle, stabbing at men who had already fled. The sailor swore a Marine killed the same spectral boy three times before realizing the child had died on the first thrust.

Thorne was a paladin, and men said righteousness burned in him more fiercely than fear. Perhaps it did. Righteous men still leave bodies. The old banners came down, ivory and gold dedicated to an ancient Golden Dragon sage rose in their place, and the new Duke promised a Rebirth. Many believed him because the alternative was to believe all that blood had purchased nothing.

Oakbottom was established eleven years ago, in 1481 DR by halflings from the Purple Hills. The Goodbarrels, Tealeafs, and Shortfoots planted orchards along the river, raised warm houses against the Wealdath, built a mill, and founded a distillery. Their first whiskey was laid down the following year. A ten-year cask is a declaration of faith. It says that the roof will remain above you, that your children will live, and that the world will still possess mouths capable of tasting what you have made. Those casks were sealed in 1482 DR.

That was the year **The Second Sundering** began. I was seventy-five. Once again the world became uncertain of its own construction.

Sages speak of Abeir and Toril, of the gods, the Tablets of Fate, and creation restored to its proper order. Such language is clean enough to write with dry hands. We experienced the restoration from inside the wound.

The roads moved first. One morning the western road lay beside our house, though it had stood half a mile east the previous night. Along it came travelers who claimed they had been walking for forty years. None had aged. None possessed eyes. They weren't plucked out, they were simply gone. Replaced by grotesque, smooth flesh. When Celandine offered one of them water, he opened his mouth and showed her a row of small fingers growing from his gums. Each finger pointed toward our daughter.



The river began flowing uphill. At night it carried drowned animals against the current, their swollen bodies passing our land again and again as though the water could not decide where they had died. The stars changed places. Our shadows developed habits of their own. Some mornings, I found four sets of footprints around our beds although only three other people lived in the house. The fourth set always began beneath my bed.

In 1485 DR, three years into **The Second Sundering**, Merla noticed the mirror. She was combing her hair when her reflection stopped. The reflected girl lowered the comb, turned her head, and looked at me while Merla continued staring forward. Its smile widened until the lips split at the corners. Merla did not feel the blood running from her own mouth until it reached her collar.

For three days, the thing behind the glass learned her. It blinked when she did not and breathed against the mirror from the wrong side, leaving patches of mist that smelled like a sealed grave. At night, fingernails scraped the glass. On the third night, Merla woke with her fingertips bloodied and eight nails missing. The reflection held up both hands. It had all ten.

On the fourth morning, her reflection vanished. On the fifth, Merla vanished with it. The mirror continued showing her bedroom, but the room inside the glass was narrow and lightless. Merla stood at the far end with her jaw hanging loose and her fingers worn to bone from striking the other side. When she saw us, something behind her placed its hands over her eyes. The fingers were too long and jointed in too many places. It drew her violently backward into the dark.

We shattered the mirror. Every piece still contained our precious daughter. In the larger shards she screamed. In the smaller ones she appeared farther away, crawling through a tunnel made from the insides of human mouths. Celandine wrapped the pieces in cloth while I dug separate holes. Each shard knocked from within the earth as we buried it. For months afterward, Merla's voice traveled beneath the vineyard from grave to grave, asking us which piece contained her heart.

Tobin went next. His voice began coming from inside the walls, first repeating words he had just spoken and then answering questions before we asked them. Soon it recited memories he could not have possessed: the night of his conception, the secret name Celandine had given a miscarried child, the promise I had made beside my mother's mark. Tobin swore he heard nothing. He sat at our table with his hands clamped over his ears while the plaster screamed until dust shook from the rafters.

One evening the voice in the wall became mine. It confessed to things I had never done and things I had

only imagined doing. Tobin lowered his hands and smiled. The expression arrived upon his face in pieces. His left cheek lifted, then his right, and at last his lips peeled back farther than the skin should have permitted. I struck him with the iron poker before that smile could finish forming.

He folded when he fell. There was no resistance from bone. His body collapsed into his clothing like a garment dropped from a hook. Inside lay warm gray dust and thirty-two white stones, each carved into the shape of one of his baby teeth. The stones clicked together, although nothing touched them. When I gathered them, they bit my palms. The wall laughed until dawn. Afterward Tobin began whispering from inside my chest, where his voice remains. Sometimes he begs forgiveness. Sometimes he tells me he is not Tobin and never was.

Then Celandine complained that her joints were stiff. By evening, her fingers had lengthened and become smooth. Her nails withdrew under the flesh. The knuckles vanished one by one, each with a soft internal crack. Grain appeared beneath her skin, first as faint lines and then as dark whorls that tightened when she screamed. Her blood thickened into amber resin. Where it touched the floor, it hardened with insects trapped inside that had not been in the room before.

We sent for a priest. The messenger returned before he had left, riding backward upon a horse whose eyes had grown shut. He could not remember our house or his own name. We summoned no wizard. I had seen enough of magic to know that a second hand placed upon a wound may only push the knife deeper.

By midnight, Celandine could no longer bend her arms. Her elbows locked with the sound of pegs driven into wet timber. By dawn, her legs had fused, split, and narrowed into four carved posts. Her spine bent backward until the vertebrae pressed outward beneath the skin like decorative studs. Her ribs spread and flattened, tearing loose from the breastbone to form a seat. Each breath rubbed broken bone against bone until her crying lost all rhythm. A clear lacquer sweated from her pores and dried over her body. It smelled of lavender, hot iron, and the room in which my mother had died.

Her face remained beneath the seat. That was the intelligence behind the cruelty. It left the part by which I knew and loved her. Her features moved under the grain as if pressed beneath dark water. Her eyes rolled toward me wherever I stood. Her mouth opened between two knots in the wood, and I poured water into it a spoonful at a time. Most of the water ran down the chair legs. Some returned from the joints warm and pink.

For two days my wife remained alive inside that shape. No priest would visit our village, no matter my sobbing plea. At night, the legs scraped over the floor. She followed me whenever I turned away, stopping the instant I looked back. The second night, I woke seated upon her. I do not remember crossing the room. Her wooden arms had curled over mine, and something beneath the back cushion moved against my spine. Celandine's voice whispered from within, 'It knows how you are made now.'

Then another voice, deep in the timber, asked whether I wished to be useful. I tore myself free and fetched the axe. Every blow opened wood, flesh, or both. Rings in the timber closed around the blade. Teeth grew in the cuts. Celandine begged me to continue until the thing forced her mouth shut. Her eyes remained visible beneath the varnish. I poured lamp oil over the floor and set our home alight before sunrise.

The chair battered itself against the door while the house burned. It screamed first in Celandine's voice, then Merla's, then Tobin's. When the roof fell, it used my mother's voice and reminded me of the promise I had kept. Last of all, it spoke in my own voice from directly behind me, although I stood alone in the vineyard. 'You carried me out,' it said. I looked down and saw a wet black grain spreading from the hand that had held the axe into my wrist. I buried it deep within my beloved wife's remains and fled.

The Second Sundering ended in 1487 DR. I spent the following winter in a neighbor's barn, watching the ruins whenever the moon was bright. Something stood in the ashes each night. It had four legs and a surface polished by the fire. Some mornings it was nearer the barn. On the last morning of winter, I found square impressions in the earth around my bed and wood shavings beneath my tongue.

In the spring of 1488 DR, when I was eighty-one, I abandoned the Purple Hills and fled north toward Cape Velen. I carried no heirlooms. Objects remember magic, and memory gives it somewhere to live. I left my wedding ring, our ledger, Merla's painted cup, Tobin's stones, and the axe fused inside what remained of Celandine. I believed distance might starve the thing. I did not yet understand that hunger travels with the meat.

Oakbottom received me with food, work, and a room near the distillery. The village had been founded seven years earlier by folk stubborn enough to plant gardens beside a haunted forest. I envied their hope. They had built for children not yet born and laid down whiskey for a future they intended to reach. I became a merchant because roads felt safer when I was moving and because every night spent away from my room was a night I did not hear the floorboards learning Celandine's

voice.

This year, 1492 DR, Oakbottom opened its first ten-year blend. The casks had been filled in 1482, at the beginning of **The Second Sundering**. I was present when the first bung came free. No one else reacted to the smell. I knew it at once: lavender, hot iron, and old death. The whiskey clung to the dipper in clear threads. Along the nearest cask, knots opened like small mouths and closed again. From within the stacked barrels came a patient knocking, passed from cask to cask in the same pattern Merla had used beneath the vineyard. No one else noticed. Or, at least claimed they did not.

I tried to stop the bottles from leaving. They thought grief had disordered me. Perhaps it has. The first cases had already gone to Velen, Saltmarsh, Tulumene, Monguldarath, and the frontier road. I have sold some of them myself. I remember placing bottles into customers' hands. I do not remember deciding to do so. I have tried to resist but the whispers only grow louder when I do. That is why I drink Sunrise Lager tonight. I will not touch the whiskey, although a sealed bottle waits in my room each morning no matter how often I throw it into the river. Nobody will listen. No one believes.

There are rules that may preserve you. Never answer a voice that comes from within the wood. Never keep a mirror that reflects an open door behind you when the door is closed. If a familiar object has moved, do not return it to its place; leave the building and burn what you wore inside. Do not sleep in a room containing furniture you did not count before dusk. Above all, do not drink from a bottle whose cork is damp with something warmer than the room.

Men in robes tell me magic is neither good nor evil. They call it a force shaped by the will of its wielder. Fire does not remember a face. Steel does not practice a dead child's voice until it can make the mother answer. Magic does. I have watched spells outlive their makers and grow patient in the dark. A wizard may believe he holds the leash. He never considers what is learning the shape of his hand from the other end.

The old account of **Netheril** says that an arch-wizard seized the power of Mystryl, **The Weave** failed, the goddess died, and the flying cities fell. That is the history fit for temples and schools. The elders of the Purple Hills kept another version. They said the torn Weave exposed creation from within, as skin pulled apart exposes meat. Something outside leaned close enough to smell us. Mystryl died closing the wound, but part of the watcher remained caught inside.

It cannot create. It imitates. It studies a daughter through a mirror, a son through his voice, a wife through the arrangement of bone and timber. Every

spell gives it another glimpse of the world and another lesson in how matter may be persuaded to betray its form. When it transforms a living thing, the horror is not that the victim becomes an object. The horror is that the object learns to want.

The grain is embedded into my shoulder and spread beneath my ribs. I no longer feel a heartbeat there. I hear tapping. When I close my eyes, I see the inside of the Oakbottom casks, and from each dark hollow someone looks back. Some have my family's faces. Others belong to people I met on the road. A few are still alive.

Since nightfall, the chairs in this room have turned to face me. We counted seven before I began. There are eight now, and the newest one is breathing.

If my voice changes, do not answer it. If I ask you to sit, burn me where I stand. When the fire is finished, do not search the ashes for my face. Count the chairs again, and if the count is wrong, leave Oakbottom without touching the doors.

Whatever waits inside the wood already knows your hands.

Pipkin Tallfellow

A CURSE OF MEMORY

In the sun-washed vineyards of the Purple Hills, Pipkin Tallfellow learned early that magic is not a wonder but a wound. Born in the long shadow of the Spellplague, he grew up among fields where teeth sprouted from the soil and streams reflected places that never existed. His childhood was shaped not by fairy tales, but by warnings: count your fingers after storms, never answer voices from trees, and burn whatever begins to speak in another's voice. These were not superstitions. They were survival.

When the Second Sundering tore the world open again, Pipkin's family was claimed one by one – first by mirrors that lied, then by walls that screamed, and finally by a transformation so cruel it defies mercy. His flight from the Purple Hills was not an escape but an exile, a retreat from a home that no longer remembered its own shape. In Oakbottom, he found a quiet village, honest beer, and a life small enough to feel safe... until the past began to follow him.

Now, with Oakbottom's inaugural ten-year whisky finally bottled, Pipkin offers his account not as a scholar or a sage, but as a man who has seen magic hesitate before choosing where to burn. He writes of spells that linger long after their casters die, of reflections that smile without faces, and of a world that dreams badly when wounded. His treatise is a warning to any who believe magic can be mastered, reasoned with, or trusted.

This is not a tale of heroism. It is a confession, a caution, and a quiet plea spoken over a Sunrise Lager. Pipkin Tallfellow has counted the chairs in every room for decades – and he thinks you should start counting too.

A Supplement for The Ghosts of Velen Campaign

