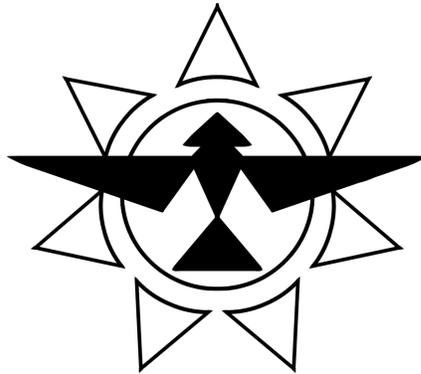


# The Immortal

Book one of *The Seven Wars*

E. H. Kindred



A Novel Of The Somadarsath

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Demon or bird! (said the boy's soul,  
Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it mostly to  
me?  
For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping,  
Now I have heard you,  
Now in a moment I know what I am for—I awake,  
And already a thousand singers—a thousand songs, clearer,  
louder and more sorrowful than yours,  
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me,  
Never to die.

—Walt Whitman

Excerpted from "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"

## Chapter One

**T**he icy wind howled around the cloaked traveler. The cold was a harrowing, snapping, chill that beat against him, blown in swirls by the wind, so that at times it whipped at his back and at others, blew stinging pellets of sleet and snow into his eyes. His horse snorted, puffing out a cloud of steam that was swept away on the wind. Ice clotted in the stallion's mane and clung to the hair around his ankles, making each step through the snow that much harder.

The traveler and his horse were shadows, equally dark, almost lost amid the inky blackness of the night. They passed like specters through the streets of a village. There was no light in the place, not a soul out in the night. Perhaps it was just folded up tight against the storm, or perhaps it had been abandoned for years; it was difficult to tell amid the ravaging blizzard.

The sword on the traveler's back felt heavier than usual. He was aware of its weight pressed against him under the sodden folds his cloak, could feel the strap across his chest shift with each breath, as if it wanted to cinch itself tighter and choke him. He pulled his cloak tighter around him and exchanged his hands on the reins, allowing his right to carry them and freeze for a while, so that his left could thaw against his chest under his cloak.

He did not know if he was close to his destination. He had ridden for two days, sweeping down from the north like the frozen winter that pursued him. The storm had slowed his progress, far more so than the traveler would have liked, to the point of making the land nigh impassable. Had he been an ordinary man, he would have stopped for shelter in an inn long ago, but he was no common man with common purposes and time gave him no sheltering favor.

The traveler did not know this land. Its air was stale and unfamiliar. There were no landmarks to guide his way, and even if there were, the storm would have stolen his view of them. He could only plod onward along the road, hoping, praying that it would not fail him.

Then, out of the darkness, there flickered a light in the distance. As he rode closer, following the road up toward it, the traveler could see the walls by the faint light of lanterns that flickered and sputtered in the merciless wind. Perhaps there would have been a time the sight would bring relief or comfort, but it was not this night. Though he now neared the end of his journey, the traveler had to steel himself, for his arrival here would herald nothing good.

The gates were shut and locked tight against the darkness of the storm. The traveler dismounted and approached, seeing the faint outline of a smaller door set into the left gate. Knowing that his frozen hands would make little sound against it, he unbuckled the sword from over his shoulder and knocked against the wood with its pommel.

There was no sound save the crying of the wind, and so, the traveler knocked again, only to receive the same, howling, nothing. Squaring his shoulders, in no mood for further delays, the traveler drew back his arm and beat at the door until he carved up splinters. At last, the door opened just a crack and a frail beam of light crawled out over the snow.

“Who goes?” asked a voice from within.

“I bear an urgent message for your king,” the traveler replied, “Great danger has come to your land.”

“You are no ordinary messenger that would have been sent to inform us of anything,” the voice replied, “It is the middle of the night, the king is asleep and I doubt he would see you anyway. We do not shelter beggars!”

With that, the door slammed shut and the flickering light disappeared. The traveler stiffened, slinging his sword back over his shoulder, and pulled himself back into the saddle, digging his heels into the stallion’s sides. The horse reared up, kicking out with iron hooves to batter at the door before the bar could be dropped back into place. The door surrendered to the stallion with a crack and the traveler urged him on, charging inside, past the short steward who had been knocked into the snow, and into the courtyard. Guards converged on him from all directions, surrounding the traveler in a ring of spear points. The stranger hung his sword from the saddle horn, then dismounted from his horse and held up his hands.

“What business do you have here?” shouted one of the men over the wind.

“Perhaps we might discuss my purpose inside,” the traveler replied.

“You are not taking this man into the castle!” the steward protested, having dislodged himself from the snow and scuttled over. “Not after he comes barging in here like this!”

The traveler waited, observing the guards from the depths of his hood, making no further motion.

“Move!” snapped the lieutenant, prodding him in the back with his spear.

The traveler obliged, walking across the courtyard to the keep, the ring of soldiers following him. They passed inside, into the light, shutting the doors behind them. The steward came stomping around to stand in front of the stranger, grouching,

“You can’t just—”

The steward recoiled. He found himself looking up into a chalk white face, as pale as the snow that raged outside, with sharp features that regarded him with annoyance. What held the startled steward transfixed, however, were the eyes that glared down the long pointed nose at him.

They were scarlet, a color so fierce that even the rufescent richness of blood could not do them justice. There was a deepness to them, as if they had seen far more than any person should, an ancient coldness that made the steward feel as though he stood in the shadow of something great and terrible. The traveler arched a single dark brow and asked,

“Yes?”

The low, dangerous edge on his voice bespoke a man not to be trifled with, and one who was already tired of the steward before him.

“Who are you?” demanded the lieutenant.

The traveler pulled back his hood to run a long-fingered hand through dripping black hair before drawing himself up to his full height and turning to regard the soldier.

“Answer swiftly!” the lieutenant ordered.

“I come with a warning to your kingdom,” the traveler said. His voice was strong, resonant, though his accent was strange and unfamiliar; flowing and rich, almost melodic in its quality. “There is a danger that has crossed into these lands, one that will wreak its total destruction.”

“That something wouldn’t happen to be *you* would it?” sneered one of the guards, drawing a jeering chuckle from his fellows.

“On the contrary,” the traveler replied, turning his scarlet gaze upon the man, “I am the one who must save you from it.”

The soldier quailed under those eyes, not daring to say anything more.

“Take him to King Tephanis,” the lieutenant said.

“You can’t be serious!” yelled the steward. “We can’t just—”

“Do it,” growled the lieutenant.

The steward huffed and looked between the lieutenant and the traveler, who was watching him with impatient eyes.

“This way,” the steward grumbled, setting off down the hall.

The traveler bowed his head in thanks to the lieutenant and followed the small man away, the guards walking along with him. The steward was still grumbling under his breath,

“This is absolutely unheard of. There are proper ways to speak to the king. Barging into the castle in the middle of such an ungodly night is in no sense the way to go about it.”

They started up a staircase and the traveler glanced up to see several more guards appear at the railing above to meet them. He looked back down to glower at the steward’s back, as the man was continuing,

“I don’t care who you are or what sort of message you carry, there is nothing so important that can’t be—”

The traveler had had enough of this bothersome little man. In one fierce motion, he grabbed the steward by the collar of his coat and hoisted him up to pin him against the wall at eye level.

“Unhand him!” snapped the lieutenant.

The traveler ignored him, snarling instead at the steward,

“I am no messenger, no common knave carrying some diplomatic paper. There are forces at work that your petty mind could never fathom. I will have no more insolence from you and you will take me to your king without another word this *instant*.”

The steward gulped, feet dangling above the floor, and his eyes glanced up. It all happened in an instant. The traveler heard the twang of a familiar sound and spun, catching the arrow in a swipe from a single white hand. He snapped the shaft off against the wall and held the point inches from the steward’s face, growling,

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Unhand him at once!” snapped the lieutenant, pressing his spear point between the traveler’s shoulders.

The stranger obliged, releasing his hold on the steward and letting the man fall back to the floor. With a flick of his pale fingers, the traveler offered the broken shaft of the arrow out to the lieutenant, who snatched it away. Just then, there was a voice from above.

“What is this fracas?”

The guards all snapped to attention as the king appeared at the railing. His eyes fell on the stranger.

“This man demands to speak to you, sire,” said the steward.

“Bring him upstairs,” King Tephani commanded and turned from the rail to pass down the corridor toward his study.

The steward straightened his coat and cleared his throat, starting up the stairs once again, leading the traveler behind him. The guards all followed, keeping their spears trained on the stranger, as if expecting him to lunge at them at any moment. The steward stopped just before the door to the king’s study and glanced over his shoulder.

“Sir?” he ventured. “May I ask your— your name?”

The traveler smiled, a look that unnerved the steward even more. The stranger’s face was not an unkind one, but a smile seemed hardly fitting to the ancient chill that clung to his presence. The guards and the steward waited in the tenseness, the silence unbroken, until the traveler replied,

“Lask.”