

THE SHINTAE

A novel by Brian R Hill

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Chapter One

The sun's rays flickered and died as dusk stepped confidently into the glade where he rested. Only his eyes moved as he persisted there, cooled by the scented air drawn down from the surrounding wooded slopes, his mind far away on matters of great importance. He had recovered The Shintae. The long years of search and hardship had not been in vain and now, finally, the end of his mission was within his grasp. Allowing his mind to wander, he fingered the short sword at his side, remembering deeds and enemies slain in the valleys and amongst the mountains of Cantae far to the west. Lying on the ground beside him was his trusty longbow, an old and valued friend that had saved him on so many occasions out beyond the edges of civilisation. Suddenly he stooped, gathered it from the still warm ground and turned towards a solitary timber framed cabin standing close by.

Although the last faint glimmer of light had been extinguished long since, he had no difficulty in picturing the building with its heavy planked wooden walls and angular straw thatched roof supported by wooden cross-members. Narrow openings cut into the outer walls were covered by shutters, which, when pulled back, allowed light to enter. An arched doorway led into the first of three large rooms, with several smaller chambers at the rear. Highly intricate carvings and multi-coloured tapestries covered the internal walls, whilst a variety of woven and deep furred rugs were scattered over the wooden floor. Most of all, however, he recalled the stone fireplace in the main living area and how, on winter days, a roaring fire threw out its arms of all embracing warmth. Even on a warm summer's evening it felt good to be reminded again of such protection.

With this thought in mind, he moved around the house towards the doorway, which, to his surprise, stood open. Running his fingers around the opening, he found the shattered remains of the doorframe where the entrance had been forced. For a moment he stood silently, listening intently to the sounds of the night. Detecting nothing untoward and finally satisfied he was alone, he removed a tallow lamp from his pack. Using his tinderbox to spark a flame, he succeeded in

lighting the lamp whereupon, shielding his eyes from the resultant glare, he stepped carefully over the remains of the door. Halting abruptly he gazed numbly around at the scene of destruction that greeted him. Wearily he moved from room to room, but the whole building appeared to have been ransacked during his lengthy absence.

A native of the forest lands of Maraé, he was just short of six feet in height, tall for his race, with long brown hair flowing over delicately pointed ears down to broad shoulders. Brown, weather-beaten cheeks faded in to a wide and hairless chin, while piercing blue eyes gazed out from beneath broad eyebrows that angled down towards a finely chiselled nose. His clothes were old, faded and stained with constant travel. A creased brown tunic covered the upper part of his torso, hanging limply from a slightly hunched back. The garment was made to blend into the surrounding woodland, as were his deer skin trousers. A pair of stretched hide moccasins covered his feet, and a cloak the colour of grass was tightly rolled within a small pack on the floor beside him. Exhausted, he leant against a wall before sinking slowly to the floor, too tired to think clearly any more. Had his instincts not been dulled by fatigue, he would have moved on immediately; and then, perhaps, things might well have turned out so very differently.

Instead, his head nodded once, twice, three times, his eyes closed, and he dropped into a deep but troubled sleep...

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