

Many  
Shades of Evil  
A Compendium of Two Novels  
and seven short stories

Seven Shades of Evil  
&  
Axe: A Tale of Carthelion

Frank Oliver

Lulu Publications

Starlight

## Seven Shades of Evil

The Seven are short science fiction stories from the Time Travellers Chronicles. They introduce you to some new science to make you think a little and smile. Shades of Evil is a full length fantasy story from the Book of Ages; a story of demons and wizards, magic and myth. It has it's own seven shades of evil.

Because these stories, associated albums and games are ongoing further details may be found in this book and on my website, [shadesofevil.com](http://shadesofevil.com)

### STARLIGHT

Welcomes you to the Darkworld

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ISBN 978-1-84799-317-5

## Axe: A Tale of Carthelion

Axe is a powerful and moving story, which is enriched with the mysticism and lore of a forgotten age. It is a tale of the imagination, which lifts the veils of time to bring the reader a story of valour and courage, of laughter and of hope. But as the mists of creation slowly recede, they reveal a lone figure, cloaked in mystery and evil; beside him a single flame flickers; it is a cold imperishable flame; it casts long shadows over hills and woodlands, bringing darkness to a land of plenty.

STARLIGHT

Welcomes you to the lands of Ineham

First published 1985

Second edition 2007

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A mixture of new and mature

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# Shades of Evil

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This novel was first released in 1992

# Shades of Evil

## Preface

Shades of Evil is a story of the darkworld, set upon an isolated island, on an isolated world. This island which was named Harandos was made up of many small domains. In times past each domain had shared the wealth of it's lands with it's neighbours, lofty mountains, fertile soil and rustling trees. So similar were these domains that they were known as the Mirrorlands, each land was a reflection of all the others, but alas those days came to an end; the Mirrorlands are no more. Harandos was not conquered from without, but from a dark place within.

With the departure of the elden kindreds and the powers of good, men tried to create their own magic. A power which related to the demons of myth. And with the unleashing of this power the kingdoms began to crumble and fall. There were many who fought the dark ways, for they said the creatures of the darkworld could never be controlled. Those who tried to master the dark powers would themselves become wraiths of it's malice. However, there were some who embraced it; the cruel Baron Nomarn Deleri was one. His wife Baroness Helian and their executioner Grogor were others. They are now a part of the circle of darkness, three of the seven shades of evil.

# Stone and Spire

## Prelude

They gathered upon the high moorlands beside the Spire of Darklore, where the wind howled beneath darkened skies. Their forms were tall; their features hidden behind shading cowls. Robes rustled as they passed over heathered ground.

The spire was aged. A shrine to the past, bound in evil and devilment. Cast in its shadow lay the cold sacrifice stone, its surface smooth; its purpose foul.

The light began to fade into the west and Nomarn raised its hands. The seven circled the stone. They chanted.

Hunched figures moved up the hillside like the rolling mist. Some scurried, some crawled. Sharp nails embedded in bony fingers clutched at withered heather. Evil thoughts formed by evil minds twisted and contorted demon faces. They too formed a circle, a circle about the seven.

The chant grew louder; slow and rhythmic; cold and deathly. The circle began to move. They danced around the stone; the stone and spire; the spire and the seven.

Louder grew the chant, faster moved the demonic shapes, twisting, turning. From beneath taloned feet spurted the flames of hell. The circle began to close.

Upon the slab of sacrifice an image wavered, gaining strength as the frenzy heightened. Graceful, enchanting, flowing melodically to the rhythm of the wraiths; the wraiths in the ring; the ring of fire.

\*

They wound their way across the moorlands at walking pace, the piper playing his flute melodically. Before him rode the mighty Lords of the Harandos. Behind, the snaking light of a thousand torches.

Raimar raised his hand and the column halted. The piper fell silent. Raimar listened. "Do you hear it?"

A distant chant drifted softly across the moors, a muffled whisper borne on an angry wind.

Raimar winced. "The wraiths have their ring. Soon they will have the fire. They are calling, beckoning. Soon she will come. They have a power not even Miriel may withstand, even now the Queen is awakening."

Jorm looked past Giyorn, to Raimar, his father, his youthful features unchanging. "Then they will have her. They will join their power in unholy communion; the evil subjugating the good. It must not come to pass."

Giyorn stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Perhaps not. Perhaps the mystical helvstone will protect her, it's strength lies in the forgotten yesterdays, the elden kindreds of old."

Raimar shook his head misgivingly. "Well she could defend against the demons of these lands; truly a shade may not harm her but here are gathered the seven and the seven as one in the circle of fire stand above all. When the flame is kindled it will reach for the spire. At its touch we are lost."

Giyorn sighed, then he looked upon the war-laden figure of Raimar, sat astride his battlemount. "I remember the days when all our lands flourished. It pains me to see the Northlands turned to sand and snow, my own lands to rolling moors - the deathly marshes. Soon all our realms will fall into decay and ruin, the forests will wither, even the Southlands will perish. We must bring an end to this madness. THE



SEVEN MUST DIE.”

“Tis difficult to kill the dead,” chortled a mischievous voice.

They all looked down at the small creature which stood beside Giyorn's mount.

“You have done well, Cretin,” Raimar complimented. “Those hind legs of yours carry you sturdily.”

“Legs of a demon,” snorted Giyorn.

Cretin chuckled.

Giyorn scowled. “You throw caution to the wind, Raimar, how may we be sure this creature has not led us into a trap?”

“You forget, Giyorn, we had little choice in this matter. Would you sooner face Greyfar, the citadel of Nomarn, or one of his many strongholds? The shades of evil grow in strength. Here they have no legions. They deem they are not needed.”

Jorm looked down at Cretin quizzically. “Why did you lead us here? Are you not a creature of the darkworld yourself? Do I detect treachery in your eyes?”

Cretin jerked his head from one rider to the next - like a preying mantis. “You fear little Cretin. Mighty lords on tall war horses fear little me!”

“Why do you aid us?” pressed Jorm.

Cretin frowned at Jorm, then turned to Raimar. “Pretty things I like, I do not wish to live in a land of snow or sand. Moors are freezing and wet. You rescue the lovely lady.” With a sudden drop in tone, and a chill which matched the dank moorland air, he hissed, “You rescue her now. You alone Raimar have the weapons to destroy these wraiths of life.” Cretin turned to the mist and pointed. On a nearby hill a flame flickered, caressing the earth with fire.

\*

At first it was only a gallop but as the flame danced higher it became a full-blooded stampede. They rounded the top of the rise and charged headlong for the flame. Battle cries issued forth and swords sang at their unsheathing. They crashed into the fire.

Tongues of flame licked greedily outward; horses reared. Riders, like flaming torches screamed as the heat scorched their souls. There was turmoil, there was anarchy. The circle was sealed - it would not break.

Raimar calmed his steed and raised his eyes above the inferno, to look upon the spire. Colours rippled across its' ancient stonework, it looked now as it had not looked for a thousand years. It laughed at him. It mocked him. For an instant Raimar's courage wavered. Then he drew himself tall and determination pierced his eyes. He spurred his mount onward.

Hellish screams burst in his ears as he plunged through the fire then all fell silent. The chant had ceased and the air hung heavy; close; claustrophobic. Sweat ran down his face. He saw the circle of wraiths. They sensed his presence.

Within the circle, Raimar saw another figure. Beautiful; enigmatic; long white hair flowing down and about her.....But the eyes were glazed, unseeing. What had they done to her?

Raimar drew his sword and lunged at the wraiths, flaying the nearest figure. The cowl severed from the body, the clothing fell to the ground, empty.

The inner circle was broken; the flames began to subside. Raimar turned his mount for a second charge...

"I am Nomarn, first of the seven," a cold voice laughed.

Raimar covered his ears in dismay; the voice was

reverberating round and around his head, yet his action was only reflex, for the sound did not enter his ears. The deep mystic laughter rolled in his mind and his mind alone. "You think to destroy me with your weapons poor fool, but I shall cast them to the four winds. You think to save the lady, but the lady is mine."

Raimar looked bewildered as his sword vanished from his grip. His shield, dagger and axe also disappeared. He gazed at the wraith. Its figure seemed to loom up before him. A clawed hand stretched outward in greeting then the fingers began to coil.

Terror reflected in Raimar's eyes. He could see the hand ten paces from him, but he could feel the icy grip about his body. The hand clenched and squeezed; bones snapped like deadwood; Raimar fell from his horse.

As the flames subsided, Jorm coaxed his mount to jump the dying embers. What he had expected to find within the circle, he knew not. The circle was bare; the towering spire stood above a vacant sacrifice stone. Only the distant echo of an evil laughter remained.

Jorm saw his father's battlemount, then horror struck his face as he saw Raimar crumpled upon the earth. He leapt from his horse and ran to his father's side. He cradled his head on his lap.

"Nomarn has taken her," gasped Raimar, fighting to draw breath into his crushed body. "I struck one down, but they were too powerful. My weapons disappeared into thin air.... They have taken her."

"No they have not," came a sad but prankish voice. "Only the seven have the power. Not the six nor the five nor the four. She is free to walk the lands once more."

Raimar tried to sit erect, but he could not. "My weapons boy, find them. Find the Queen; seek out the helvstone, for it has the goodness to see this evil destroyed.

Then....” Raimar grimaced, his voice was failing. “Seek Nomarn, this devil must be destroyed.”

Jorm felt his father go limp. He lay his head on the scorched earth, then stood to face the west. The whole moorland had fallen into silence; the air was calm and sorrowful, even the wounded had sealed their lips.

Jorm's face was a mixture of anguish and hatred. He pointed his sword with trembling hand to where the sun had fled the misted skies. “I WILL FIND YOU NOMARN. BE IT THE LAST THING I EVER DO. I WILL FIND YOU.”

# The Gathering

## Chapter 1

The guests filtered through the bronze archway as they made their way down the long corridor towards the Galerian dining hall. They chatted to one another as they walked, occasionally glancing upward towards the high pillars and the flickering torch lit decorations on the ceiling.

At the entrance to the hall Jorm greeted his guests, smiling at some, passing words of welcome to others, but his guests were nervous. Behind Jorm, on a pedestal of white marble, perched Cretin. For all the world he may have been no more than one of the many gargoye statues which adorned the grand buildings of the Harandos, alas the talons on his feet which curved over the edge of the pedestal were tapping impatiently and occasionally his dark leathery wings which folded neatly on his back would twitch, it unnerved almost everyone.

All the guests but one had passed Jorm by. Jorm stood with one arm resting across his chest, his other arm folded upward with his chin resting on the palm of his hand. He was watching Giyorn striding down the corridor dressed in his crimson tunic and dark breeches - sheathed dagger strapped to his side. Jorm extended a hand in greeting. Giyorn was about to do the same when Cretin hissed violently, then leaning forward, his forked tongue whiplashed towards Giyorn's throat.

Giyorn took one step backward, his dagger flashing as he drew it from its' sheath. It swished through the air

narrowly missing Cretin's retreating tongue.

"I see he still likes me," snapped Giyorn.

Jorm pointed at Giyorn's dagger. "He takes offence to weapons in my household, but do not feel unwelcome, he was merely dropping a hint."

"One day he will go too far and I sense that day is not very distant," snorted Giyorn, sheathing his dagger angrily.

Cretin's emerald eyes blinked, then he put his head to one side and in a deep croaky voice said, "Nasty Giyorn."

\*

Jorm and Giyorn strode across the dining hall to take their places at the far side of the long dining table. On arrival Jorm glanced down the row of seats to his left, then smiled to Miowni who stood to his right. He seated himself; his guests followed suit.

Giyorn seated himself to the left of Jorm; he too glanced down the table to his left. There were perhaps a score of guests in that direction. He then turned to his right where there were approximately the same amount. He noted some of the faces which crossed his line of vision, including the boyish faces of the brothers Dromar who carried only a score of years. He then turned his attention to the food lying on the table.

There was a great spread of fruits, meats and vegetables from which to choose and Giyorn's appetite was not lacking. He reached forward towards a juicy red apple, picked it up, opened his mouth, then paused. His ears had detected the faintest flap of wings. He did not bother looking behind, he simply turned to Jorm and said, "Why do you have a pedestal behind your dining table?"

"There has always been a pedestal behind the table."

"With that wretched creature stood on it?" queried

Giyorn.

“No. It used to hold a bust of my great grandfather.”

“Then why did you not leave the bust of your great grandfather on the pedestal?”

“Cretin is my guardian.”

“Guardian?”

“He watches over me.”

“He watches over your guests as well?”

“You could say that.”

“They do not look very comfortable.”

“They will after a few tankards of ale and a few goblets of wine.”

“Do they usually drink so much?”

“They do when Cretin is around,” said Jorm with laughter on his face.

\*

Musicians entered the large hall silently and positioned themselves in the eastern corner then without a single practised note they began to play. From down the hallway dancing girls began to appear, moving sensually to the hypnotic sounds. The faces of the male nobility lightened and their chewing became less vigorous. The ladies however looked on with a little less enthusiasm.

Miowni smiled sweetly at Jorm, brushing a few black locks of hair from her face, revealing smooth youthful skin and eyes of stone. “I see our poor dancers can still afford no more than waistbands with hanging tassels.”

Jorm lifted one eyebrow. “It is in keeping with the music my dear, besides do they not cover the lower half of their faces as modesty requires?”

Miowni bit her bottom lip and said no more.

The music steadily increased in tempo. The guests

downed their wine and tapped their feet. Like the music the dancing had its' own mysterious attractions. Faster played the music; faster flowed the wine. As each moment of time elapsed the guests became more absorbed. The musicians were lost to their vision; in fact the whole hall was lost to their vision, only the dancers remained.

Cretin swayed on his perch, lifting his legs alternately to the beat, his head moving from side to side like those of the dancers.

The music rose to new heights and the dancers writhed erotically around the floor. The populace of the hall was lost in bliss, even Giyorn had parted with the world of reality.

\*

Above the dining hall two figures cast long candle flame shadows across Jorm's bedchamber. Shiny metal implements glistened in their hands. Their voices were no more than whispers, their intent was clear.

From below came the sounds of song and dance. It seemed the assassins would be in for a long night. Time passed slowly, but as surely as night follows day the sounds subsided, until there was only silence. Two silhouettes flitted across the chamber; they disappeared into their surroundings.

\*

Cretin watched the guests leave with a look of dismay, then with an instant change of mood he grinned fiendishly, opened his wings and silently glided the short distance to the floor. "Check the corridors, stairwell and bed chambers," he chortled, then as if playing a game he partially retracted the talons on his feet and set off towards the rear exit, chuntering



to himself. “Cretin creeps quietly through the doorway on tippy talons so no one hears him; he spies a guard near the stairwell. Cretin moves like a shadow. The guard is dozing; he is unaware of Cretin's presence. Guard should not be asleep on his feet; Cretin will teach him. Cretin crouches low and approaches the guard, then he straightens his sturdy legs till his eyes glare at the closed eyelids of the guard, then he reaches out with his tongue and tickles the guard under his chin; the guard smiles; what is he thinking? Cretin tickles again. The guard's eyelids flutter; just one more tickle.”

The guard's eyes opened. Sheer terror crossed his face which reflected more than simply the sight of Cretin; he was lost for breath; his skin grew pale; then without a word he collapsed in a heap.

“Guard still sleeps, but now he is more comfortable... Cretin turns and creeps up the stairs; he spies the bedchamber entrance; he stops; he smells vermin.”

Cretin moved steadily towards the bedchamber entrance. He stopped no more than a hand span from the open doorway. Very slowly he leaned forward, stretching his neck through the doorway. He paused for a moment and listened, then he turned his head to the left and then to the right. There was no one there. Cretin scratched his head.

Stealthily he crept into the room, his eyes wide in the semi-darkness. When he stood in the centre of the chamber he stopped and peered all around. He crouched and looked under the bed. “Come out, come out, wherever you are,” he called in a silly voice but no one came. He looked towards the window drapes, then towards the curtain which divided the bedchamber from the bathing room. After studying a moment he moved towards the window. His clawed fingers reached out and he tore the drapes open. “BOO,” he cried... to no one. “Not having much luck tonight,” he chuckled, knowingly.

The bathing room curtains rustled; two figures darted

into the bedchamber. Cretin feigned surprise.

“It is his master's pet,” chastised one, as he began to work his way around Cretin.

“Ugly brute,” commented the other.

Cretin's left eye followed one assassin and his right eye followed the other, he crouched and hissed venomously. His adversaries halted.

“Come on Chard, let's take him.”

Chard moved a little closer. Cretin reached out with one claw like hand; his fingers coiled with horny, needle sharp nails beckoning Chard forward.

“I do not like the look of those claws Jame, look at the way those nails curve.”

Cretin took one step towards Chard. Chard took one step backward.

Jame moved two steps closer - talons extended between Cretin's toes.

“NOW,” cried Jame.

Nothing happened.

“Are we a little nervous?” queried Cretin in a curious, if over exaggerated voice. “Does Cretin frightens you?”

“Let's put an end to this charade!” exclaimed Jame. “This thing makes fools of us.”

Cretin shifted both eyes to Jame, their emerald shade turning to blood red.

Jame looked uncomfortable.

“It is just trying to scare us,” said Jame with little conviction.

“It is doing a good job,” replied Chard.

“There is nothing to fear; it is a demon; it puts fear into our minds to protect itself; it cannot defeat the two of us.” Jame's face contorted as if he was fighting with an invisible enemy in his head, his hands began to tremble, then with what seemed an extreme effort of willpower he lunged at

Cretin with his dagger.

Cretin had foreseen his action. He deflected the blade with his left arm. His right hand clutched at Jame's face, two clawed fingers thrusting into his eyes.

Jame shrieked.

Chard put a hand to his stomach, his face drained of colour.

Cretin turned and slammed Jame's head into the wall; once, twice. Bones smashed and blood splattered the wall. He retracted his hand, blood dripping from his fingers. He turned to face Chard.

“Keep away from me,” stammered Chard. “We did not come here to harm you.”

Cretin moved towards him.

Chard began to walk backwards. “We can talk. Are you not an enemy of these people?” Chard backed into a chair. He stumbled; he regained his balance and picked up the chair.

Cretin moved menacingly close.

“All your fellow creatures serve Nomarn, should you not join them?”

Cretin remained silent.

“Listen to me, damn you.” Chard hurled the chair at Cretin.

Cretin ducked, then leapt at Chard feet first. His taloned feet impaled Chard's stomach. His clawed hands clasped Chard's head. They fell to the floor. Chard tried to wriggle free, but Cretin held him firm; he opened his protruding jaws to reveal razor sharp teeth then he bent forward towards the throbbing jugular in Chard's neck...

\*

Giyorn was the only man sat at the table. Jorm was

somewhere down the corridor bidding farewell to the last of his guests.

Giyorn leant back in his chair feeling rather satisfied and very tired. He was musing to himself in the quiet of the hall when a distant scream reached his ears. He sat bolt upright, then glanced at the ceiling. "What was that?" he mumbled. He looked towards the corridor in search of Jorm, but naught could he see. He turned to look behind and saw the empty pedestal. Leaping from his seat he made for the rear exit, his drowsiness had fled him and his eyes were alert.

A guard lay before Giyorn, his face horror stricken. He glanced up the spiralling stairway, then back towards the hall. For a moment he appeared hesitant, then he turned back to the stairwell and began a stealthy ascent.

Giyorn leapt silently but swiftly from the top step to find cover at the side of the bedchamber doorway. He leaned forward to see through the opening; he heard slurping and licking sounds coming from the chamber. A puzzled look crossed his face then he drew his dagger and stepped briskly into the room. Giyorn's eyes scanned the room quickly. The first thing that caught his attention was the lifeless body of Jame. It was in a sitting position against the far wall, eyeless sockets seeing nowhere. The slurping sound stopped. Giyorn moved his eyes to the right. He saw two sparkling rubies. It took only a moment to recognise the outline of Cretin, but what was he doing?

Giyorn moved towards Cretin. Cretin watched him for a moment then began to back away. Giyorn could see blood dripping from Cretin's mouth. He looked down, then grimaced; he lifted his head to glare at Cretin.

"Nice Giyorn... er.. Cretin was only doing his job."

Giyorn began to walk towards Cretin. His face as black as thunder.

Cretin continued to retreat. "Poor Cretin. Cretin did

not get supper. Cretin has not been drinking wine. Poor hungry Cretin. Why is Giyorn not speaking?"

Cretin backed up against the wall where Jame sat. He looked down at Jame and patted him on the head. "Nasty misters, came to hurt nice master. Cretin showed them."

Giyorn's face looked gnarled and angry, he crouched to attack.

"HOLD," came a cry from the doorway. "What is the meaning of this?"

Giyorn half turned towards Jorm. One eye still watching Cretin. "Your creature, Jorm," he growled. "Your disgusting monster."

"Cretin's not disgusting," said Cretin. "Cretin's guarding his master. Look on the floor. Daggers; daggers to cut out master's heart."

Both Jorm and Giyorn looked around until they saw the daggers.

"Assassins," murmured Jorm, looking at a white gold ring with black seven on the index finger of Jame's left hand. "Nomarn's assassins. You have done well Cretin."

"Well," snapped Giyorn. "To kill or to capture is one thing but to tear to pieces and then... and then..."

"Have supper," added Cretin.

"You are repulsive," added Giyorn.

"But effective," added Jorm. "Would I have been shown any mercy?"

"Certainly not," said Cretin.

Giyorn looked thoughtful, his temper slightly cooled.

"Nomarn is playing for keeps. Spies everywhere, assassins...Every day that passes, poor master's life is in grave danger."

"You are right Cretin, we must act and act now," affirmed Jorm, "though I suspect these would be murderers were only unwitting pawns, sent to harass me into rash

decisions.”

“Act on what?” queried Giyorn, taking a more relaxed stance. “We need your father's weapons if we are to confront these cloaked devils; these wraiths of evil. Where do we start to look?”

“I do not think Nomarn has the power to place these weapons where he wills. I think they are back where my father found them.”

“It took him ten years and six to discover their whereabouts. The elden kindreds of yesteryear did not intend these weapons of power to fall into any fools' hands.”

“No, they did not, but my father had to search for clues of their whereabouts, whereas I know where he found them.”

Giyorn's face lightened a little. “Then we muster our armies?”

“No. Armies will not aid us in our quest. A handful of trusted friends may travel more discretely.”

“Cretin is a trusted friend,” said Cretin.

“QUIET!” rasped Giyorn.

“On the morrow we head for the village of Boudier to see what we may find. Let us go now and prepare ourselves.”

Giyorn walked toward the doorway with Jorm. At the doorway he stopped and looked back at Cretin. “What may I ask do you feed him on when there are no assassins, friends of the court?”

“No,” grinned Jorm, “of course not, only strangers.”

# The Slaughtered Lamb

## Chapter 2

Giyorn gazed down the grassy embankment towards Boudier, perhaps in better times he may have appreciated its quaint setting, the little stream which wound its way around the outskirts of the small village, the wooded areas, with trees of green and red, but now was not the time. “Where the devil is she,” he grunted.

“Patience my friend,” said Jorm. “The call of nature comes to us all.”

“Especially women,” snapped Giyorn. “Do you realise how many times we have had to stop already, every time we pass a clump of blessed trees.”

“The men have to stop as often as Miowni.”

“If we were all men we would not have to worry about the trees. Look behind us Jorm.”

Both Giyorn and Jorm turned their mounts.

“See those trees five hundred paces, a little to the east.”

“Yes.”

“See those trees a thousand paces, a little to the west.”

“Yes.”

“See those trees in the distance.”

“What are you getting at Giyorn?”

“We have wound our way around them all, a snake could set a straighter course.”

“Ah.”

“When nature calls we all have to find a clump of

trees because a lady is present.”

Jorm shrugged his shoulders.

“What on earth is she doing,” said Giyorn in a rather loud irritable voice.

The rest of the party heard Giyorn's remarks. They meant little to Cretin, but Gwidian and Morgain the sons of Baron Dromar could not resist adding their own comments.

“Perhaps it's that funny time of the month,” smiled Morgain.

“Oh you mean it's the night of the full moon,” sneered Gwidian.

“More likely a crescent,” laughed Morgain.

The laughter slowly died.

“You do not think she is having trouble with that belt of hers again, do you Gwidian?” Morgain was still smiling.

“Could be. She has probably misplaced the key.”

They both erupted into laughter.

“Silence,” cried Giyorn. Then he turned to Jorm. “Are we surrounded by fools... Two jokers, a lady with a weak bladder and a... a... ,” he pointed at Cretin.

“A strong brave loyal servant,” helped Cretin.

“Give me strength,” growled Giyorn.

“Calm yourself my friend,” said Jorm in a soft voice.

“We should not enter Boudier before nightfall.”

“Why nightfall?”

“We will be less conspicuous,” replied Jorm.

Giyorn looked at Cretin. “You jest, of course.”

“Not at all. I have an old hooded cloak he can wear. If he keeps the hood closed we can pass him off as Miowni's grandmother.”

Giggles came from Morgain and Gwidian who had been eavesdropping.

Giyorn gave them a look of disgust then turned back to Jorm. “It may make a good fairy tale, but would not an old



hag look a little out of place walking with five riders?"

"She... He can ride with Miowni."

"NOT ON YOUR LIFE."

Jorm turned to see Miowni approaching. His cheeks flushed a little. "Is there a problem?" he said meekly.

"I would sooner ride with... with Morgain." Miowni walked towards Jorm to retrieve the reins of her horse.

Gwidian chuckled and said, "I thought that was the last thing that you would ever do."

Miowni glared at him. "What difference does it make anyway. There is not a horse in the land that would tolerate a creature of the darkworld on its back."

They all looked at one another.

Cretin walked over to Miowni's horse. The horse bowed its head and Cretin stroked it behind its left ear, using the back of his hand. The horse neighed softly.

"Most strange," said Giyorn.

Miowni did not know what to say.

"See, there is nothing to fear," said Jorm.

"No, I will not," stated Miowni.

"We must all play our parts, my dear. We are trying to save our lands...our people from a fate worse than death. Soon we will face true evil. Do we falter so easily." Jorm's eyes locked onto Miowni.

"And if I do not agree, you will send me back to..."

"No," interrupted Jorm, "it is your choice."

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Jorm and Giyorn rode at the head of the small procession. Though they were not dressed in their finery or battle armour, they still looked impressive; Jorm wearing a tunic of deepest green and Giyorn clad in black, his cloak rustling gently in the breeze. They were two very different

characters; Jorm with his long golden hair held in place by a head band and his youthful blue eyes; Giyorn with his short dark hair and beard, reflecting a more mature and hardened character. Behind Jorm and Giyorn rode the brothers Dromar; both were dark and young, with a certain amount of flair. They were around ten paces in front of Miowni, who sat like a statue. She dared not look down to her waist where clawed fingers held her gently.

“You are keeping your little secrets well, Jorm,” said Giyorn, “but pray tell me, what do you expect to find in Boudar?”

“Information, my friend. The weapons of my father are spread far and wide, some paths may be more inviting than others. Many travellers pass through Boudar, it is a good place to find out what lies before us.”

“What options do we have when we leave Boudar?”

“North, East or West - all directions except from whence we came.”

“You seem very matter of fact. Where is the fire that accompanied you on that fateful day, when Raimar fell?”

For just an instant a shadow crossed Jorm's face, then it was gone. “I do not intend to fail in my task. I need cunning; I need stealth and most of all, I need my wits. Hatred blinds all.”

Giyorn turned to look at Gwidian and Morgain, then he looked at Jorm. “You certainly have the wit.” Giyorn could not help a smug smile.

“They have their purpose. They are young and well skilled with a blade, and who would believe they had a serious aim in life!”

“Who indeed!”

Gwidian and Morgain were too far adrift from Jorm and Giyorn to overhear their conversation. They chatted idly to one another. “How is Miowni faring with Cretin?” queried

Morgain.

Gwidian looked over his shoulder. "Well... Er... So-so, I suppose. She looks a little frigid."

"Did she ever look any different. Perhaps I should have asked how Cretin was faring, poor little man."

"Man, did you say?"

"Well, he is male, is he not?"

Gwidian scratched his head. "To be quite honest I do not really know. How do you tell the difference?"

"Easy. All you have to do is shake them."

"Shake them?" said Gwidian inquisitively.

"Yes, shake them. If it is male it will rattle."

Gwidian laughed. "You fool, Morgain."

Miowni sat taut in the saddle, she could feel Cretin's spikey fingers holding her waist gently. They gave a sort of tickling sensation and her skin tried to crawl away from its source.

"You are sitting very stiff, my dear," chortled Cretin.

"I... I normally ride this way," whispered Miowni.

"There is plenty of time to be stiff when you are dead," continued Cretin.

Goose pimples began to break out on Miowni's arms. "I am... er practising," said Miowni in a very uncertain voice.

"Practising to be dead!" said Cretin.

"No," said Miowni, "not that."

Cretin looked puzzled. "I know plenty of people who are dead."

"You knew plenty of people," corrected Miowni.

"I have not forgotten them," said Cretin in a strange tone, which hinted of a dreamy sadness.

Miowni turned her head until she could see Cretin out of the corner of her right eye. His hood had fallen back onto his shoulders in the riding breeze. There was a strange look on his face and a dampness beneath the eyes. Although this

may have been no more than a reaction to the cool evening air, it gave his face a look of humanity.

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They entered Boudier as the last embers of light drifted beyond the horizon. They had donned their cloaks to ward off the chill of the night.

At the first crossroads they halted. "Where to now, my lord?" enquired Giyorn.

Jorm looked about himself. "There is a tavern here somewhere, though its exact location and name elude me. The roadways look much the same."

"Is it not the Dwarf and Dragon," prompted Gwidian.

"No, that does not seem familiar - it seems such a long time since I passed this way."

"We passed this way on our journey to join you," commented Morgain, "I can remember the hanging sign." Morgain looked at Gwidian and Gwidian returned the look.

"I have it," stated Gwidian. "The Butchered Lamb."

"The Slaughtered Lamb," corrected Morgain.

"The Slaughtered Lamb," reaffirmed Jorm. He pointed to the north. "That is the way we should go."

They cantered down the narrow twisting roadway which lead north, passing buildings, both quaint and old, until they came to a clearing.

The 'Slaughtered Lamb' was set back from the road, being surrounded by a reasonably sized area of grass, where tables and chairs stood; though at this time of day they were unoccupied. To the rear of the tavern stood what used to be a barn, but was now used to stable the horses of overnight guests.

They dismounted their horses silently and began to walk towards the nearest rail where they could tether them.

A small boy appeared, seemingly from nowhere. "Water and feed for your faithful servant, Sir?" said the boy to Jorm.

"I doubt whether Cretin would appreciate oats and water," muttered Morgain.

Gwidian kicked Morgain's left shin.

"Can you also bed the animals down for the night?" asked Jorm thoughtfully.

"I trust you have rooms to spare at the tavern?"

"I am sure my father can find a place where you may rest your heads."

"Thank you, young man." Jorm began to walk towards the tavern entrance. Miowni walked by his side with Cretin tucked in close behind; his hood cloaking his face in total darkness. Giyorn brought up the rear of the group close behind Morgain and Gwidian.

The tavern was quite large, wood beams supported the ceiling and a log fire burned in a large fireplace on the eastern wall. A few guests turned their heads as the group entered, one or two raised their eyebrows at the sight of Miowni; it was unusual to see a lady in a tavern, although there was no consensus against it. They sat themselves around a table at the opposite side of the room to the fire; it was the only one totally unoccupied. They sat and talked for a while before a short plumpish man approached.

"Food, wine, what may I get you good sirs and madam and...?"

"Wine certainly and food..." Jorm looked around the table at his companions, expecting them to give their order. One by one they suggested what they would like, although sometimes their tastes could not be precisely satisfied. Finally there was only Cretin left to speak, still hidden behind his hooded cloak. All eyes fell in his direction.

"Come on now, grandma. What would you like to

eat?” said Miowni, in a sort of over emphatic manner.

“Him,” croaked Cretin, turning towards the tubby little man.

Morgain sniggered.

The little man's face dropped, then he smiled and chuckled nervously. “Grandmother certainly has a sense of humour, has she not?”

“I very much doubt it,” said Gwidian looking rather amused.

The little man looked from one face to another.

Giyorn looked puzzled by the conversation, he had not heard what Cretin had said.

“She is a funny old sort, a nice piece of meat should be fine,” said Miowni with a warm smile.

The little man returned the smile, “How would grandmother like the meat?”

“Raw,” grunted Cretin.

“Rare,” said Miowni.

The little man looked at Miowni, then said, “Rare it is.” He shook his head and walked away.

It was not long before the table was laid with dishes and the food served. The meal was marred only by Cretin, bending his head over the table and placing it squarely in his dish to the accompaniment of the most revolting slurping sounds which emanated from his hood, but this did not last long.

Miowni smiled, “I bet grandma has not had a meal this good since..”

“Chard,” added Cretin.

Miowni gave him a quizzical look. “A bit burnt was it?”

After they had all eaten, the brothers Dromar and Giyorn began to move around the Tavern, joining in with the conversation of others; slipping in questions about their

surroundings when possible and listening to the tales of others. The rest remained seated at the table.

Cretin sat motionless. Jorm gazed at Miowni. It had been a difficult decision bringing Miowni, but he had given an oath to her father that he would not let her out of his sight. Now her father was no more, it did not seem right to leave her behind, although it would have been safer for her - for the time being.

“Why do you stare, Jorm?”

“Just thinking.”

Miowni looked at the table for a while then faced Jorm again. “Do you think you will be recognised here? It must seem a little strange to these people, six travellers such as we, carrying swords and the like.”

“In more rational times, yes, but if you look around most people are armed and I doubt whether anyone would recognise me personally. They are not the sort of people you find at court.”

Miowni looked straight into Jorm's eyes. “Tell me, do you know where we are heading?”

Jorm laughed. “Now that is what I call a blunt question, if a little unexpected and faithless. I do believe I know where the weapons are which will put an end to the desecration of our lands, in time you will learn their locations.”

“They did not help your father.”

Jorm's mood darkened. “My father took too much upon himself. This time it will be different.” Then as quickly as the darkness came it lifted and Jorm's face became tranquil.

“But even if you find the weapons, how will you find Nomarn?”

“If I do not find him, he will find me and besides there are more than we to contend with. Nomarn tried to put his curse on Miriel and his hands on that priceless gem - the

helvstone.”

“I thought they were only legend.”

“Many legends are indeed truths,” said Jorm in a soft voice.

“I cannot see why he needed the elden Queen; in fact I cannot see why he does not simply walk all over our lands; how could we stop him? We have not even the power to touch him, he is... it is a shade.”

Jorm smiled. “You miss the point.” He studied Miowni’s face - it was pretty, in fact most things about her were sort of..

“You were saying?”

“Oh yes, I was saying - what was I saying?”

“It is your turn to buy,” boomed Giyorn, approaching the table.

“He bought the last ones,” croaked Cretin, although no one saw his lips move.

“I was merely jesting,” said Giyorn.

“He ha yuk yuk,” said Cretin.

Giyorn clenched his fist and looked about to use it.

“You require something,” said Jorm intervening.

Giyorn thought twice about his actions, then he lifted his eyes to the neighbouring table. “Be careful what you say,” he whispered. Then he turned and returned from whence he came.

Jorm glanced at the neighbouring table, then back to Miowni. “The inquisition is over.”

Miowni scowled.

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It was a considerable time before they all sat again together. “Well,” said Jorm. “What information have you?”

“Rumours and more rumours,” said Giyorn.



“Stories of demons and weird happenings,” said Gwidian.

“There are trees that eat people on Darkwood Wold,” said Morgain.

Gwidian chuckled.

“Alright,” said Jorm. “Any useful information?”

“I doubt if anything we heard was useful,” mused Giyorn, “although I do believe there are strange happenings, there are just too many worried people.”

Both Morgain and Gwidian nodded.

“Why did you warn me about those people who were sat at the next table?”

“Only a precaution, did you note how they vanished after I came back to you?”

“Does that signify something?” queried Jorm.

“Maybe, maybe not. They appeared to be straining their ears to me.”

Jorm looked thoughtful. “If we have no real information then we will head north in the morning. There seems to be no safe roads.”

“Only the way we came,” commented Gwidian.

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It was not long before they left for their rooms, Jorm rose first, he glanced around the room at the few remaining people then he beckoned Miowni to rise. She did as she was bid and they both bade their companions goodnight.

Gwidian watched them leave the room. “I am sure it will be,” he said, “for some.”

The others followed shortly. They had no idea where Jorm and Miowni had gone; they simply followed the young boy who led them to their room.

Cretin tagged along at the end of the line. He entered

the room with the others but when the boy left, Cretin followed soon afterwards.

“No sleepies for Cretin,” he said. “He will ensure tonight is peaceful for all.”

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Morning came and the small party rode northward, that is all but Cretin. He had resumed a more natural form of transport - his legs. He seemed more at ease carrying his own weight and none would argue that his staying power was less than that of a horse. If he did tire, it did not show. The trail they followed was clearly defined. The ground on which they rode was hard and nothing grew but to either side of them there was tall grass in which many wild flowers and weeds flourished. The lands in these parts had not been changed by the hands of evil. Ahead lay the forest Finglis. It would be midday, all going well, before they arrived at its outer reaches but already trees were springing into view.

“Do you think the forest is safe?” queried Miowni. Jorm shrugged his shoulders. “I think we are on the border of the dark domain. If what was said in the tavern is true, Nomarn's hand now touches it and none are safe.”

“Then should we not try to avoid it?” queried Miowni.

“The forest is our cloak,” stated Jorm.

“Cloaks hide many things,” commented Giyorn.

The conversation died.

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At midday they paused to rest. It was a brief respite but well appreciated. Miowni glanced skyward through the thickening leaves where streams of sunlight gave her comfort. “It does not seem evil,” said Miowni. “It seems... sort of

enchancing.”

“What does not?” queried Jorm.

“The forest,” replied Miowni.

“We are not in it yet,” said Morgain.

Miowni looked puzzled.

“When we are truly in the forest there will be very little sky to see,” said Jorm. “This is one of the densest forests I know.”

“You know the forest.”

“No, Miowni, not really. Following a trail is one thing, to try and find your way through the forest with nothing to guide you is quite another.”

They rode into the thickening woodland as the sun began to float downward, Cretin following silently. The deeper they penetrated the darker it became.

Jorm motioned to halt as they entered a small glade.

“We travel no further today, we may stray from our path.”

They all dismounted, and began unhitching their saddles.

“Do we light a fire?” queried Miowni to no one in particular.

“Yes,” replied Morgain.

“No,” replied Giyorn. “What say you, Jorm?”

“A good question.”

“It is going to get cold,” stated Morgain.

“Are we afraid of a little cold?” said Giyorn.

“We seem to be afraid of a little something,” said Gwidian.

“Caution,” growled Giyorn.

“You should not be afraid of caution,” chortled Cretin.

Giyorn opened his mouth with a nasty look on his face, but he did not get time to speak.

Morgain noticed the look on Giyorn's face; he turned his back on everyone, wrapped his arms around his side and

began making a funny sort of suppressed snorting noise.

“How about a vote?” said Miowni hurriedly.

“Good idea,” said Jorm. “Let us have a vote.”

“I vote nay,” said Giyorn forcefully.

“I vote yea,” said Gwidian adamantly.

“Yea,” said Morgain with an artificial seriousness.

“I also think caution is the better part of valour,” said Jorm. “It is a free vote but I think nay.”

Miowni looked at them all and they all looked at Miowni. “Well... er... I think...”

“This is a creepy sort of place,” said Morgain.

“Cretin creepies,” said Cretin mischievously.

“And Cretins' friends,” added Gwidian.

Miowni looked around; the leaves rustled a little; faint shadows rippled on the ground. “A fire would be cosy.”

Giyorn glared at Gwidian.

Gwidian shrugged his shoulders.

“Get the wood,” said Giyorn, pointing a finger at Gwidian. “You wish for a fire - then make one.”

Gwidian raised one of his own fingers, but Morgain clasped his shoulder and said, “I will help you, we will not have to look far.”

Those who remained cleared the leaves of the previous fall from where they wished the fire to be and then settled down to wait for the brothers' return.

Morgain and Gwidian travelled no more than thirty paces from the camp. There was wood to be had but most of it was still growing in the ground and that would not do at all.

“Giyorn has a sharp tongue and short temper,” stated Gwidian.

“He is a hard man, I often wonder why he follows Jorm. He has his own men at arms. I feel sure he revels in command. Why does he not go and wage his own war?” Morgain picked a good, if somewhat weighty, log up.

Gwidian shook his head then he bent down to grab a dead branch. As he clasped the branch he lifted his head a little; something caught his eye.

“Am I imagining it or is that a figure over there?” he said quietly.

Morgain turned slowly and followed the eye line of Gwidian. The light was not good but it looked as though there was a cloaked figure standing among the trees not a score of paces from them.

“Do you see, Morgain?”

“Yes. I see.”

Gwidian took a pace forward, then another.

A squawk came from the trees behind them. They both turned their heads. “Only a bird,” stated Morgain.

They turned back towards the figure, but saw only trees.

Gwidian dropped what he was holding and drew his sword then he set off at a gallop towards where he had seen the figure. He arrived in moments.

“DO YOU SEE ANYONE?” called Morgain who had been left standing.

Gwidian turned through three hundred and sixty degrees, then back to face Morgain. “No one,” he replied. He looked around again, then began to walk back towards Morgain. He covered five paces then stopped. The hairs on the back of his neck were standing on end. He slowly turned his head to look behind, nothing had changed.

“Is there something wrong?” queried Morgain.

Gwidian turned to face Morgain, he thought for a moment then said, “No, nothing is wrong.”

“Perhaps we were imagining.”

“Yes,” agreed Gwidian, “only shadows.”

Gwidian sheathed his sword and they picked up their gatherings and began the short walk back to their

companions.

Jorm and Giyorn sat facing one another chatting softly while Cretin picked his feet. Miowni sat alone resting her back against a tree watching the leaves rustle. She should have been relaxing but she appeared uneasy. A twig snapped somewhere nearby. Miowni's eyes widened but no one else seemed to notice. The grass rustled behind the tree on which she was leaning.

People did not scare Miowni but now her face looked apprehensive; fearful. Long moments passed - the grass rustled again. For a short while she appeared frozen, then she quickly turned her head to the right.

A hand clutched her left shoulder. She jumped - her heart skipped a beat.

Cretin lifted his head and looked towards her.

"Morgain's back," he said.

Storm clouds passed over Miowni's face.

"We are back," said Morgain, taking his hand off Miowni's shoulder.

"Do you want to help us make the fire, Miowni?"

Anger quickly changed to embarrassment, then in a matter of fact voice, as if everything was fine, she said, "Why not?"

They stacked the wood where the dead leaves had been cleared then Gwidian said, "Who has the flints?"

No one answered.

"Someone must have them," he insisted.

They all shook their heads.

"Rub two sticks together," suggested Giyorn, with a somewhat smug tone to his voice.

Both Jorm and Giyorn stood, then walked over to Gwidian. They all looked at the woodpile. "How about bashing two stones together," suggested Miowni.

"Be serious," said Morgain, with a smile, "there must

be a more reasonable way of kindling a flame.”

“Problems making fires,” chortled Cretin.

Everybody ignored him.

He made his way towards them, then nuzzled his way to the wood. All but Jorm looked at him with distaste. “A few dead twigs would help,” said Cretin.

“What good are twigs without a flame?” said Gwidian.

Giyorn stared at Cretin with a thoughtful if somewhat angered look. “I doubt he needs a flame. In fact I doubt if he needs the twigs either. He looks to me like the demons of the circle.”

All eyes fell on Cretin.

“Cretin cannot help his looks, besides it is you who are ugly. Cretin is handsome.”

Jorm had a stony look on his face. “No one said anything about being ugly, just light the fire Cretin.”

Cretin returned the look with one eye then he rubbed his thumb and forefinger together... a single dancing flame appeared on his curled fingernail.

“Fire demon,” stated Giyorn grimly.

“Twigs,” said Cretin firmly.

“I will get them,” said Miowni, with a half smile.

“Now that is a clever trick,” said Gwidian. “Where did you learn it?”

“In the pits of hell,” snorted Giyorn before Cretin had time to open his mouth.

“We should call him Flint,” said Morgain with a prankish look on his face.

Miowni returned almost immediately. The forest floor was strewn with small dead twigs and she did not have to travel far to gather an adequate quantity. She placed the twigs under the heavier wood and Cretin set it alight.

They all settled down around the fire; unbuckled their

swords for comfort and took a little food from their packs. The last light of day disappeared unnoticed. There was little sound in the air, except for the familiar noise of crickets. One or two flying insects ventured near the flames but the heat dissuaded them from too close an approach.

They ate their food then sat and talked idly for quite a while. It must have been close to midnight before they all fell silent, but when they did, another sound came to their ears; the beating of wings.

“Is that an owl I can hear?” queried Miowni.

“It sounds more like a bat to me,” answered Gwidian.

They all looked around. Whatever it was fell to the earth around ten paces from them.

Morgain looked at the others, then set off towards it. The light was poor, only the flickering flames burnt a hole in the total darkness. He slowed as he neared the creature. He could see something moving in the grass but he was not sure what. Holding his right hand before him he rubbed his fingers together and made a funny tutting sound as if he was beckoning to a stray dog. The thing sat bolt upright and a screech left its teeth.

Morgain jerked erect with a strange look on his face. “What on earth is that?”

The thing glowered at him, deep red eyes set above large jagged canines.

“Looks like a little Cretin,” commented Gwidian.

Cretin gave him a sombre look.

Another flap of wings was heard and a second creature dropped to the ground around five paces behind the first. It too stood upright, though it measured less than four hand spans.

Morgain drew his knife and poked it at the first creature. With a clash of teeth against metal Morgain was left with little more than the knife handle in his hand.



“Vicious little monster,” he remarked, then he began walking backwards. “Someone hand me my sword.”

“Perhaps he has had enough to eat already,” joked Gwidian.

“Just pass me the sword.”

Gwidian joined Morgain. He gave him his sword and held his own at the ready.

Giyorn turned to Jorm and said, “No doubt attracted to the fire, like moths to a lantern.”

“Perhaps so,” replied Jorm.

Morgain eyed the nearest creature for a few moments as it advanced, then let swing with his sword. The creature hopped to one side and hissed at him.

“Careful, careful,” chortled Cretin. “Little wood sprites.”

Morgain was not sure who Cretin was warning - himself or the creatures. By now the second sprite had almost caught up with the first, it did not exhibit caution.

“Look out,” snapped Jorm, as if an extra sense had warned him of impending danger.

The sprite leapt at Gwidian's face.

Gwidian dodged to one side not a moment too soon. The sprite went hurtling by to land head first at Giyorn's feet. A heavy boot crushed its skull into the ground.

“Oh dear,” croaked Cretin.

The first sprite leapt forward, opening its wings to soar upwards. They all ducked for safety. A receding screech reached their ears as it vanished into the night.

“Well,” said Giyorn, “the evil truly spreads southward.”

They all nodded their heads in silent agreement.

Cretin walked over to the dormant little sprite; he bent and picked it up by its pointed little tail. “Cute little thing,” he said in a sombre voice. “Only a youngster.”

They all cast their eyes at Cretin. Despite their abhorrence of the sprite they felt a pang of sympathy for Cretin, though Giyorn's face was unreadable.

They watched Cretin staring sympathetically, as though the creature was to him as a child would be to themselves. He held the creature just above eye level, then with a sickening crunch of bone he bit off its head. A bluey red substance dribbled down his mouth as he began to chew.

“Oh my...” said Miowni turning her head away in disgust. “I feel sick.”

They all turned away, none looked in the best of health.

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Morning came with no further incident. At the first rays of light they mounted up and began their ride. They travelled slowly as the trail became harder to follow. It was mid-morning when they first came to a halt. Miowni had spotted something. “Look over there,” she said pointing into the dense woodland. “It looks like a cabin.”

One by one they turned their heads in the direction indicated.

“You could be right,” said Morgain.

“I will ride over and have a look,” said Gwidian turning towards Jorm. Jorm motioned him on.

Gwidian cantered toward the small building; it was only a short distance but the going was less than easy. He brought his horse to a halt less than a dozen paces from the building eyeing the logs and old timbers from which the cabin had been built. It was not a large place, perhaps only six paces each wall.

“Greetings,” called Gwidian, “is there anyone here?” He sat back in his saddle and glanced at the clear sky above

the building, awaiting a reply. He did not get one. "Is there anyone here?" he called again.

Rustling came from the trees to his left. He turned his head, but saw nothing. "Playing games are we?" he said in a low voice.

He dismounted and walked towards the trees, the half-light of the forest did not help his vision and still he saw nothing. Gwidian tapped the hilt of his sword apprehensively.

"You are searching for something?" boomed a deep voice.

Gwidian had turned on his heels before the question was finished. He stared for a moment at a rather large figure of a man; pale of skin; unkempt by nature. He was leaning on a rather large, vicious looking axe.

"Speak up man."

"Well... er... I presume I was looking for you."

"You presume."

"You are the owner of this cabin?"

"Yes."

"Then it is you I was seeking."

"Why?"

"Yes... well... another tricky question... We were following yonder trail and we spotted your cabin. We thought we would..."

"We," interrupted the man. "Why do you keep saying we, are you not alone?"

"Well, you are stood next to me," said Gwidian with a smugness which came with the realisation that his inquisitor was no more than a man of the woodlands.

The man scowled and stood erect, lifting his axe from the ground. "You think to mock me."

"Of course not," replied Gwidian in a hurried and if somewhat feigned apologetic voice.

"Who are 'we'?" demanded the man.

“I am Gwidian and you are...?”

The man stared directly into Gwidian's eyes from beneath thick bushy brows.

“My friends are still on the trail,” said Gwidian, “would you like to meet them?”

“Could it be a trap?” said the man curiously.

Gwidian met his eyes and said in a very genuine voice. “Why in this world would anyone want to trap a wild man with a nasty looking axe, whose only possession is an old broken down wood cabin?”

The man boomed with laughter. “You are a brave young lad, if a little cheeky. Take me to your friends.”

Gwidian did not walk far. He simply hitched his horse near the cabin and walked a few paces towards the trail. “I HAVE FOUND A FRIEND,” he yelled.

His companions joined him - with the exception of Cretin. Gwidian introduced them and himself in name only, however he still did not know to whom he was making the introductions.

“I am Balmar the woodcutter,” said the man without being prompted. “Some folk in Boudier call me Treebark.” He indicated towards the cabin. The door opened slowly and a slender dark haired woman appeared. “And that is my companion in life, Meralin, flower of the forest, come and meet her.” The woodcutter began to walk towards the cabin.

“Now that is what I call a pretty petal,” said Morgain with a lusty look.

“Keep a hold of yourself,” replied Gwidian.

“I am not that way inclined,” said Morgain grinning.

Gwidian shook his head. “I am not jesting brother. Have you seen the size of his chopper, you would not have a chance.”

“I have told you once, I am not that way inclined and besides it's not the size that counts, it's the way you use it.”

Gwidian pointed a finger at Morgain as if to say something, then he smiled, had a change of heart and followed the woodcutter.

They all greeted Meralin as they would a lady of the court.

Meralin who was little older than Miowni, a good score of years younger than Balmar, returned the greetings in a soft pleasant voice.

“Would you care to join us for lunch?” queried Balmar.

Jorm looked around. “Perhaps a little refreshment, good sir, we appreciate your good intent but we are many mouths to feed and we must press on with our journey shortly.”

Balmar indicated that they should wait at the door. He entered the cabin. Deep growls emanated from inside the log walls which raised a few eyebrows, then the woodcutter emerged clutching the restraining leads of two fierce looking dogs. The group moved away to give them a wide berth.

“Not to worry,” said Balmar. “Go inside, I will let the dogs run. They will see that we are not disturbed.”

It appeared reasonably large inside the cabin. There were only two rooms; the sleeping room and the main living quarters which had a central table with four fashioned chairs. At the north side of the cabin was a bench which had seating room for another three persons. Gwidian and Morgain seated themselves there.

Gwidian heard Balmar send the dogs on their way with a chorus of barking. With an inquisitive voice he asked Morgain, “Where is Cretin?”

“He is waiting in the forest.”

“I thought so. It looks like he is going to have company.”

“He could do with some playmates.”

“Playmates.”

“Well, they probably have a lot in common; they are all so sweet and gentle.”

Gwidian heard distant snarling and barking. He leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. He smiled at the woodcutter as he entered the cabin.

\*

“Nice doggies,” said Cretin walking backwards. He had tried to calm them but he could only hold the attention of one at a time. He picked up a stick and threw it behind the dogs. “Go fetch sticky.”

They were not interested.

“Look at all the lovely trees and what are trees for,” he smiled at the dogs, though it looked more like a horrible grin.

The dogs still were not interested.

“Cretins getting into troubles.”

The dogs drew closer, baring their teeth.

“Nasty doggies going to pounce; tail between his legs Cretin flaps his wings and soars into the air.”

Cretin beat his wings against the air. They were excellent for gliding but flying was another thing. Even with all his might he could barely lift himself two paces from the ground. “Flap, flap, flap, this is not easy,” gasped Cretin in a very serious voice.

The dogs sprang upward snapping viciously at his feet. He could hear their teeth clashing as he lifted one foot at a time, just out of their reach.

“Cretins not going to stay airborne much longer. His wingsies are getting so tired.”

\*

After giving a few hints on how to make good time through the forest and after his guests had received their refreshments, Balmar bid his new friends farewell. Gwidian was the last to depart and to him Balmar said, "The next time you visit you should come straight to the door, instead of sneaking around the trees."

"I called out, but I received no reply," said Gwidian. "Then I heard you in the trees."

"I was not in the trees," said Balmar. "I was in the cabin. I saw you dismounting and followed. Probably a beast of the wood you heard."

Gwidian reflected a moment then said, "You are probably right."

It did not take long for the group to rejoin the trail and when they did, they saw Cretin waiting for them.

"He is a wily one," said Morgain. "The dogs do not seem to have bothered him."

They rode up beside Cretin and Gwidian looked down at him. "Did you enjoy the dogs company," he queried with a large smile on his face.

"I enjoyed them very much," replied Cretin, licking a trickle of blood from his lips.

# Underworld

## Chapter 3

They departed the forest that evening. Although they had only seen a small fraction of the forest it was quite enough; they were not out sightseeing. They slept the night not a league from its borders and when dawn broke they headed north-east. Around noon they reached the ringstones; a circle of large monolithic stones, whose origins related back to elden times.

“They say these stones protect against evil,” said Jorm standing at their centre. “No evil may enter the circle.”

Morgain looked at Cretin who was stood next to Jorm. “Shoo,” he said ushering him away. “You heard what your master said.”

“You will have to get your own. Cretin doesn’t wear them,” replied Cretin.

Giyorn ignored them all. “It is a magnificent place,” he said, “but we have little time to waste. Let us journey on.”

“Seven stones for the seven elden wizards,” continued Jorm, “turned to stone for their evil deeds, by the greatest of all wizards, Myrov. Now in penance they guard this worthless piece of land from evil for evermore.”

“I have never heard anyone speak of Helv... elden wizards,” said Miowni.

“That is because he has just made it up,” said Morgain, chuckling to himself.

Jorm gave him a harsh look which told him to shut up. Despite himself, Morgain straightened his face.



“Shortly we will reach the caves of Goronak, there we will find the ‘sword of retribution’.” Jorm took what looked like an old parchment from his tunic. He laid it on the ground and unrolled it. There before them was a map of the lands of Harandos.

“When we reach our next destination we must part company,” said Jorm. “I had hoped we could travel our full journey together but time is not on our side. We will divide into two groups; I shall travel with Lord Giyorn and Miowni, while Morgain and Gwidian travel together. Cretin will go with them.”

Gwidian stared at Jorm. “I thought Cretin was your guardian?”

“True,” said Jorm. “Was.”

Giyorn grinned. “What a team.”

“Why wait until now to pass this information?” queried Morgain.

“The stones,” said Miowni. “Did he not say they protect against evil?”

“She is correct,” said Jorm. “The evil we face is not mortal man. I must protect our plans from the eyes of Nomarn.”

Morgain simply shrugged.

Jorm pointed out the route of Gwidian's party and set a time and place for them all to meet again. He did not disclose his own plans. Morgain did query his secrecy but Jorm only retorted that the less they knew the better.

Jorm rose and began to walk to the perimeter of the circle of stones where their horses waited. Giyorn and the others followed. Soon they were mounted and travelling towards the dark underground kingdom of Goronak. Probably the last road that they would all travel together.

\*

It was nightfall when they reached the small circular opening, which descended deep into the bowels of the earth. Cretin had lead the way and he found the place without problem. Some wondered why this should be so, but they remained silent.

“Do we enter now,” queried Morgain, “or do we rest first?”

Gwidian looked around. “I feel we are being followed. I have felt it since we left Boudier.”

“Then why speak up now?” queried Giyorn.

Gwidian did not answer.

“You are probably right,” commented Jorm. “But if we are being followed, they are keeping their distance. Cretin would pick up their scent.”

“Cretin smellies,” said Cretin.

“We have noticed,” said Morgain, “but what has all this got to do with us entering this hole?”

Gwidian shook his head.

“I should enter alone,” stated Jorm.

They all turned to stare at him.

“Our animals must be protected,” he continued, “and besides it is stealth that is called for, not numbers.”

“And what if you do not return?” said Miowni.

“Miowni is right,” said Giyorn, “our quest would be at an end.”

“I did not mean that,” said Miowni.

“I will go with you,” stated Giyorn.

“No,” said Jorm. “You are the best to lead if anything goes amiss.”

“Lead where?”

“Cretin will aid you.”

“You trust Cretin with information that even I do not know?”

“It is not like that Giyorn, trust me.”

“If Giyorn may not accompany you, then I shall,” said Gwidian. “I will not take no for an answer.”

“Let him accompany you,” insisted Miowni.

Jorm looked at Miowni a moment, then nodded.

\*

They bent low to pass through the small entrance. “This is just fine,” said Gwidian, “darker than the darkest night. How are we supposed to find our way?”

“Stand a while,” came a voice from the dark. “Our eyes will become accustomed.”

“Accustomed to what, total blackness?” Even as Gwidian spoke the outline of Jorm came into view. They appeared to be in a large passageway.

“It is not total blackness,” replied Jorm. “Tales have it that the caverns of Goronak provide their own light. The walls contain some kind of element which glows by itself.”

They waited a while. “Is that it then?” said Gwidian, still straining his eyes to see.

“It would appear so.”

“BEHIND YOU,” cried Gwidian.

Jorm's sword whistled from its sheath as he swung around.

Gwidian leapt, sword in hand, at the menacing shape he saw behind Jorm. It struck with a deafening ring. A sudden tremor shot up his arms and his teeth began to chatter.

“Is anything wrong?” came a shout from outside the cavern.

“Er... it is Gwidian, he is trying to hack some sort of statue to bits with his sword,” replied Jorm.

“Strange fellow,” called the voice.

“Well, it could have been...” started Gwidian in a

shaky voice.

“Then again it was not,” interrupted Jorm.

They sheathed their swords and looked at one another then continued down the passageway.

“I will wear my gauntlets next time.”

How far they had walked or how many interconnecting passageways they had passed, they did not know. It seemed like they had been walking for an age.

“Well, at least it is a little bit lighter down here,” commented Gwidian.

“We cannot have far to go,” replied Jorm.

“You do know where we are going?”

“Not another. My father said he followed the straight road.”

“This is straight?”

“As straight as we are likely to find, besides he no doubt meant he followed the main corridor.”

“If the sword is down here and Goronak is down here. Then would it be wrong to presume Goronak has the sword?”

“No.”

“Then will he give it to you if we ever find him?”

“I have not come here for the walk.”

“Was that an answer?”

\*

The air was cold and no one could find rest. They sat with cloaks over their shoulders looking out into the night.

“Do you think they will be alright?” queried Miowni.

“I am starting to wonder about us,” replied Morgain. “Gwidian could be right. The darkness holds secrets.”

“Right about what?” said Miowni.

“About being followed. I too get the feeling there is something lurking about out there.”

“Some thing?” said Miowni.

“Well... somebody. I see shadows.”

“Shadows truly,” stated Giyorn. “You are indeed hallucinating.”

“Perhaps not,” chortled Cretin.

“Do you see something?” questioned Miowni.

“Cretin sniffs,” replied Cretin.

“I am sure if there is anyone out there, they will make their presence known eventually. In the meantime there is nothing for us to do but wait. It would be foolhardy to run around after shadows.” Giyorn made sense, although it did not make anyone feel any easier.

They all watched and waited.

\*

Shields and other artefacts including ornaments hung to either side of the gallery where Jorm and Gwidian stood.

“It is difficult to believe we are under the earth,” remarked Jorm as he looked around.

“Not really,” replied Gwidian. “We entered a foxhole and we have been going down hill ever since. What happens now?”

“Along comes Goronak with the sword.”

“Of course. He carries it on a silver platter, bows courteously and says, thank you for letting me borrow your sword kind sirs. I have looked after it well and now return it in a condition better than new,”

“Listen!” said Jorm.

Gwidian listened. “Footsteps.”

“Yes, one heavy and one light.”

“Perhaps he has a club foot.”

Jorm looked at Gwidian. “Try to be serious.”

The footsteps grew louder. Neither Jorm nor Gwidian

were sure from which direction they came; the gallery distributed the sound evenly. Both looked apprehensive. Gwidian's left hand reached down for his sword.

Jorm shook his head. "Leave it sheathed," he whispered.

From ten paces ahead of Jorm a stocky figure appeared, trollish in appearance. Beside him walked a wiry framed creature, a little taller, but by appearance a little less than human, both were large eyed. They seemed to appear out of the walls.

"Goronak?" whispered Gwidian.

"The stocky trollish looking one... possibly."

The two figures walked towards Jorm and Gwidian, they stopped only two paces from them. "Greetings, strangers. Welcome to the kingdom of Goronak," said the shorter one.

"Greetings, I am Jorm, Lord of the Southlands." Jorm bowed his head.

The two figures turned towards Gwidian.

"Greetings," mumbled Gwidian.

"I beg your pardon," said the shorter.

"Hello," said Gwidian in a louder voice.

"Hello," said the shorter in a curious tone.

"It means greetings," said Jorm.

The shorter tilted his head to one side as though in contemplation, then they both turned; the shorter beckoned Jorm and Gwidian to follow with a wave of the hand; they both began to walk.

Jorm and Gwidian followed.

"He is very well spoken," commented Jorm in a low voice.

"Foller us darn ere," said the shorter.

"Do you really think so?" said Gwidian to Jorm.

They walked a short distance past an adjoining

corridor from where the occupants had appeared; they stopped near three barrels, which stood to one side of the passageway.

“You're Jorm and you're...?” the shorter motioned to Gwidian.

“Gwidian, and whom may I ask are you?”

“Goronak o' course.”

“And him?” queried Gwidian pointing to the taller.

“Sliknok.”

“He does not say much.”

“Don't talk your tung.”

“He is not alone,” mumbled Gwidian.

Jorm shot him a sharp glance, but Gwidian had been overheard.

“Thinks we're stupid cos we don't talk hob nob,” said Goronak. “Hob nobs talk a lot; don't do much though, just thinks they do.”

“I do not,” said Gwidian.

“Of course he does not think you are stupid,” added Jorm.

“I meant I do not do much,” said Gwidian.

Jorm screwed up his face.

“I knows why you are here,” stated Goronak. “You wants the sword... my sword.”

“If you know what we want, then you know why we want it.”

“I knows of Baron Nomarn Deleri.”

“Then you also know that if we fail to destroy the thing that calls itself Nomarn, then you too will perish. Nothing is safe from those evil hands.”

“No, Goronak's too stupid to realise that,” said Goronak sarcastically.

“We could simply take the sword,” said Gwidian.

Goronak burst into fits of laughter. “You thinks you

could find it. You thinks there is only one Sliknok.” His laughter subsided and in a deep growl he said, “There is a thousand Sliknoks, there is a thousand tunnels.” He bent down and picked up a rock. “I could crush you to pulp.” His hand tightened around the stone, and dust began to fall to the floor as the stone disintegrated in his powerful grip.

“Things are not looking good,” commented Jorm.

“It could be worse,” said Gwidian. “We could have shaken hands.”

“Truly yours is a wit borne of arrogance,” said Goronak.

“Truly it is,” reaffirmed Gwidian. Glee flashed across his face and his sword appeared in his hand. “Why should we search a thousand tunnels when you can tell me exactly where to look. Why should we fear a thousand Sliknoks when they could not get here in time to save your puny life? You are not such a fool as to think your own life is safe.”

Goronak lifted a hand and Sliknok pounced at Gwidian. Gwidian sidestepped, tripped Sliknok, then placed his foot on the back of Sliknok's neck forcing his face to the floor. He held his sword tip to the centre of his back.

“Now to put it out of it's misery,” said Gwidian.

“No,” snapped Jorm. “I came here as a friend and as a friend I wish to leave. Remove your foot and sheath your sword.”

Gwidian's eyes met Jorms', locking into a silent power struggle. Goronak looked on in silence. It seemed an eternity before anyone spoke.

“You are making a big mistake,” said Gwidian as he slowly eased his weight from Sliknok's neck. Then in a single movement his sword was sheathed.

“Wisely spoken,” said Goronak, as Sliknok pulled himself off the floor and tottered back to his master. “I knows who you is Jorm. I knows you is the son of Raimar. He comes



here for the sword.”

“And you gave him the sword,” added Jorm.

“He was a brave man; an honourable man, but it wasn’t good enough. He was no match for the Baron. Why should I give you the sword, only to see it lost again. S’pose Nomarn’s cronies comes here. How does I defend myself?”

“True my father’s bravery was not enough to defeat Nomarn, but I intend to succeed by stealth.”

“Is that so?” Goronak paused a moment. “In that case I have a test for you. Here is three barrels. One o’ the barrels has the keys to the chest where I puts the sword. In another barrel is the snakes I keeps as pets. In my third barrel is my other pets, scorpions... all hungry. Now all the barrels have wots in them scratched on the side. Trouble is I’ve changed them all around since I did the scratching. Anyway all you has to do is put your hand in through the hole in the top of the right barrel and pull out the keys. You can ask one question.”

“What a set up,” remarked Gwidian, “though we can avoid the snakes.”

Jorm smiled. “If I can retrieve the keys. You will give me the sword.”

“Certainly will. You got the brains to work out how to get those keys and stay alive, then you got a good chance of getting the Baron.”

Jorm walked over to the barrels. “Throw me a gauntlet, Gwidian.”

“YOU CHEATS. Only snakes can penetrate a gauntlet.”

“I win,” said Jorm in a cold determined voice. “I win the sword and I will beat the Baron.”

Goronak thought a moment. “Brave and crafty. You may well be right.”

\*

Jorm and Gwidian walked towards the exit of Goronak's kingdom. Jorm carried an extra sword with him, a special sword which could cut down the wraiths of Nomarn.

“We certainly fooled Goronak,” said Gwidian. “Do you think my acting was good, or was it great?”

“Great,” replied Jorm. “I almost believed you were going to kill Sliknok myself.”

“And then when you asked for the gauntlet, ha ha, poor thing did he get upset. We knew the snakes were not in the snake barrel; he said he had moved them.”

They walked together towards their friends and the light of dawn.

\*

Somewhere deep in the bowels of the earth, spindly figures were at work, removing dust and stonework which hid trapdoors under the ground on which Jorm and Gwidian had stood. They also secured spikes in the cavern roof, so they would no longer rely on the simple trip mechanism, which had held them in place above Jorm and Gwidian's heads. Goronak himself sat and talked with Sliknok, in a language Jorm may well have understood.

“Well, Sliknok, do you think our acting was a good deal better than theirs, old friend?”

Sliknok smiled. “It certainly was, old friend, it certainly was. Alas they did not need the gauntlet to get the keys; the single question was enough to work out where the keys were. I do wish them good hunting.”

“Of course they could have worked out the simple puzzle, but perhaps it is well that they attained the keys in a way we did not expect, perhaps they can stay one step ahead of Nomarn. They are probably the best people for the task. I

think they proved that, but they will still need all the luck they can get.”

\*

Jorm exited the caverns into a cool dawn sun. Gwidian followed close behind. Their friends spotted them as soon as they appeared, though their eyes were heavy from a watchful night.

“JORM,” called Miowni. “YOU ARE SAFE.” She ran over to him and gave him a hug that turned his face crimson.

A broad smile swept across Giyorn's tired face, “I see you have the sword, my friend. Fortune smiles upon us all.”

“It surely does,” replied Jorm. “But sadly it is here that we have to part company.”

“Not yet a while,” said Morgain. “Let us first have a morning bite. Then we can bid our farewells.”

No one argued.

\*

Breakfast did not amount to much, but then again no one was really thinking about their stomachs. They talked little while they ate; there was probably a lot to say but no one was saying it. A heavy mood was settling over them. All were apprehensive of the future and none seemed enthusiastic about parting ways. There was a certain amount of comfort and safety in the small band and they had become accustomed to each others company.

A faint beat of hooves drifted across the hillside. Jorm's eyes widened.

“It sounds like we have visitors.”

They all stood and looked in the general direction of the beats. Two riders appeared, cantering slowly, but

deliberately towards them. As they approached it could be seen that one wore a tunic of brown while the other was cloaked darkly.

“I get a strange feeling,” said Jorm.

“I too,” said Giyorn. “It is a feeling of evil.”

“Shades?” queried Morgain.

“The dark one,” replied Jorm.

“Since when did a shade require a horse,” queried Gwidian.

“The wraiths of the ring need no beasts of burden, illusions,” chortled Cretin, “but this one travels with a mortal.” A solid. No doubt to do his handywork.”

“Why does he require a man?” questioned Miowni, in a disturbed voice.

“We shall soon find out,” stated Giyorn.

The horses came to halt thirty paces from the party, who stared at them with undivided attention.

“Careful, careful,” said Cretin. “Watch out for tricksies.”

“I am Ribolorn,” came a cold mystical voice which seemed to speak directly to their minds. “I have come to speak with you.”

“A shade of Ribolorn,” mumbled Cretin. “A grey aura. The grey shade.”

“I would speak of the future,” continued the dark one.

Cretin looked at the faces of his companions. Their attention was taken completely. They had become instantly mesmerised.

“Ribolorn's spellcasting, take your eyes off him,” warned Cretin.

The other rider slipped a bow from his shoulder and an arrow from its quiver.

Cretin began shaking the nearest arm to him which was Morgain's. “Watch out. Watch out.” he called.

“I have come to speak of a happy future,” continued the shade.

“Who for?” muttered Cretin, shaking Morgain's arm wildly.

Morgain shook his head as if trying to clear his mind. His face registered the rider holding his bowstring taut, arrow ready to fly.

“It is our lives they want,” said Cretin hurriedly. “Some of us are expendable.”

Morgain began to draw his sword as the rider targeted his arrow. His thoughts were as yet unclear and to him his own actions seemed slow yet deliberate. The arrow swished into flight; but like his own actions the arrow also seemed to move through the air slowly, it was as if he could reach out and pluck it from its flight. Morgain raised his sword, only then did the others begin to realise their peril. They too were dazed; they were groggy and unsure of themselves.

Morgain swung his sword at the oncoming arrow, its broad blade flashing by Giyorn's eyes on its earthward journey. There was a thud and a dull ring as the arrow glanced Morgain's sword to wing by Giyorn's shoulder. Whatever spell held their attention was broken instantly. All weapons were drawn in the blink of an eye. Jorm turned to get his own bow but it was too late.

The riders turned their mounts and galloped into the distance.

“Cretin tries to warn you,” said Cretin. “You may not be so incredibly lucky next time.”

Morgain looked at him with dubious eyes, then he half smiled. “We are in your debt,” he said quietly. “It will not be forgotten.”

“And I am in your debt,” said Giyorn earnestly. “Perhaps you are not the complete fool I thought you to be Morgain.”

Gwidian, who was listening, rubbed his nose and turned to Miowni. “Was that a compliment?”

# Who Pays the Ferryman

## Chapter 4

They parted company as planned. Jorm rode with Miowni and Giyorn to the east while Cretin accompanied Morgain and Gwidian to the north. The parting was not highly emotional, but there was a genuine sadness in the air.

Giyorn spoke civilly to Morgain and Gwidian, who for their part, kept their faces straight and forsook a jest.

Jorm remained friendly and matter of fact, while Cretin seemed indifferent. Only Miowni showed a real sadness on her face, but soon that disappeared as they rode into the morning sun.

“It seems you were right,” said Giyorn to Jorm, “the sword had been returned to the kingdom of Goronak.”

“And if that is the case then you may retrieve all your fathers' weapons,” continued Miowni.

“One weapon is enough to slay Nomarn, however it may not be nearly enough to get near him, but then again... who can tell?” Jorm brought his horse to a standstill and surveyed the landscape. “The land becomes soft and wet; we are entering marshlands.”

Giyorn sighed. “My home lies far to the east. These lands were firm and hard in days gone by.”

“And so they shall be again,” assured Jorm urging his horse forward. “And so they shall be again.”

\*

The further they journeyed the softer the land became. Soon it became obvious that their travels were coming to an end. Night was falling and the marsh mists were hugging the ground closely. They could just make out the shadowy outlines of trees standing all about them, except in the direction they were travelling.

“It is impossible to continue,” stated Jorm. “We do not know where we tread.”

“It is all so eerie,” commented Miowni, pulling her cloak tightly about herself.

Giyorn looked thoughtful. “It is not going to be a pleasant night. The cold and damp will seep through to our bones before dawn.”

Jorm dismounted. The mist totally engulfed his legs up to his knees and a flimsier mist reached up to his waist. He took a few steps forward, then grimaced as water seeped into his footwear.

Miowni stared into the mist, something had caught her attention. Calmly she said, “There is something out there.”

Giyorn followed her gaze. “It looks like some sort of boat, floating on the mist.”

Jorm also turned to look. “We must be on the fringe of some sort of lake.”

They all watched as the boat glided silently closer. Miowni pulled her cloak tighter still. “It is so cold.”

“It is an evil cold,” said Giyorn. “Unnatural.”

“Who do you think it is?” whispered Miowni. “Who would travel lands such as these at nightfall?”

“There are those who live in darkness,” said Jorm. “Keep your wits about you.” He placed his hand on the sheath of his newly found sword.

“A shade,” murmured Miowni.

“Just follow my lead,” said Jorm.

The boat drifted towards them. At its stern stood a tall



featureless figure. There was no face to see and long robes reached down to the wooden boards of the small craft. At ten paces it came to a halt. A hand was raised and a bony finger beckoned them nearer.

Jorm motioned his friends to dismount and together they waded into the water. He was the first to board and without a word spoken he seated himself forward, staring back at the boat master.

Miowni gave a questioning look at Giyorn. Giyorn nodded and they both boarded and sat between Jorm and the boat master. Neither looked comfortable and Miowni's eyes were fearful.

The boat turned though there was no visible source of propulsion; it began to drift the way it had come. Jorm's eyes remained fixed, though the figure he looked at remained motionless. Giyorn and Miowni also sat facing the boat master but there was nothing to see; dark robes covered the form completely; only a blue sash broke the completeness of this drab attire.

They drifted through the mist for a great length of time. For those on-board they may have been traversing the world of the dead. Nothing seemed to move, no sound was there to hear, no sights were there to see.

Eventually a slight scraping was heard; the boat was running aground. Jorm rose and stepped into the shallow waters; his friends followed closely behind. They watched as the boat disappeared into the mist.

“Who pays the ferryman?” queried Giyorn.

“I do not understand,” said Miowni. “Who was that?”

“What you expected,” replied Jorm. “A shade.”

“A shade,” stated Miowni surprised. “I still do not understand. Why should it ferry us across the water... unless it has... it has stranded us.”

Jorm looked at Miowni. “Perhaps, but I think not.

They are searching. They think I know the whereabouts of the helvstone. They still seek the Queen. They think I can lead them to their goal.”

“Can you?” said Giyorn flatly.

Jorm smiled. “Their lack of knowledge has allowed us to cross the water. While they guess, we have a certain amount of security.”

“You have security,” stated Giyorn. “What about Miowni. What about Morgain and Gwidian.”

“The more that I share my knowledge, the more chance these wraiths have of finding the truth. This must not happen.”

Giyorn looked disgruntled but he said no more.

They cleared the marshlands that night and the dawn found them all fast asleep. It was midday before they again travelled on. This time they carried no food and no water.

“Our destination is not far,” assured Jorm.

“We still do not know our destination,” stated Miowni.

“An old hermit's house,” said Jorm.

“Complete with hermit?” enquired Giyorn.

“I hope so. The land has changed much. I hope he has found the means to survive.”

They travelled until late afternoon before Jorm found his bearings, although the others thought he knew exactly where he was going. By nightfall a single light flickered ahead of them and a dog barked at their approach.

“Well, it seems fortune smiles upon us,” said Jorm.

The faces of both Giyorn and Miowni lifted.

They walked another thirty paces, then halted at the sound of a human voice.

“WHO IS OUT THERE. SHOW YOURSELVES.”

“WE ARE FRIENDS. I AM THE SON OF RAIMAR,” called Jorm.

There was silence for a few moments then the voice called, "HOW DO I KNOW YOU ARE THE SON OF RAIMAR?"

"I CANNOT PROVE ANYTHING UNLESS I APPROACH." Jorm began to walk towards the house. As he approached, the bent figure of the hermit came into view. He carried no weapons, only a stick to help him walk.

Jorm stopped no more than a pace from the hermit and held out his right hand. "The ring I wear is my fathers."

The hermit moved a little closer and peered at Jorm's hand. "It bears the crown of the Southlands," said the hermit in a croaky voice. "Your father is dead."

It was not a question and Jorm simply nodded.

"I thought it so a while ago. You see I found the axe again lying in the cave to the north. A strange place that. It is where I first found it. Lots of bones in there."

"You will no doubt know why I am here."

"Yes, I thought someone would come. Who are your friends?"

"Lord Giyorn of the lands to the east and Miowni; she is the adopted daughter of someone who was once close to me - sadly he has departed this world."

"It is dangerous for a lady to go wandering around these parts."

"It is dangerous everywhere."

"You had better bring your friends and join me for a bite of supper. It is safer behind closed doors."

It was a sparse meal in a sparse home. There was little more than the table they sat beside, a cupboard with shelves and the chairs they sat upon. An old stove burned in one corner which provided their only heating and two lanterns hung from the walls, casting shadows around the dwelling. It was a musty little place in which they sat and despite the stove the air still felt cool.

“Tell me er...”

“Lorns is my name, young sir.”

“Tell me Lorns, have you always lived a life of solitude?”

“Not always. I saw the evil which was coming. I used to be Ribolorn's jailer at Greyfar. I stood watch over the poor souls imprisoned there.”

“Greyfar,” repeated Miowni, putting her spoon into an empty bowl.

“Horrible place. At first it was all right. Count Ribolorn was a fair man then the visits began. Baron Nomarn Deleri and Baroness Helian, an evil pair they were, they rule the roost now. Others came too; Krangor from the kingdom near the sea, as cold as death that one; then there was the greedy Mandonna, sly and envious. I would trust a snake before trust her. Tordoth came as well. I kept well out of his way. If things were not exactly as he wanted... what a temper, fierce with it as well.”

“And that is when you decided to leave?” queried Giyorn.

“No, I decided to leave when Grogor arrived, their henchman. I just could not watch what he did to the prisoners.”

“Why did he take such an interest in your prisoners,” queried Jorm.

“They were looking for information, seeking the talismans of evil. They would all come down to the dungeons together sometimes to watch the torture, all except the count; I always thought he knew something the others did not. A wise one was the count.”

“Any idea what he knew?” prompted Giyorn.

Lorns shrugged his shoulders.

“These talismans; do you know what they were?” queried Jorm.

“Only one, a black dagger. It was awful the way they got the information. This young lassie, daughter of a woodsman; what they did to her!”

“A woodsman had the dagger,” suggested Miowni.

“A woodsman he was, an outlaw they called him. Many of the woodland folk turned against their masters. They knew there was evil in the air.”

“So his daughter betrayed him,” said Miowni.

“That is a harsh word, my dear. They had her stretched out on the torture slab. All her clothes ripped off and bound hand and foot. Grogor has ways of getting information. He has more tools of pain than an army has weapons. This day he chose his...”

“Spare us the details,” said Jorm intervening.

“The nightmares come back night after night,” said Lorns.

“I understand. I have no doubt they have found what they required, or they would not have the power they wield. Do you know your way around Greyfar?”

Lorns laughed. “I did know but things have changed. Even before I departed, the fortress was losing its reality. The light of day never penetrates its corridors any more. The wind always seems to howl like the cries of Grogor’s victims down below. They were making a pact with Leir, slipping into the darkworld where all things that are good turn evil.”

“So you decided to cut yourself off from the world,” said Miowni. “From friends and foe alike.”

“From my foes certainly. Greyfar is now a castle of shadows, where demons stalk it's passageways. There is no warmth there any more, the warmth that once was now scorches the lands around Greyfar and turns its greenery to sand. As for friends... a true friend I have never had. A jailer's lot should not be envied.”

They all sat and watched as the hermit cleared their

bowls from the table to put them on a shelf. “They say the archives survive in the middle of that desert, a pinnacle of ice, standing under a fiery sun.”

Miowni leant back in her chair. “That is strange, I would have thought Nomarn would have taken what he wished and destroyed the rest. There must have been a lot of knowledge and history stored there.”

“Perhaps he has,” said Lorns re-seating himself. “It is a lot of years since I built my little home here.”

“I am surprised the ground we sit upon here is firm,” commented Giyorn.

All eyes fell on Lorns.

Lorns shook his head. “How should I know why it remains firm. The marsh is all around me, I suppose it is just a matter of time.”

Giyorn had not meant anything by his comment but now his eyes narrowed a little. “How did you escape from Greyfar?”

“Escape! Why should I escape, I was not a prisoner there? No one really noticed me once Grogor arrived.”

“And how do you survive here?” questioned Miowni. “You may find a little food, but what about the wraiths?”

“Now just a moment, I invite you into my home and feed you...”

“Shrines!” said Jorm interrupting. “The cave where the axe lies; a shrine where the archives were built; the old elden battleground where the ringstones stand; Goronak’s kingdom. I wonder if Goronak knew he was building his kingdom beneath one of the old elden shrines.”

“You are guessing,” suggested Giyorn.

“It sounds feasible,” retorted Miowni.

Lorns sat and said nothing.

“It seems these places have a resilience against evil,” continued Jorm, “I think we owe Lorns an apology.”

Miowni looked a little bashful, but Giyorn's face held firm.

“I would not waste your breath,” said Lorns. “What is done is done. I suggest you have a nights rest then leave at daybreak.” Lorns left the table and took a blanket from the cupboard. He curled himself up beside the stove and closed his eyes.

Jorm turned to his companions and shrugged his shoulders. “It seems we are in for an uncomfortable night.”

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Dawn came, though the sun's rays could not penetrate the clouded skies. They had all slept soundly despite their uncomfortable makeshift beds; now they were rested if somewhat stiff. Lorns had been the first to rise and he now waited outside.

It was not long before the others joined Lorns, they all looked tired and unkempt, stubble covered Jorm's chin and sleep lay in the corners of his eyes. He looked at Lorns who simply turned away and began to walk northward, stick in hand. Jorm followed with Miowni at his side. Giyorn brought up the rear with a disagreeable look on his face.

They followed a narrow winding path which wound its way slowly upward until at last they reached a sheer rock face, perhaps forty paces high; at its base was a large jagged opening. Lorns stopped beside the opening and said, “This is the place you seek. You will find the axe inside.” He motioned inside.

The three stood and watched as Lorns turned to make his way back to his home.

“Lorns,” said Jorm.

Lorns stopped and shifted his head towards Jorm.

“Thank you... friend.”

\*

Jorm entered the cave by himself. The air felt cool and dry. His feet kicked up small clouds of dust as he walked. It was not a deep cave but even so he had to walk a hundred paces before reaching his goal. By this time the light from the outside world was virtually lost, but it was not completely dark. The walls had the same luminescence as those in Goronak's kingdom.

Jorm gazed around. As Lorns had said the cavern was filled with bones; skeletal figures of the past. He presumed they were elden bones but there was no way to tell. If childhood stories were to be believed the elden races were not much different to man in appearance, they had high cheekbones and ears which were far more pointed than the average man. They were perhaps a little taller than humankind but Jorm would not have been small in comparison. The only prominent feature was the eyes - they shone with a light of their own; it gave them a majestic if somewhat alien look. Sadly these features had disappeared except for the cheekbones and Jorm was no expert on bones.

At the very end of the passageway was a large stone and upon the stone lay the axe. It did not look anything special though its edge appeared keen and it was large in size - just the way Jorm remembered it. It seemed as though someone had casually walked into the cave, put it down and forgotten about it when they left.

Jorm walked over to the stone and reached out to pick it up.

“Hold,” came a voice, seemingly from nowhere.

Jorm stopped in his tracks. He looked about but saw no one. “Show yourself,” he replied, though he could not see where anyone might hide.



“You can see me already,” replied the voice.

Jorm shook his head, then cast his eyes across the bones. He was not sure but one of the skulls seemed to be smiling. “If you will not show yourself, then I shall continue my quest.”

As if a wind of magic had blown across them, the bones of one skeletal figure ordered themselves into an upright skeleton with the smiling skull sat on the top. Jorm stood back in amazement.

“Now you see me, and I tell you the axe is mine.”

For a moment Jorm was speechless. His father had not warned him about the guardian of the axe.

“Have you nothing to say, Lord of the Southlands?”

Slowly Jorm gathered himself together. “This axe was the property of Raimar and I am his heir. The axe goes with me.”

The skull laughed. “Not without my blessing.”

“And what would you ask of me?” queried Jorm in a quiet yet unrepenting voice.

“I have a riddle you must answer.”

“Damned riddles,” mumbled Jorm, his voice edged with annoyance. “And what is your riddle?”

The bones wobbled a little and the jawbone opened and shut. “If it takes four men to overcome a demon and two demons to overcome an elden, and if four elden can overcome two wizards which can overcome seven demons or two shades, although seven demons cannot overcome two shades, then in reality how many men are required to overcome one shade? You should know the answer.”

After a short while of thought Jorm snapped, “Is it a trick question?”

“Perhaps,” rattled the bones.

“And if I should give the wrong answer?”

“The axe remains.”

Jorm again looked at the bones. "Just the axe?" he said.

The skeletal figure remained silent.

Jorm reached for his sword.

The figure held out a bony hand - a sword appeared in its grip. "You choose to fight?"

"My friend Lorns has a dog. Food is scarce."

"Arrogance," commented the skull.

Jorm leapt at the figure before the jawbone had time to close, but even so it found time to duck the blow. With the clashing of steel as sword met sword they fought; thrusting; parrying; ducking; it was a ferocious fight. The only difference between the two opponents was that only one would tire. Slowly but surely Jorm became short of breath and his muscles ached.

"You are beaten brave Lord. A mere mortal cannot overcome I - the guardian of the axe. No mortal blade can put me to rest."

Jorm leant against the cavern wall panting, though his spirit was undaunted and his mind active. "Mortal blade," said Jorm drawing breath deeply. "Do you not recognise this sword?" He held the sword out, blade upward.

The figure moved closer and lifted its eyeless sockets as if to examine the blade. Then as if it recognised the weapon it said, "Even so, you must still answer my riddle."

Jorm brought the sword down with a crash. It missed the skull but smashed down through the left shoulder blade to splinter the ribcage. The bones collapsed in a heap, the skull facing upward.

"ONE," cried Jorm. "Raimar gave testimony to that with the slaying of the green shade, Mandonna." Then he stormed over to the axe and lifted it from its resting-place. Despite its size he lifted it with relative ease. He marched past his victim and exited the cave without another word.

“Just like his father,” said the skull, before its jaw closed forever.

\*

Giyorn and Miowni sat waiting patiently, staring at distant mountain peaks. Their faces lifted as Jorm appeared with the axe.

Giyorn smiled broadly as he got to his feet. “We thought you had fallen asleep, you have been gone so long. Not a sound has left that cave since you entered.”

Jorm looked at Giyorn curiously. “You surprise me Giyorn, however take the axe and use it well.”

Giyorn looked startled. “Why me? I thought you were the bearer of these weapons.”

“I can use only one, it is best we both have the means to defend ourselves against all eventualities.”

Giyorn smiled. “In that case I will indeed take the axe.” Giyorn was surprised by the lightness of the axe. He swished it through the air this way and that to get the feel of it.

“When you have finished we have to continue our journey,” said Miowni.

Giyorn rested the axe on the ground, holding the shaft in his hands. “We have to retrace our footsteps.”

“There are no footsteps across the lake,” said Miowni.

They all stood a while in silence.

“Someone must have thought of a means of re-crossing the lake,” continued Miowni.

Jorm shook his head. “We can only move one step at a time. We found the means to reach the axe; now we must head back to the lake, it may be possible to cross the water without a boat.”

“Who knows we may get a friendly shade to ferry us

back?” added Giyorn.

Miowni cringed. “I doubt that I could sit that close to a wraith again.”

“It would probably be unwise even if we had the chance,” said Jorm. “Carrying both axe and sword the shade may see us as too great a threat. At present they are biding their time, even the grey shade we encountered earlier seemed to have no real motivation behind it, but as we grow in strength and they do not, they may well decide to take a more hostile approach.”

“You think they may forsake the helvstone and their search for the Queen?” queried Miowni.

“I honestly do not know,” replied Jorm. “I think the helvstone could prove dangerous to anyone who could release its power. The wraiths may not know what they seek or they may wish to destroy it.”

Miowni looked apprehensive. “You know what the helvstone looks like and they do not?”

“It is a helvstone,” said Giyorn. “A stone of great beauty and power.”

“We know that,” said Miowni, “but how do we recognise it?”

“I cannot answer that,” replied Jorm.

“Will not,” stated Miowni.

“The stones in the hands of evil could be our downfall. The less said the better.”

“Stones,” said Miowni.

Jorm sighed then looked at Miowni for a short time. “Stones come in many shapes and sizes. Often time conceals the truth of tales. A lucky warrior may become a great hero or a hungry dog a savage wolf.”

“Are you trying to tell us the helvstone is not a valuable gem?” queried Miowni.

“I am telling you to take nothing or no one at face

value.”

“You do,” intervened Giyorn. “You trusted Lorns.”

“No. I gave him the benefit of the doubt, there is a large difference.” Jorm was beginning to look frustrated. He looked at Giyorn then Miowni. “We must end this discussion and be on our way. The more we talk the more time we waste and the more chance our enemies have of catching us out.”

Both Giyorn and Miowni returned the look, they realised Jorm was doing and saying what he thought best. Giyorn motioned him to lead the way.

\*

It was late in the day when they again bordered the lake. The stretch of water before them looked formidable and it seemed too treacherous to try and wade. They waited in expectation until nightfall. None doubted that the boat master would reappear though they did wonder at its intentions. It seemed too much to expect that they would simply be ferried back from whence they came.

The marsh and lake remained clear of mist but the starry sky threw little light on their surroundings. They all knew what to expect but even so the appearance of the boat not twenty paces from them sent a shiver down their spines.

“Krangor,” muttered Jorm.

“How do you know?” whispered Miowni.

“It was he who carried us here,” replied Jorm. “The sash it wears, it reflects its personality.”

“Perhaps it is one of the others,” suggested Giyorn.

“Krangor is the ferryman,” said Jorm, shaking his head.

They boarded the boat and sat in silence as they had done on their outward journey. When the boat reached its destination both Giyorn and Miowni disembarked. Jorm

followed at the rear, but as his feet reached the watery ground his right hand reached for his sword. He swivelled around to face the wraith unsheathing his sword for the kill - but the boat was empty. He turned to face Giyorn and Miowni; they were frozen, staring at something before them. Jorm moved as quickly as the ground would allow him towards his friends. He soon realised where the wraith had gone.

“You think to destroy me,” said a mind voice.

Jorm stood with his friends and stared at the wraith.

“You think Krangor is so foolish as to fall foul of your blade?”

Jorm motioned to Giyorn. They began to walk towards Krangor in a tight arc, one to the left and one to the right of the wraith. Giyorn readied his axe.

Krangor lifted a bony hand and pointed to the ground a pace in front of Giyorn. “You walk into a trap my friend,” it laughed.

Giyorn took one more pace forward then yelled as he disappeared into the ground. It was so quick that Jorm and Miowni just stood in silent amazement.

“You seriously believe you can challenge me?” said Krangor.

Jorm glanced at Krangor, then pulling himself together, he ran towards the place of Giyorn's disappearance. He looked around in desperation for his friend but there was naught to see, the marsh had swallowed him. He turned his attention back to the wraith. He saw Krangor lean his head back as if to look at the stars, then for what seemed no more than a few moments the light of the stars dimmed to almost invisibility, leaving a shroud of utter darkness on the marsh. When their light returned Krangor had gone.

The two remaining companions spent the rest of the night calling and searching for their friend, but even when the suns light again touched the earth, no sign of his whereabouts

could they find. Even when all hope had gone they lingered on, until Jorm eventually said, “Our search is in vain, whatever wizardry is in the air - it defeats us.”

Jorm was visibly grieved and Miowni distraught as they moved on. They found two of their horses where they had been left. Giyorn's mount was missing.

“It seems it was all planned from the outset. The evil ones never intended Giyorn to return with us,” said Jorm, with a hint of misgiving in his voice.

“It could have destroyed us all,” stated Miowni.

Jorm mounted his horse and beckoned Miowni to follow.

# Illusions

## Chapter 5

Gwidian and Morgain rode north. The day had been uneventful and only the length of stubble on their chins gave some indication that they were not simply out for an afternoon ride. But as dusk fell...

“Is that what I think it is?” said Morgain.

They had just reached the crest of a hill, below them they saw a large group of men, surrounding a small wagon.

“Human vultures,” said Morgain. “Outland thieves.”

Cretin came up from behind. Normally he led but on this occasion he thought his companions knew where they were going. “Perhaps they are just talking,” he said in an inspired voice.

They all watched. An old man and woman climbed down from the front of the wagon; a girl seemingly younger than Morgain climbed from the rear. The sound of voices drifted on the breeze but Gwidian was too far away to make out their content.

The old man was knocked to the floor.

“They do not look like they are simply talking to me,” said Morgain.

Two men climbed on the back of the wagon and began throwing what seemed to be the traveller’s belongings over the side.

“I think it is about time we intervened,” said Gwidian reaching for his sword.

“No, no,” said Cretin. “We have a mission; the Crying



Caves; we must find the shieldy.”

The old man was dragged to his feet and pushed towards his fellow travellers. They huddled together.

“Our mission can wait,” said Morgain.

“No. You do not understand. You cannot fight a score of men. You will die. We have to find the shieldy or we are all doomed... all your friends.” Cretin was pleading.

Morgain and Gwidian looked at one another and then back to the gathering. The young girl was being dragged to one side by two men; she was struggling and screaming. The men were joking and laughing; tearing at her clothes.

The old couple were restrained by many strong hands.

“I cannot sit here and watch this outrage,” growled Gwidian.

“Then close your peepers,” said Cretin.

Two more men joined in the fun. The girl’s clothes were scattered about the ground in shreds. She scratched and kicked as she passed from one set of hands to another.

“Chivalry,” rasped Morgain. “Have you never heard the word, Cretin?” His horse reared as he drew his sword. Both he and Gwidian set off down the hill in a headlong charge.

“It is all in your little mindsies,” called Cretin to the backs of their heads. “Oh dear, how sad. Two against a score, whatever next?” He held out his hand and a sharp claw sprang from the end of one of his fingers; he scratched his head. “Cretin is coming, my stupid friends.”

Morgain and Gwidian were almost on top of the gathering before anyone noticed their approach. The laughs and giggles stopped instantly, to be replaced by startled if somewhat bemused looks. Four men fell to the swords of the attackers before the rest had gathered their wits. Morgain grabbed the girl, hoisting her to relative safety. Both he and Gwidian retreated forty paces.

“We have to go back,” said Morgain. “We are not done yet.”

Gwidian nodded. He dismounted and stuck his sword in the ground. He then helped the girl from Morgain's saddle. He hardly glanced at her. “Make your way to safety,” he shouted as he regained his sword.

Morgain quickly dismounted and they made their way towards the angry crowd.

The girl watched them go. They never turned to see the wicked smile on her face.

Cretin saw what was happening, though he could have glided down the hill, he had jogged. Now he stood half watching the girl and half watching their foes, as if studying which was the greater danger. Gwidian and Morgain handled themselves like true swordsmen, a class above their opponents, yet they were greatly outnumbered.

Cretin walked warily around the girl, who gave him a questioning look. He kept one eye on her all the time, until he drew close to the fighting.

Neither Morgain nor Gwidian were aware of Cretin's approach until he leapt into the midst of their enemies. He snarled like a wild beast and lashed out with claws and talons. Cries filled the air as flesh shredded. The thieves and tormentors drew back. Cretin and the brothers moved towards them. One of their enemies broke rank and ran, then another. Cretin held out his hands to display his blood red claws and a deep gurgle left his throat. The remaining thieves stared a moment then panic crossed their faces; they too ran.

Morgain smiled and turned to Cretin. “You worry too much. Where was the problem?”

The brothers wiped their swords on the grass then sheathed them. Gwidian looked over to the girl, who had moved to within twenty paces of them. In the heat of battle she had momentarily left his thoughts, but now she was again

at the top of his agenda.

Morgain glanced at the old couple. They were standing perfectly still in the position he last remembered them. Something did not seem quite right. He put his hand on Gwidian's shoulder and said, "There is something strange going on here."

Gwidian ignored him.

"Gwidian, those people..." As he watched they began to fade. At first becoming translucent and then disappearing altogether.

"What about those people?" said Gwidian still looking towards the girl.

"They have vanished," said a bemused Morgain.

"They were probably scared and ran," said Gwidian in a very calm and collected voice.

"No. They did not run. They simply vanished into thin air."

Gwidian pulled his eyes from the girl to face Morgain. "You mean they just went puff... and vanished in a cloud of smoke?"

"Something like that."

"You are probably exhausted."

Morgain gave his brother a look of disdain then they both looked towards the girl. She was smiling and beckoning them to come towards her.

They both began to walk. They had taken about four paces when two firm claws clasped their sword belts and stopped them in their tracks.

"Is this the poor scared girl you are going to rescue?" chortled Cretin.

"Let go," said Gwidian. "You are too suspicious."

"Can you not see through her thin disguise?"

"She is not wearing a disguise. In fact she is not wearing anything to see through," said Morgain. "Now do as

my brother bids - LET GO.”

Cretin held firm. His talons dug firmly into the ground. “You are going nowhere.”

The girl turned square onto them, placing her hands on her hips. “You want to really see what is beneath my thin disguise, my little fire demon.” The girl held out a finger. At its tip was a nail as deadly looking as one of Cretin's claws. She placed it on her left hip where a trickle of blood appeared. Then she ran it over the soft white flesh of her side until she reached her neck. The line of blood followed. She continued across her collarbone and down the right side. Both brothers looked on in horror.

“Now you will really see what is beneath my thin disguise.” She began to peel the flesh from her neck downward.

A lump stuck in Morgain's throat. Gwidian covered his face.

Cretin released the brothers, and with what seemed an ultimate effort he held out a hand; a flame began to rise from his palm. With a flick of the wrist he sent a small ball of fire hurtling towards the creature which now stood before them. It impacted in a flash of light, accompanied by a cloud of dark obnoxious smelling smoke. A high pitched voice screamed with laughter and the smoke began to twist and form itself. They all looked on again as a dark figure materialised. It was totally colourless, save for a brown sash.

“You think you can burn a wraith of the circle,” mocked the hideous voice of a woman. “A wraith of the circle of fire.”

“Move back,” cautioned Cretin.

“You wish to see fire; then fire you shall have.” It moved its hands like a dancer across its empty cowl, then pointed a slender finger towards the group.

The voice seemed to come at the threesome from all

directions, but the ensuing fireball seemed to appear just in front of her finger. It held in the air motionless for a few moments. Gwidian dived away from Cretin. Morgain sprang in the same direction, shoving Cretin the opposite way. The fireball scorched across the earth at incredible speed, to pass within a hand span of Cretin's legs. They all felt the heat, then heard the hysterical laughter of the wraith. Slowly the dark figure began to evaporate and the laughter began to echo; moments later only silence.

“Have you foolsies learnt anything?” queried Cretin in an inquisitive voice.

The brothers looked about themselves at the carnage. There were at least eight bodies, which had fallen to their swords for no real reason.

“Well, they were trouble makers,” said Morgain with conviction.

Gwidian did not seem to share the same sentiment. He had been deceived, and of the men they had slain he was not sure. He looked around. The wagon and its occupants had disappeared as if they had been no more than a figment of his imagination. “We shall have to lay these fellows to rest before we move on.”

Cretin frowned. “Not to worry about these nasty men. Cretin will take care of them.”

# Darkworld

## Chapter 6

It was like endlessly falling, like a nightmare which would never end. At first Giyorn was shocked. One instant he was with his friends on the desolate marsh, the next instant he was falling through a dark infinity.

He was stood on a hill beneath the spire. The sky on the horizon hung a misty red. Above the clouds were dark; heavy; yet there was enough light to give them shape. Monstrous giants; storm flecked with red and white.

Sharp pinnacles needled the sky. They were the Shadow Mountains – distant yet daunting. Somewhere in that swirl of rock stood Greyfar. Not only was it a part of his world but it was a part of this world also, Evilon – the darkworld.

Nearer at hand lay the Lake of Tears, shed by a million people over ten thousand years. Behind lay the Forest of Fear, where devils walk and demons stalk the dark reaches of our minds.

Giyorn left the hill to walk through the Gardens of Sorrow where a thousand hopes had perished; where the trees bowed their heads and the flowers withered and died. Beyond lay the Sea of Despair; each wave a dream of man, crashing on the shore to shatter into a billion droplets and vanish into the sand.

That is how it is in these grieved lands. Giyorn did not know why he was here or how he would return to his own world. Perhaps if he shut his eyes.

The darkness lifted. All around him lay the cold wet marshlands. It was daylight and he stood alone.

He gazed around not really comprehending what he was seeing but as time passed his senses returned. His friends were gone; the shade was gone; only he remained. He returned to where they had left their horses, but naught did he find.

It was a cold sun which shone down on the marshland; for all Giyorn knew his friends could be dead, at best they had left him. He had no horse and no food; all that remained to him was the axe and a will of iron. He stared for a moment at the western horizon, then he began to walk.

# The Witches Cauldron

## Chapter 7

“What I want to know is...?”

“Go on,” prompted Gwidian.

“Well, if the elden were such a clean living people, rejoicing in the sun and greenery...”

“Yes.”

“Then why on earth did they bury all their treasures in grotty, dirty little holes in the ground?”

Gwidian looked at the cave entrance and shrugged his shoulders.

“So other eldsies would not go looking for them,” chortled Cretin.

Morgain raised an eyebrow at Cretin. “There is not only elden around.”

“Too true,” confirmed Gwidian.

“Oh well! Into the dragons lair,” said Morgain. Then he began to whistle and walk towards the hill side cavern.

Gwidian put his hands on his hips and bit his bottom lip. “I think I know why they call this place 'the crying caves',” he said looking around at the barren downs which surrounded them. “I think I would cry if I lived here.”

No one was listening.

Morgain strutted into the large cave opening. A few moments later he strutted out again.

“Well?” questioned Gwidian.

“I cannot see a damned thing in there.”

The others walked to the entrance. It was indeed dark.



Morgain took a step backwards. "This calls for drastic action -send for fire monster," he said in a loud voice.

Cretin put his head to one side and Gwidian eyed Morgain with a sort of 'wait for it' look.

Morgain pointed at Cretin. "Our hero." Then he walked over to Cretin's side and slapped him on the back. Cretin's back felt rough and hard, but as he let his hand dwell a few moments the feeling changed to soft and slimy. He retracted his hand and shook it.

Gwidian turned to Cretin. "Go on then."

Cretin shuffled into the entrance and rubbed the fingers of his right hand against the palm of his left. A brilliant white flame began to dance there, lighting their surroundings. Cretin walked forward, his hand cupped to hold the flame. The brothers followed.

They walked down long corridors turning right and left at random, sometimes the passageways sloped up and sometimes they sloped down. They heard rustling and creaking sounds but they never saw a living soul. Occasionally the passageways would open up into large rooms like caverns but never was there a sign of human habitation. In places they found stalagmites and stalactites, which glittered in the brilliance of Cretin's light and at one point they found themselves wading ankle deep in running water. Eventually Cretin came to a halt. He looked at the flame in his hand which had begun to visibly dim.

"Cannot walk in circles forever," said Cretin.

"How did you find the sword in Goronak's kingdom?" queried Morgain.

"Jorm seemed to know where he was going," replied Gwidian.

The flame died and they stood in absolute darkness.

"Has anyone any bright suggestions?" said Morgain, snickering.

“I hope Jorm's map was correct,” said Gwidian.

A shrill laugh echoed down the hallways. The hairs on the back of the brother's necks stood on end.

“What was that?” said Morgain in an exasperated voice.

“It sounded like the shade we met on our way,” said Gwidian.

Morgain frowned.

“Sound comes in the earsies,” commented Cretin.

“Not a wraith.”

The laughter died, but as it did so a distant whistling sound reached their ears; they all listened intently. The whistle rose in pitch and intensity. A tinge of fear crossed the brothers' brows, though the darkness hid them.

“It sounds to be getting closer,” said Gwidian.

Morgain looked around, trying to force his eyes to see, but it was hopeless. Louder grew the sound. It seemed as if something was speeding towards them from the direction they had been walking.

“GET DOWN,” cried Gwidian as he spotted what seemed to be a ball of fire, hurtling down the passageway.

They both crouched and covered their heads. The sound was on top of them. It screamed passed their ears and on into the distance.

Morgain lifted his head. “What was that?”

“A wall of light,” said Cretin. “Look.”

The brothers looked this way and that. The cavern was filled with light. Naturally it took a moment to sink home.

“Listen,” said Cretin. “I hear the sound again.”

This time it was coming from the opposite direction.

Morgain caught a glimpse of something speeding from the opposite direction. “DOWN,” he shouted, but it was too late.

“Darkness,” said Gwidian in an astonished voice.

Like the light, the darkness had sped down the passage, as if it was a solid object. It had stopped three paces from them. Beyond that point they could see nothing.

“Do you think someone is trying to say something,” said Gwidian.

“Follow the light,” said Morgain.

This time their path was clearly defined. Where they were not expected to tread lay in total darkness. Where they should tread was brightly lit. They followed the light apprehensively, until the faint sounds of someone mumbling came to their ears.

“One more bend,” said Morgain.

They turned the next corner to be confronted by a door. Morgain lifted his hand to knock.

“Are you being serious?” said Gwidian.

“Why not?” Morgain knocked.

The door creaked open.

“Come in,” said a croaky old voice.

The brothers and Cretin found themselves peering into what could have been described as a room. In the centre of the floor was an old hag, stirring what appeared to be a giant cooking pot, which sat upon a metal rig above a fire.

“Come in... Come in,” she croaked.

They walked inward staring at the strange writing and symbols on the wall. There were pots of strange substances on shelves of ageing wood. Cobwebs seemed to hang everywhere.

The hag looked up from her pot. Slant eyes glancing over a crooked nose which sat atop a mean mouth and a pointed chin.

“Welcome to the witches hovel,” she chuckled.

“A which,” said Morgain, “which what?”

“What where,” said Gwidian.

“A witchy here,” said Cretin.

“Which what, where?” said Morgain.

“Not which what,” said Cretin. “She is a witchy. Where - you are looking at her. A wizardess.” He eyed the brothers suspiciously.

“In that case, should not we be elsewhere?” said Morgain. “Have we not had enough of ladies with dark powers.”

“Not if we want the shieldy,” said Cretin.

“You are a sweet one,” croaked the witch, looking at Cretin.

“Nice lady,” chortled Cretin, in what might have been an embarrassed voice... to someone with imagination.

“You require the shield - my shield - never,” said the witch, popping what looked to be a couple of live frogs in the pot.

“What would you want with a shield?” queried Morgain. “Surely a witch does not need such things?”

The witch frowned. “I did not always look this way,” she said. “I was an attractive lady once. Had I possessed the shield when that ‘she wraith’ came calling, I might still be an attractive lady.”

“A shade,” said Gwidian.

“Helian the hellish... Heelian the evil.”

“Hellian,” chortled Cretin. “That is how you say it. Like Cretin not Creetin.”

“The one we met back down the way?” queried Gwidian, directing his question at Cretin.

“It wore the brown sash of Malice,” chortled Cretin.

“I was more beautiful than her... it; when she was made of flesh and blood. If only I had kept the shield. I should never have let it go.”

“Problems,” muttered Morgain.

The witch tipped a jar of writhing insects into the pot. “Anyone for supper?” she said.

“Mmmm, creepy crawlies,” said Cretin.

“More problems,” muttered Gwidian.

“Er... we are not really hungry,” said Morgain, “but thank you.”

“Cretins hungry,” said Cretin.

“Cretin... what a charming name,” said the witch. She took two bowls from a shelf and with a large spoon she filled them with the contents of the pot.

“We must talk of the shield,” said Gwidian.

The witch passed a bowl to Cretin and sat upon a stool with her own bowl.

Morgain peered over Cretin's shoulder to see exactly what he was eating. The broth or whatever it may have been was a deep green. It seemed to move around the bowl of its own volition.

“Seat yourself,” said the witch, looking at the brothers and pointing to a bench.

The brothers did as they were bid.

“Tell me,” began Morgain. “If you are a wizardess and you have your cauldron and spell books, why can't you return your own beauty?”

The witch replied with a question of her own. “Who are you youngsters to come here and ask such questions?”

“I am Gwidian and this is my brother Morgain. We are on a quest to destroy these wraiths.”

The witch chuckled. “You have high hopes. If Andora cannot destroy just one wraith, what chance have two children of destroying seven.”

Gwidian's face fell. “I am not a child,” he growled. “Nor for that matter are there seven wraiths.”

“True,” slurped Cretin. “There are only six.”

“Six,” said Andora.

“Mandonna fell to the blade of Raimar. Confined to the walls of Greyfar now - will fear the light,” said Cretin.

“The castle of shadows,” mused Andora. “A gateway to the darkworld. And of Raimar, it is a long time since we crossed paths?”

“You have the shield again,” mumbled Morgain.

“Fell in battle did he?” said Andora. “He slew the wrong one, Mandonna was a nobody.”

“You did not answer my question,” said Morgain in a coarse voice.

“Question... Oh my book of spells. I draw on the etherworld for my powers. Helian is part of that world - the dark side. Her presence lingers on.” Andora put down the bowl and took a golden key from her tatty robes. “Would you like to see the shield?” Her eyes were laughing.

Morgain nodded, casting an eye around for Helian.

Andora stood and walked over to one of two chests stood by the wall.

Morgain and Gwidian watched closely. Cretin was watching wisps of smoke drifting up from the fire, around the pot and through a circular opening in the roof.

The key turned in the lock and she lifted the lid. Gwidian's eyes had almost left his head, trying to see what was inside. Firstly Andora took out some indescribable oddments, then she reached for the shield.

All eyes fell on her as she lifted the shield from the chest. It glittered like a mirror, except for the strange crest moulded on its surface and a horizontal slit above the crest.

“All mine,” she said. “Nothing is going to take it away again.”

“Surely you would wish to regain your good looks,” said Gwidian. “The only way to do that is to give us the shield so we may bring Helian's downfall.”

Andora snickered.

“I doubt if she had any good looks,” mumbled Morgain.

“We have been deceived before,” whispered Gwidian.

“My good looks,” said Andora.

“It must be lonely hiding down here,” said Morgain.

“Lonely, I have friends down here,” she laughed. “The more the merrier.” She pointed a finger at the door and it slammed shut.

Morgain winced. “We really must be going,” he said in an uncomfortable voice.

“But it is such fun being here,” chuckled Andora.

Morgain tried to stand, but he felt like he had ten times his own weight on his shoulders.

“Cretin,” said Morgain. “It seems we are being delayed.”

“Nice place,” said Cretin. “Cretin feels good.”

Morgain's eyes fell to the broth Cretin had been eating.

Andora began to replace the shield in its chest.

Gwidian stood. Andora swung around to face him.

“Not having any ideas are we?” She held out her left hand flat and motioned him as if to rise. His feet began to lift from the ground. Amazement crossed his face as his whole form rose a pace above the floor.

“Now you stay there,” she chuckled, then she turned her back and began closing the chest lid. “Did you ever wonder what else I put in my pot?”

Gwidian shook his head and reached slowly for his dagger.

“I cut bits of people off,” she giggled and turned the key in the chest lock. “Now are you not interested which bits?” she said, turning firstly to face Morgain, then Gwidian.

“Yummy bits,” slurped Cretin.

Gwidian had heard enough. He unsheathed his dagger and spun it in the air to catch it by the blade. He hurled it with all the force he could muster at the witch.

The blade slammed firmly into the witch's chest.

Gwidian instantly fell to the ground in a heap.

Andora looked astonished. “ATTACK ME, WOULD YOU?” she screamed, pulling the dagger from between her ribs with no apparent discomfort.

Morgain felt the weight lift from his shoulders. He watched as the witch wafted her hands - as if beckoning - invisibly dragging Gwidian across the floor. He drew a small, concealed dagger and made a run at Andora.

She switched her attention and with one hand, palm out held, she stopped him in his tracks. “Another dagger for Andora. See how you like to bite on a cold blade.”

It was like a pair of strong hands clasping Morgain's arms. The dagger swivelled around to face him and the blade began to draw close to his mouth. He was forced backwards until his back hit the cool wall. The blade drew closer. Every muscle in his arms ached trying to restrain the force which pushed the dagger closer. He opened his mouth and bit on the blade, though it slithered between his teeth.

Gwidian gathered himself together. Andorra's attention to him had lapsed. He drew his sword silently and lunged at Andorra's back. The blade swept into her shoulder blades - not once - not twice, but time and time again. He seemed hysterical. “Die you old hag,” he shouted, “DIE, DIE, DIE.”

Morgain watched as his arms again came under his own control. He watched as his brother systematically hacked the witch to pieces. “Enough brother. She is dead.”

Gwidian looked up at Morgain and slowly the madness in his eyes departed.

“We have to get the shield and get out of here. Get the key,” said Morgain hurriedly.

As Gwidian sheathed his sword and searched the remains of Andora, Morgain sprang to the door. It was securely shut. The door had no lock and Morgain was not sure



why he could not open it. He threw his weight against it, but he might as well have thrown it against a stone wall.

“I have the key,” said Gwidian. He quickly opened the chest and withdrew the shield. He turned to face Morgain.

Morgain shook his head. “We are trapped. The door is closed; there is no way out.”

“Smoke goes up the flue,” said Cretin with an incredibly silly look on his face.

“Stupid animal,” rasped Gwidian.

“Calm down brother, I think he is not quite with us; the witch must have given him a potion in that... broth. Besides he has a point.” Morgain looked up at the roof. “That hole must lead somewhere.”

Gwidian also turned his eyes to the roof.

“Are you alright?” said Morgain.

Gwidian looked around at the mess. He breathed deeply, then said, “I am now.”

Morgain smiled. “Let us put the fire out and stack some of this rubbish. The roof is quite a height.”

They doused the fire then stacked what they could find until they could enter the roof chamber.

“Come on, Cretin. We are leaving, the darkness is closing in.” said Morgain.

Cretin rose and began slopping about in the remains of Andora as if he was searching for something.

“What is the problem,” asked Morgain.

“Nice witchy,” said Cretin. “Cretin would like to take some of her with him.”

Morgain shook his head.

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It was a long time before they exited the cave system. They were filthy, tired and Gwidian was covered in clotted

blood; it was perhaps a blessing that the skies had opened and rain fell heavily.

Morgain put his fingers to his mouth and whistled. They heard the distant sounds of hoof beats.

Gwidian watched their horses canter up the hill, then he turned his eyes to the grey skies. "Do we move on?"

"Shortly," replied Morgain. "Firstly we rest." He glanced at Cretin who appeared to be back to his old self. "Keep an eye out," he said.

Despite the appalling conditions, they slept.

# The Elden Temple

## Chapter 8

Jorm and Miowni rode towards an old elden temple that lay to the west of the ringstones. They did not retrace their steps completely but travelled slightly south of their outward journey, passing two small homesteads whose inhabitants aided them with food and water. They tarried only a short while at these places, and Goronak's kingdom which lay to the north was by-passed completely. Even when they spotted the seven stones, Jorm only paused for a short while saying, "It is not for me again to set foot in the circle," then they rode on.

Again their path westward was not totally deserted but Jorm insisted on pushing on, stopping only at nightfall for sleep and short intervals through the day for sustenance. Eventually the temple came into view. Both were weary and saddle sore and the sight of their destination cheered them though Miowni remained cautious.

The building retained little of its former glory, it dated back countless years and although its pillars and ornate designs had weathered well, time had taken its toll.

"Alas, this is what an elden temple looks like," said Miowni in a weary voice.

"The remains of one," said Jorm. "If indeed the eldens considered it a temple. We often attach our own names to strange places. It is the place of the shrine, which in times past held the doorway to the darkworld firmly shut. That was until Nomarn created the 'seeing glass,' whatever and

wherever that may be.” Jorm sighed. “Useless information. It is said that only the Queen of the elden can destroy the glass and even then it would only serve to trap these evil wraiths in our world.”

Miowni gave a disenchanted look, then in an inquisitive voice said, “Does anyone live here?”

Jorm shrugged his shoulders. “There is only one way to find out.”

The ground before the temple was unkempt. Tall grass grew and there was a scattering of trees. They rode almost to the cold stone walls before they dismounted. After tethering their horses they made their way towards a large wooden door which stood atop a staircase of stone.

“Should we enter?” suggested Miowni.

Jorm glanced at the deepening sky, then looked at the door which had a large brass knocker which looked recently polished. “I think we should make use of the knocker.”

The knocker made a loud deep sound when Jorm struck the door - not once but three times. They waited... Jorm knocked again. No one came. He pushed the door; it slid silently open. They entered a large hallway which stretched twenty paces before them; above shafts of light struck patterned walls through small windows. They walked quietly forward as if the slightest sound would give away their presence, though their aim was to attract attention. They passed through an archway to stand in a large chamber. The shrine stood against the far wall, it looked not unlike a large bronze eagle. Before it, crouched a bent figure.

“Welcome Jorm, I have been waiting for you.”

Miowni and Jorm looked at one another.

“Are you expected?” questioned Miowni in a quiet voice.

“It would seem so,” replied Jorm.

The figure rose and turned to reveal an aged face, a

full set of greying hair and a short white beard. “Come closer, my children.”

They both moved a little closer.

“Are you an elden, little old man?” asked Miowni.

“No, I am a little old man.”

“Oh,” said Miowni.

“I am the 'keeper of the shrine'. The caretaker of all that stands about you.”

Jorm's eyes were studying the shrine. “Yes, we noticed the door knocker that had been cleaned.” He gave a tired smile.

“It is good that you can still jest,” said the keeper.

“I find it more difficult by the day,” replied Jorm.

“Nevertheless your spirit is still strong.”

“If you are the keeper - for whom are you tending this place?” asked Miowni, in a curious voice.

“Perhaps myself. This was the home of the elden wise; wizards some called them. I feel it is their power which holds this stonework together, though the shrine these walls were built to protect is now no more than an ornament – a rather beautiful one, I may add.” The keeper cast his eyes around the chamber, then to the shrine.

“It seems you expect the wise to return,” said Jorm, his eyes widening.

“Who knows?” replied the keeper fixing his eyes on Miowni.

“I deem you know more than you are telling,” said Miowni. “You expected Jorm's arrival. Was this meeting pre-arranged.” Miowni's eyes flitted from the keeper to Jorm.

Jorm shook his head. “I thought this place was tended, but word of our coming did not precede us.” Jorm cast his own eyes on the keeper.

The keeper smiled. “I am the wizard's sage. Some call me the soothsayer, others call me an oracle.”

“A seer,” said Miowni. “You see the future.”

“A sage,” replied the keeper, “I am wise enough to foresee the future.”

Miowni thought for a moment. “Ah... Yes... Well if you are so wise then why are you the keeper.”

“I am the keeper because there is no one else.”

Jorm studied the little old man. “You are telling us nothing.”

“You knew I would be here,” replied the keeper. “My family has tended this place for countless years. We bear much of the knowledge and wisdom that dwelt here in the elden days. No one can really be certain of the future, but I, like those before me, can project my mind forward to glimpse the many roads of destiny. You came here for my help. You wish to know the outcome of your story.”

“And.”

“First you must eat and rest. You travel well ahead of your friends. You have time in hand.”

“How...?”

The old man simply turned and beckoned them to follow. “All in good time, my friends, all in good time.”

# Demons and Wizards

## Chapter 9

It was a good distance to the old elden temple but if everything went smoothly they would arrive on the arranged day. The fact that they were alive and well and carrying the shield they had sought testified to their good fortune.

“Do you think our luck will hold?” queried Morgain.

“It has held so far,” replied Gwidian.

Cretin trotted along beside them. “I think we are stretching lady fortune to her limits.”

“Now that is an interesting thought, who is lady fortune?” queried Morgain.

“Morgain is being silly, danger grows by the moment.”

“What are you gibbering about, Cretin, what danger?” Gwidian stared directly at the darkworld creature.

“We are doing too well. We are in danger. We have the power to defend against the evil shades. We have the power to foil Nomarn's plans.” Cretin stopped dead in his tracks and shouted after the brothers. “They are not going to allow us to do this.”

Morgain and Gwidian turned their mounts and cantered back to face Cretin.

“You mean the shades are going to attack us before we reach the temple,” said Gwidian, bringing his horse to a halt.

“Cretin thinks their minions will,” said Cretin.

“You believe we are being followed,” suggested

Morgain.

“Eyes everywhere.”

Both Gwidian and Morgain looked around. They saw nothing but their blood began to run a little cooler.

“Who is following us?” demanded Gwidian.

“Many men ride behind us, demons stalk our flanks.”

“How do you know?” queried Morgain.

Cretin gave him a disgusted look. “The ground, feels the ground.” He began marching on the spot.

“Do you need a tree,” queried Morgain.

Gwidian dismounted and stood a moment. Cretin ceased his marching. Gwidian got down on his hands and knees as if he was feeling for vibrations.

“Gwidian feels it?” said Cretin. “Cretin feels it.”

Gwidian gave him a dubious look, then put an ear to the ground. “Riders, Cretin is right, we are being followed.”

“Of course Cretin is right. I smell demons as well.”

“What now?” queried Morgain.

“We ride like the wind,” replied Gwidian.

“To the temple?”

“The stoniesies are nearer,” intervened Cretin.

“Stoniesies,” repeated Morgain.

“The ring stoniesies.”

“The seven stones. What good are they? We still have to make our way to the temple. Would it not be better to ride straight there?” Morgain was looking uncomfortable.

“If we stay here much longer we will be riding nowhere,” said Gwidian hastily.

“Seven stones for seven shades,” said Cretin in a mischievous voice. “Did you not listen to master the last time we passed that way?”

“No evil may enter the circle,” said Morgain thoughtfully.

“What if it is an old wives tale?” said Gwidian. “And



besides, what good does it do sitting in the centre of the stones. We cannot sit there forever?"

By now the hoof beats were audible.

"Follow Cretin," shouted Cretin, setting off at a jog.

Gwidian and Morgain looked at one another for a few moments before they followed. Both had a look of resignation on their faces.

They now followed Cretin's steady pace looking behind every few moments.

"They will not catch us. Horsies only run like the wind for a short distance. Cretin will know if they draw close. He feels it in his feeties."

"How can you feel anything when we ride beside you?" snorted Gwidian.

Cretin did not answer.

The afternoon drew on. Two leagues they covered before they came to a halt. Cretin stood motionless feeling the earth with his feet. "They are not so near now."

Morgain looked up at the sun. "We are heading for the stones, are we not?"

"Of course," replied Cretin. "We will not lose our enemies. Even if men are not good trackers my brethren are. They will hound us until we are cornered... Horses following us are tired now; we can travel a little slower."

"What about your brethren?" queried Gwidian, with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"They are only a few. They will wait and watch."

"For how long?" prompted Morgain.

"Not too long. If they guess we are heading for the stonies they will try to prevent us. If the men cannot catch us they will have to find more demons... and there are many to be found."

"Who are 'they'?" queried Morgain.

"The shadesies, who else?"

“Who else indeed?” reaffirmed Gwidian. Once upon a time he may have had a joke for this situation, but smiles were becoming few and far between.

They travelled on until late in the day and even then their break was short. Forever they moved on and forever did their pursuers track them. About them bushes rustled and shadows flitted through the night. Dawn came; a cool grey dawn. Gwidian's face-hardened. His eyes were narrow and his beard unkempt. He spoke little.

Morgain cantered his horse behind Cretin. His face showed no sign of emotion, although his eyes moved from side to side surveying their surroundings.

They paused at noon. The trees offered them a few berries and the ground several roots, Cretin ate naught, though it was well within his powers to catch small game. He looked around and felt the ground. “They are drawing near my friends, the power of Nomarn is driving them on.”

They continued through the afternoon and most of the night. Their mounts were weary so at times they dismounted and walked.

They met the dawn with leaden eyes. Their muscles were sore and aching.

“How much further?” queried Morgain.

“A day perhaps,” replied Gwidian.

“We will be there by nightfall,” said Cretin. He pointed to the North.

Both Gwidian and Morgain turned to look. There on the horizon was a large party of riders.

“They are within striking distance,” said Gwidian in a matter of fact voice.

“Yes, but they seem to be waiting,” replied Morgain. “They have been waiting for a long time.”

“We must move on,” said Cretin in a staunch voice. “Let them get too close and they will attack.”

“Do we ride our mounts into the ground?” said Gwidian. “What would that achieve?”

Cretin began to move on. His pace was no faster than before. The brothers followed, their horses travelling little more than walking pace.

“Does he ever tire,” quipped Morgain.

Slowly they moved towards the ringstones but the closer they came the nearer drew the riders in their wake. Time seemed to crawl by as they journeyed on, though a sense of urgency hung over all of them.

At the rounding of a hill the stones came into view standing stark against the skyline, they urged their horses onward.

“What are those small figures moving about down there?” said Morgain in a strong voice.

“It looks like a herd of some kind,” replied Gwidian.

“Demons,” stated Cretin. “It is a writhe of demons.” Morgain shot him a glance. “Then why are we heading towards them?”

In a simple voice Cretin replied, “Because there is nowhere else to go.”

Gwidian looked over his shoulders as he rode downward. The hilltop behind was alive with riders. “There is no turning back now,” he called, then he spurred his horse faster.

“Hold your shield before you and draw your sword. They will fear their power,” rasped Cretin.

Gwidian raised his shield and drew his sword. “The sword has no power.”

“They will feel the power. They will not pinpoint its source.”

Gwidian and Morgain brought their horses to full gallop while Cretin opened his wings to circle westward and glide towards the stones.

An arrow whistled by Morgain's ear. "Those animals behind are gaining," he grunted, "and those hellish creatures are getting closer."

"Close ranks," called Gwidian. "Stay close to me." It seemed an impenetrable wall of writhing forms between the brothers and the stones but to their surprise the wall began to part as they approached, then close again as they passed through.

The riders behind ceased their chase as they approached the wall, as if their task was done.

"Not much further," called Morgain, swinging his sword. "I think they are going to let us through."

Both men's brows were heavy with perspiration. The horses they rode were panting for breath.

"We are going to make it," called Morgain, then without warning a demon struck. It glided silently from Morgain's rear, its legs hanging low. It snatched at his shoulders, sinking its talons deep into Morgain's flesh. It did not have the power to lift him into the air but forced him from the saddle of his mount. They both hit the ground in a heap. Morgain was momentarily dazed though he quickly realised his predicament. The demon released his shoulders then snatched at his throat with its claws.

Morgain avoided the snatch by less than a thumbnail. He reached for his sword, which was no more than an arms length away. The demon grabbed his legs.

Gwidian saw his brother fall and immediately turned his horse about to hew his way back to his brother's side. He called to Morgain, then realised there was no way his brother could free himself. He bent low from his mount and slashed at the arms which restrained Morgain. One arm he severed, the other quickly released its grip. Morgain half climbed and was half pulled onto Gwidian's horse. Again Gwidian turned his mount, then galloped towards the stones. Their opponents

were fierce yet tentative. The determination of Gwidian carried them to their goal.

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The setting sun saw three figures in the centre of the circle of stones. Morgain was injured severely and lay on the grassy earth, his head propped on Gwidian's cloak. Gwidian himself sat and watched over his brother. There was little he could do. Morgain's shoulders had been pierced deeply by the darkworld creature, as if he had been stabbed by many knives. Gwidian wondered if those talons bore venom.

Cretin surveyed their surroundings. He had helped to calm Morgain by methods only he understood, now he watched the milling hordes of his brethren; he seemed unsure what their next move might be.

As the last rays of light struck the stones Cretin walked to the most easterly stone and began to chant.

Morgain lifted himself onto one elbow and with a painful smile he said, "Cretin gives us a song, there is yet some cheer in the world."

"Do not speak, brother. You need all your strength."

Both watched as Cretin chortled on. "Am I hallucinating, or do I see that stone crumbling?"

Gwidian watched a few moments then said, "Perhaps we both hallucinate, a trick of the sun perhaps for I too see the stone crumbling."

They watched as powder, then larger pieces fell to the ground. The whole slab seemed to be disintegrating. Gwidian rubbed his eyes and when they cleared the stone had gone. In its place stood a tall lean man of elden features; he seemed to carry many years for his beard was long and white but his eyes shone brightly. He bowed before Cretin and seemed to say, 'My lady or lord.' Distance muffled his voice.

Cretin turned and walked towards the brothers. The man followed; he was looking around and smelling the fragrances in the air as he drew closer.

Gwidian stood erect and stared straight into the eyes of Cretin's companion. "I have seen Cretin do some strange things," he mumbled.

The new arrival came to a halt. At first he paid little attention to Gwidian, but after he had done sniffing and looking he said, "Troublesome mortals," then he began flexing his muscles.

"Who or what are you?" demanded Gwidian in a rough voice.

The character ignored him.

"This is Palanzarr," said Cretin. "He is one of the seven wizards - one of the elden wise."

Palanzarr halted his actions and turned to Gwidian. "Not one of the seven," he said in a commanding voice. "I am number one of the seven."

"That is all we need," said Morgain, in a weak but somewhat bemused voice, "an arrogant elden."

"Elden," said Palanzarr. "I am not a mere elden. I am the great Palanzarr, master of the mystic arts."

Morgain shook his head then coughed. "If I had a hat you could pull me out a ..." his voice trailed off, then he began to cough again.

"You dare to mock me," growled Palanzarr. A staff appeared instantly in his hands. He slammed it against the ground and the earth trembled.

The brothers steadied themselves - a look of complete surprise on their faces.

"You are lucky," chortled Cretin. "Once upon a time he would have flayed you for such insolence, but now he is a good wizard. He is tired of being an evil monolith to the past. Is that not true Palanzarr?"

Palanzarr's eyes narrowed and moved to Cretin. "No one in this world would succeed in returning me to..."

"You are 'one' Palanzarr. The days of the seven are over," chortled Cretin.

Palanzarr looked studious for a moment. "But of course you will release my friends. As seven we may defeat all our enemies."

Cretin shook his head. "Cretins not a fool. Lots of difficulty with seven before."

"We could bring your friend back to health."

Gwidian turned towards Cretin, his eyes said what his mouth did not.

"I cannot do it," said Cretin, in a solemn voice. "Do not even ask me."

Gwidian turned towards Palanzarr. "I deem you are not the greatest wizard of all time sir, if you cannot heal just one single man."

"My powers are of the etherworld. To heal his wounds of evil is but a simple task, the flesh of mortals however must heal itself." Palanzarr lifted a hand above Morgain and flakes like sparkling snow fell from his palm to land upon Morgain's wounds. "All he needs now is time and care, but beware those wounds are open to disease."

Gwidian noted a slight change in Morgain's face; he looked more comfortable, as he lay back on the cloak.

Beyond the circle demons were gathering into large groups. Men could also be seen though they kept themselves separate from the darkworld creatures.

Gwidian stood in the centre of the circle and stretched out his right arm with pointed finger. He turned a full circle then said to Palanzarr, "And what would the great wizard of good do about our enemies beyond the stones?"

Palanzarr did not bother to look where Gwidian pointed. "They are only puppets. I have watched them come

and go from my place of reverence in the circle. Do not trouble yourself with beings such as those.”

“Mighty words, indeed. Do you intend to bury them all in sparkling snow?”

“Your mouth is not your ally... friend. You would be wise to curb its use.”

Cretin turned his back on Palanzarr and spoke softly, “You would do well to heed his words. One so powerful as Palanzarr may find it difficult to tolerate you, regardless of consequence.”

Palanzarr continued his exercises as if Gwidian and Cretin did not exist.

He walked a little; he talked to himself a little; he seemed to be enjoying a new-found life.

“Are you serious, Cretin? Do you expect me to believe he is going to stop an army single handed?”

“He seems to think he can... a very tricky wizard.”

“He could not even heal my brother.”

“He could have made your brother believe he was well.”

“What use is that; look your friends are beginning to move.”

Cretin’s voice dropped an octave and he hissed his next words to Gwidian.

“Do you never learn? Have you not seen the power of the wraiths? Do you not realise who constrained... my friends in days gone by?”

Gwidian understood Cretin's words but such was his scepticism he did not take him seriously.

“We will soon find out how clever our wizard is,” said Gwidian, then he knelt by his brother's side.

The demons and men forged themselves into fighting units around the circle. The last rays of the sun had disappeared but the moon rode high in the sky, casting its



silvery light on the landscape. Only now did Palanzarr begin to take interest.

He glanced around the circle; mist was beginning to form near the ground and upon the mist a silent figure glided. It came to rest in the place of the missing stone.

“See the purple sash,” whispered Cretin. “That is the shade of Tordoth.”

An evil voice laughed. Both Gwidian and Morgain tried to shut it out of their minds, but it seemed impossible.

“Depart the circle, wizard, this battle is not your affair,” boomed the evil voice.

“It is I who shall decide or were you not aware; this circle is a hallowed place, a place which is so rare.” Palanzarr stood to his full height and gripped his staff with both hands.

“My servants will cut you down, wizard, standing in these wretches stead.” Tordoth raised a bony finger and pointed towards the brothers and Cretin.

“I stand where I please, Wraith, and I will stop your forces dead.”

Tordoth laughed. “And how will you stop my bowmen, wizard; their arrows will seal your fate.”

“Only snakes dwell in your bowman's quivers and they do not fly straight.”

Shouts and a scream pierced the cool night air.

“That was close,” muttered Cretin. “Try and protect yourself with the shield and whatever else you can find.”

Gwidian looked puzzled.

“They only see snakes. A stray arrow or any weapon could strike you down.”

“By the sound of that scream those arrows have teeth,” mumbled Morgain.

The wraith seemed to fade into the darkness and as it disappeared the demons began to move, their hideous faces lit dimly by the moon. The first group clawed their way towards

the missing stone.

Palanzarr lifted his staff above his head and the ground before the demons began to heave. Skeletal elden hands began to appear from the earth snatching and grabbing at the taloned feet of the demons; dragging them down into an earthen grave. To the south more demons approached, snarling and hissing as they made their way towards the circle. Palanzarr pointed his staff at the grass beneath them. The ground shuddered and split. A great chasm opened beneath their feet; they screamed and howled as they plummeted down a bottomless pit.

To the north riders approached. The wizard held his staff before him. Flames burst forth to engulf them. The air filled with the stench of burning flesh, and the sounds of pain and agony tolled the ending of many lives.

“WHERE ARE YOUR SERVANTS NOW?” cried Palanzarr.

The wraith appeared at the perimeter of the circle, at first no more than a shadow, then its form took substance. “You have done well wizard, but these menials were of no consequence. You have merely sealed your own fate. Nomarn does not forgive easily and he will be filled with wrath and hate.”

Palanzarr’s eyes glared with defiance and loathing. “Bring forth your master before me, lest it be too late. And I will show him power that no one can gestate.”

The wraith held its arms to the sky. A wind sprang from nowhere to howl between the stones. Dark clouds rolled over the moon, and a stench of evil filled the air; total darkness blanketed the landscape. Vision was impossible. “You think you have me beaten. You think you save this land, but I hold the veil of darkness, a power you cannot withstand.”

Palanzarr let his staff fall to the ground, though no one saw it

drop, then he held his palms upwards before him. Shafts of brilliant white light sped skyward. It was as though he held the beams in his hands. "There are things you have forgotten. There is no place to hide. For I have the power of goodness, invincible towers of light." Palanzarr noted Tordoth's position, then the light vanished momentarily while he shifted his palms to face the wraith.

Tordoth manoeuvred quickly into a defensive stance. It held its own palms towards Palanzarr, its left arm outstretched and its right nearer to its cloak. An instant later the shafts of white light re-appeared and shot towards Tordorth, at arms length they ricocheted upwards as if some invisible force had deflected them. The shafts exploded into colour and the sky was filled with pyrotechnics, lighting the land for many leagues.

Tordoth looked uncomfortable, it seemed in danger of being overpowered.

Gwidian and Morgain looked on incredulously then a voice rolled in their minds. "This story is not yet ended Palanzarr, we will meet again in the fires of hell, the darkworld awaits you."

For now it was over - the wraith simply vanished. The shade of Tordoth existed in their vicinity no longer. The odour of evil was gone.

Gwidian climbed to his feet as the clouds began to dissipate and the wind calmed to silence.

"Promise me one thing," said Morgain weakly as he looked at Gwidian.

"What is that, my brother?"

"Do not aggravate Palanzarr again."

Gwidian smiled.

They all remained in the circle that night. Palanzarr produced a fire to sit around, although no one knew for sure whether it was real or simply a figment of their imagination.

He also produced a roast. Where he had conjured it from did not really matter, it certainly seemed to fill their stomachs. Gwidian's temper had cooled; he dressed his brother's wounds, then they all sat and talked as they watched the flames flickering upward, especially Palanzarr. A strange calm had come over him though none knew why. He told tales of the elden days - not only of his own exploits but also of his kindred. He was indeed an elden though his powers set him apart from most of his people. He talked also of the coming of men to these lands and why the elden people had to depart to the Outerworld, where all creatures from the distant past now dwelt. It was all so strange and fascinating to Morgain and Gwidian and at times seemed no more than folklore and fairy tales.

Eventually the story telling ceased and both Gwidian and Morgain settled down to rest. Gwidian still had reservations about Palanzarr but his eyelids forsook him and both he and his brother fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

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It was late in the morning when Gwidian opened his eyes. At first his face looked blank, then recollections of the previous night flooded his mind. He wondered if it might have all been a dream, but as he climbed to his feet and looked around he noted a stone was missing. He looked down to see his brother still sleeping, then he turned to Cretin, who stood a few paces to the north, before walking to where the stone had stood.

He stood a while on the flattened imprint where the stone had been, staring blankly at the ground, then he lifted his eyes and walked a little. The pit should have been nearby, where the demons had plummeted to their doom but the land was green and fertile. He ran from one stone to the next

looking about. He did indeed see the occasional demon lying dormant; he saw too the bodies of the riders which had pursued them; but the masses which had been slaughtered the previous night had vanished without disturbing a blade of grass. Eventually he completed the circle and again stood where the missing stone should have been but this time a realisation began to sweep over him. He had been a part of a poetic nightmare; a dream as real as the air he breathed; a part of a battle played out in the minds of magicians, though some of the players were of flesh and blood. Evil had not entered this circle. Neither wraith nor demon.. Save one?

The sound of trickling water came to his ears and for an instant it seemed he had stood upon this spot before. Something drew his eyes downward until he again looked at the ground, this time a sparkle of light shone from the compressed earth. He bent down and scraped the soil around the glistening object until it was completely uncovered. He picked it up and held it before his eyes. It was a large gemstone of great beauty; a crystal whose light seemed to shift and sway as he looked upon it. Soft words drifted through his mind and seemed to run with the trickling of the water.

“This is the gift I leave you, Gwidian, look after it well. If you again need my assistance use it to call me, but be warned, I am no longer a part of your world, nor have I been for countless ages, though I may come to your aid once more, that will be our final meeting.”

“WHERE ARE YOU,” Gwidian called, turning his head from left to right.

“I stand upon the endless stream of time, which carries me to my home, take care friend, and may all your burdens be light ones.”

The voice of Palanzarr drifted away and so too did the sound of the trickling stream. Gwidian turned back towards

his brother and Cretin who was now sat by his side. He walked toward them slowly still looking at the jewel he held.

Morgain was by now awake though his complexion was ashen.

“What have you there?” queried Morgain.

Gwidian came to a halt. “A gem stone... The gem stone; the helvstone of fable!” He looked at Cretin with questioning eyes.

Cretin shook his head. “A call stone - a Kreth. It has its secrets.”

“I feel its power,” said Gwidian. “I know it carries the power of the helvstone.”

“True,” said Cretin.

Gwidian frowned at Cretin.

“Hey diggle diggle you have found a riddle,” Cretin's voice was mischievous.

There were a great many explanations that Gwidian required from Cretin but he knew he would not get them. What possible sway could a demon such as Cretin have over an elden wizard was one? He sighed, then moved his eyes to Morgain. “We have to move on, do you think you are well enough to travel?”

\*

They gathered their horses and departed the circle riding westward. They had only covered a league when it became obvious that Morgain could not complete the journey, still they rode on.

At nightfall a distant light was spotted. It signified a homestead. Morgain was in great pain and sweat hung on his brow. A fever had taken him and to try and continue their quest would be fatal, though there was no guarantee he would live even if they halted.

They made their way towards the light. Like most homesteads the occupants kept guard dogs to give warning of the arrival of strangers and this one was no exception.

As they neared the buildings the dogs began to yap. Cretin came to a halt while Gwidian rode on with his brother.

They were met by a thickset man who carried what looked like a rather nasty multi-pronged farming implement. Gwidian had no idea what it was but he eyed it with suspicion.

“WHO ARE YOU?” called the man.

Gwidian, who sat on his horse some ten paces away from the porch, was getting annoyed at the incessant yapping of the dogs. “Can you not hush your animals, sir, so we may talk?”

The man remained silent for a moment then turned to his dogs and in a deep commanding voice he snapped, “Quiet.” The dogs fell instantly silent.

Gwidian looked a little surprised. “My name is Gwidian. My brother here is seriously injured. We seek help.” Gwidian noticed the shutters of the house opening slightly to allow curious eyes to peep out.

“We want no strangers here,” said the man. “We have enough troubles of our own.”

“But we cannot travel on,” insisted Gwidian.

“No matter, we have our own problems.”

The figure of a middle-aged woman joined the man. “Who is it Jon?”

“I thought I told you to stay indoors.”

“My name is Gwidian. My brother is wounded.”

Gwidian walked his horse a little closer.

“How did it happen?” queried the woman.

“We were attacked by demons.”

A fearful look crossed the homesteader’s faces. “We want nothing to do with demons,” said the man.

Morgain's head was swimming but still he managed to speak, "Neither did we, good people." He slumped forward in his saddle. Gwidian quickly dismounted to help his brother to the ground.

The woman looked anxious.

A young boy of around ten years of age came through the doorway dressed in a sleeping gown. He stared at his parents and in a pleading voice said, "You have to help them father."

"Get back inside," growled the man.

"But you cannot just leave them," said the boy.

The woman cast a glance at her man then scurried down the porch steps to join Gwidian. She could see where Morgain had been wounded by the rips in his tunic. "We must get him inside."

Jon was taken aback by the actions of his family, but by the time Gwidian had reached the entrance to the house, he was holding the door open.

Gwidian appreciated this gesture and with Morgain leaning heavily on his shoulder, he entered then stopped; his face a picture of surprise. There was a dining table in the middle of the room; around it were four chairs. On the chairs sat four young children - three boys and a girl. Beyond the table was a fire. A pace in front of the fire was a bathtub; in it sat two girls, splashing happily. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at Gwidian - beaming smiles on their faces.

"Follow me," said Jon. He led Gwidian and Morgain across the floor to a small backroom. Near the far wall was a bench draped with a blanket. "Lay him on the bench," said Jon.

Gwidian did as he was requested, making Morgain as comfortable as possible then he stood and faced Jon. "I did not realise..."



Jon shrugged. “Perhaps you see why I am dubious of strangers. These are difficult times and I feel they are going to get worse. There are many stories of strange goings on and honest folk fear to travel the countryside. I wish no harm to come to my family.”

Greta, Jon’s wife entered the room. She carried water and fresh linen.

Gwidian turned to face his brother, who lay still with his eyes open, bearing a distant look. “I do not know what we can do for you, brother.” He turned to Greta.

“He needs his wounds binding in clean bandage and the dirt washing from him. A cool cloth on his brow will help and a little food to keep his strength up.”

Gwidian nodded his head.

“You are not from these parts?” said Jon.

“Can I look at your sword, sir.” No one had noticed the entrance of the young boy in the gown.

“Go and join your brothers and sisters,” said Jon.

“Plee ..ase.”

Gwidian unsheathed his sword and the boy’s eyes lit up. “Careful lad, the edges are sharp.” He passed the sword to the boy.

Jon’s eyes fixed on the sword as it passed from one to the other, paying special attention to the snake fashioned into the hilt. “You are of the House of Dromar,” said Jon with surprise on his face.

“We are Baron Dromar’s sons. We go to join the Lord of the Southlands and Giyorn, Lord of the East.”

Jon remained silent for a while as if weighing the situation up. “Indeed these are dark times,” he said, “but your brother cannot travel.”

“No,” said Gwidian. “I must travel alone. I need someone who can tend him. I can pay well.” He placed a bag of coins in Jon’s hand.

“You would leave your brother?” said the woman.

“If there was anyway I could delay my journey I would. If we do not succeed in our quest...!”

“We understand,” said Jon. “Perhaps you will rest and share our table before you leave?”

“I sense you have enough mouths to feed and besides I pose a threat to these darkworld creatures. While I dwell here, I put your family and my brother in unnecessary danger.”

“As you wish, but we do have our guard dogs to keep watch.”

“Yes, the dogs,” said Gwidian, with concern on his brow. “Really, I must be on my way.” He clasped his brother's hand for the last time then thanked Jon and Greta for their help. He gathered his sword with a smile and walked towards the entrance porch. He felt a great many eyes watching from the household as he stepped out into the night air. “Those dogs are quiet,” he mumbled, then he cast his eyes into the night, looking for Cretin.

# Dillusions

## Chapter 10

Time seems so endless. It drifts by without meaning, without reality. Sometimes I feel so hot - my flesh seems to burn. Faces; I see faces; faces without names. Distant voices; voices from yesterday; an echo of the past. Why am I here? What is wrong with me? Pain; I feel pain in my shoulders. Something is pulling; trying to tear me away from my saddle; must hang on; we are nearly there. I can see the stones; a tall elden wizard guards them... Wait! I see a face. I remember that face - it is my friend Giyorn. Why is Giyorn here? Has he come to help - to take me away? The meeting; the elden temple. They must have found the axe. Something to tell him. The shield, must tell him about the shield... and Palanzarr; he was the tall elden wizard. We need his help. Cretin knows. Cretin turned the stone into living flesh. Cretin has many secrets.

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Giyorn's face was stony. He had travelled a long way, much of the distance on foot. He was surprised to find Morgain at the homestead.

“Has he been here long?” queried Giyorn as he knelt beside Morgain.

“Two days,” replied Jon. “There were two of them. He rode with his brother.”

Giyorn looked thoughtful. “It is strange how fate

brings us together. Both delayed. Morgain wounded in battle and myself left to walk. It was good fortune that I found a homestead with horses or I may still have been trudging the countryside now. Tell me, did you notice if they carried a shield?"

Jon shook his head. "Honestly, I do not know. Perhaps Greta or my eldest son might know."

"Morgain knows," said Giyorn. He turned to face Morgain and with his head no more than a hand span away from his face, he said, "What happened Morgain? Who did this to you? Did you find the shield?" His eyes drifted down to the claw marks on Morgain's shoulder.

Morgain could not make out what Giyorn was saying; his voice was unclear and seemed a long way away. Must tell Giyorn that Cretin has many secrets. "Cretin," whispered Morgain, but it was too much for him; his voice faded and he drifted into the lands of darkness.

Giyorn stood for a moment, his face blank then anger began to cross his brow. He turned to Jon with raging eyes. "And they trusted that creature," he scorned.

Jon was startled at the change in Giyorn's mood. He stood back as the Lord of the Eastlands stormed out.

# The Wizard's Sage

## Chapter 11

Gwidian and Cretin approached the elden temple by the same route as Jorm. They were aware of Jorm's presence by the tethered horses. Gwidian was about to put a foot on the steps leading to the doorway when a voice called him to a halt.

“Welcome Gwidian. I trust your quest went well?”

Gwidian turned to face Miowni. Despite his fatigue a large smile crossed his face. He walked the few paces towards her and clasped her by the shoulders. “You are a welcome sight.”

Miowni also smiled. “Am I really hearing this from the lips of Gwidian?” She stared for a moment at the dirty, weathered, bearded face, then with a concerned brow she said, “Where is Morgain?”

Gwidian's face sank. “He rests at a homestead. Our journey has been thwart with hazards - enemies at every turn. He was hurt badly by a winged demon. We were lucky to survive.”

“We got the shieldy,” croaked Gwidian's partner. “Where are Jorm and Giyorn?”

Miowni turned her head slightly so she could see Cretin. “Jorm speaks with the keeper, the sage of this temple. He is a wise man and they have spent much time in conversation... of Giyorn... I do not know.”

Gwidian looked at the slight figure of Miowni. A sadness had come over her and she bowed her head to stare at

the ground. He could see the journey had taken its toll on her and in the weak morning sunlight she looked no more than a wisp of a girl, even the staunch darkness of her hair seemed to be fading. "He is alive?" prompted Gwidian.

Miowni raised her eyes. "I honestly do not know. We encountered a shade... Giyorn simply vanished."

Gwidian did not press on with his questioning. The fearful look in Miowni's eyes told him that he had said enough.

"Disappearing Giyorn," chuckled Cretin. "He is still alive. Shades have not the power to make peoples disappear forever. He is probably stood where you left him."

"They can kill," said Miowni in a distraught voice. Cretin fell silent.

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The four sat around the table. It had been a day since Gwidian's arrival and the tales of their journeys had been told.

Cretin paced up and down. He would cast his eyes from one face to the other as they spoke, occasionally adding comments of his own.

"Giyorn will follow if he is able," said Jorm. "I feel sure he will make his way straight to the spire."

"You seem very sure that Nomarn will be awaiting us there," said Gwidian.

The keeper or sage as they now called him looked at Gwidian and intervened. "Nomarn will be there, of that you can be certain, but he will be wary. Since you encountered Palanzarr he has learned the secret of the helvstone; the elden called themselves helvs. The helvstone was indeed a stone helv; an elden who was turned to stone by the master wizard, Myrov. Nomarn knows the power of this elden, Palanzarr and he will be cautious. But he must destroy the Queen, Miriel.

He no longer has the power to control her for there are only six shades.”

The sage’s words caused a few murmurs.

“And he expects the Queen to arrive with us at the spire?” said Miowni.

“You will not defeat Nomarn without her. You may have the shield to defend yourself and the sword with which to slay, but the shades are powerful and you are men and weapons short.”

“I have the Kreth,” said Gwidian.

“Remember Palanzarr is only one. The wraiths are six,” warned the sage.

“The Queen will be there,” said Jorm assuringly.

Cretin nodded his head.

“How can you be so sure?” queried Miowni.

Jorm shook his head. “I wish I could tell you, but my lips are sealed. The Queen ensures I do not speak; my mind is locked. Nomarn must not know of her whereabouts, he must not sense her power.”

“I feel we walk into a trap,” said Miowni.

“Confronting all six shades is suicide. Could not we and the Queen destroy them one at a time?”

“If we could find them. No, it would not work.

Nomarn will wait at a place of strength, the place where my father fell. He knows I will return there. It is our chance to rid the world of all of these evil beings and we must take it.”

“It is also Nomarn's chance to rid the world of us,” said Gwidian.

“He could have destroyed us long ago,” said Jorm.

“He has spared us to bring the Queen to him - and so we shall.”

“Had not Nomarn tried to steal the Queen's powers in the first place he would have already won the battle. The Queen would still dwell in her own lands,” said Miowni.

“That is true,” said the sage, “but remember his power is the power of the mind. He can kill with a thought, yet in reality he cannot lift a pebble from the beach. If he conjures a dagger from thin air and sticks it in your neck, you will die, though it is only an illusion, a perfect illusion of sound, sight and of course feeling; he craves for immortal reality. The Queen's powers coupled with his own could have given him this. He had to try.”

The sage looked at Miowni, Miowni returned the look, something unreadable to the others passed between them.

“Are we not forgetting one thing?” said Gwidian. “I understand a fallen shade will walk the corridors of Greyfar. Could not Nomarn lure her there?”

“He needs the power of the spire - the circle of fire. Reality has been denied him, but vengeance and mastery of the world are still within his grasp.”

“We must leave tomorrow,” said Jorm. “The more we delay the more havoc is caused by these demons which roam the countryside. All our lands are falling into ruin. If we do not put an end to this evil soon we will have no lands to rule; the Northlands are already desolate. The people have suffered enough.”

“To the spire of Darklore,” hissed Cretin.

They all turned towards him.

“What is it about that creature?” said Gwidian. “The more I travel with him, the less I seem to know him. He has saved our skins more than once, yet sometimes I feel he could be a greater enemy than Nomarn himself. He knows too much and he is unnatural... even for a demon.”

Cretin gave what seemed to be an impression of a smile. “True, loyal Cretin.”

“If I were you I would get some rest,” said the sage looking at Gwidian. “You need all the strength you can gather.”



“We all do,” confirmed Jorm.

They all rose from the table. The sage mentioned Jorm to one side.

“You require something?” said Jorm.

“You do not intend taking Miowni to the spire.”

Jorm shook his head. “I have grown too fond of her to risk her life, though it means breaking my oath to her father. Strange really, I knew the old man for years but it was only a season since I learned he had an adopted daughter; three days before he died in a riding accident,” Jorm paused for a few moments. “Tell me, do you know the outcome of our venture?”

The sage pondered a moment, “Know you that matters are as destiny demands; know you also that the name Miriel means Queen.”

# The Spire of Darklore

## Chapter 12

It was still dark when Jorm stirred in his bed. His eyes came to full alert. Carefully he put one foot on the floor, wincing a little at the cold then he stealthily departed to wake Gwidian.

He shook Gwidian lightly on the shoulder, then a little harder. Gwidian grunted.

“Shush,” whispered Jorm, “we are leaving.”

Gwidian was half-asleep; he began to open his mouth.

Jorm clasped a hand firmly over it. “Follow me.”

Together they gathered their clothes and distanced themselves from the sleeping quarters. The sage and Miowni had separate rooms close by and Jorm did not wish to wake them.

“Our supplies are packed and we are ready to move,” said Jorm.

Gwidian looked surprised. “What about the others?”

“Cretin will be stalking outside. Miowni and the sage should remain asleep.”

“You cannot leave Miowni.”

“She is safer here. This is no work for a lady.”

“But she will follow.”

Jorm hesitated. “Hopefully not. The sage should have the sense to restrain her. He will understand.”

Gwidian reluctantly dressed and followed Jorm out into the night.

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Jorm slowed his horse to walking pace. "We should arrive by next nightfall."

Gwidian also slowed his mount. He had noted a troubled look on Jorm's brow. "Is there something on your mind?" he said casually.

Jorm pondered a moment then said, "Only the world."

Gwidian smiled. "Care for a bite to eat? We did leave in a bit of a hurry."

Jorm nodded and they dismounted. They sat facing each other on the grassy earth.

Gwidian stroked his short beard. "I think it is about time I was given all the facts. I have followed you thus far in the darkness but the end of our journey is nigh. I would like to know what I am walking into."

"You know as much as I," replied Jorm.

"That is not true. If that were the case we would be fools to ride on. You must know more than I do."

"It is dangerous to speak aloud."

"It is dangerous to ride on."

Jorm bit on a raw carrot. "What would you have me tell you?"

"Firstly, where is the Queen. As far as I know she is just a myth... and Cretin... that is no ordinary fire demon."

Jorm put a finger to his mouth to hush Gwidian, then spoke in a quiet voice, "You are of course, quite right," Jorm looked around as if looking for uninvited guests, "but I still think we are making a mistake talking of it. Even the trees have ears."

"If there was anyone close by we would see them."

"A shade?" said Jorm.

"I would feel it and besides from what I have seen they have to materialise before they can come in contact with

our world.”

Jorm shrugged. “The answers are before you. You said yourself Cretin is no ordinary demon.”

“Well.”

“Who has a great interest in our success. Who vanished on the moorlands until my father fell at the hands of Nomarn.” Jorm frowned.

“Who did vanish? What are you trying to say?”

“Who has an answer for everything? Who breathed life into Palanzarr?”

Gwidian remained silent for a short time, then with an astonished look on his face he said, “This is no time to jest. An evil bloodsucking creature like...”

Jorm stared straight into Gwidian's eyes. “Am I jesting?”

“It is impossible. Even elden cannot change their appearance. You mock me. You may as well have told me it was Miowni.”

“Do I? It was you that told me a stone turned into an elden wizard.”

Gwidian struggled for words. “The elden were a fair race who were good and righteous, not like...”

“Is Palanzarr. Is he good and righteous or does he aid us under threat? Why are there still six standing stones? Is it because Cretin feared that to release the seven would be to put the Harandos in as much jeopardy as the wraiths have?”

“But he is disgusting,” said Gwidian in a flabbergasted voice, “and besides he is a HE.”

Jorm gave a half-hearted laugh. “You take too much at face value. You think of the elden as a kindly people but have you considered all the facts.”

“Yes I do. There may have been a few bad ones but did they not depart these lands for men? We could never have defeated them in battle and yet they gave up everything.”

“I grant you that, they did put a high value on life and they did foresee that man and elden were not compatible, but how do you think they defeated their greatest enemies. Do you think they killed the demons with kindness? Do you think they banished and imprisoned most of their race in the darkworld as a goodly deed? Believe me, they can think and act with as much venom as a snake.”

Gwidian shook his head. “If Cretin is indeed the elden Queen he... she would have aided us more on our quest. Giyorn and Morgain would ride with us now. If you really believe what you are saying, then I feel you have been misled.”

“She had to restrain her powers to maintain her disguise. Nomarn would sense her presence as she can sense the whereabouts of the shades.”

Gwidian looked up to see Cretin leaping towards them, distaste crossed his face. “Not in a thousand years could I believe that creature is the elden Queen in disguise.”

Jorm smiled. “I hope Nomarn Deleri feels the same way.”

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Jorm led on to the moorlands with a melancholy heart. Most of what had befallen him, he had expected, but his decision to leave Miowni at the temple hurt him deep inside. He hated deceiving her but he could see no alternative.

“What are our chances of defeating Nomarn?” queried Gwidian in a matter of fact voice.

Jorm looked towards Gwidian although he had not appeared to be listening; “They are good.”

“You say they are good, even though your father failed with a thousand men.”

Images crossed Jorm's mind. He saw mighty Lords

riding across the moorlands; Raimar; Dromar; Trian; Giyorn; a thousand torches in their wake. An impressive sight - yet it was to no avail. "Men are of little use against the shades. Demons perhaps but the shades are beyond mortal understanding. They could conjure a thousand darkworld creatures from the evil recesses of their minds and leave men fighting their own shadows. Now we have something more. Miriel can no longer be mesmerised by these wraiths. We have also found the secret of the helvstone, something even my father knew little of, and you have the Kreth which can recall that power - the power of Palanzarr."

"I hope that you are right."

They rode onward towards the spire, Cretin continuing to trot beside them. Often Gwidian glanced at Cretin, sometimes with a look of disbelief at whom he had been told Cretin really was; on occasion a smile would come to his lips and laughter dance in his eyes but naught did he ever say.

As the light began to fail the Spire of Darklore came into view, perhaps a league distant. They rode towards it without challenge as if the moorlands were totally deserted or worse still, as if they had been invited.

They rounded the final mound. Jorm's eyes fell on the cold dark sacrifice stone then he raised them to look at the spire. For a moment he could again see the prancing shadows on its barren walls; the way it was when he last stood upon this hill, when the wraiths performed their evil rights and the demons danced. The ring of fire had burnt its place in his memory forever more.

Gwidian halted his horse and dismounted. Jorm followed suit. They both stood a while studying the building before them. It was a tall watchtower with slit windows; it stood thirty paces to what appeared to be a balcony or battlement where stood the effigies of demons and other foul creatures. Ten paces above the battlement was the spire itself,

stretching another twenty paces towards the darkened sky. It was an ominous sight, commanding the landscape as far as the eye could see.

“Have you ever set foot inside?” queried Gwidian.

Jorm nodded his head. “It seems a tall narrow building from where we stand, in fact one sometimes wonders why it does not topple over, but inside it seems far more spacious. It is for all the world derelict, yet I feel it is alive.”

“You paint a foreboding picture.”

“I climbed every step and searched every room of that building. Never have I felt so much in the eye of evil.”

“Would it not have been better to cast the building down?”

“We were warriors and were not equipped for such a task and besides I knew Nomarn would await me here.”

Gwidian had heard Jorm speak these words before and by now had convinced himself that Nomarn Deleri would be waiting here, though the place did seem deserted. “What do we do now?”

“We wait,” said Cretin, who had himself seemed little more than a shadow throughout the day.

Jorm gazed around at the rolling countryside. It was just as barren and empty as he remembered it. “The moon will rise shortly. We are fortunate to have a clear sky.”

Gwidian pulled his cloak about himself. “I feel it is going to be a cold night.” He reached into his tunic and pulled out the Kreth. “If I am to call Palanzarr, perhaps now is the best time.”

Jorm looked at Cretin, then back to Gwidian. He nodded his head. “For better or for worse.”

Gwidian held the stone in his right hand and in a low voice whispered, “Palanzarr.”

Nothing seemed to happen. The air was still and a deathly silence hung over the moors.

“Palanzarr,” said Gwidian, a little louder. He did not know if it was his imagination but the stone felt a little warmer then softly in the distance came the sound of tumbling water. Both he and Jorm looked apprehensive. They waited another few moments then with a strange and sudden sound, as if something had been sucked from nowhere to stand in their vicinity, Palanzarr appeared.

Jorm and Gwidian were taken aback by the suddenness of his appearance and for a short while their tongues were frozen.

Palanzarr glanced at Cretin, then turned his attention to Gwidian. He bowed his head.

Gwidian still could not find any words to speak. Cretin eyed Palanzarr with something a little less than love; it was left to Jorm to break the silence.

“Palanzarr, I presume,” he greeted, bowing his own head.

Palanzarr turned to Jorm. His eyes fell on the sword Jorm carried then moved to the hand, which carried the ring of the Southlands. Their eyes met for a brief instant; the wise mystical eyes of Palanzarr which shone despite the lack of light and the distant blue of the Lord of the Southlands from which the boyish sparkle had fled... to be replaced by something cold and harsh.

“Greetings, Lord of the Southlands,” said Palanzarr in a voice which reflected the mysticism of his eyes.

Gwidian's voice finally returned. “We again have need of your help, Palanzarr. We have reached the final darkness.”

Palanzarr glanced at Gwidian then turned to look at the spire. He lifted his eyes to its summit. “You walk into the jaws of the darkworld.” He turned back to Gwidian. “Your brother could not complete your quest?”

Gwidian shook his head.

“Do you have a plan?” queried Palanzarr turning his



attention to Jorm.

“Only to wait.”

“You may have to wait a long while. Your enemies may wish to test your resolve.”

“They will find it unbreakable,” replied Jorm, in a strong unyielding voice.

“Then we should wait in comfort.” He pointed to the ground and a warming fire materialised. “Keep your shield by your side,” he continued, directing his suggestion to Gwidian.

Gwidian walked to his horse which had strayed a few paces eastward and collected his shield.

“Know you how to use the shield?” queried Palanzarr.

Gwidian had not really thought of what might have been special about the shield and could only answer, “As you would use a shield.”

Palanzarr smiled. “Hold the shield before you and look through the slit.”

Gwidian looked at the slit in the shield which stretched horizontally above the crest; then he held it before him so that he could see through it. Everything seemed normal. He manoeuvred himself until he could see Jorm and Palanzarr who stood by the fire. What he could not see was the fire. He quickly removed the shield and again he could see and feel the flames. He took a final look through the slit in the shield then lowering it he said in a somewhat bemused voice, “It blanks out the fire.”

Jorm lifted his eyes to look at Gwidian.

“You only see what is real,” said Palanzarr. “It does not blank out anything.”

“Did you know this, Jorm?” queried Gwidian.

Jorm turned his eyes to Cretin. “More important, did my father know this?”

“I am sure he did,” said Cretin, in a hesitant voice.

“But remember knowledge is no protection in itself.” He put

his head to one side.

Jorm frowned. His father had spent many seasons searching and learning the lore of elden weapons and no doubt did know of their uses. But Cretin had said nothing of the shields power of truth; not even to himself.

“I presume you did not know,” said Gwidian.

“I would have told you, had I known,” stated Jorm. He sat near the fire and Palanzarr sat close by. Gwidian also seated himself but Cretin remained standing - prowling around.

“Do you have faith in me?” said Palanzarr, quite out of the blue.

The question was a surprise but Jorm had long since given Palanzarr's presence much thought. He had decided Palanzarr was necessary before they had left the temple. “Nomarn Deleri would not make a pact with an elden wizard. Nor do I believe that you would trust the Baron. I am not sure why you have decided to aid us again but I do believe you will stand by us.”

Palanzarr nodded.

The moon rose over the horizon and began to climb high into the sky as they waited; the heathered ground had become cool and damp. A harsh voice whispered in Jorm's ear, “They are coming. Demons climb the hill.”

Jorm listened to Cretin then turned his eyes to the spire. Even as he looked two dark forms materialised. His eyes could have been deceived but he could feel their presence. “It has begun,” he whispered.

# Spire and the Seven

## Chapter 13

Two leagues south-east of the spire a lonely figure made her way across the moorlands. She would not be left behind at the temple.

Miowni trotted her horse relentlessly towards the spire. So far the ride had gone without incident, but as darkness fell and the moon drifted into the sky she became aware of another presence in her vicinity, following closely behind.

As she drew nearer to the spire the presence drew closer to her; but now it was not alone. There were others following her, both to her left and to her right.

At a league distant from the spire she could make out the figures on her flanks. They were demon like; short and stocky - powerful.

She began to gallop her horse but the demons kept pace, slowly tightening their grip. Occasionally they vanished from view as the landscape changed, only to re-appear again moments later. She rounded the top of a small rise, again the demons vanished from view. Miowni glanced to her left and to her right; too late did she realise they were before her.

Miowni tried to gallop between them. At first they seemed to step aside then the demon to the left snatched at the horse's hind legs; its claws sank deep. For a few paces the demon was dragged but then the second demon also took hold; the horse's legs collapsed beneath it and Miowni was thrown to the ground.

She looked up as the demons released the horse. She was not injured but her eyes reflected her predicament.

The demons moved towards Miowni, saliva dribbling from their mouths. They were no more than a pace distant when they halted at the sound of approaching hoof beats.

A horse drew close, its rider was carrying a fearsome axe. Giyorn had been following Miowni for the past three leagues, though he did not know it was she. He brought his horse to an abrupt halt then he dismounted. He could not clearly see the figure on the ground but the demons were unmistakable, both were the image of Cretin.

The demons turned their attention towards Giyorn and began to move stealthily towards him. Perhaps an ordinary man would have fled but Giyorn's face was filled with hatred.

The darkworld creatures began to circle as if there was something they were not sure of. Occasionally one would make a strike for Giyorn and twice their claws hit the mark shredding Giyorn's clothing as they swept by. He parried and dodged their blows, more by reading their actions than speed of response.

"GIYORN," cried Miowni as she regained her feet.

The demons turned. Giyorn sank his axe viciously into the side of the nearest. It let out a frenzied scream; its flesh seemed to burn where the axe had penetrated. The second demon moved backwards, its eyes locked on the axe. Giyorn drew a dagger from his belt. The demon snarled. Giyorn let fly with the dagger; it flew directly towards its target. Only at the last instant did the demon manoeuvre itself from the dagger's path.

Giyorn charged at the darkworld creature. For a moment it looked like it would stand and fight, but then it was gripped by fear, as if the axe could administer more than death. The demon turned and fled.

"It seems we travel the same path," said Miowni, with

a smile of welcome and voice strangely untroubled.

Giyorn turned from his pursuit of the demon to find Miowni only a few paces behind him. He was more than a little surprised to see her. "It is good to see you are well milady but tell me, why you are here by yourself? Where are Jorm and the others?"

"We have encountered many problems since we left the Southlands. I, like yourself, have been parted from the others. I am just pleased.. Happy to see you are well," she smiled. "We thought you were lost to us. We searched the marshlands all through that dreadful night and on into the next day. But you and the shade had simply vanished. Your disappearance made our hearts heavy."

"I am not lost, but you seem to be. Do you know where Jorm is?"

Miowni turned in the direction of the invisible spire. "He has gone to fulfil his destiny. Even now he may be confronting our enemies. We should hurry to join him; his life may be in danger."

Giyorn remembered Morgain's only word - Cretin . Alarm showed in his eyes. "Can your horse be ridden?" Miowni nodded her head. "I think so."

"Quickly then, we must ride to the spire with all haste."

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Palanzarr stood and with a passing thought he extinguished the fire. Jorm and Gwidian rose also, their eyes slowly becoming accustomed to the darkness.

A third shade appeared; then a fourth; they now formed a loosely spaced semi-circle before the spire.

Palanzarr pointed to the first shade, then moved his arm around in an arc speaking their names as he did so.

“Ribolorn, the grey mystical shade of Greyfar; Krangor from whose kingdom the blue sea touches the blue of the sky; Tordoth the shade of rage, his purple sash is a fitting colour; and Grogor, as red as the blood of his tortured victims... WHO AMONGST YOU HAS THE POWER TO STAND AGAINST PALANZARR THE MIGHTY?” he called.

“You are a fool, Palanzarr. I, Ribolorn fear not the power of one elden wizard.”

“It was foretold that we would meet again,” rasped Tordoth, with a wicked thought. “Now wizard you will meet your betters.” Flames appeared in Tordoth’s hands. It outstretched its arms and the fire streamers shot towards Palanzarr. Palanzarr moved his head to one side and with a flash of an eye the flame exploded into a fine spray of water, which fell gently to the ground like rain.

“You jest, Tordoth. Are your powers really as small as your brain?” laughed Palanzarr.

Tordoth raised its hands to the sky where giant winged serpents appeared and Krangor knelt low as if scooping the ground; snakes writhed on their bellies to where Jorm and his companions stood.

Gwidian cast his eyes to the sky where the serpents beat their wings. Then he raised his shield to glance through the slit in its metalwork. He saw no serpents.

“Do not be deceived,” said Palanzarr. “Unless you keep your eyes shrouded behind your shield, those winged monsters are real. Even I must protect myself.”

Palanzarr held his right hand palm down towards the serpents then he turned his palm upwards. The outlines of the creatures disappeared to be replaced by doves as white as the winter snows.

Jorm slashed at the slithering creatures on the ground, some were as large as two paces in length and he had to be wary of their bite. Gwidian also turned his attention to the

snakes, unsheathing his own sword. Cretin's hands could strike faster than a snake and the power of his arms and sharpness of his claws and teeth left the snakes little chance, soon there were few to deal with. Palanzarr put a final end to them with a touch as cold as ice. The snakes appeared to freeze and lay as dormant as the branches of a dead tree. He then held out his hands for his staff, which appeared at his call. Although he was a good distance from Tordoth he motioned as if to strike. From the staff flew a sphere of blue light. Tordoth seeing this danger took up a defensive stance; the sphere of light exploded. For a moment the shades image seemed to waver, then it resumed its deathly darkness.

Grogor began to move backward towards the spire while Ribolorn appeared to float nearer.

“Enough of this foolishness,” said Ribolorn, in a wise but evil thought. “We are here to find the Queen. If your lives are in peril, she will come. We have waited long enough.”

As Grogor vanished into the tower Ribolorn unleashed a beam of emerald green; sheer power hurtled towards Palanzarr.

In an instant of time Palanzarr spun his staff almost too fast for the eye to see and before him appeared an arc of blue light. The emerald beam smashed into it and sparks flew in the air.

“The time for talk is over Palanzarr, return to your own world or perish in ours,” said Ribolorn.

Palanzarr pointed a finger at Ribolorn and a needle thin ray of white light sprang forth.

Krangor cast a spell of darkness before the ray of light and in its depths the light was lost.

“Can you hold out?” said Jorm hurriedly and with concern.

Palanzarr did not answer.

“GIVE ME THE POWER OF DARKNESS,”

commanded Ribolorn. He held his right hand towards Tordoth and Tordoth held a hand towards Ribolorn. Pure evil passed between their hands and the beam of emerald power focused on Palanzarr increased in fury.

“Go,” said Palanzarr. “We are locked in stalemate. Grogor has entered the spire; there, you will find what you seek. Nomarn awaits you. He has beckoned his executioner.”

“But what of you?” said Jorm. He could see quite clearly that Palanzarr was fighting a losing battle.

Cretin pushed Gwidian towards the spire then took hold of Jorm to pull him the same way. “Move,” he growled. But they had only taken a few paces when the hillside behind them became alive with demons.

“Damn them,” spat Jorm. “Palanzarr is doomed. We must stay and fight.”

A voice laughed in his mind. He recognised it instantly; it was the laugh of Nomarn Deleri. He looked around and then cast his eyes high up the walls of the spire. It was difficult to see the battlement, but he sensed Nomarn was standing there. “Your demons cannot stand against my sword,” growled Jorm. “What power have they to withstand me?”

A chilling voice spoke in Jorm’s mind. “Do you think one man can stand against even one demon, Lord of the Southlands. These are the pride of my domain and did you know they also number eighteen?”

“Ten and eight,” said Jorm bewildered.

“They are standing in three groups,” replied Cretin. “The number of Leir. We go to the spire now or we will not go there at all.”

“RUN FOR IT,” cried Gwidian, throwing the shield to Jorm. “Get to the spire, I will try and distract them.”

Jorm started to open his mouth but Cretin dragged him towards the spire.



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The entrance was open and Jorm entered with Cretin by his side. They headed for the torch lit stairwell. They ran by two levels of the tower, but at the third Jorm ground to a halt. Before him was the most grotesque chamber he had ever seen. The room seemed larger than the width of the tower though it was not this that stunned him. It was a torture chamber. There were people hanging from chains, locked in stocks. They were crying for aid or to be put to death. The floor was covered in blood running from spiked iron cages. There was one particularly horrible sight of a girl like Lorns had described stretched out on a slab, nearby was a blacksmiths fire with reddened pokers and irons.

Jorm stood and stared as the black shape of a shade appeared in the centre of the room. It was standing with its back to Jorm. Slowly it lifted a poker from the flames and moved towards the girl.

“It is all in your mindsie,” hissed Cretin. “Look through the shieldy, Grogor possesses your thoughts.”

“Help me,” cried the girl in a distraught voice.

Grogor thrust the poker at the girl. Jorm’s ears were pierced by the most terrifying scream.

Jorm cried out as he lunged at Grogor, but the shade seemed to flow through him. He crashed into the far wall, his sword thrown from his hand. Grogor faced him.

Jorm instinctively raised his shield and as he did he caught a glimpse of a radiant fireball scorching the air towards him. The fireball struck his shield and rebounded harmlessly out of a slit window.

“You have delayed us enough,” scowled Cretin. His voice was carrying deadly undertones...the strained silliness had completely gone.

Grogor turned to face him.

Cretin's eyes reddened; he held out a clawed hand as Nomarn had done with Raimar. Slowly he coiled his fingers and as he did so the figure of the shade became crushed. Finally he squeezed his hand tight. There was a deep throated cry and the shade was gone.

Jorm looked around. The room was empty save for himself and Cretin.

Cretin looked at Jorm. "Nomarn will have felt my true power. I can conceal it no longer. Together we shall stand or fall."

Jorm gathered his sword. He half smiled then both sped to the stairwell which spiralled them upwards. They passed another three levels before their pace slowed.

"They are directly above us," said Cretin. "We must proceed with caution."

They crept the last few steps of the worn stonework, to be faced by a low archway. The stairwell continued up but they knew where their enemies waited.

Jorm peered into the darkness but naught could he see. "We may walk into a trap."

"We must walk into a trap. Nomarn will indeed be prepared for us... We have no choice. Trust me."

They walked under the arch to stand in total darkness. Despite Jorm's hatred of Nomarn and his drive to see the circle of wraiths destroyed, he could barely contain his fears. Sweat clung to his brow and his breathing was heavy. The fear of the unknown was upon him.

Cretin lifted a hand to point at the high ceiling. Slowly a star-like light began to glow, bringing light where once there was only darkness. As the room grew in brightness they were met with a dread they had not even considered.

The room appeared at least four times the size Jorm would have thought possible. Around the perimeter were

darkened archways, which still defied the light. In the centre of the room was the cold sacrifice stone and atop the stone a black dagger; Jorm was mystified. He could have sworn the stone still lay on the hill beyond the confines of these walls. Above the stone and dagger spun a large crystal with eighteen smooth surfaces. It sparkled like ice.

A cloaked figure moved out of the furthest archway; evil emanated from its being. It stopped beside the stone and bowed its head.

“Baron Nomarn Deleri,” said Jorm in an angry yet fearful voice.

The shade raised its head and its thoughts echoed colder than the sacrifice stone itself. “I am Nomarn Deleri and this is my chamber.” The shade paused a moment. “And this is the stone and dagger which will give me my reality.”

Cretin sneered. “Your reality is lost Darkmind. The circle is broken forever. The wraiths of the ring no longer number seven. Your dagger will slay no-one.”

Six more forms appeared from the archways. Even the shade Mandonna stood there in all her wickedness.

Jorm's eyes opened wide. “How can this be?” he muttered. He lifted his shield before his eyes. The shades still numbered seven and the sacrifice stone was still in the centre of the floor. The crystal spun above it seemingly suspended in mid air. Realisation crossed his face; the stone had been moved inside, no doubt by Nomarn's demons. He had seen no more than an illusion outside. But the wraiths - how could there be seven?

“Do you still not understand?” said Nomarn. “Can you not see?” He raised his arms as lightning flashed outside the archways and thunder rolled.

Jorm walked as if mesmerised to his left. He passed through an archway and stood on the lofty battlement. Below the ground had fallen away. The spire was stood upon a high

hill and in the distance stood dark jagged mountains. As the lightning flashed he could see the terrible landscape of a dying world and as the roll of thunder subsided to a whisper he could hear the roar of waves. He did not know why but he knew he was looking at the darkworld. They had been deceived. There was not one gateway to the darkworld but two and though a fallen shade could no longer walk in the light of day - here in the darkworld they were as real as ever. Jorm glanced down to the ground beneath him; demons were beginning to form a circle; they would create a ring of fire. Had Nomarn really beaten him? Frantic thoughts sped through his mind; the crystal; was that the device with which Nomarn crossed between worlds? Was that the 'seeing glass', but how? Nomarn would not allow it to be destroyed; what could he do?

Jorm turned and walked back into the room. He would kill Nomarn. All he needed was a moment of time. He raised his sword but his arm froze. Try as he may, he could not move it. The wraiths began to chant. Though he could no longer see outside he knew the demons would be preparing their dance of fire. It was like it was before; Nomarn was taking control of the Queen. Cretin's disguise would vanish and Nomarn would join his powers with hers. The evil overcoming the good. He wanted to scream but his lips would not move.

“That one is mine,” said a shade, looking at Jorm. A shade with the brown sash of Baroness Helian. “It is a long time since I have taken a man and I would enjoy picking out his eyes.”

Nomarn laughed. “The world is mine.” He turned his eyes to Cretin. “Your guise is ended, my dear, now your beauty may return - for a short while, Queen of the elden. You cannot resist the chant, your power is my power.”

Cretin sneered. “There is only one fool here,” he

chortled, “and I am looking at it. Does Nomarn think his silly song will woo me?” His face turned to a snarl. He turned to the nearest shade, Ribolorn. “You are required at Greyfar,” he rasped. White energy shot from his raised hands, and with a dazzling flash of light, the wraith was gone. He swept his eyes around the chamber and at his motionless friend. “Perhaps you should all be frozen in time.”

The wraiths moved to defend themselves but Cretin made no move towards them, he clenched his hands and concentrated. The wraiths too became motionless but in an archway to Cretin's right a figure moved stealthily.

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Giyorn and Miowni arrived at the spire in the midst of battle. They saw the shapes of demons climbing the low moonlit hill before them.

Giyorn remained on his horse and said, “We should circle around and climb the hill from the west.” He did not wait for Miowni’s reply but galloped his horse around the base of the mound like hill; Miowni followed in his wake. They rode around the hill then part way up it. Giyorn clutched his axe and motioned to Miowni to dismount, they continued their journey on foot.

They rounded the top of the hill to find only demons. They seemed to be gathering in a group and chortling to one another. Giyorn took Miowni’s hand and they both ran to the spire.

The entrance was open and for a while they stood just inside the entryway gathering their breath. “I hope they are in here,” said Giyorn, “otherwise we are too late.”

Miowni nodded her head.

Giyorn turned towards the stairwell and slowly and quietly he began to climb the steps. He beckoned Miowni to

follow.

They had reached the third level when the sound of thunder ripped across the skies. They halted a while and stared at one another. As the rumbling subsided they continued to climb. On the fourth level the sound of chanting echoed in their ears. Giyorn recognised the chant and alarm showed in his eyes. Miowni turned a deathly white.

“What ails you?” said Giyorn with concern in his voice.

Miowni did not answer but collapsed to her knees with her hands covering her ears.

Giyorn was trapped by indecision, but then he said, “I must go on, there is treachery abroad. We are all lost if Nomarn is not destroyed.” He took one last look at Miowni then his face hardened; he gripped his axe tightly and began to climb the stairwell.

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Cretin gazed around the room at what may have been motionless shadows. His power could not hold the stasis on all the shades for long, nor as Grogor had proven could he destroy them, not in the darkworld, but what he could do was remove them from the vicinity, it would take them time to gather their senses, and by that time he and the ‘seeing glass’ would be gone. He knew where to take it.

He pointed his fingers at the shades; one by one and without a trace they disappeared deep into the darkworld until only Nomarn, Jorm and himself remained in the room. He turned to Jorm and said, “It is over, I leave Nomarn’s fate in your hands.”

Jorm stared at Cretin, he would have answered but his mouth would still not respond to his commands. He saw Cretin move towards him and begin to manoeuvre his hands.

His only hope was that Cretin had the power to release him from his invisible bonds.

A figure loomed up behind Cretin. Jorm recognised it instantly, it was Giyorn. For an instant his heart rose, but what was Giyorn doing? Why was he creeping up behind Cretin?

Giyorn's knuckles shone white on the axe shaft and his face was full of loathing.

NO, cried Jorm, but only his own mind heard his plea.

Giyorn lifted back his axe and in that very instant the sorcery which held Jorm motionless broke. His face filled with horror as he reached out to grab Cretin but it was too late; Giyorn struck a mighty blow. Cretin's flesh writhed at the touch of that mystical blade, his body collapsed in a heap.

“Traitor,” rasped Giyorn. “Perish vile demon.”

Jorm was stunned. He shook his head absently. “No, Giyorn, that is not a demon, that is our friend.”

Giyorn looked down at Cretin. The body was moving in spasms and blood soaked the floor. Cretin seemed to be trying to raise his head but as he did so the outline of his body began to fade. The whole essence of the demon was beginning to change.

“And it was I who was called fool,” laughed the menacing mind voice of Nomarn.

Giyorn swung around and charged headlong at the Baron.

Nomarn moved backwards, a fiery whip appeared in his hand. Giyorn had covered only four paces when Nomarn cracked the whip. Seven tails of fire coiled themselves around Giyorn's face and body and with a cry of pain he was spun to the floor.

Nomarn turned his attention to Jorm. Again he cracked his whip. Jorm crouched behind his shield and sparks flew wildly as the tails struck metal. Nomarn laughed bitterly and again he lashed the whip at Jorm.

“That is enough,” a calm voice spoke from a darkened archway.

The seemingly empty cowl of Nomarn moved perceptively towards the voice.

Miowni stepped out into the darkening chamber. She cast an eye at the fading star which was the only source of light then she cast an eye to the elden body which lay beside Jorm's feet. “Myrov,” she said. “You did your best, no one could ask more.”

Jorm looked at Miowni with disbelief. The darkness had faded from her hair and a light shone in her eyes. Her skin seemed so pale and soft; it seemed to highlight her high cheekbones. “Miowni,” he said in a questioning voice. “I left you at the temple where you would be safe.”

Miowni nodded her head. “There is nowhere safe to hide - not while Nomarn walks your lands.” She turned her head to the Baron.

Nomarn raised a hand towards her and an emerald beam flowed through the air, passing through Miowni as if she was not there.

“Your nightmares cannot harm me, Baron. I have what you have craved so long. The power of the etherworld and the reality of life. Twice I have been under your power, the power of the ring, but that is ended forever.” She held out a hand to the ‘seeing glass’. It drifted effortlessly from its position above the sacrifice stone towards her hand. “You sought to draw me here to the gateway. Now I have come. You thought to again trap me in the circle of fire and you almost succeeded, but to achieve your desire you had to gather the seven shades of evil on the dark side of this gateway to the shadowlands; and in the shadowlands they will remain.”

Miowni held the ‘seeing glass’ in her hand; though it was large it bore no weight. She lifted it high and it began to



glow.

Nomarn moved backward trying to shield itself from the light.

“What are you doing?” said Jorm. “Why does the 'seeing glass' glow?”

Miowni looked towards Jorm. “Only I, Miriel Miowni, Queen of the elden have the power to seal the darkworld.” She looked at the 'seeing glass'. “I shall change this creation of evil into the light of the future, then once more will the eagle shrine be the sentinel of your lands. The sage kept my temple well.”

Like a heavy weight, realisation fell upon Jorm. He never dreamt the Queen might look so young – not aged by the passing of years. All the time he had thought Cretin to be the power which ruled over all eldenkind. No one had lied to him; yet his presumptions from the first day he trusted Cretin were so hopelessly wrong. Cretin had never tried to dissuade him from his beliefs; he should have guessed the truth. Who could have released Palanzarr from his penance, save the master wizard, Myrov, who had sentenced him? What a perfect act they had all performed.

Jorm gazed at Miowni through misty eyes. He wanted to be angry with her but all he felt was a deep longing to again be near her. It had wrenched his heart to leave her at the temple but he had to do what he thought best for her safety.

“You must go now,” said Miowni in a soft voice, “lest you also become trapped in the world of demons. You have stood on the edge of the abyss; it is time you walked away.”

“I cannot leave you here,” said Jorm. “I cannot leave without you. My friends...They are here also, this is where they gave their lives so the rest of humanity may live in freedom.”

Miowni smiled though it was a forlorn smile. “Farewell Jorm, I do what I must. For an eternity I will

remember you. Perhaps in a time and place not yet dreamt of we may meet again.” She held the glass above her head clasping it with both hands. The light grew stronger as her strength drained into it.

Jorm could only look on as the light began to blind him. Then he was stood on the moorlands alone, his eyes staring up at the battlement. “Miowni, do not leave me alone,” he called. “You are all that I have left.”

Powerful shafts of light thrust out from the tower battlement. Each archway casting its own beacon of hope across the lands, burning the shadows and fear from the minds of men, bringing the promise of better days to come.

Tales End

## Everyone's Story

PC Paul Capston looked at Frankie; he smiled then rubbed his chin. "So you really think the future is cast, we do not make our own decisions. Our lives are predestined?"

"More or less," replied Frankie.

"Do you think it is predestined because of the way we are brought up?" Paul relaxed, it was his day off.

"Too shallow. You can try and a tell a caring child how much fun it is to eat his pet rabbit but he isn't going to buy it."

"You kept pet rabbits?"

"Yes, still can't eat them," answered Frankie.

"Perhaps it's a Muslim thing, a saying, 'tomorrow, god willing'?"

"No."

"We are a part of a computer program, controlled by someone with a keyboard?" queried Paul.

"Not what I was getting at."

"Didn't you write your own fantasy adventure? Burned onto disk, released and re-released. So good they did it twice?"

Frankie blushed, "Makes you think when you write adventures.....Not so much about the adventure but the mistakes you make in programming. Everything that happens in an adventure does so because of variables. For example 'If  $w=1$  Bill has a gun, if  $w=0$  he doesn't."

"Yes, I know that."

"Well for any particular situation there is a boat load

of variables, like life. If you get one wrong, strange things can happen. For example if you put time, day and month into a program and the 'year = 0127' then Roman soldiers walk down 'Adrian's Wall'. Pop in a mistake like, 'If year =>0127' then for evermore at this time of year these soldiers will appear and walk down the wall."

"Yes, but they wouldn't be real would they. The rest of the variables; the rest of the conditions wouldn't be met. They would be like ghosts.... You've done this haven't you?"

Frankie nodded his head. "It gets weirder, remember Zoom 3, the computer game, it comes with cheat modes which are there to aid the programmers. Enter the correct cheat and you can walk through walls. Instead of looking out of a window at Venus City, you can actually walk through the glass into nothingness. You can look back and see the world you have just left hanging in the void of cyberspace."

"Sounds creepy." Paul shuffled in his seat.

"Most 3d games are like this but not to worry. If the Universe is an arcade computer, bios included, and you come to a sticky end someone always puts another quid in."

"So you are saying....."

"The universe is a computer, activated by a core program which sets evolution in motion. The human race being the eyes, ears and hands of nature's second phase." Frankie paused. "Yes, but it wasn't what I was thinking of."

"Ok, if you're not particularly down this avenue, is it a time travel thing, because the future already exists we cannot change it?"

"No," stated Frankie.

"You are down the cause and effect path, life simply dominoes."

Frankie smiled. "I am sure all that you have mentioned has some role in our lives but no, it is something very basic; we are prisoners of our genes. They are at ground

level, they don't simply control our actions; they control our minds. We balance on a chemical tightrope. A gene here a genius, a gene there an idiot. A gene here a suicide case, a gene there an enthusiast. A gene here a saint, a gene there a politician. To truly attain sentience we must accept this."

"You do realise what you are suggesting."

"Yes."

Paul ignored the reply. "You are suggesting that mass murderers, serial killers, benefits agency doctors and paedophiles are not responsible for their actions."

That struck a cord with Frankie; he hated 'bad' doctors and their successors. In his mind they had sworn an oath to help the sick then spent their lives tormenting them. He believed they were descendants of the Nazi eugenics doctors, only fit for insurance companies. That made them different. He gritted his teeth. "Yes, that's right."

"So you believe paedophiles and child murderers should go free because it wasn't really them to blame, it was their genes. They shouldn't be persecuted, slandered, shamed and stoned by do-gooders," said the constable in Paul.

"I think we all know why most paedophiles become child murderers. It is exactly because they are slandered and stoned, they have to destroy the evidence. Do you know if I was the parent of a missing child all I would want is my child back... So much pain ..... The do-gooders, with, in many cases an unnatural interest for something they are not directly involved in, can turn a minor offence into a murder enquiry and it's never their fault." Frankie scratched his chin.

"Didn't General Pat Holding say the only good do-gooders were dead do-gooders?"

"Search me. Was that before he lost his son, before he nuked that Central American state in 'operation appeasement'?"

Paul shrugged his shoulders, "What would you do

with people who exploit children for their own gain, who put them on screen, the seedy downloads?”

“There is nothing you can do with advertisers and film makers, it's big business like wi-fi, thus it's legal.”

“No. I meant what would you do with a paedophile?” said Paul.

“The definition being?”

“At No3, an unaccompanied adult male standing within two hundred metres of a minor. At No2, males who get jobs with kids such as 'event organisers' and 'baths attendants' despite the paranoia which surrounds them and at No1, colleagues who sit looking through pictures all day, investigating the culprits who look through pictures all day.”

“Why do they sit all day looking at pictures? There must be an alternative,” stated Frankie.

“Job satisfaction.”

Frankie looked a little flushed. “Yes, well, firstly I would have to be sure he was guilty, which is hard. If juries were ‘just’, insofar as they had to find guilt beyond reasonable doubt and they did just that, instead of simply being fifty one percent sure, no one would ever get convicted of anything. As soon as someone pleads innocent with half an alibi there is reasonable doubt. It makes the system a medieval sham. It's about as convincing as dunking witches. It's why hanging is banned, too many wrong convictions; too easy to plant forensic evidence. However, if the paedophile were found genuinely guilty I would quietly put him out of harms way like any other undesirable. I do actually believe, paedophiles are like gays, they follow their hormones, except where gays are concerned it's now legal.”

Paul screwed his face. “You really don't like gays do you?”

“I didn't say that. A heterosexual is to a gay, what a gay is to a paedophile, what a paedophile is to a

heterosexual... and whatever other combination you can think of. A flip of hormones, they change groups and carry on doing what they were doing before.”

“Enough, too much information.” Paul winced.

“No, no one wants to know that it’s simple chemicals that keeps them out of jail. Awful really, when a murderer sits in jail for twenty five years for something he never had a choice in.”

Paul hardened his wrinkly face a little. “Bullshit, I make my own decisions. I make my own destiny. I do not dance to chemicals in the brain, nor am I a slave to hormones.”

“No one controls what pops into their minds. If you want to cross a road and your brain tells you to watch for traffic you’re fine. If it decides to think of something else you get squashed, like thousands of people every day. We are little more than passengers in life, some get a better deal than others.”

Paul studied a moment; he did not look convinced.

Frankie continued, “Take heroes and cowards. If a gang of thugs accost you and you have no feelings of fear just a fighting adrenalin rush, you defend yourself, pound them into dust and you are a hero. The poor guy whose knees begin to knock and who wets himself without a conscious thought, who gives no more than a token defence, well, he is deplorable. No medals for him.”

“Even if some responses are autonomic we do still have choices.”

“Our genes control our thoughts. You do realise that serial killers enjoy killing people? They have no remorse or they wouldn’t do it. You do realise that the people who strapped thinking, feeling chimps into chairs, put cosmetics in their eyes and fags in their mouths for the duration of their lives enjoyed what they were doing? The huntsman, tearing

foxes to pieces in a blood rush to the brain; the thrill of seeing another sentient creature in pain and agony being torn from limb to limb by a pack of dogs... It may be the most humane way to cull foxes? But it doesn't get away from the fact that they enjoy the hunt to the point of fanaticism. They do what they do because they are who they are."

"Chimps are different from humans. They do not contemplate death," stated Paul.

"They do not contemplate, full stop. Without an advanced language you take life as it comes and for that they should be truly thankful but that is just about the only difference, besides that wasn't the point. We all dance to the gene tune; we all think we are right. What we do is normal and righteous to us. We justify ourselves. Every one else has got it wrong. Fancy a coffee?"

"I wouldn't mind, milk and no sugar. Ever thought of being a preacher." Paul smiled.

Frankie winced. "Wasn't it you who said that everything we do is selfish and you had an answer for everything I could throw at you. When I said the guy who climbs out of the trench on a battlefield to rescue someone he doesn't know is not selfish, you said, he does it because it makes him feel good, makes him a hero, or because it takes away guilt." Frankie got up painfully, walked like a cowboy without his horse to the worktop. He switched the kettle on.

"Vasectomy?" Paul grinned.

"You got it. You know, I don't understand why the procedure causes ninety nine percent of victims to inherit swelling of the epididymis, while only thirty percent end up in eternal pain."

Paul returned to the original argument. "It could have been me that made that statement but that's different. What you are suggesting is that we do not have free will?"

"If you are mind-locked you will never appreciate



this.” Frankie put the dirty cups into the 'dirty side' dishwasher which was now full. He started the wash cycle then took the last cups out of the 'clean' dishwasher, which would now become the dirty side. The kettle, which was still hot from the last coffee, which Paul had made, boiled in seconds. Frankie put the coffee into the cups then poured the water. “If your brother was drowning, could you sit on the riverbank and simply watch. Have you a choice here?”

Paul looked irritated. “That question is unfair. Of course I couldn’t just sit there.”

“Ok. Your brother's drowning and he’s got the plague. If you rescue him the plague is going to spread and kill thousands.”

“I would rescue him and keep him away from others.”

Frankie poured the milk into the coffees. “You’re side stepping. How about something not so personal? I watched my cat chomping a sparrow last week. It looked to be really enjoying it. The bird was squawking, there were feathers everywhere. Could you do that?”

“That’s sick.”

Frankie put sugar in the coffees. “You are at a restaurant and this fellow on the next table has an upset stomach. Just as you are going to take a bite from your scrumptious...”

“You are getting worse,” interrupted Paul.

Frankie walked over to Paul with his coffee. He passed him the coffee then said, “Let me think of something not so awful.”

Paul took a sip of coffee. His face screwed in horror. “It’s got sugar in. You know I can’t drink coffee with sugar. Hell will freeze over before I drink this, it makes me fat.”

The End

# Calendar

The setting was a quiet suburban village, which lay three laps outside of the great dome of Veloria. The year was seven thousand, one hundred and twenty six, which was the extent of Arcazian history. The time of day was thirty-five units past zenith; the sun was setting in a fiery blue haze.

All these things were as they were because Teroni Methuzala just happened to be sitting in his laboratory, gazing out of the window at this particular time and place, when a great idea came into his head. He would contest the will of creation and bring into being the most spectacular achievement man could ever dream of - the 'Trigon mind' but alas this story is not about him.

Denori Rori was just another seedling of our universe, who happened to live in the same village as Teroni Methuzala. Things were not as they were because of him, although he did have many original ideas of his own – one of which lead to a great discovery .... What was his discovery? He discovered the end of reality, the instant when our universe would cease to exist as we know it.

What lead Denori to his discovery? No one is certain, but the tale that drifted down the aeons goes like this:

One day Denori was sitting under an okibu tree (the okibu was similar to the earthly apple, except the okibus were a little larger) watching one of his 'Quantum Fantasy' comics. It had just told him the universe was eight directional: up and down, left and right, in and out and finally forward and backward. It had shown him the forward time universe in the form of metal turning to rust and the tachyon universe, rust turning to metal, also the neutral photon point. It was now

explaining how mass and energy, gravity and acceleration, velocity and time were a contrivance, for his benefit, of the same thing, the 'Revilo Knarf Perspective'. It gave sub atomic existences more than one identity and dismissed magical super and sub atomic forces with 'time intricacies', the boundaries of existence being defined by absolutes. It was old headgear and he was getting ever so bored then what should happen? A ripened okibu detached itself and fell from the overhanging branches. It landed squarely on his head - with a sort of dull thudding sound. This was not a unique happening in this particular universe but sadly Denori was picking his nose at the time. Denori grimaced, and put his hand to his aching cranium, after he had got his finger free that is; then made sure his left eyeball was still in place. "Zucking gravity," he cursed in the heat of the moment (the word zucking was not a verb). "Just my luck. If I had my way I would banish all our dangerous forms of life into the nth dimension," he painfully jested. Now that is an interesting thought, he mused. I wonder if there really are other dimensions.

He had watched much of other dimensions in his 'Quantum-Fantasy' comics and now the drive was upon him to seek out these alternate planes (plane is a much more accurate term than dimension, though most of us prefer the word dimension). He noted the date in his audio computing diary - having an eye on that most famous of calendars, the 'Calendar of Famed Names', the calendar which immortalised all the great people of Arcazia, and that is how it all began.

Twenty-five years had passed before Denori realised how other dimensions could exist. It was obvious to him that more than one world could not exist at the same time in the same place, so there seemed to be only one answer - the worlds must exist in the same place at different instances, not so much moment to moment, that implied time, they pulsed

into reality for an instant of existence alternately.

After deducting the way in which worlds could co-exist, Denori had a couple of biblio tablets because he was getting a headache, then he lay down for a few units rest. NOT, I may add, under an okibu tree.

When his brain had settled down again, he continued his line of thought. He knew from his astronomical training that ninety percent of the universe was missing, there just wasn't enough mass to hold the likes of galaxies together. He did not believe sciences explanation of hidden mass and hidden energy; he believed the universe was being acted upon by something outside their understanding; he termed it the Nth dimension. Firstly he drew a picture in his mind's eye, which resembled the oscillations of an electrical sine wave; a pictorial way of showing how electricity pulses on and off, though he appreciated that most people thought of it as simply pouring out of the plugus holus. Every time the sine wave moved itself away from the zero or 'off line', be it in the positive or negative (reverse) direction, every atom of Denori's world came into reality. The rate being the frequency of reality. Needless to say, there was space between his world's pulses for another dimension out of synch with his own. The overlap of the sine waves was considerable, but if you altered the waveform from a sine wave to something more convenient, it was possible to fit many dimensions into one space with a permissible overlap. Some overlap was considered reasonable to obtain the maximum amount of dimensions.

Another couple of unit's rest and another tablet.

But what of his world when its waveform sank to the zero line? The answer was simple. He assumed that the waveform was like that of alternating electrical current at unity with its voltage. When the electrons reached the zero line, they didn't just evaporate into nothingness - not at all,

they merely lost their potential reality.

Yes indeed, thought Denori, feeling rather pleased with himself, that is the way it must be. Our perception simply needs a bridge rectifier and capacitor ( $br+c=dr$ ) to keep direct reality moving smoothly forward.

Many things changed over the following years. One of the most noticeable items was Denori's stock of biblio tablets, but never the less he continued his thoughts. Most of his ideas fall outside the parameters of this story, but the one we are interested in, is, of course, the one about his pulses of reality. Denori thought the pulses were slowly diminishing in amplitude, due to the slight overlap, which occurred at the dimensional interchange - the zero line. He quickly calculated the rate of decline just in case he ran out of reality, then proceeded to calculate the end of our universe, as we know it. When he had finished his calculations and completed his 'factual' he made his way to the scientific academy of Veloria, to put forth his hypothesis with its implications and, naturally, to receive his just acclaim.

He was greeted at the academy on audio link by the elected president, who despatched some of his best researchers to consult personally with Denori.

From their report the president allocated Denori speaking time at the next general meeting, which was to be held two days hence. Denori thanked everyone and then went off to practise his speech.

Two days hence: Denori attended the meeting at the appointed time. At first he was a little apprehensive but as he stood before the gathering, the certainty of his discovery gave him strength. He spoke in a confident voice.

The professors, scientists and doctors sat in silence while Denori put forward his hypothesis. When he had finished they said such things as, "Umm," and "Arr," and some said, "Umm arr." One even said, "Where's the

bathroom?" He was so excited.

It appeared to Denori that not everyone was convinced by his rationalisation of the subject, so he decided to strike the master blow. He knew that if he could 'prove' his hypothesis by mathematics, everyone would agree with him. He strode over to the blackboard which was situated where none could miss it (the blackboard was used for prestige reasons only) and there he wrote for all to see,  $3+3=6$ . He simply hoped that his adjudicators would take his meaning.

The assembly was dumbfounded, shocked and utterly exasperated. They just didn't have an answer to such a technically perfect piece of mathematics. What else could they do but accept Denori's reasoning. When the gathering eventually found their voices, they said such things as, "Well, yes," and "Oh, I see," and one voice at the back said, "That bathrooms illusive.....damn.....too late."

Amidst the uproar and commotion, the president rose to his feet and appealed to the crowd for quiet. "SHUT UP!". In the new-found silence he looked upon Denori and said, "It has been my pleasure to welcome you here in Veloria, Denori Rori. It is not every day that I have the honour of greeting a man of such dedication and free thought. I propose that this assembly, whom, if I may say, have more qualifications than you have had hot okibus (type of apple pie), allocate for you, a day in the Calendar of Famed Names."

The gathering burst into applause shouting such things as 'hooray' and the snobby ones, 'hurrah' and when it had quietened down the president continued, "As to keep with the tradition set by our ancestors, we will dedicate the day in which your thought first encompassed this subject, to your honour. Which day was this, Denori?"

Denori couldn't remember the day on the spur of the moment, with his fluttering heart and all, so he took out his audio diary and asked it with a sort of pleading, please, the

date of his first entry on this subject. It took the diary quite a while to come up with the date, but the main thing was, it did.

"The forty second of Duli," cried Denori.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," said the president. "That's my day."

It was the first occasion that Denori Rori had looked Teroni Methuzala directly in the eyes, and if looks could kill.....

The End

Post Mortem

Arcazians believed that the mechanics of our universe were intended to appear correct from the vantage point of any particular individual; for example if our sun went super-nova and we were evaporated, on Arcazia, because of the distance, our sun would remain unchanged on that day, making it a none event. This belief went one step further than the simple idea that the universe is as it is or I wouldn't be sat here typing this sentence. It says everyone's the centre of the universe and the universe is designed to be right from their perspective.

Considering the above, and the honour of being considered by all, the centre of the universe for a day, it is perhaps not surprising that Denori Rori, whose name never appeared in the Calendar of Famed Names, took matters rather badly. It is perhaps even less surprising that Teroni Methuzala disappeared mysteriously. No one knew where he had disappeared to, but the nth dimension did have a certain ring about it.

# Tumblewheel

From a distance it looked like a tiny bicycle wheel. Its true size did not become apparent until you drew nigh, only then did you appreciate the engineering skill which had been employed in its construction.

Tiros Eddy thought at first that it was a traditional space station, it was when his shuttle craft came under the effects of its gravity that he realised it was something totally different. He knew full well that space stations did not have gravitational fields of their own, nor were they this large. He had seen stations anything up to a kilometre in diameter, but if his on-board computer was correct, this feat of engineering was slightly in excess of thirty kilometres.

Tiros ignored his computer readouts for a while as his little shuttle drew closer. He had set the controls on auto, to slow his craft on its approach run, while he sat before the forward viewing port - enamoured by the view. The wheel now appeared to be immersed in a bluish white haze. He thought it strange that he had not noticed it before. He guessed that the effect was caused by some sort of flimsy gaseous presence, which would become translucent again when his distance decreased. There was no way he could confirm his thoughts, his little space ship did not carry the equipment to make a full analysis from here.

An alarm sounded. Tiros wrenched his eyes from the viewing port and turned to the control console. A small brilliant amber light blinked on and off insistently, warning him of an auto pilot failure. Tiros, was puzzled. A failure with this type of equipment was virtually unknown, unless of course it was not a failure at all, perhaps the auto-control



simply could not cope with the prevailing conditions. This thought sent a shiver down his spine. If the automatics could not cope with the situation, he might have great difficulty in controlling the ship himself.

The floor shuddered. The thrust modules were straining. Tiros flipped to override, his eyes scanning the instrument panel. What he saw did not please him at all; the shuttle speed had increased by twenty percent. At this rate of acceleration, he would impact with the spherical wheel hub at a catastrophic speed - if he ever reached the hub at all; the thought had crossed his mind that the 'flimsy gas', which engulfed the entire structure, could possibly be too dense for his fragile craft to enter at high speed. How he longed for his star cruiser.

Tiros handled the shuttles controls with skill, turning its thrusts to the correct angle to provide him with an adequate orbit around the wheel. The idea of going into orbit around an oversized space station made his flesh crawl. How can you orbit a space station, he asked himself?

The sun glistened through the starboard viewer, its harmful rays blocked by filters, which had automatically swung into place at the onset of the photon storm. The port viewer showed thousands of stars - glimmering gems in the darkness. In the forward viewer the wheel grew ever larger; its light reflecting spokes betraying its slow and serene turning motion. It seemed that it would take half an earthly day to complete its cycle, which to Tiros made no sense at all. The speed was inconsistent with that which was necessary to produce an artificial gravity on the rim; but then again he had already entered a powerful gravitational field, which seemed to be emanating mysteriously from the wheel.

Tiros again sat before the forward viewer, his ship back on automatic. "What in the universe could it be?" he mumbled. He recalled that once, many years ago, his race had

been visited by a ruthless alien intelligence. Maybe this was one of their creations. Would these particular aliens remember the race they once tried to overcome, all those years ago. He was loath to pick up his phonic mike to try and forge a communications link, but he knew if there were any aliens upon the structure, they would make their presence known. He presumed that they were aware of his approach, and if by some slight chance they were not it would be better to investigate before revealing his position. It was very possible that the 'wheel builders' were hostile, whoever they were.

The structure loomed large. Its shape now seemed oval as the tiny shuttle reared towards its rim. According to the on-board computer the effect was not totally due to the shuttles course. The structure was actually tumbling through space, rim over rim, far slower than its normal wheel rotation.

Tiros Eddy's eyes goggled at the blue haze which now seemed to fill the entire viewer. Below the craft, towards the wheel hub, the colouring was more intense, becoming lighter near the rim then darkening to black above him at the very edge of his vision.

His ship quivered; he realised he must have entered the outer layer of the gaseous zone. This did not perturb him unduly, he reckoned the gas was not dense enough at his present distance to cause problems - besides he was about to flip over the rim edge, his curiosity would not allow him to leave the viewer.

Tiros waited in anticipation for the final seconds to creep by, when his questions would be answered. He saw the glittering rim change to green as his ship sailed topside of the structure. There were large areas of watery blue amidst the green, and most astounding of all were the patterns - patterns, which looked undoubtedly, like small towns, like the towns looked back home from the air. Could he dare to believe he

was observing a fully self-sufficient world, with its own atmosphere and even its own gravity?

Tiros had a whirling head when the viewer finally turned black and the stars again sparkled ahead. He returned to the console to check his readouts, and what he saw seemed to confirm his thoughts. They told him the gravity to which he was subject, was just over a half 'G'. The gas concentration on the outer side of the rim was dense enough to support life, if, of course it was the correct mixture of life giving oxygen and nitrogen, without any of the nasties. A man - or more accurately an alien made world, he thought; thirty kilometres in diameter and six kilometres across the rim, turning slowly edge-wise to the sun.

What the hell holds it together was the question in his mind. The only thing Tiros could imagine at this point in time was a massive 'accelerator'. Long ago, when the many aspects of the 'Theory of Infinities' were first debated, the accepted laws, which governed the universe, were again to a large degree turned on their head. The answer to life the universe and everything had changed from '42' to 'infinity-1', an answer from which you can deduct the question. In fact the universe itself had become the multiverse with the discovery of object U2, the birth of a massive, thirty billion year old universe, with implications such as why our particular universe expands and how it cycles without collapsing. However it was the realisation of the dual direction of reality which led to the development of the 'Bin Karmoon accelerator', so named because of the relationship between acceleration and gravity. The anti-gravity decelerator in theory permitted inertialess drives; no gravity, no mass. In the early days of testing, many test pilots had become two dimensional, at one with their seats. Massive accelerations had to be balanced and if you got it wrong? Eventually the incidents ceased and a new star-drive was born. Applying

reverse technology to an artificial world was something different again. He was unsure.

His autopilot had set him on an elliptical orbit, adjusting the crafts speed to suit. It would not be long before he was heading back toward the opposing rim.

Tiros mused for a short while. He had to do something. He was in a strange stellar system, in a craft that was not capable of taking him anywhere. How he longed for the luxury of his cruiser. He had no idea what had happened to it, all he could remember was doing his safety schedules - well, actually he was reading an ancient novel named 'Axe: A Tale of Carthelion'. He had read a couple of hundred intriguing pages and was just reaching the finale. He was lost in a world of his own, until his shuttles warning lights began to flash. His last memory was of somersaulting down the craft as it automatically ejected, but that was all. The rest was a blank until he awoke with his throbbing head and aching limbs.

Tiros fidgeted with the phonic mike. Should he try to make contact with the wheel? It occurred to him that whoever lived below could have been responsible for his present predicament. Something must have gone tragically wrong with his star cruiser for the shuttle to eject. The cruisers computers only took such action if destruction was imminent, when it did not really matter if there was anyone on board the shuttles or not. It was a last death-defying act by the 'comps', to save all who could be saved, and it seemed they had saved few - perhaps only one, Tiros himself. It was unlikely that anyone would have had time to board the emergency craft, which meant the entire crew of the starship had perished seconds after his shuttles ungamely exit. Tiros reflected sadly as the ghosts of his friends materialised before his inner eye. He hoped only that his cruisers 'comps', had put out a distress signal, but even if they had, it would be weeks before help

could arrive and that left him with the age-old question, "What do I do now?"

The orbit of the shuttle altered steplessly, until it circled; following the rim around, from daylight to shadow and back to daylight. The crafts speed steadily lessened and its hull vibrated as its height decreased. Tiros watched the landscape change from cultivated areas to wooded land, from woods to lake. The distant town patterns had now changed to towering buildings of unknown design. There was no longer doubt in his mind to whether the race that built this world still lived here, the signs were too obvious. There was, however, still much doubt, as to the way the 'tumblewheel' provided its own gravity, or why it had a tumbling motion at all. He would have loved to see a speeded up movie of the wheel spinning and toppling through space around its life giving sun. Many ideas on its source of gravity now entered his head, some were weird and some wonderful, but none seemed feasible. He even considered an artificially made 'black hole' contained in the wheel hub, straining to pull in the unyielding metal which surrounded it, though a super dense neutron lattice seemed more plausible. He was mystified - yet the 'tumblewheel' was an undeniable fact of life. He settled for his original idea of an `accelerator`.

Tiros sat at the controls, the idea of using the phonic mike discarded. He would land and play by ear. He wished he knew the constitution of the atmosphere. It had to be similar to the air back home for the vegetation to thrive, though much of the foliage he didn't recognise. From his present altitude of a thousand metres there were many marked differences in the plant life, to what he had known before. He could make out woods of metallic green, with a smattering of scarlet; fields that had appeared totally green, now contained swirls of yellow and crimson in definite patterns; he had never seen anything like it on his own world. He crossed his fingers. "I

hope I can breathe down there," he uttered, again wishing the shuttle had been fitted with analysis equipment. Such equipment, he knew, was normally excess baggage; the shuttle was no more than an escape capsule. It did not really have the capability to land on a full sized planet, nor could it sustain life for long periods. It is just as well, thought Tiros, the makers did not even bother to fit a 'loo', of any description - mores the discomfort.

"Let's hit the ground," said Tiros to his uncomprehending computer. The shuttle rolled around the rim, daylight turned to twilight, then quickly to near darkness. The craft crashed down heavily but safely. The computer was given its final program for what had to be done, and the small circular hatch hissed open. Tiros sealed his lungs as he gazed outside into the stillness, before finally drawing a hesitant breath. He put his mini torch and SD cancel device in his pockets before wriggling out.

Standing beside the shuttle, he drew in air uneasily. It was moist and filled with many strange scents. He heard the scuttle of tiny feet and saw a flash of luminous red eyes. His heart jumped, then settled down again. Only one of the locals, he thought. He glanced sunward; the last glimmer of light was vanishing beyond the horizon, no more than a stones throw away. The light seemed far brighter towards the rim edges. His view of the circular horizon didn't seem particularly unusual; it looked very much like the brow of a hill - a hill whose brow you could never reach. He wondered if he happened to stray edgeward towards the rim, if there was anything to prevent him falling off the world. Now that would be a sight for sore eyes, he thought - no, not falling, but looking over the edge of the world. He smiled nervously as he imagined the scenario.

Tiros turned his eyes starward. There was little he could see of his surroundings; even the crackly stalks on

which he stood were poorly lit in the deep twilight. It unnerved him a little that he may not be able to see any predator - man or beast, which may approach. He consoled himself by the fact that the darkening sky hid his own craft. He appreciated that even in daylight; the world's curvature would restrict his sight severely. All in all he felt about as secure as a turkey in its run – two weeks before Christmas.

Without more to do, and there was little that he could do, Tiros began to make his way starward, leaning backwards to level the illusionary hill. He managed one step only before he gently 'crashed' to the ground. He grunted his discomfort and rubbed the back of his head. On regaining his feet he made a second attempt, leaning forwards, which perhaps made more sense. This landed him on his face. By now he was feeling rather dizzy and silly. The dizziness worried him; there seemed more to it than exertion or the fact that gravity was making his feet relatively heavy and his head light.

His third attempt was more successful, he tottered forward like a tightrope walker, only he was walking sideways, but even then he only managed a short distance before his head began to swim. "Damn", he cursed. "I am not going to get anywhere like this." He began to breathe deeply. The more he inhaled the better he seemed to feel. Could he make it back to the shuttle; the thought was pointless; the crafts oxygen supply was almost exhausted when he landed, it would only mean a short extension to his life if he did make it ..... Unless he could contact the local inhabitants with his ships communication equipment. He was still very dubious about that course of action, but it now seemed his only alternative to perishing where he stood.

Brilliant lights burned before him. Something was approaching. Tiros watched intently trying to hang on to his senses. The lights halted - there were three of them, like vehicle headlights. The sound of crackling stalks broke the

silence of the night. Two silhouettes appeared in the light beams. They were tall and spindly, and they were walking towards him with a menacing elegance, an elegance Tiros had read about in his history books. It was a deadly elegance.

The figures stopped before Tiros, who was now crouched down, in a bid to remain conscious.

"Bim Blobble obble floberdob," said the first of the aliens.

"Its the bloody flowerpot men", mumbled Tiros. "I must be hallucinating."

"My friend said that a human in the hand is worth two in the bush."

"Yes," said the first, now speaking in English, "The Eagle has landed but who is in it?"

"None other than Dan Dare." said the other. The being laughed hideously.

"The cat has nine lives," said the first.

"We have taken the bull by the horns," said the other.

Tiros now understood their words perfectly; he was obviously meant to; he was the target of their scorn. They thought of him as he would think of an ape, only they added malice.

"Do you think it can say anymore?" said the first.

"I doubt it," said the other. "It is dying, it does not appreciate our atmosphere." They both laughed.

"It did do well to get out of its primitive space ship though. I thought we would have destroyed all the vermin, perhaps it is a super hero, like Flash Gordon," said the first.

"Like Samantha Carter," said the other.

"Like Superman," said the first.

"Like Samantha Carter," said the other.

"Like Luke Skywalker or James T," said the first, raising a wrinkly, inquisitive eyelid to the other.

"Buffy.....Yes, indeed it did do well to escape. I



bet it did not realise that we were watching its escape. I bet it thought it had landed here undetected, its race is conceited like that."

Transmissions must really travel slowly, thought Tiros. He grappled with his mini-torch; he would get a look at the beings who were scorning and laughing at him, if it was the last thing he did. With much fumbling he freed the torch from his hip pocket, and switched on, pointing it at his oppressor's faces, revealing bulging eyes and wiry grins.

The beings became startled. "It knows tricks," said the first, moving to the opposite side of Tiros.

"It will not know them much longer," rasped the other. "Look at us," continued the being, "look upon our faces, Earth man. It will be the last sight you ever see. Your life is ended." The being spat the final words.

"Trapped like a rat," said the first.

"He has dug his own grave," said the other.

Tiros with his sight now blurred and his body propped from the ground by one elbow only, forced his lips to move. "Do not gloat over-much, alien. You were fortunate my hand holds only a torch." Tiros felt his hand being crushed by some invisible force. He grimaced, but was too far-gone to feel the full intensity of the pain. "Beware for your own lives, of which your audacity may yet cheat you," he continued in a weak yet defiant voice. His last words he could only mumble. "Beware of little weed." Tiros slumped to the ground and remained unmoving. The strange thing was that he had a smile on his face.

The beings looked at Tiros, then they looked at one another. Simultaneously they turned their frightened eyes to the shuttle. Their intuition told them there was something not quite right, something which could be very dangerous. Sadly they knew nothing of the Star-flyers Code, nor for that matter, page one hundred and six, paragraph two of the 'Star-flyers

Manual', which states clearly: -  
NO EQUIPMENT OF STAR COMMAND SHALL FALL  
INTO ALIEN HANDS.  
ALL EQUIPMENT MUST BE DESTROYED - NOT  
ABANDONED.

The other looked at his companion. "Any more earthly sayings or does our enemy have the last word."

"Just a question," said the first.

"What is that?"

"Which super heroes are the flowerpot men?"

The aliens were only stood six paces from the shuttle when its computer carried out its final command and self-destructed. After all, the self-destruct cancel device was still in Tiros' pocket and he was in no fit state to cancel the order. Neothon devised explosives made a very big bang.

The End

## Trimark

Dave Fremont sat idly watching six banks of instrument panels which made up the Southbank control system while Pete Longman sat facing the equally daunting Northbank panels, although his eyes were not fixed upon the actual control layout itself; he was watching the tiny flickering flame of the Beadmore flare stack which displayed itself on one of the seven closed circuit television monitors.

“How's the family,” queried Dave.

“Val's fine, my parents are hanging in there and my son Tom's got a new girlfriend.”

“I guessed that, I was stood behind him in the chemists, you can guess what he was buying.” Dave smiled.

“At least he is taking precautions, I am too young to be a grandpa. They teach them sex education on TV and at school these days.” Pete looked complacent.

“That would worry me,” stated Dave. “When he left the chemists he went into the grocers and bought a bunch of bananas to put them on.”

Pete frowned.

A faint bleating sound came from the east end of the control room.

Pete lifted his tall slender frame from his chair, placed one hand on the small of his back, groaned, then set off down the room towards the distant Systems Analysis and Control unit.

Dave navigated his castor-mounted chair to join Pete. By the time he arrived Pete had already cancelled the alarm. A single red light showed on the alarm annunciator to the left of the Visual Display Unit. Dave lifted the radio transceiver

handset away from the console keyboard and pressed 'EXPAND'. The VDU sprang to life - it read 'TRIMARK REACTOR TE3/3 HIGH TEMPERATURE'

"That's odd," remarked Pete.

Dave pressed the tag button then entered TE3/3, finally pressing the display button. The schematic layout of the reactor appeared on the screen.

Pete pointed to the display unit. "There's three temperature sensors on that reactor," he stated. "The highlighted high temp, the emergency cooling water cut-in and the S.A.C. readout."

Dave noted the S.A.C. tag number and entered it on the keyboard. The temperature reading appeared on the screen. "Two hundred degrees Celsius," commented Dave. He tapped a few more keys, then said, "That's normal, we must have a faulty alarm."

Pete shrugged his shoulders, "Better get the technician to have a look at it. Mind you, he won't like it. He was last seen heading to a job at the top of number three distillation column."

"So."

"It's seventy metres high, it's a long way to come down."

Dave had a smirk on his boyish face as he picked up the radio hand set. He thought for a moment then queried, "What channel is he on?"

"One - better you than me."

A tall figure leant against the handrail at the top of number three column. Carl had a spectacular view from his vantage point and despite the cold of this frosty November evening; he was taking a few minutes to examine the scenery. The Taneside petrochemical plant stretched out beneath him. In the distance to the north lay the tall Beadmore and Donna flare stacks, throwing a flickering red light on the miniature

methanol plant; closer at hand on the left of the roadway was the hydrogen plant with a drum storage compound close by, both faced the new Trimark unit, even closer the phosgene and insecticide plants. To the south there were clusters of distillation columns plus various utility and package units. There was the scientific research block that faced the main control centre - which some referred to affectionately as 'Jekyll's hide'. To the east, the meandering River Tane and in the distance the Tane Hills. Over to the West lay Tanemouk itself, a bustling town, lit by a thousand neon lamps.

"Process control to Carl Jones."

Carl winced, then unclipped his radio from his breast pocket and pressed the transmit button. "What's wrong?"

"Hi Carl, it's Dave Fremont, we have a bit of a problem, could you come down to operations? - Over."

"You are of course jesting."

"No, sorry Carl, I'm afraid not. I'll explain when you get here - Over."

Carl looked at his radio. "Do I detect you snickering, Mr. Fremont?"

"Me! Never....What gives you that idea? Over."

Carl clipped his radio back onto his pocket in disgust. There were a lot of steps between him and the ground.

John Saunders, the shift supervisor, was standing with Dave and Pete as Carl Jones entered the control room; he had a troubled look on his seasoned face.

"Hi Carl," said John.

"I hope you haven't brought me all the way here for nothing?"

John pointed to the VDU on the S.A.C. unit.

"Problem with the S.A.C. I thought that thing was supposed to be infallible. New computer, new plant, all space age design..."

"Remember the Titanic," interrupted Dave.

John ignored them both. "We have a high temp alarm up on the Trimark reactor. The temperature readout is pretty much normal, although it has risen a couple of degrees since Dave called you. We want to know if the alarm is genuine, it is important."

"You think the alarm is faulty?"

John shrugged. "A new high grade fuel called 'neothon' for the ... well it's a defence contract. This part of the process is easy enough; we simply mix the chemicals and keep it cool while they react. We really do need the instrumentation working and accurate."

"No heating," queried Carl.

"Just cooling, the process produces very minute quantities of oxygen, which itself reacts again with the chemicals to cause heat .. It's highly volatile...very powerful...very hush, hush. The reactor is oil cooled, the usual helical coil. The oil is circulated through the reactor to cool the chemicals and warm the oil, then into a water-cooled tank, which is mounted higher than the reactor to cool the oil and warm the water for further usage. Clever eh!"

"Why not simply use water?"

"Oil's harmless but the chemicals mustn't come in contact with water or air, the 'nasty bang' syndrome; they contain too much oxygen. Besides if the flow wasn't high enough the water would boil much easier than the oil."

"Silly me."

"The reactor was cheap," continued John, "and the running costs are almost nil, all we have to do is circulate filtered river water; there's a couple of pumps of course in case one packs up. We also have 'towns water' back up. Everything's monitored; flow, temperature, pH, level; the vapour pressure, everything on the main loop."

"Is the reactor under pressure?"

"No. A few centimetres water gauge on the nitrogen

blanket, that's all."

"Sounds safe enough," chirped Dave smirking.

"That's the reactor there on monitor four," said John, pointing down to a T.V. monitor on the Southbank panel.

"Since when did you take pictures of a lump of metal?" queried Carl.

"We had to go to town on this reactor to get planning permission to bring it on site. The town council's getting a bit uppity these days. We've even had to install a halon discharge system - the fire quencher."

"That's what I call safe," said Carl.

"Not really," chided Dave. "It's a bit of a red herring. Its place is on turbines and the like. If that fuel reaches its flash point and pressurises the reactor, Tanemouth will launch its first satellite. It's a bit like standing on the volcanic ridge of Mount Etna and pissing into the volcano on eruption day."

"You are the cheerful one," said Pete. "Look at it this way, it's probably the safest plant on the site."

Carl scratched his head, "I think I'd better go down to the reactor and see what I can make of it."

"Can't you do anything from this end?" queried John.

"There's a million wires in these control panels," replied Carl, "and it would take ages to sort the wiring diagrams out. I doubt the information being stored in the S.A.C. unit itself."

"Fair enough. I'll lock out the halon system for you. I would hate you to get dowsed by accident."

"Me too," said Carl frowning.

John Saunders stood by monitor four watching Carl as he warily entered the reactor room. Carl had been joined by a plant operator who John thought might be of assistance. He watched as Carl approached the temperature sensors, took his meter out of his pocket and began screwing the temperature probe enclosure heads off with a gloved hand.

"Carl Jones to control."

"Receiving Carl, what have you got for us?" answered Pete.

"According to my meter and little black book, the higher SAC sensor is reading two hundred and five, the town's water cut-in two hundred and twenty ... big difference, the stirrer hasn't fallen off has it?" joked Carl.

"No, heat rises, the top one would be hotter," said Pete seriously.

John watched Carl stroke his prominent chin, then speak to the accompanying operator before again speaking into his radio transceiver.

"Probably have a fault on the bottom sensor. It's mounted physically lower on the vessel than the others and if the alarms tripped it must be reading much higher." Carl paused a moment. "The reactor is full isn't it?"

Pete pressed a few keys on the keyboard. "Actually it isn't, there's five thousand litres in it - about half full, it's only a test batch - research for the boys."

"What's that in inches - the level in the reactor?"

"I can give you it in millimetres." Pete looked at the VDU. "Two thousand nine hundred - What's that got to do with anything?"

"Hang on," replied Carl, as he tapped the side of the reactor with a spanner. He wiped sweat from his forehead caused by the radiated heat from the partially lagged vessel.

John watched Carl climb the step ladder, take a tape measure out of his pocket handing the end to the operator. He looked to be measuring the vessel.

"Pete, these sensors are above the low level trip, ones around three metres and the other three and a half metres from the bottom of the reactor, you're measuring the nitrogen temperature on the sac. The alarm sensor is reading the liquid temperature. The town's water cut-in is borderline. I think



someone's dropped a clanger."

Concern showed on Pete's face.

John ran from the monitor to snatch the mike from Pete's hand. "YOU MEAN THE REACTOR IS AT TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY?"

"If that's the alarm point, it could be more," replied Carl, noting the urgency in John's voice. "I'll check it out. What's the panic?"

"The damn stuff will flash at two hundred and fifty five," replied John.

"I'll check the water line - are you sure the pumps are running?" said Carl.

"The indicators on. I'll make sure," replied John typing on the console keys.

Carl walked with the operator to the river water line and put his hands on the pipe.

"The pipes warm John, we're not getting the water."

"Is that control valve fully open?" queried John anxiously. "The temperature is above the control point."

"Certainly is, but we'll open the by-pass, just in case it's blocked."

Together Carl and the operator wrenched the manual by-pass valve open. Carl glanced at the overhead tank, which had started to bang violently as if the water in the heat exchange coil was boiling.

"Carl, can you get me a correct temperature reading on the S.A.C.?"

"Will do," Carl yanked the wires out of the sac sensor, ripped the cable from its tray and connected it to the alarm sensor. "How's that?"

"Horrible, the reactor's up to two hundred and forty two," replied John, glancing at the VDU.

"Can you open the town's water valve - hold it, don't bother, the town's water is off," said Pete.

"How do you mean off. Don't we have our own storage tank?" Carl's face was now showing concern.

"Well yes! But it's empty. It will be full by the time we resume full production. It was emptied to replace a faulty 'run off' valve. Really the tank should have been refilled by now."

"If it's supposed to be full then why isn't it?"

"The telecom people put a pick through the feed line - burying a cable, I think."

Carl put his hands on the by-pass line. "Have you got a flow reading on the river water?"

"I presume so, we haven't had a low flow alarm." John entered the flow recorder reference on the keyboard. "It's reading full scale, we should have all the water we need."

"Or the damned flow elements blocked. It's only a plate with a hole in which causes a differential pressure," retaliated Carl. "A blocked orifice will show full flow."

"Carl, I think we've got problems, the temperature's still rising."

"Correction, you have problems."

"How do you mean?"

"If that temp's still going up, then we have a blocked water line or at the least a restriction - probably in the flow element. If you think I'm sticking around here, you're sadly mistaken."

"There must be something we can do."

"What's the temperature?"

"Two hundred and forty five."

"We haven't got a chance, it would take me too long to clear that line. From what you have said 'neothon' would make the worlds badist bomb."

"Get back to the control room, Carl."

"Like hell, I've a wife and kids living half a mile from here, if this reactor goes, it could take the site with it - flatten

half of Tanemouth, there would be chemical fallout downwind for the next fifty miles. Remember the Italian affair, Mexico, not to mention the horror of Bhopal. We'll make Flixboro look like a popcorn factory."

"If you're so concerned for people, stay and help. Drop the melodramatics."

"Help to do what? I'm out of ideas, besides, millions starve every year that no one gives a damn about. I look after my own. See you in chemical hell, John."

The radio went dead.

John looked at Pete and Pete looked at John.

"Do you think we should tell someone?" said Pete meekly.

"TELL THEM WHAT - SOME DAMNED HALF WITTED TELECOM NAVVY'S PUT A HOLE IN OUR WATER LINE SO WE'RE GOING TO BLOW THE BLOODY TOWN UP IN SYMPATHY.... Sorry Pete, it's getting to me. The best thing we can do is keep this control room sealed and hope that the Trimark reaction ends before the temperature goes much higher." John glanced at the wall clock. "It can't react forever." He re-armed the halon system then walked to the T.V. monitor; he barely noticed the entrance of the operator who had accompanied Carl.

Pete returned his eyes to the VDU; the temperature was now standing at two hundred and forty six. Slowly, with a cold indifference the reading continued to crawl upward, two hundred and forty seven ...two hundred and forty eight.

"The rate of increase is slowing, I think, I hope." muttered Dave.

Pete nodded nervously. "Statistics say we should get away with five hundred and ninety nine mistakes out of six hundred."

Dave remained silent as the air became charged, his cheeky sarcasm had gone; his hands were clenched, knuckles

showing white; beads of sweat appeared on his brow and his breathing became laboured.

The readout lifted to two hundred and fifty.

Pete's hands rested on the console, the index of his right hand tapped lightly on its surface. His face was ashen; his stomach hollow.

The seconds ticked by. Two hundred and fifty one.

John Saunders and the new arrival were glued to the closed circuit monitor, which was focused on the Trimark reactor, watching, waiting, silently praying. A heat haze was rising from its surface, wavering the picture, casting a hypnotic spell on its enamoured viewers.

Two hundred and fifty two.

The air was still, close, tension was high. A deathly hush had fallen upon the entire control room. The ticking of the wall clock had now become audible, like a heartbeat it thumped away the seconds, its every beat echoing around the walls, heightening anticipation, spreading fear.

Two hundred and fifty three.

Pete slammed his fist on the console. "It's too late," he stated in a bitter but restrained voice. "She's going to blow."

Dave glanced at Pete, then turned to the pressure readout, hoping against hope that the temperature reading was wrong, but the rapid increase in reactor pressure assured him it was not.

An audible alarm screeched out giving warning of impending danger. An external heat detector initiated a second crimson light on the annunciator. A second later came the flashing amber light of the discharging halon system; the Trimark building was being dowsed by many spewing nozzles.

Pete moved towards monitor four. His interest in readouts had lapsed. The vapour pressure was racing skyward; they had thermal runaway. The deadly chemicals

had reached their flash point, the liquid was boiling, churning, producing its own catastrophic oxygen in abundance.

The view on monitor four vanished in a bright white halon haze, then the lights dimmed as all unnecessary power to the plant was cut. The main annunciator sprang into action as alarm after alarm came to life - the entire plant was shutting down. Power supplies were being cut, feed valves were clamping shut, sirens wailed discordantly.

Pete moved down the line of view monitors, until his eyes came to rest on the flare stacks. He didn't hear Dave screaming out a temperature of over one thousand degrees, his eyes were watching a small dancing flame high in the sky. For a moment he seemed mesmerised, then as the fire shot skyward towards the zenith like an erupting volcano, he stepped backward, as if he could feel the gushing heat of that inferno. He moved his eyes to the more distant prime monitor where he could see almost half the site. The giant tongues of flame licked towards the sky, silhouetting tall distillation columns and bulbous storage tanks, whose shadow images danced upon the earth. Billowing plumes of smoke spiralled towards the vastness of the heavens.

"Shut those damned alarms up," cried John. "How the hell can anyone think with this row going on?"

Pete felt John brush past then he moved his right hand dreamlike towards the 'panic button'. As John silenced the last of the alarms, Pete's hand pressed firmly on its target. The light dipped momentarily as the control room switched to internal power. A heavy clunk of metal rang around the room as shining steel latches tumbled loudly into place barring heavy iron doors, then the slithering sound of the ventilation seals, securing their protective cocoon, like the final slab of a tomb.

The action ceased. Pete turned slowly towards the prime viewing monitor, his face unreadable, his eyes blank.

One by one they all turned to the prime monitor as an air of finality swept through the control room. It was quiet .....foreboding.

Pete focused on the Trimark building; it appeared normal, then in silent horror, the roadside wall exploded outward, a fiery liquid following in its wake. It crossed the roadway as if propelled by an invisible water cannon. Sheets of brilliant flame leapt from the storage drums up the cold steel of the hydrogen storages... A savage tremor shook the control centre.

Pete steadied himself on the nearest console; his eyes remained fixed, he had half expected to see the hydrogen storages withstand the heat or perhaps blow individually, but he was wrong. One thunderous roar sent a horizontal wall of fire rushing in a widening arc, towards the control centre. The walls of the phosgene and insecticide building blew away like leaves in a hurricane. A great white cloud mushroomed upward, then the picture was gone...

Amidst the turmoil a telephone rang. There was no one nearby to lift the handset but as the floor and strengthened concrete walls trembled to the multiple explosive quakes, the phone danced its way to the edge of the console then fell to the floor.

"Good evening," came a voice from the dislodged handset, "this is your local water authority. We must apologise for the interruption to your water supply, but everything is now under control; your water has been restored. I hope the delay hasn't caused you too much inconvenience."

The End

# Silverbird

From the depths of the cold barren void came Silverbird; a speck of light amid the darkness. He had slept for an aeon, but now in the warmth of the newly found solar breeze his mind slowly became aware.

He opened his giant collector wings stretching them to their limits, then in his own way, he yawned. The sudden photon saturation sent a tingle down the full length of his body, exciting his aching joints and bringing new life to his inboard neuro-trionics.

His first actions did not concern his mission, there would be plenty of time for that later, after he had soaked up as much free energy as his photonic and proton field absorbers would hold. Now was the time to enjoy the richness of this sky field. He rolled upon his back, watching the vivid star streams of Galactica shift from beneath him, to high above his pellicle sensor outlet. It seemed so easy to roll vast star systems around the universe. He smiled to himself inwardly, not only at his illusionary feat, but at the wind of many frequencies, whispering gently past his ears and the softly coloured light, which entered his hyperoid eyes. Oh, it was good to be alive.

Before him riding on the vortex of heaven was a small yellow disc. He recognised it immediately as the star of his destination, a second-generation bio-sun; the source of his new found energy. How wonderful, he thought, that such a tiny part of creation could give so much joy.

His anti-gravity generator he carefully turned down, with the 'accelerator' minimised he could again experience mass, and acceleration; no longer was he inertialess. Though

the drag of a near vacuum was small he could still sense himself falling.

The little yellow lamplight grew steadily in luminosity until Silverbird decided it was time to brake and turn into a falling spiral around the energy fields pleasure centre. This was a simple task, which his uni-conscious could handle effortlessly.

His retro's swung through one-sixty degrees upon his belly and his interchange submersion unit, an integral part of his anti-gravity generator, was activated. He then closed his ears and lower eyes to all emanations. A quick systems check proved all his faculties to be in order, all that remained was to re-fold his wings and give the command signal for ignition.

A tremendous roar ripped through the framework of Silverbird as his speed reduced dramatically. The small yellow disc stayed its growth and veered toward the outer edge of the enclon arm spiral.

The inertia of decelerating from nine eighty standards down to one, left Silverbird feeling rather giddy, despite the standard settings of ninety seven percent on the submersion units, but he knew it would pass quickly. It wasn't the first time he had experienced such a 'T' force and he hoped it wouldn't be the last.

An 'A' type ringworld appeared on his detectors. They informed him immediately, knowing how much he enjoyed such sights, even though he would pass by swiftly.

Silverbird thanked the detector-decoder-basers and again opened his wings, ears and lower eyes. He wanted to feel all of the vibrations of this glorious gas giant with its elaborate ring system, recording all the sensations for later analysis.

The flypast lasted only moments, but the sights were not missed. A slight course deviation had taken him across the ring-plane adding more pleasurable variation to his



already heightened sensors. There were many cold moons abroad in this mini-system yet he knew the heat of gravitational drag would make them both weird and wonderful. He made a note in his jogger log to return if possible.

"Closing in on bio-world three," came the detector's voice. "Suggest an easing of speed to point zero two standards."

Again Silverbird thanked the detectors, though he guessed they didn't really appreciate this courtesy; they would merely take his words as an acknowledgement.

"You have previous soundings of the bio-worlds on data feedback," continued the detectors. "If you would care to latch on to the appropriate pointsenders." The basers always referred to Silverbirds uni-conscious as 'you' for their own reasons.

"Very good, I shall re-run the sounding for bio-world three."

Before losing himself in the data feedback section, Silverbird had a word with his auto-comp-basers. He, Silverbird, his conscious that is, wouldn't have time to steer himself while experiencing the re-run. "Drop my speed to that suggested, and wind my way into orbit. I want to have a close look at what is down there."

"As you wish," replied the auto-comps.

Silverbird tried to find the original dating of the soundings but had no luck. The only reference he could find was an archaic logger module, which gave the impression that the soundings were made around the time naught blob. Never mind, he thought, let's get on with the show.

The viewpoint for the recording came from the visionary of some ancient vessel, but despite that it was still in reasonable condition. There was also an internal sound recording, which increased Silverbirds interest considerably.

He relaxed and slid into the space of yestertime, which came to him as if it was the present.

"Double zero one boost confirmed, altitude decreasing."

"Forward shield up, this is going to be a hot one."

The shield flared brilliantly as the vessel began its descent. The recording visionary, for a time, became blinded by the brilliance.

"Four jiffs to bounce, brace yourselves....."

"Ugh, didn't like that, isn't there a better way?"

"We haven't got the thrust juice to spare on a controlled descent; what did you expect?"

"What I got I suppose."

"Altitude four five zero three, speed five zeros and a two, coming under powered flight."

The visionary cleared, revealing a rocky terrain, but a meandering river could be seen, surrounded by primitive vegetation and the occasional woodland.

On the forward horizon the familiar plume of an erupting volcano could be viewed spreading its obnoxious dust and fumes across the landscape.

"Do you think the place is habitable?"

"Wouldn't like to say for sure. I have an O.K. reading on the atmosphere content, but it certainly looks hostile down there."

"That's fair comment. I think we should investigate more closely."

"Your wish is my command."

The viewpoint dropped steadily toward the ground, until the vegetation could clearly be seen. It was sparser than at first thought, but the richness of colour made the place seem more appealing.

"Any sign of animal life?"

"No, the sensors show a blank and I certainly can't see

anything."

The terrain changed suddenly from rock to water, a large lake it seemed, one of the few gathering points of water, on an otherwise liquidless land. The volcano ahead began to grow larger, looming high above its surrounding rockworld.

"Two degrees port."

"Two degrees port confirmed."

The hollow mountain drifted by.

A plain now lay before them, followed by crater after crater after crater.

"I think we are in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I couldn't agree with you more. We have all the information we require for the three biological worlds. Let's head for home."

"You don't mind if we hit the hybo-tanks before we go stellar outriding?"

"Not at all."

Sky only appeared before the craft, a deep, deep blue. With an ear splitting whine the booster pods burst into life, and the picture went blank.

Silverbird mused to himself for a while. His mind smiling at what he had just experienced. It wasn't hard to see where he had inherited the old flaws in his speech and this amused him. It was always an experience to hear the 'bios' in action, though the ones in this sounding were very different to those of the present, evolution had seen to that. In his own lifetime, which had spanned many ages, he had seen much change; he often wondered how they coped with their little lifespans and endless diversities.

"Ready for descent," stated the auto-comps.

"Hold a while," replied Silverbird. "Let me have a quick look first." He closed his upper eyes, so that he could concentrate on the world below. What he saw was not at all pleasing. The world was dead, little atmosphere and even less

moisture. Enormous red deserts covered the land and impact basins were abundant.

He asked the detectors for a second opinion and they confirmed what he already thought.

"Bio Two," said the auto-computers, "the third innermost planet?"

"Ride on," he didn't really mean to say it that way.

## CHAPTER 2

Boris Rigapolski was worn out after a heavy day of canvassing for the ninety-nine elections. He couldn't quite understand the need for democracy.

Huddling inside his cumbersome leather overcoat he surveyed the Moscow scenery. It looked bleak with its thin covering of snow and heavy March skies. He would be glad to get home and have a warm bath.

Boris absent-mindedly wiped a bloodstain from his coat as he trundled down one of the many back streets, which led to his residence. Not much further, he thought, just another ten minutes, then a nice glass of warming vodka.

His two helpers followed closely behind. All junior members of the Bureau had escorts, especially the junior member for defence. It annoyed Boris intensely that such a high ranking official should have to take to the streets, 'for the cause', as it was so admirably put. His helpers didn't seem to mind street walking too much, for they were members of the D.K.G.B., the D being for democratic. They were hardened to this type of work, in fact it could be said that at times they relished it. Not until they reached Boris's home would they finally part company. This was standard procedure, just in case the locals didn't think a great deal of the way Boris conducted his free and easy campaign.

At 4p.m. he arrived at his doorstep; he wafted his helpers away and reached into his pocket for his two keys to unlock the door. This always proved to be an annoyance. The difficulty of handling keys with frozen hands was immense. I will have to get a sentry, he thought, it would be much simpler.

Once inside the door, he called for his wife, a small

slender woman, with a quaint, pretty face; a complete contrast to the brusque Boris. He often wondered why he had ever married her; she wasn't his type at all. Why hadn't he married someone with a bit more to get hold of, stronger thighs, someone with a stronger personality that could hold her own in a good conversation. It must have been the insanity of youth, he concluded, that had led him astray.

It wasn't Olga who greeted him on his entry but his little pet Doberman Pincers. They snarled lovingly at the scent of blood on his person.

"Down Hans, down Fritz," he said warmly, "your dinner will come soon enough."

Olga stood in the opening to their modest sized lounge, her soft hair hanging gently upon her shoulders, with just a wisp upon her brow, even her drab clothes couldn't hide her gentle charms. "Welcome, good husband. I hope your day was not too hectic."

"Of course it was," he snapped, "have you boiled the water for my bath and warmed my vodka?"

"Yes, my darling, all is prepared."

Boris threw off his clothes and settled down in the tub, in front of his thirty-centimetre black and white television. Only this sort of luxury was provided for Bureau members and Boris knew this well.

"VODKA!" he yelled.

Olga hurried to his side with his drink.

"Television," he commanded, "put it on the government channel."

"But both channels are government ones," Olga whimpered meekly.

"I know that," he scorned, "you know I always watch the news on D.K.G.B.B.C."

"I apologise for my ignorance," she uttered. "I will see that I am not so stupid in future."

Olga turned the set on and waited for the tubes to warm up before switching to the correct channel. She then retired to the room corner to hold the antenna.

"Be gone," rasped Boris, "the picture is satisfactory without you standing there." He then settled down comfortably, sipping vodka and blowing bubbles, until.....

## CHAPTER 3

General Fitzpatrick Holding, head of the Deep West Retaliatory Command, sat in his long johns, looking bored at his thirty-inch tri-hi-fi sensorvision tv screen. He normally sat this way because he found it much more comfortable.

The commercials had just been interrupted by the 8a.m. movie, but now they were back on again.

"...How are you today, Miss Finebody? You look very healthy and full of the joys of life."

"Yes, indeed I am, Mrs Bodice. Yesterday I felt depressed and unclean. I even thought of throwing myself out of the window, but then I discovered new 'Cheekrub', the moisturised toilet tissue. It changed my outlook on life completely. I feel a new woman...."

"Load of crap," grunted Holding. He flicked switch thirty-three on his remote handset and the screen went dead. He placed the handset on a large smoked glass coffee table, then reached for his deodorant. On clasping it, he raised himself up and walked over to the mirrored wall. A quick spray under each arm and he plonked it down on his desk, using his other hand to obtain a large Havana from a silver beaded box.

Well, that is another rigorous night at the office over with, he thought. Now to go home for a bit of relaxation - or I would be able to have some, if it was not for that old 'Foxbat' wife of mine. Perhaps I should fix her up with some spare-time work, the D.K.G.B. maybe. He grinned fiendishly as he lifted his shirt from the back of his desk chair. Now, that would be a good idea ... I wonder when Phil will come visiting. He's a fine boy, takes after his daddy.

The next few minutes he spent practising his 'John



Wayne' walk in front of the mirror, saying such phrases as .... 'The hell I will' and 'Let's get the hell outa here'.

His telephone, the presidential one to be precise, which was having its usual quiet time, suddenly sprang to life. Must be the presidential office, he mused, recognising the 'Star Spangled Banner'.

After stubbing his unlit cigar in the ashtray, he made his way quickly down the mirrored wall, past his personal transceiver to his desk. He brushed the fluff from his shirt and smartened his collar, then lifted the phone to his ear. "Holding speaking."

"Hi there, Pat. I hope I haven't caught you with your pants down. Have you been watching T.V.?"

Holding looked down at his long johns and answered, "Well, yes Mr. President.... I did watch it for a while earlier, but I had seen all the ads before, so I decided to switch off."

"No, not the commercials, something more important."

More important than the commercials, he thought. Then listened more intently, his face slowly becoming awe-stricken.

The rest of his phones were now playing their various tunes impatiently, but he ignored them. Only one thought came into his mind as he looked down at his long johns and he muttered it out loud. "If this is truly a national emergency, I think I had better....."

## CHAPTER 4

Silverbird approached the blue bio-world with apprehension in his mind. He had run the ancient sounding of this place through his conscious, and now felt a little uncertain of what to expect.

Bio-two had been inhabited, even in those distant times, by a race who wield power, not by technology or muscle, but by their very thought. They were a powerful race, they who had taken the task of carving a civilisation from the wild and barren terrain, and the appearance of an alien craft made them less than happy.

They would not permit the landing of the reconnaissance vessel. "Depart now," they had said. "We shall not tolerate interference while the world is yet in infancy."

The crew did not contest this wish, realising the power which was abroad. They had come upon the creators before and knew they worked with forces, not of normal space but of a place where matter and energy were as one, the conjunction of darkness and light.

The total sum of data obtained, amounted to no more than the place name, which like many other worlds was Earth, and the name of those who bid them depart, which was Monitor, a modest name.

Silverbird mused long over this sounding and eventually decided that the Earth would no longer be the domain of the creators, for once other races came into being, the power of the Monitors would decline, leaving all living things to their own.

"On approach run, reversing thrust to orbit."

Silverbird's mind jogged back to the present with the

sound of the auto-comps voice. "Have I decoded any of those communication channels from below yet?"

"Indeed you have," retorted the detectors, "but it was thought best not to channel the information to you as yet, because of the sheer quantity you have received and the difficulty in ascertaining what is relevant. Some of the channels could not be decoded, the pictures did not sync with the sound, often the pictures would break up into squares or freeze or repeat themselves, grainy movement. I think they call it digital TV. You have however detected no coherent beam directed especially for you, the inhabitants must not be aware of your approach."

"Could I have a quick briefing on what I have received?"

"Of course, but you will not like it, here goes ....The world which we approach is made up of over one hundred individual races, all with the same chemistry and all with different ideas. The abundant races hate the sparser races, but not as much as they hate each other. The sparser races hate each other about as much as they hate the more abundant races. Many of the abundant races possess atomics of varying degrees, enough to wipe themselves from the universe, several times over. On the domestic front it seems that all races have a certain amount of poverty, strife and lawlessness...."

"Alright, point taken." Silverbird cringed a little. "Do I have any information on any of the individual beings concerning their mental states?"

"Only on a certain Miss Finebody, but it is a mistake to base your overall assumptions on one person, especially this one. She seems very unstable."

Silverbird dwelt on the words of the detectors, then decided to by-pass this 'misbegotten island'. "What of the 'distant survey' on Bio-One?"

"I am afraid you cannot be sure from this range, but it seems the surface temperature is far too high to support life and the atmosphere is made up of a thick layer of poisonous clouds. If you wait a while its position will become more favourable for analysis, or, of course you could make the short journey."

"No, it doesn't matter, Bio-One must have undergone some catastrophic changes since it came into being. I shall have to settle for Bio-Two. Perhaps I am hasty in my conclusions of this world. It would not have survived thus, had there not been great and courageous minds at work, maybe I underestimate its populace."

"Should the field deflectors be energised?" queried the auto-comps.

"It may be wise," added the detectors.

"They emit too much radiation," replied Silverbird. "I shall fly into the atmosphere without defence and put a general peace call out on their public communication systems. It seems that there is no way of making official contact through any one governing body without unsettling the rest, and all must be aware of my presence."

"Could you not place the Krykan incubator egg in some secluded place and leave its inhabitants to do the rest?" It seemed for a moment that the detectors voice held frustration.

Silverbird could feel the pressure of the Krykan incubator on his peritoneum. His trionics kept a constant vigil on its occupants in their hybo-matrix. "I must first try to persuade the Earthlings to my cause. It would be a shame to overcome them in such a way and it is by no means certain that they would be overcome. All life should find its own path, if that is possible without force or deceit." Silverbird realised that his sympathy would fall on deaf ears, but the detectors would accept the reasoning of a sentient mind.

"Should you inform Warcloud and Thunderwing of your decision?" queried the detectors.

The vision of Warcloud and Thunderwing swept into Silverbird's minds eye. They would be cruising wing to wing like dark shadows within the inter-stellar void. Huge in size and deadly in their tasks.

"I have no choice. I only hope that I have matters under control before Big Brother and Thunderwing arrive." With that final statement Silverbird cleared his mind of all unhappy thoughts and ignited his retro's.

Like a giant butterfly he came upon the land, his wings flapping in the air around him. Over hill and mountain, sea and lake he flew, drawing in the beauty of life and revelling in its lushness. For a while his sensors were overcome with feelings, not strange but very old.

## CHAPTER 5

Boris Rigapolski could barely believe what he was hearing on television. What was supposed to be the news, had turned out to be something entirely different.

"....And this my friends is why I beg your co-operation. Though we may be different in kind, I believe our aims to be the same. Let us join our forces to combat the common enemy, before it is too late. I, Silverbird, await your decision."

The screen returned to normal. Boris still couldn't comprehend what his eyes had seen. There was no such thing as silver butterflies. It must be an imperialist plot, he thought.

At that moment a loud knocking came at the door. Hans and Fritz began jumping about excitedly.

"I am coming, I am coming," yelled Boris, as he raised himself from the tub.

Olga passed him a large towel which he wrapped around himself. Then he made his way to the door, leaving puddles of water on the lounge tiles.

He opened the door slightly, just giving enough space for Hans to slip his head through and sink his teeth into the house caller.

The man let out a yell of pain, then quickly stepped back from the doorway.

Boris recognised the yell; he had heard it before. It was one of his D.K.G.B. escorts.

"What do you want?" called Boris, "apart from a doctor."

The helper grimaced. "You are required at H.Q immediately, comrade. Something very important has come up."

Boris's mind flicked back to his television, so it is an imperialist plot, he thought. That is why they require my services. My comrades are certainly on the ball.

He closed the door again and hurriedly dressed. Without a word being spoken, he kissed his dogs goodbye, locked the door and left.

## CHAPTER 6

"I want a full status report on the activities of that mechanical canary. I want fighter planes tailing it. I want ground stations tracking it. I want answers and I want them now."

General Holding's aide flew out of the room as if a nest of hornets were in hot pursuit. The General wasn't in a very cordial mood at all.

Holding picked up the telephone, "Give me the Pentagon.... Cheyenne Mountain.....Area 51, get me foreign affairs."

A few seconds later the voice of his clerk replied, "I am sorry sir, the line is engaged."

"GIVE ME FOREIGN AFFAIRS."

"Yes Sir, of course Sir." His clerk knew that Dr. Jekyll had been discarded and Mr. Hyde was on the rampage. He put his behaviour down to the two years he had spent in what was known at the time as White Africa. Not the best place to send the 'typical' American General, he thought. An ego boost was the last thing Holding needed.

"Foreign affairs, who is speaking?"

"General Holding, give me Wilder."

"Sorry Sir, Mr. Wilder is engaged."

"Give me Wilder and give me him now."

"Yes Sir."

"Wilder here, what can I do for you, General?"

"Information. I want information on what you bureaucrats are doing about this clockwork cuckoo."

It is a pity he is a friend of the President, thought Wilder. "We are participating in a discussion in Moscow with various foreign affairs and defence attaches, to try to come to



some understanding about the problem. Does that answer your question?"

"Make it snappy," the General scorned. "I don't want this bird to get away."

Holding slammed the phone down and began pacing up and down, up and down, up and down. Then he sat on his desk and tapped his fingers, tappity tap, tappity tap, tappity tap. Then he raised his sensorvision remote handset and switched on."

"Good-day Miss Finebody...." ...crash.

## CHAPTER 7

Boris Rigapolski entered the conference room thirty minutes late for his meeting. He had been partially briefed on the situation concerning Silverbird, not his guests, and had been given his instructions. Normally his superior Alexi Krakarov would have attended the meeting but he had been taken ill, after a mis-timed remark concerning 'The Bureau' while addressing an audience in Bruzengrad.

The preliminaries for the meeting had been by-passed. It had been decided by all concerned that the three-day ritual, to decide what shape the table should be and who sat where, would be overlooked, they did not have the time.

Boris looked down upon his three adversaries contemptuously; none had the iron muscles of the ex-Soviets. They should all feel honoured at having him present.

Ricky Trickston, the U.S. Ambassador also looked down upon his adversaries but with sympathy, none, he thought, had the dash and sheer capacity of the Americans, everything in the States was bigger and better, especially in his adopted state of Texas, plus he wasn't a 'temp'.

Julian Smithers, the British charge d'affaires looked down upon his adversaries, because they simply weren't British, and that spoke for itself.

Jacques Bastille was his usual bloody-minded self. He hadn't forgiven the British for liberating France, back in 45, nor had he forgiven the Americans for helping them, or was it the other way round. Anyway, he would show them.

The rest of the world was not invited. It was thought in the Kremlin, that their atomics did not justify them a place at such a crucial meeting, apart from the fact that they couldn't find any more chairs, but they did promise to inform

all of the situation as it arose. This was a pledge made by the highest available authorities, whom everyone knew were forthright, if perhaps a little on the devious side.

Boris surveyed the faces of the other representatives before speaking. They were just as he had imagined, faces have a habit of mirroring lifestyles and Boris had no queries about life in the West. "Good-day comrades, my name is Boris Rigapolski. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

It was quite obvious that he wasn't being completely truthful.

"Please be seated."

They all sat and awaited Boris to continue.

"I am afraid that I am new to this sort of meeting. Normally my superior would take the chair."

The hell, thought Ricky, I bet he really needs it.

"But at present he is disposed of."

A good choice of words, thought Julian.

"As this meeting was put together hurriedly, I think we should all introduce ourselves."

Julian spoke first, "My name is Julian Smithers, British charge d'Affairs, my pleasure, Mr. Rigapolski."

"What is your pleasure?" asked Boris.

"To make your acquaintance," replied Julian.

"Oh!" Boris gave Julian a dubious look.

Next to speak was Ricky. "Howdy doo Boris, ma name is Ricky Trickston. From the States that is." He doffed his size eight Stetson courteously.

"You surprise me," said Boris. "Please hang your hat next to the bowler, if it feels uncomfortable."

Ricky looked puzzled, "It's fine, but thankee all the same."

Last but not least came Jacques, his face sullen and determined, "Je suis ..."

"Ah! That is happy Jack from Nice," interrupted

Ricky, realising that Boris's French probably wasn't too good.  
"That right, Julie baby!"

"I wish you would not call me that."

"Hi Jack," said Boris.

"Nice in Nice, ain't it Julie!"

Dignified silence.

"Oh nice!" exclaimed Boris turning to Jacques, "and what is your title, comrade Bastille?"

"Je suis..."

"We hold the same positions, for different governments," intervened Julian.

"Oh!" exclaimed Boris.

This conversation went on for the best part of an hour. The duty guard had to be excused twice, to relieve himself, as he put it. On both occasions he returned holding his sides. He complained that they hurt him. Boris politely gave him some abuse in his best Russian, then offered in English to get a doctor. The guard assured Boris that he would be all right; he said the trouble was due to an old complaint with his ears, then commenced fitting cotton wool.

After their introduction they pressed on with the matter at hand and by dawn they had issued a joint communiqué which read as follows:-

We, the joint committee of Europe, Asia and America, have decided to pool our resources in an effort to come to an understanding with our alien visitor. All actions we may undertake will be done jointly and in close co-operation with all countries concerned. We would ask the general public for its co-operation in exercising calm. There is no reason for alarm. Our visitor has shown no hostile acts and we have no reason to suspect a ploy. Our joint forces are on a constant vigil and together they can handle any threat which may be poised. We ask again for calm and restraint.

The broadcasting of the communiqué would have

been met by the usual disinterest by the populace, had it not been about the worlds most momentous happening for two millenniums, but even then, most of the world heralded the news with no more than a keen interest, some even thought it a hoax, especially in one American city.

## CHAPTER 8

Over the Arabian Gulf and high above parched lands, he glided, soaring like an albatross on the warm air currents of terrene.

It was here that Silverbird had taken thought and spoken his plea for unity. He had spoken to all who could receive his message and when he had done he waited, for what he hoped would be his hearts wished answer.

The dying embers of daylight saw him swoop, wings locked toward the Indian Ocean. The Sun's last rays dancing upon his body. No longer was he alone for now he had drawn company. He listened intently to the conversations of his guests, but as yet found naught to answer to.

"This is Nightrider, patch me through to General Holding."

"Holding here, what is the latest, Nightrider?"

"I have a sighting on Silverbird, I am turning to pursue."

"Are you alone, Nightrider?"

"No, I have two Mig thirties for company, General. They look like gnats on the back of a great silver eagle."

"Play it cool, Nightrider."

"Will do, General... Wait! We have more company. Bogey inbound at two six zero, ten miles, four hundred knots closure."

"Identify, Nightrider."

"Too far away, General. Will close on mystery craft for identification."

Silverbird watched Nightrider draw near to the new arrival; in fact he thought them dangerously close for foreign vessels. They seemed to be flying wingtip to wingtip.

"I see, but I do not believe."  
"What do you see, Nightrider?"  
"This fella with a turban on top. He's ... shaking his head and talking to himself."  
"How close are you, Nightrider?"  
"Very close, General."  
"What is this about a turbine?"  
"Not turbine, General, turban, like bandages."  
"Has he hurt his head, Nightrider?"  
"Turban, General, its a head-dress."  
"A redskin. Warn him off, Nightrider."  
"Will do, General."  
"Nightrider to new arrival, acknowledge new arrival."  
"I am being a new arrival, what is it you are wanting, Nightrider?"  
"You are interfering with United States operations, new arrival, please abort."  
"But it is being such a lovely evening for flying."  
"ABORT, NEW ARRIVAL."  
"As you are wishing, Nightrider, I am being aborted."  
"Task accomplished, General. Returning to pursuit."  
"O.K. Nightrider, what is your position?"  
"Coding beta beta six five - L.C. eight six two four, alpha three two zero zero six niner. Altitude two five four zero zero. Cruising at mach one point five. That baby is really moving."  
"Stay with him, Nightrider."  
"Roger, General."  
Silverbird calmly processed the information received. The coding was simple to crack, but he had difficulty with the phrase, 'really moving'. It was, after all, quite obvious that he was moving.  
"Could it be some sort of reference to how you are moving?" suggested the detectors.

"Perhaps," replied Silverbird, "but I thought they used such terms as amble or dawdle, however, it is not important. I do find it curious though, how they refer to me as an infant."

A short, thoughtful pause, an inward smile.

"Let me proceed, just a little faster, and see what other innovations the Earth holds for me."

Silverbird maintained his new speed over the South China Sea with little incident. There were comings and going of the little 'fireflies', but this did not perturb him unduly. On occasion some had tried to speak with him, but he could not answer. Not until he received a joint call would he deal with the natives, for fear of causing envy. He knew this emotion well.

Over the vast Pacific, he continued, seeing many small islands below. It was upon one of these small lands, locked within a deep sea mist, that he decided to place his Krykan incubator.

He flew low over the appointed area and caused a brief but violent electrical reaction in the overlaying cloud. He still hoped the 'bios' locked within the incubator of Krykan, would not be required, but he thought it best to play safe. The last thing he wanted was to bring his warring brother, Warcloud, down upon this little island world. He then considered transferring his uni-conscious to the mind of Krykan himself, if his plans for a peaceful joining with the Earthlings went amiss. So he could direct the tutoring of the 'bios' when they emerged from their embryonic shells, but this thought he dismissed, he would not force his will on another. The most he may do was to implant his conscious in the depths of Krykan's basers and lay dormant until the arrival of his big brother, but this was a dangerous idea. He could quite easily loose himself, and lay dormant forever.

Silverbird returned to his flight plan, night turned to day; the sun sped across the sky. Again he saw the pursuit



craft close in behind.

"You are approaching a large land mass," commented the detectors.

"Yes, I see," replied Silverbird, who was breathing the fresh sea air and channelling it over his analysis lungs. "I wonder what I shall find here. I will watch and listen."

"This is Highflyer calling General Holding, come in General Holding."

"Holding here, Highflyer."

"We are approaching the mainland, General."

"Where do you expect to intersect, Highflyer?"

"North of L.A., somewhere in the Frisco vicinity."

"Can you give an exact location, Highflyer?"

"Sorry General, Silverbird is making constant minor flight adjustments, he may pass over either city."

"What of the Russkies, Highflyer?"

"They are peeling off, do we inaugurate plan Zeta six five?"

"No, Highflyer, peace is the order of the day. We have received a communiqué from Moscow; we are to work jointly with all nations. Let nothing hamper Silverbird's progress."

"Roger, General, will keep you informed..."

Silverbird again came over land and saw many tall buildings; he coughed a little and closed his analysers. He then proceeded inland at a much-reduced speed, so as not to make nasty bangs and disturb the inhabitants below.

He saw it all, high mountains, painted deserts, lush fields and many varied habitats. For this he didn't require daylight, his eyes used many wavelengths.

With the dawning of the World, he hovered high above New York, where sleepy eyes would not observe him, and with his keen vision, he saw many contrasts, but one thing especially took his interest. A large lady, holding what appeared to be an ice-cream cone in her hand. His conscious

had little information regarding such things as ice creams.

"Who is that?" queried Silverbird.

"You have received this information already," replied the detectors.

"Miss Finebody?" queried Silverbird.

"No," replied the detectors. "It is the Statue of Liberty."

"I am sorry," replied Silverbird. "I must have been so engrossed with the scenery, my location reports never registered. I will have to pay more attention in future."

It was at this point that Silverbird received his first joint contact. The message came from high above the atmosphere, broadcast from the other side of the world, where Boris Rigapolski had been standing by his transfer technicians for many hours. He was waiting for them to rig up a satellite link on their American imported giro beam equipment.

The difficulty had simply been a dud chip, but the techs could not replace it. Something to do with another high technology embargo, the technicians had said. However, they had finally by-passed this fault and after congratulating themselves the link had been forged.

"I, Boris Rigapolski, speak for the joint committee for alien contact. Please acknowledge, Silverbird."

A short pause. Boris waited with anticipation.

"I am Silverbird, ambassador of the free worlds of Pentakon. I acknowledge your beam, Boris Rigapolski."

Silverbird's pulse began to race as the heart of his trionics increased his perception. It made his pellicle sensors tingle.

Boris showed obvious delight at Silverbird's acknowledgement. He glanced around himself as if to say, 'Look at me, I've done it.' He noticed that the rest of the committee had joined him and this served to please him even more.

"I .... I mean we of the joint committee bid you welcome, Silverbird. We assure you that our disposition is friendly, but you must appreciate that we have many governments to satisfy, please bear with us."

"Your position is understandable, Boris Rigapolski. I shall do all in my power to satisfy your curiosity." Silverbird's voice gave no hint of excitement; he simply spoke in his normal way.

Boris noticed that the voice of Silverbird was not only coming from his own highly sophisticated receiving equipment, but from the rear of the room also. He turned to look behind and saw an old television set, perched on a cabinet in the room corner and there upon the screen was the animated image of Silverbird, just as it had been when he was sat in his tub.

This threw Boris off balance; he didn't even know the set was switched on. The measure of concern this caused him reflected in the way he forgot to abuse his technicians. He began to stutter into his phonic pick-up. "We .... er .... Those of us who .... er ...."

"Please feel free to use what language you wish," said Silverbird. "My decoders will translate to my own tongue, they even mimic my accent."

Julian Smithers, realising Boris's shortcoming, quickly stepped in his place. "My name is Julian Smithers, also of the joint committee. We realise that you mean well, but could you possible narrow your bandwidth. Though we of the committee welcome you, we feel your presence may cause disruptions in some of our more unstable societies. Some repressive regimes may even use your presence to further their own ends; acknowledge Silverbird."

Silverbird was dismayed at what he heard, but he thought it only to be expected. His detectors fed him close up views of the ground below to enlighten him of the situation.

He took a moment to re-adjust to the detectors, eye to visionary exchange, an odd sensation, one of the few functions that he always achieved with a conscious baser request.

The view he received of the streets was not unlike his normal eyes on full magnification, except for the lattice board effect and of course the limited angle a single scanner gave.

He zoomed the view to a single street. The first thing that struck him was the large quantity of people recently gathered, many standing around in groups, the scene didn't appear normal at all, surely they had other things to do. This made Silverbird fearful.

"What rides the airwaves?" he queried, it was much simpler to ask than to clog his awareness with numerous irrelevant broadcasts.

"You have one wavelength of particular interest," replied the detectors. "It will be filtered out and given to you direct."

".... And this is the scene here in New York City. As you can see, crowds are beginning to gather at the news of our first alien contact. What was thought yesterday to be no more than a hoax, has in the last fifteen minutes become more of a reality than ever ...."

Silverbird stared into the crowd; he saw many carrying placards which read, 'WELCOME SILVERBIRD, WELCOME TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA'. This made him wonder for a moment whether he had been detected by the crowd, visible yes, identifiable perhaps but he quickly dispelled the thought and continued to observe. He saw other placards, one of which read, 'PREPARE TO MEET THY DOOM. THE ANGEL OF DEATH IS UPON US'.

This caused Silverbird to cut the link with the committee to assess the situation. The continuous aircraft drone above him, only served to upset him even more.

"This is General Holding to Skyraider. Come in Skyraider."

"Skyraider receiving."

"What is happening up there, Skyraider? I have word from Moscow that they have lost contact with Silverbird."

"Things are just as they were, General."

"No signs of hostility, Skyraider?"

"No General, he just seems to be watching, but I doubt whether he can see much from this altitude. It's hazy, I can barely see the ground."

"Do not underestimate, Skyraider. His technology is beyond our understanding."

"Should I put my cameras on him, General?"

Holding glanced at his new forty inch sensorvision screen. "It would not do any good Skyraider, he has left his silent animation overriding all visual channels.... Wait a minute, the image has disappeared."

"Switching on cameras, General."

"Roger and out, Skyraider."

Sweat poured down the brow of Julian Smithers as he stood before the communication equipment. Why had Silverbird gone silent, leaving only a screen image?

Boris Rigapolski was also perspiring, his early bravado gone. "I could do with a vodka," he choked.

"Me too," said Julian.

"No bourbon?" quipped Ricky.

"Trust Ricky Trickston."

"Would you be so good Jacques? There is a bottle in the cabinet under the television," Boris spoke nervously.

"Jacques, I said could you please get the vodka."

Voice strengthening.

"JE SUIS, JE SUIS."

"OK, OK," said Boris with a Russian accent.

As they all watched Jacques walk over to the cabinet,

the picture suddenly vanished from the screen.

They held their breaths.

A voice came from behind.

They all jumped, then turned to the communication equipment.

"I apologise for my lack of thought. I have narrowed my beam and now await your instructions." Silverbird spoke with his usual calm.

A huge sigh of relief from the committee.

The senior transfer technician approached Boris, a few words in Russian and he dismissed himself.

"I have been informed that we are receiving direct pictures of Silverbird via the American Defence Network. The department of a certain General Holding. If you would care to view the video screen to your right, we should have pictures any moment."

The screen burst into life and Boris's face fell. "Is this some sort of joke?" he spat at the technician.

The technician held out his hands palms up, in a gesture of incomprehension.

General Holding sat in his office and smirked. "I think that is enough," he said to his aide. He never did like bureaucrats, all talk and no action.

In Moscow the picture of the lady holding a box of toilet tissue vanished and was replaced by an incredible view of Silverbird, hovering miles above the distant skyline of New York, balancing on huge wings.

"Wow, golly gee whiz," cried Ricky. "Lookee here at that."

They all stood and looked, amazement on their faces.

After a few moments, Julian again spoke into the phonic sender, which had remained continuously on. "Do you need re-fuelling, Silverbird?"

"Do you mean, am I hungry?" came the reply. "The

answer is no. I had a light meal when I entered your stellar system."

Julian didn't quite understand the answer. Even if Silverbird uses solar power, he thought, surely he couldn't have gathered and stored enough energy to power all his needs. He decided not to meddle further in what he didn't understand.

"We will assemble a joint naval fleet in mid-Atlantic, Silverbird. We would appreciate your presence. It would alleviate our people's misgivings and would allow us to provide you with protection. Although I doubt that you need it. It will also give us time to contact more heads of State with regard to our future relations."

"I will gladly oblige," replied Silverbird. "I would assure you, that while I am upon your world. I will not pursue any course which may cause harm to any individual of the Earth. I sincerely regret any disturbances I may have unintentionally caused already."

"Thank you, Silverbird. One last question, could you clarify your earlier remark concerning a joining of our forces against a common foe?"

"As our civilisations are drawing together, this matter need not concern you unduly. I have friends on the way, who are quite competent to deal with any disturbances. Your part will be small and not for many years yet. Let us talk of these matters when our bonds have been formed."

At first the committee was shaken by his answer, which seemed a little none informative if not ominous, but the warmth and confidence of Silverbird's voice, continued to grow on them, even after he had spoken, and their fears were allayed.

"We thank you again, Silverbird, our co-ordinators will supply you with the location of our rendezvous.... "

"Could I ask one question, Julie?"

Silverbird answered for Julian Smithers, "Of course, go right ahead."

"What in this cock-eyed universe, are you?"

"I am to me, as you are to you, Mister Trickston."

Ricky Trickston's bewildered face, held its pose for many minutes.



## CHAPTER 9

General Holding was feeling whacked, after the many hours he had been on duty. His only consolation was that he hadn't been able to get home to his torrid wife.

He sat now with his aide, talking and joking, anything to keep his eyes open.

"This nigger I was telling you about, got out of his ramshackle automobile with his mouth full of custard, ha ha, ho ho then he walks up to the fancy dress ball entrance, ha ha ha, bet you can't guess what happens next?"

"No, General."

"Well you see, it goes like this: The doorman, all dressed in his fancy duds, with his pretty white shirt says, 'Hey man, this is a fancy dress ball. What do you think you're supposed to be?' ha ha, he ho, grunt and the nigger spits out the custard all over that mans fancy duds ho, he ho and says, 'AAS A BLACKHEAD' he he, ha ha, ho he. You know, a zit. You ain't laughing boy."

"Ma Pa was a nigger, General, died in the Vietnam war."

"Well I'll be. You cotton picking son of a bitch, and you all pearly white."

Holding's transceiver burst into life. It was now used only for matters concerning Silverbird.

"Calling General Holding. This is Sunchild calling General Holding, come in General."

Holding sprang to his transceiver, "General Holding here, Sunchild. Is that you Phil?"

"It sure is, General."

"How on earth did you come to get mixed up in this business, Phil?"

"I was riding shotgun for a naval manoeuvre, apparently the cameras that were fitted to the long range fighter escort, which were to accompany Silverbird required adjustments, so here I am."

"You have the task of escorting Silverbird down the North Atlantic coast until he turns out to sea?"

"That's right, General. A piece of cake really."

Holding turned and picked up his phone, "Get me Commander Hilroy. I want him in this office. He has some questions to answer."

"But the commander is in Florida, nearly two thousand miles away," replied the clerk.

"GET ME COMMANDER HILROY AND GET ME....."

"Yes sir, General, of course General, right away."

"Sorry about that, Phil. How are things out there."

"Me and Silverbird are just fine, General, and yourself."

"Oh, plodding along. You know I hate sitting in an office."

"Yeah, know what you mean. Could I ask a favour, General?"

"Sure, go right ahead."

"Well it seems I'm gonna be late for supper. I was due on leave tomorrow. I promised the kids I would take them down to Rocky Park. Would you let Jenna know I'm gonna be late."

"Sure kid, I used to worry too. You sure love that family of yours."

"You bet, General."

Holding fumbled about in his pocket, searching for the phone number. He knew the house call number, but the interstate exchange always had him beaten. Finally he found the tatty piece of paper he was looking for.

"I have the number here, Phil. I'll get right on it."

"No hurry, General, I ain't due home till the early hours."

"Say Phil, if you are going on leave, why not call down my place sometime. I'm sure the old Foxba ... er, I mean Bertha, your ma, would be pleased to see you."

"Can do, General."

"Is there anything else I can do before I sign off?"

"You could check where my relief has got to. I am already off the Central American coast about fifty miles out, fuels running low and the skies getting dark. I will have to return to base shortly."

"Message understood. I will see what I can do."

"Just a mo, General. I think you can cancel that request. I have four blips on my radar, must be the escort, strange though, I have had no recognition code."

"Perhaps with us chatting so much, Phil, maybe you missed..."

"Maybe, General, will take a look anyway .... I have them in view, but I can't make them out clearly, it's too dark up here."

"Give them a call, Phil."

"Will do, General."

"Sunchild to Foursome, Sunchild to Foursome.

Identify .... Sunchild to Foursome, come in Foursome .... No reply General .... HELL AND DAMNATION, WE HAVE A MISSILE LAUNCH. THEY'RE ATTACKING SILVERBIRD."

"GET OUTTA THERE, PHIL .... DO YOU HEAR ME?"

"No can do, General. I have a job to do here."

Sunchild swung through one eighty degrees at the speed of sound, but even the oppressive 'G' force couldn't slow Phil Holding. His duty was clear.

"SILVERBIRDS HIT. DAMN THOSE BASTARDS  
.... Launching Tracker Dogs one and two.

"GET OUTTA THERE, PHIL."

"Running on target. Hit one.....Two hits, General.  
Swinging round to engage remaining bandits."

A thunderous roar ripped through General Holding's  
speaker system. "PHIL, PHIL, WHAT`S HAPPENING?"

"Taken a hit, General, but I ain't finished yet ....  
Launching Tracker Dogs three and four .... Can't hold her, I'm  
breaking up."

"SUNCHILD, COME IN SUNCHILD. SPEAK TO  
ME PHIL. PHIL, IT'S YOUR DADDY."

"Tell Jenna I love her Pa. Love you all ....."

The speakers fell silent.

General Holding's face was a ghostly white. His  
hands were trembling and his legs felt weak.

"Let me help you, Sir, " said his aide, "I know how  
you are feeling."

## CHAPTER 10

Pain racked Silverbird's body. Thunder was in his ears and his eyes were blind. He screamed heedlessly in his anguish, his cry reaching out into the distant heavens. All his thoughts were numbed by the agony of his body, but like a passing hurricane the pain was gone. His conscious drifted freely in utter blackness, no thoughts passing through his mind, for he had no language in which to think, nor had he any memories to fall upon, all was gone.

From out of the darkness came voices.

"Flight path stabilised. Have directed auto-comp-basers back to Silverbird uni-conscious. All remaining detector functions channelled similarly."

Silverbird's sight began to return, but his vision was not his own. A single lattice screen appeared before him, as his mind again connected he recognised the detector visionary. The sound of the wind again became apparent, but it was metallic and cold. His body remained numb. It could only mean one thing.

"Detectors, report please."

"I am afraid you are flying on borrowed time, Silverbird. You have lost all sensors and analysers. Your trionic nerve centre is dead. All normal sound and vision functions have been rendered inoperative. It is only the deeds of the auto-comps which have kept you airborne. All detector functions were channelled directly there."

"I understand, detectors. Thank you and the auto-comps for bringing me back on line. What of our aggressors?"

"They did not cease hostilities voluntarily; they were destroyed by our escort. He fought valiantly before his own end. He died well."

Silverbird wondered at his detectors sentiments. At times he found it difficult to believe that they and his auto-comps were no more than his subconscious and at times the alter-ego of his Trigon mind.

"Aircraft approaching."

"Probably my fighter escort," retorted Silverbird.

"Have I the means with which I can warn them to stand off, for my departure?"

"Perhaps," replied the detectors. "One can only try."

The detectors attempted to put out a message of warning as best they could, then spoke no more.

The battered hulk of Silverbird groaned as it changed course; propelled only by his directional thrusters, for his wings were crippled and his engines lifeless. No more did he speak with his basers; there was nothing more to say, they knew their final task.

The committee for alien contact stood motionless, staring at their television screen. The fighter aircraft had directed their camera vision via normal channels to all who would watch. These were the orders of General Holding, given with the consent of the President.

Upon the screen the shadowy outline of Silverbird could be seen moving out to sea. He moved with laboured determination, until he came at last above a small island atoll and there he paused, and in the light of a silvery moon, his broken body came to its final destiny.

A cruel detonation of horrific magnitude, rent the calm of the night air asunder. With the likeness of a huge atomic explosion, the powerful, but pathetic remains of Silverbird transcended the world of humankind. A brilliant light before a darkened sky.

The End

## EPILOGUE ONE

With a deliberance borne of hate did Warcloud break his bonds with his companion; the tortured cry of his little brother still echoing in his mind. His boosters burst into life and like the true angel of death he pounded his way down the celestial star lanes. The galactic myriads shrank and cowered at his coming. Even the perpetual river of time stemmed its flow to stand breathless and in awe. A mighty phantom, he seemed, menacing, foreboding, but most of all, vengeful.

## EPILOGUE TWO

General Holding sat in a darkened room reciting to himself:

A cold moonset of blue  
A blooded sunrise of red  
A deathly hush lay upon the world  
For all birdsong was dead

x x x x x

A friend he did come  
And trust he did give  
A joy to the world  
Why could he not live

x x x x x

A darkness descends  
A shadowy shawl  
For what we have done  
God help us all

## Another Day

Denori Rori was sitting peacefully on the stump of an okibu tree looking quite simply, awe stricken. He was looking towards the space port at Aprillion, three laps from his village, six laps from the great dome of Veloria, which it served. Hanging in the sky above the port was a giant silver sentient spacecraft; it was just too much for him to take in at one go. It was beautiful, mesmerising.

Denori studied the craft, it did not look like a conventional spaceship at all, it was like a giant bird or flutterby. It had collector wings that flapped? He did understand that the wings were dual purpose and not for beating air, it was about gravitation and the surface area which faced the ground. The ship was in a sense balancing gravity and changing conditions as its wings slowly lifted, straightened and fell. It was as if gravity was magnetism and the ship's wings were of like poles to the ground; they were repelling each other.

For many years Denori had been aware of 'reality-reversed' theory, usually referred to as tachyon theory. He knew that in everyday life gravity sucked, that is why he was sat on the stump of an okibu tree. He also knew that gravity attracted only when time went from past to future. It actually repelled when going from future to past, going nowhere at the interchange; a sort of flip of the gravitational bar magnet. It was variable time perspective that allowed engineers to counteract gravity and engineer 'mass manipulators', allowing extreme accelerations and tip top velocities but there was a problem in many people's minds, a very real problem.



They worried about time. They worried that people may one day travel back in time thus wrecking their future, disappearing their now, for it was said that if someone travelled to the past and a single okibu was munched then the ripple of events would change humanity. Here sprang the routes of another idea in Denori's mind.

While Denori was musing a close friend named Trilorian wondered by.

"Good musing," said Trilorian.

"Indeed," replied Denori, "what brings you this way?"

"I am looking for Teroni, have you seen him?"

"No."

"Strange, no-one seems to have seen him. It is as if he has disappeared into another dimension."

"Really." Denori smiled.

"You would think he would be around to see his life's achievement flapping over Aprillion." Trilorian turned his head in said direction. He felt a slight breeze in his face, oscillating as if it came from wing beats.

"I could not agree more, perhaps a hold up?"

"Maybe. However, no time for chit chat, must hurry along," said Trilorian. "Toodles."

"Toodles," replied Denori.

Trilorian was a good friend of Denori's. He was much acclaimed for his theory of 'pin head universes' and 'gene string-theory', the genetics of universe type. Part of the friendship was probably due to the fact that he too had used Denori's visualisation of the dimensional interchange to make his former theory work. Trilorian had postulated that this universe was one of many. They formed around the dimensional interchange, where the lack of reality allowed for such massive objects. A gathering mass here would add the universal creator and support, time and would worryingly

explode into our space with an almighty bang...so to speak. It was to replace the old 'we condensed from hidden, dark stuff theory'.

Denori watched Trilorian disappear into the distance then went back to his musing. He had long thought about conventional time and now a theory was developing in his head. A certain Albert Onejug developed the time 'factual' many, many years ago and Denori had studied his works. Berty had explained his ideas on time by employing the relativity zipflyer; a medieval interchange express. Back in those distant days much transport was done on rails by machines with engines and Denori decided to use this zipflyer coupled with the ancient communication medium known as the coms pole to develop his own 'factual'.

Denori had become a biblo junkie over the decades. Because his mind spent most of his time in overdrive he suffered much cranium pain and required the biblo mind numb..er. As you might expect over the next decade Denori did much biblo popping while he developed his theory of time. He really wasn't convinced that travelling back in time to scoff okibus would make any difference to the future, although it would prove that the pasts, futures existed, hmm?

In his mind Denori pictured the railtrack on which the zipflyer ran. He then pictured the zipflyer. It was an engine powered by steam. A real nostalgic device with character. Behind the engine were many carriages which the engine pulled. People were seated in these carriages and there was a walkway which allowed people to walk up and down the carriages to buy bad food.

The zipflyer or time train, travelled the track heading forwards, a pretty reasonable thing to do under the circumstances. To each side of the track were the coms poles, they were around fifty paces apart, sticking up in the air around five paces, with wires attached at the top, which in

this instance was unimportant. Denori pictured these poles as years and as the zipflyer passed them, the years slipped away into the past. This was time as everyone understood it. The next step was to move into the future then the past.

In Albert Onejugs 'factual' he did not have a problem moving into the future, you simply had to walk in the direction the train was moving and you would pass the coms poles, the years, much more quickly than some-one sat on a seat. However, if you tried to move backwards in time, you may well move forward slower than the man on the seat but the best you could manage was to walk backwards at the speed the zipflyer was moving forwards thus freezing yourself in time, staying level with the nearest coms pole.

Denori had mused on this a long time and decided there was a way to move backwards in time, all you had to do was disconnect the 'br+c' and leave the carriage at the interchange, wave to Teroni in the Nth, then set off walking in the opposite direction to which the carriage was travelling. When you got tired jump back on a carriage to rejoin the flow of time. You would be coms poles in the past.

This was not exactly something to write to the great dome about because the sheer fact that there was a giant silver spaceship flying about using a 'time variance' anti-gravity accelerator proved there was a way backwards, but what about changing the future, his present. Albert had stated that if you went back in time, the time line would change so the event of going back would not occur as was, which would leave you going round in circles, did, didn't; did, didn't and so on, having a sort of 'ground pig day' or instant or whatever.

Why should this be so? Denori was having none of it. If you get off the flyer and get back on a carriage further down the line you would have no effect on the carriages in front of you. The man you left sat on his seat would always be sat there in your future. Even when you reached the point of

your exit the last time you passed this 'time', it would not make any difference because you and your memories had already moved on, just like the seated man. Time rippled forward in waves, the waves never caught each other, serial universes. You could have around an infinite amount of time lines all following one another, one never interfering with the next. Yesterday may not now be as we remember it.

Wow! Thought Denori. Now I have something to write to the great dome about... a figure of thought. Denori did have a realisation here that life itself was experienced in pockets, it made him a little reflective. A single happy day in the life of a young child who had many fun days would no doubt be forgotten; forgotten by everyone, yet it was a pocket of happiness. A time worthwhile yet no memory remained. Denori smiled.

The time arrived when Denori had completed his work and decided to put it to the most learned minds in Veloria. Because he had been there before no one bothered researching his work, they simply hired the orchestra and set a day for his speech.

The scientists, professors and doctors sat in silence while Denori put forward his hypothesis. When he had finished they said such things as, "Umm," and "arr," and some said, "Umm arr." One said, "Where's the bathroom." He was so excited. Not a lot had changed since Denori's last visit.

It appeared to Denori that not everyone was convinced by his logic, so he decided to strike the master blow. He knew that if he could 'prove' his hypothesis by mathematics, everyone would agree with him. He strode over to the blackboard which was situated where none could miss it and there he wrote for all to see,  $4+4=8$ . He simply hoped that his adjudicators would take his meaning.

The assembly was dumbfounded, shocked and utterly exasperated. They just didn't have an answer to such a

technically perfect piece of mathematics. It was twenty five percent...or was it a third?...Or was it a third which made it twenty five percent more advanced than his last mathematical piece of inspiration? What else could they do but accept Denori's reasoning. When the gathering eventually found their voices, they said such things as, "Well, yes," and "Oh, I see," and one said, "I am wearing pull-ups... No sweat."

Amidst the commotion, Trilorian, the stand in president, rose to his feet and appealed to the crowd for silence. "Please be quiet!". In the new found silence he looked upon Denori and said, "It has been my pleasure to welcome you here in Veloria, Denori Rori. It is not every day that I have the honour of greeting a man of such dedication and free thought. I propose that this assembly, whom, if I may say, still have more qualifications than you have had hot okibus, allocate for you, a day in the Calendar of Famed Names."

The gathering burst into applause shouting such things as 'hurrah' and the poor people 'hooray' and when it had quietened down Trilorian continued, "As to keep with the tradition set by our ancestors, we will dedicate the day in which your thought first encompassed this subject, to your honour. Which day was this, Denori?"

Denori had chosen his date well. He had made sure it didn't clash with the date of anyone else's great idea because only one person could be allotted a specific day on the calendar. "The twentieth of Duli," cried Denori.

"A truly unique day," retorted Trilorian. I am sure the president, Teroni Methusala will dedicate it to your name as soon as he returns.

"Bugger," cursed Denori.

The End

# Genesis

Abdul and Savaka sat behind a bullet pitted wall. It was late afternoon in the holy land and public transport was near full.

Abdul checked his explosives belt then fastened his coat. “Soon, the bus will be along. We will wreak our revenge for the years we have suffered, for the lands we have lost, for our friends who have perished.”

Savaka raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure this is a good idea. We have been friends for years and I support your cause but this act is beyond me. I do not see how more killing helps anything.”

“They understand nothing less. You cannot reason with them, they think this is their land, yet less than a lifetime ago they were few, these were our lands.”

“Even so you risk eternity. You do realise that Christians believe in a place called hell, for everyone, and you could be heading down that highway.”

“That place is not for the true believers, Savaka.”

“It is a place of fire and brimstone, of eternal torment, the house of Satan. Be sure of your faith.”

“Where there is a hell there is a heaven. Besides my cause is just. I fear not.” Abdul's voice held conviction, if not complete certainty.

“There are others with beliefs too. Some believe after death we are reborn.”

“Reborn to pay for our sins, the Ghoddles. I believe them not. I will take my place in Paradise. What I do is not evil but glorious.”

“I mean the followers of Siddhartha. Like you they

believe suffering is inseparable from existence. They strive for Nirvana but not through the deaths of others but through tolerance and enlightenment.”

Abdul smiled, “Were it that life was so simple. I believe we must stand and be counted. This is not about me or simply what I stand for, it is for the ones I love; it is for freedom; it is for the future.”

The sound of an approaching bus came to their ears. Savaka stared for long moments into Abdul’s eyes, Abdul looked back. “You are a follower Savaka but I must lead by example, peace be with you my friend.”

Abdul left the shelter of the wall almost casually. He walked towards the waiting bus.

Savaka looked on in awe and horror. He did not agree with Abdul but he knew his friend was not brain washed or a fanatical follower of ‘Laden’, who had to the best of their knowledge died with his second in command in the Afghan war. He, like himself, carried questions about life and doubts about the afterlife. It was a brave, unselfish, yet murderous deed Abdul had plotted. Savaka sat with his head in his hands, a tear rolled down his cheek. He shook his head.

There was standing room only on the bus; Abdul tried to mix invisibly with the crowd but still he received anxious glances. He avoided the eyes around him and quietly said his prayers. He knew the final seconds of his life on earth were ticking away; the bomb timer was set; it needed no more encouragement from himself nor could anyone else hope to disarm it.

A young Jewish girl made her way to the bus entrance where Abdul was standing. She would exit the bus at the next stop. She brushed against Abdul. He looked down; he could just see her face; he had the strangest feeling. For an instant he hoped his explosives would not detonate, not at least until the next stop where this girl would depart but it was not to be.

It was not as Abdul imagined. He saw the blinding white flash of the explosion before his sight was lost; he heard an earth-shattering roar as his eardrums burst. He felt excruciating pain while his body was being ripped to pieces by the force of the blast. He was still aware; his brain required nothing to survive a limited time.

Abdul really didn't know if he was dead or alive but his sight was returning. It was blurred and the shapes were ghostly. He heard sounds, at first muffled but then with clarity. He was in a hospital; he had survived the blast. He tried to speak but he couldn't seem to form his words, he just gurgled. He tried to speak again, "ooh coo cooey iggle." It really wasn't working.

He heard a loving and compassionate voice say, "He sounds so cute."

"He just looks like his big sister," came the loving voice of a woman.

The man smiled. "His face will always remind us. We will never forget."

The lady was holding a picture. It looked shadowy to Abdul but it reminded him of someone he knew; the little girl who was stood next to him on the bus. Who were these people? What were they talking about?

"He will avenge her death when he grows to manhood," said the voice of the woman.

Abdul was feeling tired. He felt someone stick something in his mouth. He sucked on it. It was comforting. He flayed his arms and kicked his little legs. He tried to think back to how he had got here, but he couldn't remember; in fact he could remember little of anything. The word bomb seemed to come to mind then for a moment enlightenment crossed his face.

The man turned to the woman, "Am I hearing things, did our son just say, 'Oh Buddha'."



“Perhaps, just baby talk, bless his little cotton socks.  
Look he’s gone to sleep.”

Stories End

## Time Warrior

A game that joins Shades and Axe

### Guild of Time Travellers

I was sat by the camp-fire with heavy eyes. One moment I was staring into the flames the next moment the flames were gone. I could see a city bathed in starlight. Above me giant birds of steel and iron winged their way towards the high walls and towers. I was running, my form was surreal; the trail beneath my feet was beckoning me onward. There was a gateway ahead, like a door to some strange new world. I was on an outcrop of rock. I could see nothing below me, just the gateway ahead.

I entered the gateway. Flames were lapping at my feet; I had to run, run ever faster. Lights and sound exploded in my brain; pounding; beating. Then they were gone, I was in a long tunnel, leading from whence I came; to where I was going; to where I am now, but the other world still haunts me. The moon is bright tonight, but is it the moon of the steel bird or the moon of bow and quiver. Amidst the stars a giant wheel turns. I feel I have seen it before; I feel I have been there before, but it does not exist in my land of fields and hedgerows; castles and courtyards. The tunnel divides us.

The last thing I remember before I sank into a deep restful sleep was the runway. I do not understand the word runway, yet I know that is its name. In the mist of the horizon, lights flicker, beckoning, like the call of some distant village, but I will not go. A shadow approaches; it is borne on the wing, the wings of dread. It trims its flight getting ever nearer, nearer and nearer. I am apprehensive, if that is a good name

for fear. I see an opening; a window that is too dark for my eyes to penetrate, then in a flash of light I see inside. I see myself, but I am not alone; a shade of something evil lurks behind me.

This was the original readme file, which accompanied the 'Dreamscape' demo of 'Time Warrior'. This demo is still available. To view this demo or to play 'Time Warrior' as it was intended you really need a Commodore Amiga with a hard disk and 2megs of chip ram. It will quite happily run on the slowest to the fastest. The game will run under Amiga emulation on a pc.

When the demos were made they were copied in low-resolution (around 320\*256) to VHS then loaded into a pc and compressed into movie format. While the quality was not good, the writing being very difficult to read, it did allow anyone to view them. They give a good insight into the game. As the files are small I will upload them to my website, allowing download with broadband.

While game control did allow the player to walk around in a full screen landscape, using a joystick; it was in fact meant to be played using click on icons or by written word. You can actually say what you like to who you like; you would type as you would talk. As night fell and the camp-fire lit the player entered an animated dreamscape.

The game was easy playing and not over long. Like 'Shades' it was intended to give a full experience without lingering on. For a full review and update log onto my website.

'Axe' begins on page 255. This novel carries a name index at the back of the book for character identification also notes on pronunciation. Carthelion itself rhymes with rebellion. This index is an aid to the reader and can be of use in identifying non-mainstream characters. It is in places slightly cryptic so it can be used without interfering with the story.

## Open Forum

Some people get writers block others have stories just bursting to get out. It really helps if you are writing because you enjoy it.

Why should we escape to the worlds of fantasy and science fiction? Because it can be fun, it's a laugh, it's harmless and it throws different ideas around. I think the realities of life help us to walk in this direction. This is the first time any of these stories have appeared in book form.

The first story 'Shades of Evil' is in itself a short novel. It was a follow up to the paperback 'Axe: A Tale of Carthelion' from the Tolkien era. This story had an accompanying album and game. This was decades ago; the game 'Axe' was a commercial Spectrum release that made No2 in the adventure charts. The album itself was professionally mastered though distribution was very limited. This was a hobby not a career; something I liked to do as opposed to something I had to do, there were other pressing matters.

'Axe' and 'Shades' came together in the game 'Time Warrior'. This game came in two parts on the Spectrum followed by a much advanced shareware version on the Amiga, appearing on Amiga Format cds 12 and 24. It looked great on my 20" Granada tv/monitor; sadly a 28" LCD TV left a lot to be desired, although the game play remained the same. Like 'Axe', 'Shades' also had an accompanying album. The story integrated the music and the tracks were arranged around the story. While the album was compiled it was not professionally mastered. I have tapes of 'Shades' from Derrick Johnson, its chief architect (once associated with Pentere and Silent Watcher), right up until the instrumental and pre-studio demo's, at this point in time we both moved home. I narrated the final version using the original tracks but it was destined to be returned to Derrick to complete, putting vocals to the new instrumental tracks. This never happened. It is a real story telling album from 'Stone and Spire'. It survives on cd and in mp3 format. One half of me says 'forget it', the other half says 'oh what the hell'. If it's kept in a cupboard it simply dies. While nothing is certain, this album may be made available on my personal website for those who have sufficient interest in the story.

The stories in this book were written over a long period of time, from the eighties to the present. 'Seven Shades of Evil' took its name from the novel 'Shades of Evil' and the seven complimentary short stories. 'Shades of Evil and the Seven', reworded because there were indeed seven shades of evil.

'Shades' was first released on 'floppy disk' in 1992. I sent the story to what I thought to be the largest 'public domain' company around at the time. I believe I sent it on the Tuesday and on Thursday morning they rang me and said, can we put it on our catalogue disk, not as a listed item but as a complementary story. I was quite humbled. There are probably still thousands of these disks in bottom drawers somewhere.

'Everyone's Story' was a different kettle of fish. It was simply trying to make a particular point on choice or the lack of it but once you bring up the subject of choice then you begin to look at the choices we have made. I was taught at junior school that 'things can only get better'; what we seem to have achieved in the decades since is to lose much of what we had. This is a very short story. They are mythical characters, yet the story had very real implications. Because it is about who we are, what we have become, it was titled as such, because it was indeed 'Everyone's Story'.

To actually write a story, which says we have no choice in what we do, I looked at the people who were making decisions around us; what these decisions were, the people who were carrying out these decisions, our freedoms, which seem very much diminished by laws and surveillance. What was really a simple statement which said, 'We are who we are, but not by choice', grew wings. There were issues to discuss but I thought an open forum was a better place for discussion than the story itself.

I can always remember many years ago walking through airport customs. I was the first off the plane, first to walk by the customs officers. There were two of them. They fixed their eyes on me as I approached and glared at me with bulging eyeballs until I disappeared. They knew how to make innocent people feel guilty. Things have changed since then; this is no longer limited to airports and uniformed custom officers.

Over the term of our last government we have seen over three thousand new laws, that you can be found guilty of despite the fact you haven't the foggiest idea what they are. There are plans to tag everyone; there are 'after the event' cameras that watch us each step of the way. Then there are the chips, which now come in economy packs to log everything we do, even wheely bins are being fitted with them. Next you will get fined for putting an extra cabbage in the bin, then they will want a dna sample. A survey showed a quarter of the British public admitted to breaking the few laws they knew about. In reality we have laws to ensure everyone breaks one law or another. It hasn't just been pensioners not paying their council tax or people who sell goods in pounds and ounces that have been criminalized; try saying 'nonsense' at a Labour Party conference, the terrorist squad will have you. You can even get thrown in jail for falling asleep behind the wheel; the problem here is that everyone drives while tired, usually when they have just awoken. No one wants an accident but if your numbers up? With roads choked with speed limits most cars are on autopilot anyway.

We have laws and surveillance that would leave the Gestapo wetting themselves with glee. With a half accountable government and an under funded police force this isn't too big a problem but we live in a fractured society, suppose Muslim terrorists or general Muslim behaviour gave the 'BNP' a real voice, then how would these 'police state' powers be used. Even now police can shoot an innocent bystander in the head seven times on mis-information without recourse. Worse still there are millions of people out there with such gullible minds they support it. They never consider that they may be the next. There were so many safer and more rational actions the police could have taken.

The man in the 'Home Office' of 'New Britain' said, 'If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear', presumably like the guy with all the bullet holes; a saying echoed everywhere. He left office because he got caught jumping in bed with someone else's wife.....hang on, I stand corrected, it was 'nanny fast tracking'. Ok, that was the first time; the second time was suspicion of shady business deals.....

This is of course typical of people who quote this saying and like this man they think what they are doing is fine. It's just everyone else who is at fault. This is why government only agrees to freedom of information about others, because they never do anything wrong?

New laws have put everyone at risk. You can be jailed for a single picture on your computer, yet the minute you log on line, any site you click on can download what they like onto your hard drive, there is no protection at all against this, all the firewalls, virus checkers and spam seekers in the world will not pick out text or a picture. Why would anyone want to invade your computer? I've no idea. I've no idea why people would write viruses either but there is a whole host of new ones every day.

Why would you be jailed for a picture? What it cannot be is exploitation, especially of children because as the story says it's advertisers and TV companies who make billions out of kids and the company owners get Knighthoods. Little Billy doesn't really get a choice about appearing on telly having his bum kissed, he simply accepts the exploitation. In fact he is quite likely to smile and giggle, because he has not yet been paranoidised (new word (1 of 2) for a new concept). There isn't any harm here. People are not born with shame or embarrassment of this nature, nor as the 'Amazonians' have proved would they ever grow into it, they need some one to make them paranoid, to make them hurt. Paranoidisation is itself a creator of evil. Where it exists debate is dead, conflict thrives, societies become repressive.

We live in a country where we have hang-ups from public toilets and showers through to breast feeding. When the sun comes out there are thousands of holidaymakers on our beaches wrapped in brightly coloured towels, hopping on one leg trying to get in and out of bathing costumes. They are like exotic birds from the 'rainforest' doing mating rituals. For the odd few who are not shy, they have to go to, what's that name again, those places without a sex offenders register, oh yes, 'nature reserves'? Are we sure we have the right people in there? In reality you may get thrown into jail for taking your clothes off in public yet we break records in teenage pregnancies? If you really want something to sky rocket, make it illegal. It worked with guns and certain web sites. Ban something and everyone wants to see what you are banning. Do it like the Americans did with prohibition. This piece of legislation successfully turned a couple of million part time drunks into twenty million full time criminals.

It would seem that looking at a picture could be classified as abuse, or at least cause abuse. I wouldn't argue with this. An example being Britain's very own Princess being hounded every day of her life, forced at a hundred miles per hour into a tunnel, rammed into a support, having lots of pictures taken while she was crushed and dying. This was horrific. Why were the photographers doing this?

Because newspapers pay for the pictures. Why do newspapers want pictures? Because it sells their newspapers and makes them loads of cash. Who is it giving them all this cash? The people who buy all the papers because her pictures in it. Shouldn't these people be doing ten years? Well, there are no pressure groups or newspapers to support this, besides it would be a 'police state' gone mad. Let's face it, teenager Freddie watches Rambo, then borrows his dad's gun and makes a real effort to kill all his school mates. We know this happens, and the people who are responsible are TV viewers. Films and other lurid programs wouldn't be made without their money. As with most things watching TV is not a victimless crime. Should we jail all TV viewers? There is a practicality problem here, fill our jails with people like this and the drunks who fall out of pub doors every weekend and try to beat your head into pulp get off with warnings..... O.k they do anyway.

In front of me I have a tabloid newspaper. It jumps on the missionary bandwagon and rants about a very reserved senior police officer's view on 'paedo's' under the heading 'paedo outrage'. It says any one viewing images which cause abuse should be imprisoned and ends with the comment about this form of abuse. 'If that is not worth a jail sentence what is?' Now let me think. How about paying three hundred thousand pounds for pictures of a Princess crushed in a car crash? She had to die to prevent the cash swapping hands. I certainly don't under-estimate the influence the press have on simple minds and their ability to destroy the innocent, similar to this officer is renown.

For me this is perhaps the tip of the iceberg. There are worse things than law. Over the last decade we have been taught how not to be communities. Different religions encouraged to build their own schools. We have to watch the disabled like hawks, just in case they are claiming benefit they are not entitled to, the unemployed living the life of Riley on their fifty pounds a week. We really do have to shop them for digging someone's garden and making an extra few quid. Does anyone ever wonder why these people toil for a few pounds instead of getting a regular job? Perhaps the most eerie thing I heard was from one of our most notable do-gooders. I can't remember the precise wording but it went something like this:

We should all be vigilant and keep our eyes peeled for suspicious looking people. The most suspicious are the ones that don't look suspicious.

Long pause for contemplation.....Where does that leave us all, back in the airport? I'm afraid it does. Everywhere becomes a custom post. We should all sit on a bench and look out of the corners of our eyes, at each other. So, so sad. I first noticed this on the East coast. I left the family to get a hot dog. After ten minutes waiting I said, 'Oh come on, the family will think I have fallen off the pier.' One of the 'hot dog ladies' looked at me and said, 'We thought you was on your own. We wondered what a man by himself would be doing on the sea front.' Clearly the type of people who love to gather in 'huddles' and point.

Now you know where the 200 metre comment in Everyone's Story' came from. I really think wherever there are signs which say 'No Dogs Allowed', such as parks and holiday resorts, they should have the signs extended to 'No dogs and unaccompanied adult males'. There are vast swathes of country where these males cannot go without suspicion and there are at any one time around fifteen

million of them. Witch-hunts have been held from Wolverhampton to the Orkney's with Newcastle in the middle. From Hull via Rochdale to Neverland. The world's biggest child supporter being pursued by what seemed to be the largest turnout of American uniforms since D-Day. It proves Salem is truly alive and kicking. Camera wars at school plays and football matches from parents who fear for their kids being put on film despite the fact that kids appear on TV 24/7 on dozens of channels. Is there a man out there who would dare to rescue a lost child on a beach or for that matter, anywhere? Dare you risk misinterpretation by grabbing a child who is going to walk in front of a car? Intervene when kids are beating each other to pulp to get pictures to upload to the internet? Funny how these pictures are at present legal, perhaps not of special interest to pressure groups and lawmakers? Is there a child of paranoid parents with a serious, personal, life threatening medical problem that would step forward or would this area be so no-go they just die from it?

When you take your kids around town many women stop and smile at them and say such things as, 'Aren't they gorgeous'. Imagine a man who liked kids saying this? Imagine a man who loves children and has none of his own his own? And this poor guy pays for everyone else's tax credits.

There are people out there who sit and watch TV all day, complaints telephone in hand, on genital watch. What on earth goes through their heads? It leaves the few rational people befuddled. If they want to do something useful there are hundreds of good causes out there. If kids and genitals are their thing then why not try and save the little boys who have socks put in their mouths and razors taken to their genitals in religious rituals. Children are not born religious and if they don't grow up that way they are going to spend their lives wondering what it would be like not to be mutilated. This is an activity promoted by state and police through their inaction. These kids really do need help.

In schools children have been handed control, instead of strict discipline, bribes are the order of the day, but in handing them control they have also been alienated. Laws are made to give them immunity from adults then more laws have to be made to protect the public from them. And at the end of the day, poor little Johnny who spent his life locked in his room with his games machine for fear of unaccompanied adult males has now grown into one. Even worse he may be 18 years of age with a 15 year old girlfriend and be in line for a ten-year jail sentence. No one told him that only women are allowed to associate with the under sixteen's. If you are not a woman you fit the profile of an abuser. If Johnny is in love he really needs to move to a less repressive EU state. Odd really that you can step over a white line and a crime suited to a 10 year jail sentence turns into something perfectly fine. From the girlfriend's point of view, young people hate being classed as children because they are not allowed to make their own decisions. All they want to do is grow older, what a waste of their best years.

One police chief reckoned there could be a million potential abusers at large that could give society a problem. His numbers could well be right but doesn't that quantity make society itself the problem?

We live in an age where the head of a city social services, by his own admittance dare not bath his own child, where the old lady on the talk show has



cut up her holiday snaps of her grandson because she fears the police under new child laws. If you have the letters 'paed' in your job title you are in danger from the mob and if you look like someone you shouldn't then your best bet is to leave the country. The damage done by lawmakers, and certain do-gooders in this country, aided by the media fighting for viewing figures, from a public who seemingly can't get enough scandal, is permanent and irreversible. It's quite amazing that there are still countries out there where children can be children and adult males without genetic connection can still be part of their lives.

There is an interesting scenario regarding lecherous old men. If you and your wife fell head over heels in love when you were sixteen...stop here, lets wind the clock on. You are forty, that same sixteen-year-old girl walks through the door, are you no longer to be attracted. Does being attracted to the girl you fell in love with now make you a pervert?

I don't agree with the statement, 'The only good do-gooders are dead ones', attributed to General Holding. Some of them are brilliant. Voluntary workers devoting their lives to looking after abandoned children, aids victims, the undernourished. It makes my modest contributions look small....make that pathetic. However for those who revel in the misfortunes of others, those who like to be in the thick of everything, those who need someone to prey on, the puritan busybodies; the world would be a lot better place without them. I do really believe they are responsible for today's children. Half of which are locked in their rooms with their games machines eating pork pies and the other half out causing mayhem. I think the little guy who embezzled £250000 had it all weighed up. 'You can't touch me I'm a minor' AND for anyone who wanted their money back he would shout, 'abuse'. I think most five year olds are up to speed with this, often encouraged by their parents. In fact neighbours tend to use the 'abuse weapon' against each other. When I was young I certainly didn't qualify for angel status but whereas I got a clout they get a payout, can you blame them for being what they are?

I suppose I came from a different age. People didn't spend their lives strapping kids in chairs giving them 'time out' or dainty taps on the hand. Our teachers had canes and even the thugs sat quietly in class, not that they ever used their canes, the threat was sufficient. I have never actually seen anyone expelled or suspended. When teachers have authority and are prepared to use it there isn't a need for this silliness.

This brings us back to the theme of 'Everyone's story'; we are just following the path laid out for us. Some of us are reasoning and we follow reasoning paths but rarely can you reason with those who do the shouting, their paths are set on a different road, their eyes are vacant. It's bad enough when the mob is on the rampage but when you get someone you believe to be a genuine, intelligent, caring person, who is so blinded by their own righteousness that they can't see the damage they are doing it becomes a matter for concern. Only when they can say, 'Yes, by increasing sentences ten fold we have dissuaded minor offenders from crime of this sort BUT we have turned the hard core into murderers,' can you listen to them. Because they have learned the world is not black and white. They have learned to reason. Even the anti-child spanking

campaigners will have deaths on their hands. If a smack can stop a child running on to a road it may save its life. If the campaigner can accept this then you have a rational reasoning person, but the odds are they will have another solution, they can never accept the reality that they may be to blame. They suffer from 'mind-lock'.

If these do-gooders want to help children, campaign for an international spotting service for missing children. Flash their picture around the worlds Civil Services. DO NOT give the picture to the media, that makes the kids a dangerous liability.

With regards to fox hunters and animal-testers, I simply don't understand them. They feel euphoria where I feel revulsion, and never the twain shall meet. As people we are different. I think what really is important is intent. Certainly today's animal researchers seem to be a different breed even if the animal handlers don't.

Of gays. I think they are heterosexuals who prefer men. You could apply this to all tastes, even those who chase sheep, they simply don't have a choice as to what they are attracted to and because the desire is in their brains they don't want to change. Do we feel revulsion or pity? Again intent is the key. Where there is ill intent to harm others there is a crime.

My opinion on juries comes from personal experience. At the end of a trial a jury should retire, consider the evidence, then state a percentage of guilt on a piece of paper. Pop them all in a box then find the average. You would then get a true picture of how guilty the jury thought the accused was. The sentence should reflect the vote. I think many mothers already devastated by the loss of a child due to cot death would stay clear of prison. The hunter do-gooders would need a REAL case with REAL evidence. Most jury decisions are on the flick of coin, evidence is always split. The vote would take the coin away. When I sat on a jury I had to say innocent or guilty. I wasn't allowed an honest opinion, which of course was somewhere between. That was wrong. This idea that someone must be found innocent or guilty is both silly and dangerous. Once an accusation is made and publicised, as is the way, the damage is done. No one lets their kids go off with a suspected murderer who's been cleared. On the other hand why do the 'false accusers' get off scot-free?

For myself I haven't come to terms with this 'five year' jail sentence for defendants who 'conspire to pervert the course of justice'. Doesn't every one who pleads innocent and is found guilty do this? Really the law should pursue these people and extend sentences from say a year for assault and battery to six years because they lied to save themselves. It makes you think there is something more perverse going on like simply prosecuting people they don't like, or people they cannot hang anything else on.

The whole concept of 'Everyone's Story' is that we do not make our own choices. It is purely fictional in the same sense as 'Trimark'. However to test this argument, every time you want to do something badly....don't. See how hard it is to put that fag out, the pint down, no cuppas. When the big business deal is on the table and you're going to make a million, just walk out.

That's just a test, a very difficult test to pass and even if you did pass

you would have still done what you did because you are who you are. That argument is watertight. Once we understand this, vengeance becomes pointless. Imagine a world without vengeance? At the end of the day our strength of character depends on how we deal with our new-found knowledge.

Before I move onto 'Calendar', people do make me laugh. Here is a story from the 'Book of Truth', Chapter 13, 'Unwanted Truths':

John leaves his house, spits like a footballer all over the pavement, blows his nose like a footballer on the road without the need for a hanky. Gets in his car, which belches blue smoke, throws his fish and chips paper out of the window, drives to his mates. Gets out of the car and urinates on a lamppost and throws up over the dog. Enters the house and switches all the lights on, ignites the fire, blowing smoke up the chimney and fumes up the power station stack.

His friend arrives and lights a fag. 'How dare you,' shouts John. 'You are polluting my air.'

No I don't smoke. I just have a real problem with hypocrites (and with the amount of kiddies who will die in the home with a public smoking ban) but you may have noticed that already. I am one of those people who would like to see lie detectors in open court, on tv, not to be simply used on the defendant, let him question his accusers while they are wearing one. It would be interesting to see who ended up in jail. Another truth questions the many people who report illegal web sites. What are those people searching for? why are they visiting the site? Or if they are being targeted, where have they been to make the illegal site owners think they are bent? If I was a police officer I would keep an open mind but I would know whose house door to knock on first. Next story.

'Calendar' is one of the older stories. It is very light hearted; the only story I have written that contains brackets, as this makes the story unique I thought they would be best left in place.

'Calendar' was one of those stories you just doodle or at least it started that way. What the story doesn't say the 'post mortem' does. In the days of film cameras a real photographer would be happy to get one good picture per role of film. With sci-fi stories the object is to come up with an idea to make the 'general' reader think.

While the 'accelerators' in these stories are perhaps an eternity evolved in 'idea' and engineering from our 'particle accelerators', there is perhaps a similarity in the fact that both can manipulate time and mass. It is of interest to note that if you give a young child a garage and a couple of cars, he will pick up the cars and bash them together. Give science a 'particle accelerator' and some particles.....

For anyone who thinks the 'book' didn't tell them when the end of reality would occur. Yes it did.

'Tumblewheel' was the space station and the centre of my fourth story. It's one of those things you have to sit and imagine, slowly turning and tumbling

through space. Large enough to sustain a population with its own, outside agriculture, woodlands and lakes. I always found other sci-fi stories by other authors intriguing such as 'Ringworld'. A ring around the sun on which people lived. 'Cities in Space'; the vision of a spindizzy ripping a city out of the ground. Or a space elevator with counterweight to keep it in the sky, a lift that takes you into orbit. This is 'core science fiction'. Imagine a universe imploding into existence from near the interchange or dark matter; take the tachyon perspective.

The 'theory of infinities' is interesting, amongst other things it points out that some 'apparent definates' are not quite what they seem. For example if you set off across the room at 90mph for eternity, you would at least expect to get to the other side, but if you half your stride every step, a billion years later you will still be in the middle of the room. It says the universe we perceive as magic is indeed created with mirrors. To move forward strangely, try adjusting the mirrors.

'Tumblewheel', like other of my science fiction stories considers the possibility of anti-gravity as used in star-drives but more importantly in this instance increasing gravity. Everything with mass has gravity thus my stories made the reasonable presumption that if there was no gravity there was no mass, an object without mass is inertialess; without being dogged by inertia you could power yourself to the speed of light with a piece of coal. Sadly things are not quite that simple, it's a type of cartoon logic. It followed to Tiros that if gravity could be reduced then maybe it could be increased. I think all Britishers know who those super heroes, 'The flowerpot men' are...And of course 'little weed' in the middle. Dan Dare and Neil Armstrong were in their own versions of the Eagle.

'Trimark' is a very real story. Experience tells me that large chemical complexes have minor mishaps continuously and every few years ones of a more dangerous nature. Every now and then lady luck really does conspire against them and the lid blows. Of course this doesn't simply happen in chemical complexes, the nuclear industry has the same problem. I can always remember a conversation with a friend. I had been working overseas in the oil and gas industry while he had been down the nuclear road. He said to me, 'The nuclear industry is three times safer than petrochemicals,' to which I replied, 'Oh, you only have one major alert each week?' That question still remains unanswered.

One thing I would say in defence of the oil and petrochemical industry is they do plan for disasters. Some companies do build on-site bunkers and have maps covering a 25-mile radius, the area at major risk. They understand nothing is perfect and there are things unforeseen, sadly the nuclear industry doesn't seem to grasp this. I heard there were no emergency plans for a major disaster because like flood and earthquake, it is never going to happen. How stupidly conceited can you get.

Actually, I would bet a thousand pounds to a penny there are plans; they just won't include the general public. For anyone who believes governments are not this sinister, how about the decades of silence over asbestos? Britain allowing German battleships to blow seven bells out of Scarborough to annoy the public, or better still deliberately bombing German cities so the Luftwaffe would redirect their bombing efforts from airfields to British women and children.

One of the world's greatest myths is that you can meld production targets and safety. The company that makes it cheaper gets the orders, this is why corners are cut. Mind you sometimes cutting costs can in the long run be expensive. Often the NHS tries to keep costs down by minimum intervention, especially since surgeries and local trusts have their own budgets, the trouble is uncured patients keep coming back.

'Silverbird' is the oldest story in this book, it dates back a long way. Like all my stories there have been minor adjustments and corrections from its original conception to make it gel but storywise these are really small. The idea that the Soviets would live in any sort of democracy in 1999 was so far in the future I didn't think it mattered if I got it wrong. The story was written in the manner of its time and couldn't really be changed.

The name Silverbird came from my times overseas back in the eighties. Language was always a problem. It was an old joke, pointing at the sky and saying, 'Me fly big silver bird back to England.' Nothing racist, I believe in the integrity of the individual, not the race. I do get a little tetchy when it comes to being blamed for occurrences such as the slave trade; most English people were akin to slaves themselves. Besides who was it selling overseas slaves to the English traders and which continent started the slave trade anyway? Strange we never really talk about that. 'Silverbird' does go down the road of nationalities but we did have more in the line of free speech when it was written. You didn't get cast from the halls of Big 'B' for saying the big 'N' word.

There's a thing, I know what happened to 'Gollywogs' and the 'Black and White Minstrels' but what happened to 'Mustapha Phag'. Did he go the way of 'Seaman Staines', 'Master Bates' and 'Roger the cabin boy' or is he still out there somewhere, ever popular as 'Muffin the Mule'. Must ask Simon the bar steward.

It really did seem appropriate to have an alien visit the Earth and the Earthlings in their primitiveness, me included, look to the sky and point, saying, 'Look, big silver bird'.

The Trigon mind was based on our own minds and does relate to 'Everyone's Story' as well as 'Another Day'. Thoughts just pop into our heads, we have no control over them, even memory retrieval is totally random. Silverbird was given detector-decoders and auto-comps, which continually acted as a subconscious and alter ego, feeding a constant stream of information to his central processor; sometimes the information was contradictory. Silverbird made the final decision on how to act depending on information he was receiving coupled with information and experience he already possessed.

'Another Day' was a continuation of 'Calendar'. Decades newer and without the brackets. Again light hearted and again it really speaks for itself. Despite its simplicity it did take a little thinking about; portraying our three-dimensional universe (conventional) travelling down the rail track of time, with an outside to our dimensions. We are beings of these dimensions and it is difficult if not impossible to think outside those confines. We talk of a two-dimensional

universe being a flat surface like a painting but if the painting were really two dimensional the paint would have no depth, the picture would vanish. The choice is three dimensions or none. All physical dimensions are at right angles to one another. If time was considered to be at a right angle how do we portray it? Perhaps one of the human races greatest attributes is that we can appreciate things that we can never truly envisage.

'Genesis' goes down the terrorist trail. Because you cannot be wholly religious and also wholly reasoning (a hundred percent belief leaves no room to reason other possibilities), Abdul was given his doubts. There was room for discussion. There are real people in this world, not brainwashed terrorists, who will do what Abdul did. This happens when you have a real grievance, when you and your family are suffering and you hit a stone wall.

'Genesis' has a cruel twist in the tale and who am I to say this is not how it is? Incidentally some think Abdul's last gurgles should have been, 'Oh Ghoddle', not 'Oh Buddha'. For many this religion though supposedly the same, appears to carry more justice.

Finally a solution to today's overcrowding. In our 21st century world most people spend their lives wishing the bad times away. From life locked in the crèche wondering who mum and dad are to those mind numbing days in the classroom, now to be extended to twenty four seven, plus summer school for those who still haven't found their parents. Suffering the job you hate under an ankle biting 'Jack Russell', who got his job by 'bum licking' and whose incompetence makes for long hours and disasters. A painful arthritic retirement, where you find yourself stood in the middle of a room wondering what you came in for. I am a happy person and think you should only live the happy times. This would cut average lifespan to a few years and the world would be full of smiles and have room to spare.

May sentience define you.

Here ends Seven Shades of Evil

# **AXE**

**A Tale of Carthelion**

**Frank Oliver**

Second Edition 2007

Starlight

To Shelagh, David, Leanne and Tracey  
Jade, Kieran and Paige

Axe, the album was written by Kev Vause, Steve Reynolds &  
John Simpson. Performed by Kev Vause and Strange Brew

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*The days of the Sea Kings have gone.*

*No more will their crimson sails of  
fire be seen on the distant horizon.*

*They departed leaving but one  
legacy. And of this legacy does our  
tale speak.*

**AXE**

# ***HOMESTEAD***

The heat of the room was unbearable. Tongues of flame licked greedily at the sparse furnishings which occupied the dining area of the lonely homestead.

“WE HAVE TO GET OUT,” cried Gorran. “WHATEVER AWAITS US BEYOND THESE WALLS MUST SURELY BE A BETTER ALTERNATIVE THAN DYING BY FIRE.”

Hellner heard the voice of her man through the clouds of smoke which separated them. She sensed the desperation in his tone and immediately began to make her way toward him, holding her only child closely against her bosom. Our lives cannot be wasted like this, she thought, the joy we have found in the past few years cannot be destroyed in such a horrible way.

Gorran knew they could not force their exit through any door of their home. Their retreat was blocked by crashing timbers and dancing flame. Only the window could bring them salvation. He had released the catch but the shutters would not move, whether they were jammed or had been secured from the outside, he did not know. Indecision was now upon him. Should he make his way to Hellner and his son or find a means to open the shutters.

The small, slender outline of Hellner became visible to him, through dense smoke. She was choking and gasping for air. “OVER HERE,” yelled Gorran. “THE WINDOW IS OUR ONLY MEANS OF ESCAPE – IF I CAN JUST RELEASE THESE SHUTTERS.” He glanced around looking for something to aid his plight. Only a short wooden bench lay within his reach. This will have to do, he thought, and with no hesitation at all he clasped his hands upon the rough woodwork.

Hellner looked on as the bench crashed through the shutters. The flames leapt higher as the fresh night air rushed in to aid their destructive course.

“Pass me our child and get yourself out of here,” said Gorran

hurriedly, "I shall pass him back to you when you are safely outside."

Hellner was at first reluctant to part with the child, who was now coughing and sobbing, but the heat of the room prompted her on. Her long auburn hair at the back of her head felt as though it were alight and her uncovered legs between gown and footwear burnt feverishly, scorching in the intense heat.

She passed the child to Gorran, who himself had to free the tiny clutching hands from Hellner's gown. Hellner just did not have the heart to do it herself, despite the desperate situation.

Splinters of wood stuck in Hellner's hands and legs as she scrambled through the window opening, but the feeling of pain was subdued. Her mind had become detached from the sufferings of her body; nothing mattered now, except the lives of her loved ones.

She fell from the window head first, cushioning her fall with her bleeding hands. Just for an instant she lay on her back, unmoving upon the barren earth, watching the billowing smoke rise upward, like a great dark plume toward the equally lightless sky, into which it became lost.

"HELLNER!" came a shout. This shook her mind back to reality and brought the fears and anxiety flooding back into her conscious.

She leapt to her feet, holding out her arms high to receive the child through the open window. "QUICKLY," she cried, "WE HAVE NOT A MOMENT TO LOSE."

Gorran passed the child through the window, then followed himself. He landed feet first on the ground, but when he raised his head, his blood ran cold. Before him, in the light of his burning home, he saw the hideous bent figures of those creatures which dwelt in the high mountainous region to the North. They were his nightmare. It seemed that there was no escape after all.

Gorran picked a small log from the ground which he thought to use as a club. "Make a run for it," he said, "I shall try to draw them from you while you make your way to Lorrin's wood. It is less than half a league distant. Wait for me there, I shall follow if I may."

Hellner's eyes met Gorran's, they both knew the chances of escaping their foe were nil, but they had to try. To be captured by

these foul beasts would probably bring a fate worse than death.

Gorran noticed tears in the corners of Hellner's eyes. He too felt sad amid the danger that surrounded them. He saw his little boy's head, buried deep in his mother's breast. How can we outpace our enemies, he thought, but there came no answer.

Hellner began to run eastward. As she drew away from the ferocity of the blaze, she felt the heat steadily subsiding, but her fear grew with every step that was taken. A scream began to build in her throat. She fought down her fear and whispered softly, "Do not worry little one, our home is gone, but we will survive."

The silence of the watching creatures was suddenly broken as two of their ranks sprang forward. They were brandishing spears and a strange high-pitched screeching sound was issuing from their mouths.

Gorran faltered at the hideous sound of their voices, he tried to parry the thrusts of their spears, but his momentary hesitation had betrayed him. He felt a burning pain in his right thigh. Gamely, he tried to advance, but his injured thigh would no longer support his weight. He stumbled and fell upon his hands and knees.

This certainly must be the grand final, he thought. There was no point in looking up, he simply shut his eyes and clenched his teeth waiting for the inevitable end.

Hellner saw Gorran upon the ground as she struggled to maintain her freedom. She still held onto her youngster and though all of her strength and concentration was directed toward her own struggle, the plight of her man came to her in crystal clarity.

Those who stood above Gorran did not intend to end his life quickly, they simply jabbed him with their spears, hard enough to penetrate his skin, but not to bring death. The torment that Gorran suffered brought pitiful cries from his lips, he writhed and twisted in the dirt, wishing with all his soul that his life would come to a close, but it was not yet time.

Hellner fought onward, as spiny fingers wrenched at her child. She bit and kicked out, but it was no use, the numbers, which surrounded her, were too great. The gown which was wrapped about her, hung in tassels. Hands were clawing and tearing at everything and anything. Her grip upon the child was weakening. It

was inevitable that her strength would finally give way – and when it did, Hellner burst into hysterical screams.

The little boy, now wrenched from his mother's arms, passed from one pair of grubby hands to another. He cried for his mater, as he floated through the air, "Mummy!" he called. "Mummy!" He did not know what was happening. Bewilderment and fear had engulfed him.

\* \* \*

The small troop of foot-soldiers had been no more than half a league distant when they had first seen the blaze, but they had known that it would be more than enough to ensure their late arrival. Sweat ran down their brows in the cool night air and their limbs ached sorely from exertion. They had carried packs upon their backs when they had first espied the lighting in the night sky, but these had been thrown to the ground, as had all burdens which they bore. Only their swords remained to them, which they held drawn, as they ran through the undergrowth.

The flame grew brighter as they approached the homestead and their laboured breathing grew harsher. Some tripped and fell as they ran, only to regain their feet again and continue their headlong rush.

It was against all rulings to act in this manner but no-one cared. They all knew the atrocities which came about when a homestead was put to the torch, their only concern was to reach those poor inhabitants that were now besieged.

Pain racked Rowgar's toughened body as he came to the last rise before the homestead; he gritted his teeth in an effort to restrain its effect. Damn those vermin, he thought. It is always the same story. Sometimes I think they choose their victim's locations simply to frustrate us. We are always within viewing range but too distant to help. How I hate them!

Rowgar's hate drove him onward, his pace had now become less, but his determination more. He could feel his heart thumping under his hide jacket, in its valiant effort to circulate life-giving oxygen to his straining body.

He was not alone in his hatred for the enemy, all his men felt similar, especially the one who bore the name of Tarrol. Tarrol was the tallest and the youngest of the group; his years numbered only ten and seven, eight years less than Rowgar, his leader. He had much to live for, yet he would sacrifice all to save just one life from their foes.

The flames leapt ever higher into the heavens, casting a great heat far and wide. Patterns sprung to life upon the earth, formed by the ever-changing configurations of light, ensuing from the homestead.

Rowgar was now close enough to feel the heat of the blaze. He could pick out the silhouettes of figures standing between him and the house. The silhouettes he had come to know so well.

Frantic screams reached his ears; a cry for help from a woman in torment. He tried desperately to increase his speed. There were only two hundred paces to go, but his legs felt leaden. An infant could now have kept pace with him easily.

Tarrol came alongside Rowgar, whether his youthful stamina or grim determination propelled him, it was hard to tell. Rowgar was glad to see him, he did not care who was first on the scene, nor did he care that one of his subordinates had greater strength than himself. His only desire was to save the lives of those who must surely be on the threshold of death.

Rowgar's mind began to spin, in its oxygen-starved state. The motion around him began to wind down. He saw Tarrol before him, leaping dreamlike towards the stooping figures surrounding the house.

The woman whose screams he had heard became visible. She was being half dragged and half carried toward the raging inferno, which once had been her home. Her cries could still be heard, but now they seemed muffled. Rowgar could see there was no chance of escape, too many strong hands held her securely. Tarrol, why is Tarrol veering away from her? he thought.

Hellner struggled on as best she could. Small rivulets of blood trickled across her soft white flesh, where bony fingers had left their marks. Even her thighs were pierced where the stooping horrors had sunk their sharpened nails, to restrict her movement.

“My baby,” she whispered with anguish in her voice. She could see the child being carried toward the open window from which they had only recently escaped.

The child wafted his arms as he hung head downward from the vice like hand of the beast that bore him.

They are doing it deliberately, Hellner thought. They want me to see my child burn. She glanced around helplessly, seeking for aid, but only Gorran came to view. His captors held him pinned to the ground. His head forced backward, so he too could see what came to pass. “MONSTERS,” she cried, “ALL OF YOU, MONSTERS.”

Tarrol could feel the heat of the inferno, through the homestead’s outer walls of stone, the only walls which still stood. He saw a child in the hands of one of his enemies. We cannot be too late, he thought, not again, please do not let it be this way.

The creature raised the child with one hand, then clasped the head with its free hand. It sniggered as it prepared to toss its prey into the cauldron of fire.

“HOLD!” came a voice.

The creature turned to face the sound. Steel flashed brightly before its eyes. For an instant only, did it see its peril. Then the sword of Tarrol slashed wildly into its face.

Hellner saw the blow of Tarrol, then her view became obscured by a hideously warped face. She felt a sharp penetrating pain in her groin. Her frame shuddered uncontrollably, as the sharpened point of a barbed spear sank through her tender skin and deep into her taut body.

She felt this motion only briefly, before darkness and peace descended upon her; then from deep within her soul, where no mortal may tread, warmth came. It spread steadily throughout her whole being and amid the warmth she saw a vision. It flooded her awareness as if it were in truth a reality. Her child was at play upon a hill of crimson and gold. A low autumn sun beating down upon him. He seemed happy and carefree, as though the whole world with all its wonders, was his to have fun in. His tiny form radiated joy and contentment, to give a last comfort to the one he loved.

Hellner’s face became calm and serene as she exhaled her last breath. The endless strife of life was now at an end. She lay upon

the scorched ground in a tranquil silence.

Rowgar cried out as he lunged at the creature that held the blooded spear. His sword struck downward toward its arched back. It found its mark. The creature had no time to cry out, it merely slumped towards the ground.

The momentum of Rowgar carried him onward. He collided with the beast as it fell. The impact sent him reeling on his feet, but even as he spun, he caught sight of a second victim. He thrust his sword out. It arced menacingly through the air, then sliced the throat of the foe, cleanly.

The enemy was now in full flight, but none took up the chase. The last energies of the troop had been spent in battle, trying vainly to amend something that was not their doing. The bodies of their enemies which lay dead upon the ground testified to this, but even more, they gave testimony of the wrath that was unleashed at their coming. The coming of the Carthelions.

Rowgar stood amidst the lifeless forms. His eyes were turned toward the burning homestead. Not twenty paces from the house he saw Tarrol, bent upon his knees, an infant in his arms. The child was silent and still. At first he thought it to be dead but as its tiny hand gripped Tarrol's muscular arm, he realised the spark of life was still present.

Before Rowgar lay Hellner. He knew it was too late to give her aid. Her limbs were limp and motionless. The scars of those wretched hands were apparent everywhere along the length of her near naked body and the wound that finally took her life was ghastly to behold. Yet Rowgar looked upon her face in wonder, for there was no sign of the torment she had undergone. "If only my final approach had not been too slow," he murmured. He cursed himself for his failings, then bowed his head low in sorrow.

*No more to walk the green fields of Carthelion  
No more to play in the cool sparkling waters of Brece  
The sweet fragrance of life has departed  
In the path of death and disease*

These words drifted through his mind aimlessly. He had come to think of the mountain creatures in terms of a disease rather than a noble enemy. The disease ought to be eradicated, he thought, but he



knew it could not come to pass, not yet anyways. They could not sustain the losses that they would incur in a push to erase these vile creatures from the mountainous regions. There were too many places for them to hide and prepare ambush. Perhaps in the next decade, he thought, when royalty again commands the forces of Outer Carthelion, we shall strike a blow which will end all strife, not just here in Outer Carthelion, or the mountains to the North, but a blow which will regain our fatherlands beyond the mountains, the Northlands of Carthelion... He sighed at his own thoughts, the Prince was only fourteen years of age, many years would pass before he ruled over the realm.

Rowgar was just beginning to raise his head, when he heard a groan. His mind sprang alert and his eyes flashed right and left, scanning the ground for signs of life. A small distance from him he saw the body of a short, hefty man. It lay still and unmoving upon the earth.

The muscles in Rowgar's legs again sprang to life. Hope propelled him the short distance between himself and the dormant figure. He fell to his knees on arrival and carefully he turned the body to face upward. His stomach almost betrayed him, when he saw the full extent of the wounds, which had been inflicted on the body of the homesteader.

"I am Gorran!" whispered the dying man. "My time is short, tell me please, my wife and child, how do they fare?"

Rowgar swallowed hard, but his voice would not come.

"Your child is well," said a deep understanding voice. "He will grow to be a fine man, but alas, your wife, she has departed this sad and sorry world. You will have company and comfort on your last journey."

The bluntness of the last statement did not shock Rowgar; he recognised the voice of Belgar. The harshness of the words were engulfed by the overwhelming truth which lay within them. The fears Rowgar held for the child's health subsided a little. He knew Belgar was a healer of minds, it was his great gift in life.

Gorran looked past the face of Rowgar into the mystical eyes of Belgar. "Thank you my friend!" he said and though the expression on his face did not change, Rowgar felt the man's life drain away.

\* \* \*

A wispy haze settled on the land as the first light of day spread across the dawning sky. The stars flickered and dimmed before the oncoming morning.

A small group of men stood in silence beside a single mound of earth. They were listening to the final words of a short sermon.

“May Elebriouse guide them to a happier world, where they may rest together in peace.” Rowgar concluded with solemnity in his voice. His heart was heavy with sadness at the loss of the homesteaders. It was not the first time he had found himself in this position, but repetition made his task no easier.

The silence grew more pronounced with Rowgar’s last words. All who were present for the short ceremony felt forlorn. Their strength was sapped with the mental as well as the physical exertion of the previous night, all that is, save one.

Tarrol’s sorrow had turned to hate during the ceremony and as the silence grew upon him, his anger flared.

The eyes of the group turned toward him as he strode up a small rounded grass covered rise. He drew his sword and faced northward, then he raised his sword above his head, by hilt and by blade. “HEAR ME, ELEBRIOUSE, GUARDIAN OF MEN,” he cried, “LOOK DOWN FROM YOUR HIGH MOUNTAIN PALACE UPON THE CIRCLES OF THE WORLD AND LISTEN TO YOUR SERVANT. I, TARROL, WARRIOR OF THE REALMS OF CARTHELION WOULD SPEAK WITH YOU.”

Rowgar made to follow Tarrol, fearing the ill that might befall, should the highest of all earthbound entities become angered, but Belgar restrained him. “Fear not the wrath of he who dwells on the summit of the world sir,” he said. “He will only feel pity for him, he has no mortal anger as we have. Let Tarrol have his say.”

Indeed Tarrol did have his say and when all thought he had done, he turned to the East and faced the new day, standing darkly against the light. “I SEE YOU BRING A FAIR DAY FOR ALL TO BEHOLD AND PRAISE, BUT WHAT OF YESTERNIGHT?” he scorned.

With his final word, the sword he still held aloft, shattered in his powerful grip. Only the gloves he had worn to move earth upon the mound of Gorran and Hellner saved his fingers from being severed.

The group stood in awe as Tarrol threw his sword shards earthward and let his head sink upon his chest, but the awe turned suddenly to disbelief. The morning sky was growing dark.

Rowgar turned to the staunch figure of Belgar, his face troubled.

Belgar raised his questioning eyes to the sky. "Perhaps a storm approaches!" he said softly, but his voice held no conviction.

The group began to crouch. They thought the air unnatural and cold. They were afraid. Beads of sweat appeared on their brows and their hands became clammy.

The light of the morning soon departed completely and a dank mist began to settle above the ground. Tarrol slowly raised his head, to show a face of unrepentance, a face of defiance.

Lightning flashed across the sky. The men shielded their eyes from its glare and awaited the sound of thunder.

The mist swirled upward, as if propelled by an unseen force, but none raised their eyes to witness its form, save Tarrol. Tarrol the unyielding. His eyes alone saw the shaping of the mist; the shaping of what he thought to be a warrior, sitting tall in the saddle of a noble steed.

The lightning flashed again and the horse reared silently. The rider bowed forward, clasping reins in his left hand – revealing a large axe with sculptured shaft in his right. Its sharpened cutting edge glinting red in the fire of the sky.

Tarrol stared at the warrior, whose blackened hand held that deadly weapon. He stared into the eyes which sat beneath a dark helm, and though there was little light, he saw clearly. They were not the eyes of some majestic entity but the eyes of mortal vengeance.

Thunder clapped and Tarrol tore his eyes from the warrior, his own face strangely lit in the gloom. He scanned the sky for the light of day, and slowly but surely it returned. He turned again to the warrior, but there was only a thinning mist. Tarrol rubbed his eyes, then faced the rest of the foot-soldiers. Their faces were only now appearing from their hands. Was he the only one who had seen the

warrior? He moved his vision to Rowgar, perhaps Rowgar has seen him also. Tarrol's thoughts were unclear; he tried to read Rowgar's face, seeking confirmation of his vision, but there was none to be had. He was the only one who had seen, or was it all just a waking dream.

Rowgar stood erect and spoke sternly to his men, "Do we all cower from a passing thunderclap; a thunderclap that did not even bring rain?"

Belgar stood and tilted his head upward, looking quizzically at Rowgar.

"As you said Belgar, just a passing storm." Rowgar's voice held the power of certainty. A voice which was trained to sound bold even in the face of death, if not grief.

Belgar smiled thinly, "As I said, just a passing storm."

Rowgar gave no hint of unease as he gave instructions to his men to rejoin the main body of his command. In fact it seemed that he had shrugged the passing darkness off completely, turning his mind to the more substantial problem of the young boy that they had rescued from the homestead fire.

"I think it is best if Tarrol returns to Brannock with the boy," explained Rowgar thoughtfully, his eyes fixed on Tarrol, who still remained upon the rise.

"Perhaps you are right," replied Belgar, brushing his bushy brown hair from his overhanging forehead, "but may I suggest you keep the child hidden from the truth of this night, my skills may bury those horrors which have come to pass, deeper than his conscious may reach, but I cannot erase them."

"What then should I do?" queried Rowgar. "I have no means of protecting the lad, I could, perhaps, give him to the care of Mathin and his family, but they dwell in the heart of Brannock and Mathin spends much time from his home, as I do, he too carries the burdens of leadership."

"Maybe I can help," answered Belgar. "My wife and I live some two leagues from Brannock. We could adopt the boy. We already have a little girl, not much older than this poor helpless child. I doubt if any one would be the wiser for us adopting him."

"That is a noble gesture you make, my friend. I hasten to thank

you, but I think we should at least inform Gerome, guardian and adviser of the young Prince, lest something goes amiss. He is tight lipped and does not spread gossip. The rest of my men, I shall swear to secrecy.”

“Let it be as you will,” said Belgar.

“Then we are agreed,” continued Rowgar. “Give Tarrol the location of your abode when his temper has cooled; then he can depart homeward. We shall take up the hunt of those vile demons who caused this unhappy affair.”

\*

The troop departed the ruins of what once had been the home of the family of Gorran around mid-morning. None looked back as they left.

Tarrol carried the child of Hellner in a crudely made sling, which tied around his neck and hung before him. His face looked drawn and haggard for one so young. His hair, which was normally clean and tidy was now unkempt; that which was once dark and flowing looked lank and plaited, but it did not bother him. His main concern was fast asleep in his arms, helpfully supported by the sling. It was a concern which for the present outweighed retribution.

Rowgar led his small troop of men, retracing the paths they had trodden the previous night. They could not take up pursuit of the enemy without their backpacks, and they were still upon the ground, where they had been discarded. It irritated the men to have to delay the chase, but delay they must.

The Carthelions had gathered their packs and eaten by midday. They were still low in spirit but this was only to be expected. Not until this tragic episode was finally put to rest, would they again laugh and sing, such was the feeling that ran between them.

Tarrol and Rowgar faced one another as they prepared to part ways. “Fair you well, Tarrol,” said Rowgar. “Be sure to take the straight road back to Brannock.”

“That I shall,” replied Tarrol. “Take care on your hunt, and remember the words of Gerome.” Tarrol turned and began his

journey southward.

Rowgar watched him a while as he made his way through the undergrowth which bordered Lorrin's wood and recalled the words Gerome had spoken, at their onset from Brannock.

*'There is a cunning and deceit in the highlands to the North, for that is the home of our enemies. Beware the shadows that lurk there. Beware the lair of the Mountain Krril.'*

# ***GAMES CHILDREN PLAY***

“Shush!” whispered Jedro as he tried to open the closet door.

“I am being quiet,” replied Mirriam in her normal voice.

“Shush!” said Jedro again turning to Mirriam, gesturing with his finger over his lips.

The classroom was dark but Jedro could just make out six pairs of eyes – two tiers of three, peering through the window.

“Hurry up,” came a voice from the centre of the top tier at the window.

“I am going as fast as I can,” replied Jedro. “The door is stuck.”

“Pull harder,” came a strained whisper from the direction of the left pair of eyes, bottom tier.

“Give a hand Mirriam,” said Jedro quietly.

“What did you say?” said Mirriam in her normal voice.

“Shush – lend a hand,” whispered Jedro.

Mirriam put one hand on the doorknob, and with the fingers of the other she tried to get a grip on the edge of the door. Jedro also had one set of fingers gripping the edge of the door and the other set under the door.

“Are you ready, Mirriam?”

“Mm mm,”

“Now!” said Jedro.

They pulled together and the door opened with a CRACK. The six pairs of eyes vanished from the window, hiding behind the stonework beneath the window.

“Drat! That was a bit noisy,” said Jedro, eyeing the shadows of the classroom.

“You bet your life it was,” said Mirriam in her normal voice.

“Shut up,” said Jedro. “HEY BARRIN, WHERE HAVE YOU GONE?” he shouted, with a very airy but vocaless expellation of

breath.

A pair of eyes re-emerged at the window. “Are you sure this is a good idea?” asked Barrin softly.

“You chicken?” said Mirriam in her normal voice.

“Shush sis, do you want to wake the dead?” said Barrin.

“Have you got the rat?” queried Jedro, looking at the lone pair of eyes.

CLANG – A bell fell out of the closet. Barrin’s eyes vanished, Jedro cowered and Mirriam was half way to the window.

Jedro’s head emerged from behind his left arm. “It is only the school bell, come back.”

Mirriam stopped in her tracks and looked back at Jedro.

Barrin popped his head up again.

“Have you got the rat?” asked Jedro.

Barrin nodded his head, then looked right and then left. Two more pairs of eyes popped up. “Give me a hand up,” said Barrin softly.

There was a certain amount of scratching and bumping as Barrin climbed into the window opening with the aid of his friends. He only had one hand with which to climb as the other held a dead rat by the tail. He hopped off the window ledge on to the classroom floor, which just happened to be a foot higher than the outside ground level. He stumbled and one knee hit the floor, “Ouch!” he exclaimed, before regaining his senses.

“Shush!” said Mirriam.

“Shush yourself,” said Barrin, looking upward at his sister.

“Both of you be quiet,” said Jedro. “Do you want us all to be caught?”

Barrin got back on his feet and carefully stepped over a bench and made his way to the closet. “I still do not think this a good idea,” he mumbled.

“Then you should not have come along,” said Mirriam.

“Have you got the string?” asked Jedro, who looked slightly downward at Barrin.

“Of course,” replied Barrin reaching in his pocket with his free hand.

Jedro entered the closet and began shuffling things about. “Here,



hold this,” he said, holding a book out of the closet.

Barrin looked for another free hand but did not have one. “Hold this,” he said to Mirriam, holding out the dead rat.

Mirriam shrank away and said, “Give me the string instead.”

Barrin gave Mirriam a disgusted look and passed her the string, then took the book from Jedro.

“Right! Give me the string and rat,” said Jedro.

Mirriam passed the string and Barrin passed the rat, which he still held by its tail.

Jedro set about tying the string around the rat’s neck, while Barrin strained to read what was written on the book cover. It appeared to be entitled ‘ELEBRIOUSE ION A INEHAM’.

Jedro placed the rat neatly on a shelf inside the closet and began tying the string to the inside knob of the door. All doors had a means of opening them from both sides, even when considered unnecessary. It was safer to make them that way and Jedro was fully aware of this.

Barrin walked over to the far side of the classroom, avoiding obstacles on his way. The moon shone through the far window and this enabled him to read better. He could hear Mirriam and Jedro mumbling at each other as he began to read the first page of the book to himself.

*Far to the North, over the vast frozen reaches of the Palanglace, stands the Telematre, with its summit high into the distant heavens; high above the clouds which swirl and cling to sheer ice faces; high above the clouds which gather on the world below. Here dwells Elebriouse, whose great halls were delved in the pinnacle of the world 'ere time began. Alone he dwells, alone in meditation.*

*On a time his thoughts reach out o'er the lands and seas of the Earth. From him little is hidden. He hears all sounds which ride the wind and sees through the eyes of creatures which roam the skies. Past and present to him are as one. To the future he steers the world for he is the Helmsman.*

*Elebriouse is not the only one of his kindred, but he is the highest of Monitors; whose task it is to build a world of peace and understanding, and not until this task is achieved will all his kinsman return; to remain in the halls of the Helmsman, watching*

*the great wheel of time turn its course, until days end and the coming of the night ...*

“Aaeeh – get it off me,” screamed Mirriam.

Barrin jumped with fright, catching a glimpse of his scrawny sister clutching her throat.

“Calm down silly girl, the damn thing is dead,” said Jedro, throwing his arms in the air.

“What is the matter?” asked Barrin hurrying across the room.

Mirriam pulled the rat from her throat and threw it to the floor in horror.

“Oh! I shut the closet door forgetting to put back the book you hold, so I yanked the door open again. As you can see our little joke worked perfectly – well nearly perfectly,” said Jedro.

“Just the wrong person,” commented Barrin.

“JUST THE WRONG PERSON,” screeched Mirriam.

“Shut up,” said Barrin. “What is done – is done.”

“Oh it is fine for you ...” started Mirriam.

“Shush,” said Jedro, his ears pricking up.

Barrin also listened. “There is someone in the next room!” he exclaimed.

“No there is not,” stated Mirriam, “I can hear nothing.”

“Quickly,” whispered Jedro, snatching the book from Barrin with one hand, and picking up the rat with the other.

Barrin and Mirriam made for the window. Jedro followed close behind, but not until he had the book and especially the rat back in the closet. He had a grudge against their teacher, Elger the old.

They all clambered through the window to rejoin their friends. Then all eight of them beat a hasty retreat.

The blank eyes that watched from their classroom window saw them running for their lives, but soon their paces were seen to slow, and like moonlit waifs they pranced into the darkness of the night.

\* \* \*

The sun had risen twice before the children of Brannock again met. It was the day before they were due back at school.

Barrin and Mirriam had spent the previous day in the

countryside visiting their mater, who now lived a lonely existence. It was a hard walk to their home from Brannock and that was why they spent most of their time with relatives who lived near the school.

“Did you enjoy your journey yesterday?” called Jedro playfully as he approached the rest of the children, who had been waiting for him on the northern outskirts of Brannock.

Barrin scowled. He had enjoyed his visit immensely, but he knew Jedro was referring to their two league outward trek at sun up and their two league return trek in the evening.

“We are pleased to be able to make the journey in these troubled days,” replied Mirriam in a loud voice.

“Lucky indeed,” repeated Jedro sarcastically.

“That is enough,” said Barrin in a low menacing voice. His eyes fixed on Jedro, who had only just reached the group.

“I think you are very brave,” said Owly whose enormous eyes were beaming. “It is very dangerous to leave the confines of ...”

“No it is not,” interrupted a small girl. “It is safe this far South. The Krril never leave their hills far behind.”

“Oh, forget I opened my mouth,” said Jedro. “Let us go play hide and seek.”

The children set off at a run toward the place of the old corry tree.

“Who is the seeker?” cried Mirriam, parting her long brown hair, so she could see where she was going.

“You are,” replied Jedro, sniggering.

Mirriam ground to a halt, ten paces from the tree. “That is not fair,” said she. “It is always me.”

Jedro turned to face her, scratching his head with hands so dirty that they matched his black hair. “Well! Whom do you suggest?” he enquired.

Mirriam was lost for words; she did not want to put the finger on anyone in particular. She held her hands out, palms up, and shrugged her shoulders. “All right, it is me again.”

Jedro turned away from Mirriam to hide a smug smile.

Mirriam strolled over to the corry tree, which she would face while the others hid.

Barrin scanned the horizon with eyes as blue as the sky for somewhere to hide.

Mirriam gave a quick glance at the rest of the children before turning her face to the tree. "Go on, get lost," she said.

Jedro motioned the other children to hold their ground as Mirriam turned away from them.

Mirriam began to count.

Jedro with an impish look on his face, put a finger to his mouth to hush the others and began to creep towards Mirriam.

Barrin opened his mouth to speak but no words came out.

"What is he up to?" whispered Owly to no-one in particular.

No-one replied.

Jedro paused a pace from Mirriam and eyed her up and down. The growing season had only just begun, but this day was mild and Mirriam wore only the traditional tunic of Brannock's youth, a heavily woven garment with short sleeves, it was held to the skin at the waist by a hide belt and hung a hands reach above the knees.

"One score and one, One score and two," counted Mirriam.

"Oh no!" whispered Barrin, as he realised what Jedro was up to.

Jedro took the last pace.

Barrin held his breath and screwed his face up. Do not do it, he thought.

**BUT JEDRO DID.** He hooked his hand under Mirriam's tunic and lifted it high.

Barrin cringed.

Mirriam immediately felt the draught. She turned like the wind, frowning like an overcast sky, landing a blow like a thunderclap. She had a very large hand for a girl of thirteen years.

Jedro bit his tongue and then the dust. Bells were in his head.

Barrin winced as his head chimed in sympathy.

"Twas not a very good idea was it!" squeaked Owly.

Mirriam's cheeks had become red, all of them. It could have been a blush, but to Barrin it looked more like rage. He began to whistle.

Mirriam's eyes shot in his direction. Then she took two paces towards him, one upon Jedro's plumpish stomach, the other over him.

Barrin pointed to himself and shook his head. "I had no idea," he croaked.

Mirriam's brown eyes had become beady. She glared at Barrin and then at the other children. "WHAT ARE YOU ALL STARING AT?" she yelled. "Did I not tell you all to get lost!"

Barrin breathed a sigh of relief. Mirriam was calming down. She wanted rid of them all, before her anger was replaced by embarrassment.

"Do you mean to continue the game?" queried Owly in a foolish voice.

"And why not?" replied Mirriam.

"It is a good time for us to hide," whispered an unknown voice.

Indeed it is, thought Barrin.

The gang made a dash for seclusion, with Jedro hot on their heels, still trying to shake the cobwebs from the belfry.

Mirriam again turned her face to the trunk of the old corry tree, and began to count.

The other children were heading in all directions, looking for somewhere to hide. There were a great many places where one could disappear – a hedgerow, trees or simply in the long grass.

Barrin wanted somewhere better, especially since it was his sister who had to find him. He would hate to give her the pleasure of finding him first, especially in her present mood.

He could hear her counting in the distance as he made his getaway, forcing his feet through the tangled grass as if his life depended on it. She was already up to one score and nine, it would only be moments before she reached two score, and turned in his direction.

"One score ten and seven, One score ten and eight." Barrin made a dive for the edge of an embankment. He reached it just in time to avoid Mirriam's eyes, although he was not really thinking about Mirriam as he went head over heels down the embankment. He was thinking more on the lines of broken bones.

Barrin's tumble down the embankment left him lying on his back, looking up at little white fluffy clouds scurrying across the sky. "Just my luck," he cursed.

"What is just your luck?" sounded a curious voice.

“Tumbling down the ...” Barrin sat up with a start and turned toward the voice – all in one action. “Who are you?” he burred, staring at the back of the head of what appeared to be an old man.

“Who am I?” repeated the voice. “Should I not be asking who you are? ’Tis you who have broken my peace and quiet.”

Barrin brushed the grass out of his fair straggling blond locks. “I am Barrin, son of Belgar, now will you tell me who you are? – Or at least turn and face me.”

“Why do you disturb my peace?” The figure remained unmoving.

“I am playing hide and seek. What are you doing?”

“Nothing, nothing at all – except meditating.”

“Why will you not face me?” repeated Barrin. “Have you something to hide? Do you not wish to see who you are talking to?”

The figure turned to face Barrin. “I will see you no better if I face you.”

Barrin looked into the eyes of a very jovial and very kind old man, but the eyes did not look back, they were glazed and unseeing. “You are blind!” gasped Barrin.

“Blind! No. I am not blind, it is just that my eyes do not see.”

“You talk in riddles, old man, if you have no sight, how can you see?”

Barrin presumed the man had lost his sight with age. He could tell that he was old by the length of his beard, and by the fact that it had lost all of its original colour, it was pure white, the same colour as his very sparse hair.

“Visions are not only beheld by ones eyes, young Barrin. When your years number many more than ten and two, you will realise this.”

“How do you know my age?” asked Barrin with surprise in his voice.

The old man laughed. “I hear your voice. I sense your youth in your tone, besides my inner eye sees much.”

“Are you a magician?” said Barrin quizzically.

The old man laughed again. “A wizard,” he said. “Do I look the sort of person who would turn little boys into toadstools?”

Barrin smiled, “I think I do misjudge you a little.”

“It is very good of you to say so,” replied the old man.

“I do not mean to sound ... well ...”

“Well,” said the old man, “perhaps you will tell me a little of yourself, now we are friends.”

“Friends!” said Barrin.

“Friends,” repeated the old man warmly.

“Of course,” said Barrin, looking slightly bemused.

Time seemed to stand still as Barrin told his story. It was a happy story which any young boy might tell. He told of his adventures and the pranks he and his friends had played on unsuspecting victims, including the one about the dead rat in their tutor’s closet, tied to the inner door handle, to give the impression of a leap when the door was opened. He had an idea that old Elger would come very close to a heart attack when she opened the door, which made him feel remorse at this foolish trick, but even so he could not help laughing at the thought of Elger’s face when she opened the door.

The old man interrupted Barrin on occasions to ask details of particular incidents and sometimes he would comment on Barrin’s ‘foolishness’, on other occasions he would just laugh along with Barrin.

All was fine until the old man mentioned Barrin’s father. Barrin had never known him personally, but the few stories his mother had told him made him feel proud to be the son of Belgar and this pride made him both sad and angry at the way his father had died – with a Krril spear in his back.

“Oh! How I wish I could avenge his death,” said Barrin with anger in his voice. “I can barely wait until I am old enough to have a sword of my own and fight at the side of Rowgar.”

“Perhaps it will be sooner than you think,” replied the old man. “I hear rumours that Meldir and Bradur are making plans to move against the Taern-Loch, those who dwell beyond the mountains.”

“What is that to me?” replied Barrin. “I am much too young to join him in battle, besides it is the Krril I wish to fight. I have no knowledge of the Taern-Loch. They are nothing to me.”

“They are the ones who see the Krril are well supplied in their mountain hide-aways. They are the ones who are ultimately

responsible for the outrages committed against your people.”

“Even so, I am still too young to join Rowgar, he would laugh at the suggestion of me carrying a sword.”

“I think not, Rowgar would not laugh at the son of Belgar. If I remember correctly Rowgar was the only one who returned from that tragic sortie which took your father’s life.”

“You know of my father?” queried Barrin.

“Let me say I have heard of the ambush which took his life, and if I know Rowgar he will hold himself responsible for the whole tragedy.”

“You know Rowgar?”

The old man smiled broadly. “You are an inquisitive young lad. I know many people in many places.”

“Even Prince Darrian and Gerome his adviser.” Barrin sounded excited.

“Even Prince Darrian and Gerome. In fact I know Gerome very well. It is he who suspects that Meldir is plotting war.”

“Indeed you must know him very well for him to disclose such information to you. What sort of person is he? I hear tell that he is a wizard.”

“Wizards and goblins, elves and fairies. Who is the teller of such tales?”

“You know of elves and fairies?” Barrin’s excitement and curiosity were growing.

The old man smiled, seemingly at Barrin’s youthful curiosity and the way Barrin had pulled himself from the gloom of his father’s death, to the joy which he displayed when talking of elves and fairies.

“If you wish to hear tales of elves and fairies we must meet again.” The old man’s voice seemed very suggestive.

“Why not now?” said Barrin, his face dropping slightly.

“Are you not in the middle of a game of hide and seek?”

Barrin’s eyebrows rose. “I had forgotten.” He leapt to his feet. “When will I see you again?”

“Oh, I shall find you, do not worry about that.”

Barrin turned to head back up the embankment, then turned back to the old man with an after thought. “Are elves and fairies



really real?” he asked.

“Are wizards and goblins?” replied the old man.

Barrin pulled a face then set off up the embankment at a four-legged gallop. He reached the top quickly and looked around.

“Two score, coming to find you. I see you Barrin – COME HERE,” yelled Mirriam.

Barrin just stood looking bewildered.

# ***CARTHELION***

The inner council had already been in assembly for nearly three days. The twelve members who sat around the large oval table looked tired and weary. Their breaks had been few, and when the sitting had been adjourned for sleep, there were none who slept untroubled.

For years now the council of Carthelion – the council of the Outer Realm, had spoken of revenge for the deaths of their brothers and sisters, not just those who had perished when the fearsome Taern-Loch had plundered their way southward over the lands of their forefathers which lay to the north of the White Mountains, but for those who died horrible deaths at the hands of the Krril – the Mountain Stalkers.

The Krril were not native to the White Mountains, but had entrenched themselves on the mountain heights when the Loch had pounded at the gates of Outer-Carthelion, at a time when the warriors of Carthelion had defended the Gateway of Arandil with life and limb. They were the puppets of the Loch, who constantly antagonised the forces of Carthelion, with their nightly atrocities against the homesteaders who dared to live near their haunts.

It had been three score years since the downfall of the northern province of Carthelion, but the stories of the gallant defence of the Northern Realm were still rife, as were the stories of the trek southward to the White Mountains, where took place the last stand of Arandil, at the gateway of Outer-Carthelion. It was there that the Loch were finally held in abeyance, with a grave loss of life on both sides.

None deny the valour of the Carthelions of old, but some historians questioned the actual numbers of Taern-Loch who were said to have invaded Carthelion. Tales spoke of forty and fifty thousand invaders but some of the historians thought that twenty thousand was more like the true number. The historians believed

the Loch to be a ferocious race, even though yarns gave them little credit for their fighting prowess.

The Gateway of Arandil, even after three score years was still the dividing line between the Carthelions and their enemies, although the enemies to the immediate north of the gateway had changed from Loch to Krril, for reasons that the Carthelions did not fully understand.

The Carthelions knew the Loch still occupied their lands beyond the mountains, and they knew the Krril did not arm and feed themselves. That was an impossibility in the mountains. Even the rich mountain valleys had become desolate since the Krril occupation, but what they did not know was why the Loch had pulled back from the gateway. None really believed they would settle for anything short of full mastery of all lands.

Meldir raised himself up from his chair at the council table. His eyes boring into those who still remained seated.

He looked on Bradur, Chief of Carthelion's armed forces and saw a portrait of dedication. He was the anchor stone of the realm. Tall, sturdily built and dark, but most of all he was reliable. A great asset.

Next to Bradur sat Rowgar. He was of similar physique, perhaps a shade smaller and a little more lithe but apart from that, there was little difference. Meldir knew Rowgar and Bradur to be great friends, even though Rowgar was Bradur's Captain – his subordinate.

On the opposite side of Bradur was Carrich. The right hand of their Prince. Meldir knew him well, for they had certain things in common.

Meldir noted the expressions of the other eight members of the inner council, realising that they all had their duties to perform. He thought the decision that was about to be made, was above their jurisdiction, but nevertheless they were entitled to their vote, that was what the council was about.

“Hear me now,” said Meldir, “for when your decision is made, it will be final. I would ask you for a last time to consider what has been put forward, it will be your last chance. I realise how much you all would like to see an end put to the atrocities being

committed by the mountain dwelling Krril, and to regain all the lands of Carthelion which lay to the North from the Loch, for I too would see the Carthelions re-united. It pains me sorely to see all our people hemmed here in Outer Carthelion, though it is a good land and the land of our Lord Fatherer. Take thought, I beg you, take thought now.”

Rowgar looked up at Meldir and spoke, “Will the Prince endorse our decision if we decide to move against our enemies?” he queried.

“I am only a statesman,” replied Meldir, “not an oracle, but I think that he will. In fact, I believe he has enthusiasm for the quest, though he may not show it, for Gerome is back at his side and he always employs caution, whether he is in favour of an idea or not. On this occasion he is likely to be extra cautious, especially since we are planning an exodus of all the descendants of the people who were driven south over the mountains all those years ago.”

“Point taken,” said Rowgar.

“Are there any more questions before we vote?” asked Meldir.

“What of the strength of our forces?” asked Carrich. “Surely they are far too small to make a serious assault!”

Bradur answered this question. “Our forces will have to be trebled,” he said. “The six thousand men we now keep constantly is not nearly enough, but as it seems likely that the majority of our warriors will be encircling the mountains, we shall need more horsemen and this is your domain.”

“I thought you may say that sir.” Carrich smiled as he spoke.

Meldir had one last glance around the table, then asked, “All those in favour of putting an end to our enemies, raise your hand.”

\* \* \*

In the courthouse of the King, sat Darrian, Prince of Carthelion, his long golden hair flowing down and around his shoulders. He had eyes of blue, flecked with white, which sparkled in the light of the sun, whose rays streamed through the large bay windows of the courthouse. It was he who was given the final say in any matter concerning the realm but he rarely interfered with the decisions of

the council. He was only one score and four years of age and rightfully could not claim the throne of Carthelion until his next birthday. This was the law of the land. On the day of his inauguration he would become head of the inner council, and take his place in the council chamber. Though he was young, and as yet not King, the council heralded him as their Liege, and all decisions were put forth for his consent.

By his side stood Gerome, adviser and friend of the Prince. He was not of Carthelion, but folk admired him and held him in great esteem, for his counsels were wise. He aided himself with a stick, for he was great in years, but humour and mirth still shone through his coarse white beard, which hung almost down to his waist. One rarely found him seated despite his years. He now held his humour in abeyance and stood in silence.

Four knocks came at the courthouse door. Then the great oak door swung slowly open. Meldir and Bradur entered. They walked quickly to the head of the courthouse, their footsteps echoing off the walls and roof about them. They bowed before the Prince and Bradur spoke in his usual direct manner.

“My Liege, it has been three score years since our people were driven from the homelands of our forefathers, in that time our people have grown strong and though we love the land in which we now live, we long to return to the hitherlands, it is there, that the council believes our destiny lies.”

Gerome, who had been staring at the floor raised his balding head and before the Prince had time to answer said, “And what Bradur, do you know of your homelands. Have you ever seen them?”

“I know what is said in our histories,” replied Bradur, “and I listen when our elders speak of them.”

“Perhaps,” continued Gerome, heedless of Bradur’s reply, “the lands of your ancestors may not now be what they once seemed, and this, the land in which you now dwell, be your true homeland, the land of your birth.”

“Nay, Gerome, what was once the Kingdom of Carthelion, still is the Kingdom of Carthelion, and will always be, not just the doorstep to the sea in which we now dwell.”

Bradur again turned to the Prince. “What say you, my Liege?”

Gerome speaks wisely, we shall not by-pass the mountains without great loss, perhaps we would be better to remain here in peace.”

“But, in peace we are not,” said Meldir. “We suffer raids from the Mountain Krril, not perhaps serious affronts, but nonetheless, they are becoming more frequent. The Krril become more bolder with each day that passes. They receive arms from the lands over the mountains, which were once ours, and are now occupied by the Loch. We pursue them back into the hills, but they have the skills of the mountains. Had we all our lands, they would receive no weapons, we could squeeze them from front and rear. When Sire, will Carthelion again rise from this tyranny and stand free as of old?”

“That is a good question,” replied Darrian, taking more heed of the elderly statesman.

“I fear that the Prince thinks as you do Meldir, my friend,” said Gerome, “but I think also that you have not told all.”

Bradur looked at Meldir – Meldir returned the look, then said to Bradur, “Gerome is not the adviser of the Prince for nothing, there is more hidden under his beard than meets the eye.”

“And there is more behind your tone of speech than meets the ear,” replied Gerome. “Tell us of your plans to move your people northward – all of the people who descended from the northern province.”

Darrian looked curiously at Gerome.

Bradur was taken aback by Gerome’s comments, to his knowledge Gerome knew nothing of their plans.

Meldir remained unmoved, “I doubt whether you need telling anything, but for the benefit of ...”

“Oh, I have not been forgotten then?” quipped Darrian.

“Indeed not Sire,” replied Meldir, “please forgive my manner.”

“Of course,” said Darrian looking amused. “I realise the difficulty in exchanging words with my ancient adviser.”

“The Prince flatters me,” commented Gerome, his face unchanging. Then he returned his attention to Meldir. “Please tell us of your plans.”

Meldir faced Darrian and began, “We wish all our people – save those who are native to Outer Carthelion to join our march northward. We see little point in them remaining here. Our intention is to split our forces – with your consent of course, and make a two pronged assault on our enemies. Bradur will lead our foot-soldiers up the perilous causeways of the White Mountains to the southern borders of Carthelion, while our cavalry encircle the mountains to enter Carthelion from the East ... Our wives and children are to follow in the wake of the cavalry. They will travel more slowly but their way will be clear, besides they cannot possibly cross the mountain trails.”

“This has been agreed by the inner council, our women and children will not enter the northern province until all Carthelion is ours,” added Bradur.

“And why do you see little point in leaving our families here in safety?” retorted Darrian, ignoring Bradur and directing his question at Meldir.

Meldir’s face began to beam. Darrian had not even questioned the plan of assault itself; he only seemed concerned about the families.

“What hope have our people if we fail?” asked Meldir, his face now showing no sign of emotion. “How long would it take the Loch to swarm through the Gateway of Arandil with only the garrison of Outer Carthelion to defend it. Barthen may be a gallant leader, but he could not defend these lands unaided.”

Bradur’s face had become flushed. “The Krril would also descend from the mountains. Should we leave our people to a fate worse than death!”

“You intend to leave our brothers behind?” said Darrian.

“This is their land,” said Meldir. “They have no want to move northward with us. Those whose ancestors have always dwelt here by the sea would sooner perish here.”

“Well, they may if your plans are not successful,” said Gerome.

“I have faith,” said Meldir.

“So have the Loch who inhabit the northern province. They have faith in their leader,” said Gerome.

“The Warloch,” Bradur raised one eyebrow as he spoke.

“The Warloch,” repeated Gerome.

“I think they do not place their faith wisely. What sort of leader needs a fortress such as that at Lochgor, it seems to me the Warloch is no more than a coward hiding behind his legions,” said Bradur confidently.

“Do not ever think as such,” rapped Gerome, in a powerful voice. “The walls of Lochgor reflect only the strength of he who built them, and when you stand beneath them you reflect on what I now say.”

“I do not see your reasoning Gerome. We Carthelions do not hide behind high walls. I do not follow in the wake of the warriors of Carthelion, like the Warloch followed his, when they invaded our lands.” Bradur rested his right hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Are you sure the Warloch had not more immediate problems. You are not the only people who inhabit Ineham. There are some who crave vengeance against the Loch just as surely as you do. In days of old there were mighty Sea Kings who fought many battles with the Loch and there were those whose homelands were ravaged and left desolate by the Loch. They too weigh on the mind of our enemy.” Gerome stroked his beard.

“You speak of legends and myth,” said Bradur.

“It is more than myth,” said Meldir thoughtfully. That is why the peoples of Carthelion are such a mixture of customs, it is why some folk still speak in the old tongue on sacred occasions or in times of heroism or sorrow. We do not forget the language because it is a part of the heritage of Carthelion, a part which tells of great deeds.”

“Yet the every day tongue carries more of the pleasantry of the Gresians, those who were made homeless by the Loch,” added Gerome.

“Then those people will help us in our conflict,” stated Bradur.

Gerome allowed himself a thin smile. “It has been over a thousand years since the Sea Kings set foot upon these shores, there will be no aid from the Ancient Kingdom of Tukamar.”

Darrian turned to Gerome quizzically and as if Gerome had read his mind, he said, “There is still an oath unfulfilled, made by a King of Tukamar many years ago, it was a promise to see an end to



the Warloch.”

“I think your imagination affects your reasoning,” said Bradur. “No one lives for ever. And have you not said we will receive no help from Tukamar – wherever that may be.

Gerome did not answer those questions, indeed he spoke of other help. “There may be aid to the Northwest,” he mused.

“The Gresians,” said Meldir, raising his thick eyebrows.

“Why have you not spoken of these people before?” Darrian looked curious and none too pleased.

Bradur looked at Gerome and then at Meldir. He was obviously as much in the dark as Darrian.

“There has been no need. They are not a part of our battle plan, nor are they within easy reach of our messengers. I think it would be a mistake to take them into consideration.”

Gerome did not look too pleased at Meldir’s answer, neither did Darrian.

Bradur turned to Meldir and said, “Whether it is a mistake to take them into consideration or not, I believe the decision should have been made by the council.”

“And what of your Prince?” said Darrian sarcastically. “I sometimes think my head statesman and private adviser plot the decisions of state between themselves.”

“On the contrary,” said Meldir, “we only share a knowledge of past events.”

Darrian looked at Gerome.

Gerome appeared to stare back but his blank eyes never flinched. “I simply advise on all matters which are put to me. If you do not ask the questions ...”

Darrian became agitated at Gerome’s words. “Then tell me please what questions I should ask.”

There was a short pause. Bradur looked apprehensive. It was unlike Gerome to cross words with the Prince. Meldir and Darrian were both looking straight at Gerome, awaiting his reply.

“You should ask of your chances of success on this venture. You should ask what your chances are of gaining entry into the walled Citadel of Lochgor. You should ask of your chances of crossing the White Mountains which bar your way to the borders of

Northern Carthelion, then you should ask Meldir more of his plan of action. Your soldiers are numbered; it is common knowledge that King Reyon of Rhone declined your invitation to join forces when the council first debated retaking Carthelion.” Gerome turned slightly towards Darrian and raised his head.

“I have no doubt that Meldir has an adequate plan of which the details he will tell me shortly,” said Darrian.

Meldir nodded.

“Pray tell me, Gerome, what are our chances of crossing the White Mountains and throwing down the walls of Lochgor unaided,” continued Darrian.

“About nil, but I am sure someone will come to your aid and pull your neck out of the noose.”

Darrian burst into laughter, though no one else thought it funny. “Then we ride my friends and if the walls of Lochgor do not fall down before the trampling of our steeds, we shall sit at the gates and wait for help.”

“As you wish, Sire,” said Bradur, his face straining to hold back his confused joy. “I will leave Meldir to give you the details of our plan. I have much work to do.” Bradur turned and his footsteps could again be heard as he marched down the hall.

“I too, have business,” said Gerome. “There is no longer need for advice on my part, I am sure Meldir will spin you a good yarn.”

“As you wish,” replied Darrian.

Gerome tapped the floor before him with his stick, then took a pace forward. He paused for a moment beside Meldir. Then shuffled his way across the hall, tapping the floor with his stick as he went.

Meldir watched him departing and mumbled, “As blind as a bat, and yet, he has the best sight of all.”

“I could not agree more,” said Darrian, “I often wonder why he came to our realm, but of this he never speaks. He says only that he comes to those who need assistance. Tell me, Meldir, is it true that Gerome was present at my birth?”

“It is true,” replied Meldir, “and your father’s. He has been the adviser of Outer Carthelion for more years than most people have lived.”

“No doubt he will be around for my son’s birth too,” said Darrian.

“I hope you are right, but I fancy the fate of Gerome is bound to the fate of Carthelion, and the fate of Carthelion is now in the balance.”

“Are not all our fates?” asked Darrian as he raised himself from his seat.

“Indeed they are,” said Meldir. “Indeed they are.”

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Twilight was upon Brannock as Barrin made his way to his abode. He had been rather late leaving school this day due to his tutor being a little upset about an incident involving a closet and a dead rat. He still had not quite figured out how he had come to get the blame for the whole affair, but whatever the reason, he was not too pleased about it.

Barrin began to whistle as he walked between the stone buildings on either side of the cobbled roadway; whistling took his mind off immediate problems.

He took a left turn at the Woodman’s Inn; the last outpost of civilised ale on the road northward and the first on the southward road, for those who lived to the north of Brannock, or at least that was the innkeeper’s tale.

Barrin could not help peeping in through the inn window as he passed by. He did not intend to stop at the window, but he glimpsed the back of a rawhide jacket. Rowgar, he thought, coming to a halt. Who else wears hide?

Barrin’s chin barely reached the window, though this was quite enough to give him a clear view. He saw another man sitting with Rowgar and could just about make out what they were saying.

“The meeting went well, Rowgar.”

“Indeed it did, Bradur tells me our Prince has agreed to Meldir’s plans.”

“All of them, or did Meldir not tell the full story?”

“He told the full story. He had little choice, Gerome sensed what we were plotting.”

“And he did not object?”

Rowgar appeared to shrug his shoulders.

“Did he give words of warning about our plan for splitting forces?” continued the other man.

“I think not, though I am still a little wary of the plan myself. It would seem a good idea if we do indeed draw many Loch from the walls of Lochgor, but if we do not ... or what if we draw too many? Even the Krril may become brave and try to prevent our march through the White Mountains.”

“The Krril will not attack such a large force, not if we stay on the northbound trail. Why should they risk their scrawny necks, when the Loch would have to do their fighting for them?”

“Of course you are right,” said Rowgar warily.

The other man laughed. “Let them come.”

Barrin did not really understand what they were talking of, although their conversation did bring back to mind the old man, the one he had met while hiding from Mirriam.

“It is time I was about my business,” said Rowgar. He lifted his goblet and drained its contents. “I have much work to do, our time for preparation is short.”

“I, too, have work to do, let us go together.”

“A good idea, Tarrol. Come, it is time we were on our way.”

Barrin watched the two men rise from their seats. As yet he had not seen their faces. Rowgar kept his back to the window as they stood, but Tarrol turned to face the innkeeper who was chatting near the window.

Barrin’s heart missed a beat, at the sight of Tarrol’s face. He felt a searing heat blow from the window, which caused him to cover his face instinctively. The moment he covered his face the heat was gone. He turned his back to the window and slowly removed his hands. His mind had not really comprehended what had happened, but fear made him set off at a run down the roadway, and not until he had put the inn out of sight did he stop.

For a while Barrin stood speechless, then he crouched down and leaned his back against a building. His breathing was hard and his head puzzled. He remained this way for quite a while, before he tried to picture what had happened. Then his mind’s eye took him

back to the inn. He saw Rowgar and his friend rising from the table slowly. Rowgar kept his line of vision straight, but the other man turned his head toward the window. Barrin saw his features appearing as he turned; he did not consciously recognise them but something in the back of his mind seemed to react at the sight. Then, from nowhere flames leapt out of the window.

Barrin shook his head to clear the vision. It seemed so real, but he knew it could not be. Where could the flames come from? Why did they disappear as he raised his hands to his face? "No, it cannot be real," he mumbled.

"What cannot be real?" came a voice that Barrin recognised.

Barrin jerked his head back, banging it against the wall. "OUCH," he cried.

"I am sorry," said the voice. "Have I startled you?"

The voice was kind and understanding and it served to smooth Barrin's nerves.

"Of course not," said Barrin. "Well, perhaps just a little." He lifted his head up again, with one hand rubbing where he had bumped it, and looked into the eyes of his old blind friend.

"Does something else trouble you?" asked the old man.

"Well ... well, not really," replied Barrin.

"Perhaps you have had a hard day's learning," the old man smiled.

Barrin frowned. "Not half, in fact I was still learning after all the other children went home."

The old man raised his eyebrows. "Learning what, may I ask?"

"How not to be a naughty boy," replied Barrin, screwing his face up.

The old man began laughing.

"You find my misadventures funny?" queried Barrin.

The old man was still laughing.

Barrin's face took on a sour smile, then a more honest smile, then he too began to laugh.

Slowly the laughter died away. "Should I take it your rat in the closet prank did not go down too well; did not old Elger see the funny side?"

"Not really, she just stood clutching her throat saying, aaagh!"

The old man chuckled, "I am not surprised you had a little extra work to do."

"But it was not my idea," said Barrin. "The real culprit got clean away." Barrin paused ... "Jedro the toothless." He smiled.

"Jedro the toothless," said the old man in a rather loud inquisitive voice. "Since when has young Jedro been toothless?"

"Since recently," said Barrin with a wry grin. "Just the one tooth less you understand."

The old man crouched down and leaned against the wall beside Barrin. "I hope you did not ..."

"No, no!" interrupted Barrin. "It was nothing to do with me. He sort of picked a fight with big Sis."

"Sis ... Oh, your sister. Mirriam, do they call her?"

"Why yes!" exclaimed Barrin. "You seem to know everyone."

"No, not everyone. Just most people."

"Including elves," said Barrin, mischievously.

"Mmm, I thought you may have forgotten about ..."

"Me! Forget about our little talk; talking about our little talk, when I left you and ran back to the top of the embankment, Mirriam was ..."

"There are many strange creatures in Ineham," mused the old man, ignoring Barrin, "but I am afraid such as the like of elves are not to be found. Not at least south of Cryon, the outer world of the Majestic Warlord and no one treads those paths."

"Why not?" asked Barrin, completely forgetting about what he had been saying.

"It is said that Cryon is the guardian of the ancient, the beasts which roamed Ineham before the coming of men. He is of the House of Elebriouse, fearsome in his tasks. Not even the Taern-Loch stray that far North, nor did the Sea Kings of Tukamar in days gone by."

"You have me lost," said Barrin shaking his head. "I do not know of such people and creatures ... but I would like to," he added.

"Then why not go north with Rowgar when he leaves?"

Visions of the scene in the inn sprang into Barrin's mind, and the flame which followed, he quivered a little then said, "I cannot

go with Rowgar, we have spoken of this before.” Barrin pondered over the conversation he had heard through the window.

“Of course you can,” said the old man. “I have a plan.”

“You have a plan for me,” said Barrin in a startled voice. “What is it to you, whether I go with Rowgar or not?”

“I think you should have a right to see distant places if you so wish. Why should you be made to stay here when your want is to go to the fatherlands.”

“I did not say that.”

“Of course not ... I presume too much. I thought you wished to fight beside Rowgar and see the northern province free from those dreaded Loch. And the Krril who plunder our ... I am sorry I should not talk of such things.”

“Do not be sorry,” said Barrin sternly. “I do wish to fight with Rowgar, and I do wish to go northward. And above all else I wish to avenge the death of my father. Tell me what I should do.”

The old man smiled, but it was a sad smile.

\* \* \*

For many days that followed the people of Carthelion prepared themselves for departure. The lands they had tended for many a year could not now be left to the wild, so arrangements were made with the people whom were native to the Outer Realm, for their upkeep. It was hoped that the Krril would keep their attention on the movements of the forces of Carthelion, rather than those who would be left behind; besides, the time was not yet ripe for them to move down from the hills and mountains, not without the aid of the Loch. The people of Outer Carthelion, for the time being, felt secure, though they knew that this could not last, Carthelion must either be totally liberated or all would fall.

When all was ready, a great feast was held for the departure of the Prince and his followers, to celebrate the coming of a new era. Everyone’s spirit was high, wine flowed freely and food was plentiful.

Darrian sat at the head of the great table in the hall of Ramno, by his side was Lithien, the light of his life. They had entered into

wedlock the previous summer, though it seemed to him only yesterday.

He could still remember their first meeting in Treegarth clearly. He had been hunting and had become separated from his escort. As he wandered on the edge of a wood, he had heard her voice, floating gently on the breeze, singing softly what appeared to be a song of great sorrow. He entered the woods and had not travelled far, when he saw her, sitting by a pool of clear sparkling water. Her hair seemed to reflect the sparkle of the pool, as the sun glinted through the trees, her face was serene and beautiful. He would never forget that moment; the picture would never diminish or die.

“Darrian, Darrian, are you still with us, or is this just an empty shell, whose thought is far away? If I have no need of your company, the good lady still requires you here, in body and in mind.”

Lithien blushed; Darrian turned and looked at Gerome, “I thank you, good sir, for reminding me of my duty, pray be seated, your presence here seems to make the floor look quite untidy.”

Gerome grinned and took his seat between Barthen and Darrian, which was most unusual.

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Far into the night, went the feast, but when the bell in the watchtower tolled midnight, Darrian stood, and all the hall grew still. For long moments the silence lasted, then Darrian spoke.

“Here, tonight in Brannock, we are gathered under the roof of Ramno, fatherer of our great people; he who united the realms of Carthelion. Here in the presence of the one who sees all, Elebriouse, in whose faith we trust. Here, I say to you good people, NEVER, never shall we rest, while our lands are defiled by the vermin of the earth, nor shall we sleep while our homes are at peril from the foul creatures of the night. Long shall we strive for the downfall of our oppressors.” Darrian’s voice rose with great strength then fell to solemnity and sincerity. “Three score years ago, the light of day faded, and the darkness of night descended about us, but we, the people of Carthelion have never cowered from



our predators, huddling in our homes, never daring to venture out, indeed not. We have defended what lands we still possess with valour. Now we see the coming of the dawn. With the rising of the sun we shall strike fear into the hearts of our foes. My friends, I give you a toast.”

All in the hall stood and raised their goblets.

“To the rising of the sun.”

“To the rising of the sun,” was the reply from those in the great hall; they all drank deeply.

## ***SUNRISE***

Upon the fields of Tor Palin, the might of Carthelion was gathered. Many thousands had come to begin the trek to their forefather's homeland.

Bradur and Rowgar were to lead a large company of footmen over the White Mountains to the North, entering Northern Carthelion on its southern borders, while Darrian circled the highlands, heading East, North, then West. It was a long journey, which Darrian had agreed upon, but his men were all mounted and they would travel with speed. It was planned for Darrian and Bradur to come upon the stronghold of the Loch together, from different directions, crushing all resistance between them. The year was now one third spent, and the weather was becoming kinder with each day that passed. If the journey went well, unhindered by storm or excessive enemy resistance, both armies hoped to come upon the enemy's stronghold of Lochgor, when the moon became a crescent for the second time. It would be fatal, not only for the warriors themselves, if they failed in their timing, but for their dependants also, for they were to follow in the wake of Darrian. Such was the determination for success, that the leaders of Carthelion were willing to sacrifice all in a bid to spur their warriors to victory.

There were many fond farewells, as the sun rose this morning, and tears were shed as families and friends prepared to depart. Not only were the able bodied men being parted from their loved ones as they made their separate ways, but there was also the parting of the kindreds. Those native to Outer Carthelion, who remained behind had become deeply entwined with their kinsmen from over the mountains, in the years that had passed since the ravaging of Carthelion. They were saddened and grieved by this sundering, but they hoped that one day the mountains would again be free of danger, allowing them to cross the mountains as their forefathers

had done before the coming of the Krril.

Barthen, Lord of Outer Carthelion was to remain behind with his garrison. He had heard the cry of the Krril high in the mountain peaks many times on his ventures to the North. It did not fill him with fear, as it did many, for he was strong of mind and resolute of will. Nor did he fear an onslaught from the Krril. He thought the Krril would not descend into his lands with open warfare; he thought them more a people of stealth and cunning, if people he did indeed call them, for their bodies were hunched grotesquely and their faces were set in a hideous grin.

“Well!” said Rowgar, gazing at Gerome. “All seems ready, I hope our decision to split our forces proves wise.”

“Come now,” said Gerome, “when have your counsels ever been otherwise?” Gerome winced. “Oh and by the way, I have brought you a wagon filled with supplies, it should help Bradur and yourself on your journey to the mountains.”

“To the mountains only,” was the reply, “we can take it no further, but I thank you for the gesture. Bradur will also be pleased with your gift. We shall meet with him on the third day out. He has business that keeps him elsewhere.”

“So I hear,” said Gerome, with a faint smile coming to his face, “Darrian also has business, but she will follow with Meldir in the train, to be sure he will see the way is free from peril; he and his sixteen thousand horsemen should encounter no problems, especially since Carrich is his Lieutenant, no finer nor nobler man could one wish for, a fine choice.”

At that moment Darrian rode up, sitting high on his haughty stallion. Renevar, he had named him, he who runs like the wind, in the tongue of old.

“Good-day, Rowgar, I trust all is set!”

“That it is,” replied Rowgar, “we await your command.”

Darrian looked at Gerome. “What of you, kind sir, are you still to stay here in Outer Carthelion, or perhaps you have changed your mind and decided to honour us with your company?”

“I dare say,” Gerome began, “that the counsels of the Prince will be much the poorer without my assistance, but I think you may survive, perhaps I shall follow later when the fighting is done.”

Darrian laughed, then turned his steed and set off at a gallop to the head of his cavalry.

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The horns sounded, and the great host of Carthelion began to move. Darrian leading his horsemen to the East, banners rippling in the cool morning breeze. Rowgar to the North, two thousand men at arms in his wake.

The countryside of Tor Palin reached out endlessly before Rowgar. Wild and rich with a great amount of bush and a scattering of trees. Few hedgerows could be seen though, most of the cultivated land lay to the South and East of Brannock where the soil was deep and the population more numerous. There were, however, many homesteads to the North, but they were well scattered as the land stretched far and wide. Towards the foothills of the White Mountains no one lived at all, the dangers which lurked there were too great.

At the rear of Rowgar's company came the lone wagon. Bart, a foot-soldier of the realm had been assigned the job of wagon driver. He was pleased with this task, it would save his feet from carrying his short plump body on the arduous trek ahead.

The foot-soldiers began to sing, while they marched, it helped to put the sadness of parting behind them and helped to lift their spirits for the journey before them. At first their voices were sombre, but as they went on, their voices lifted. A song of battle it was, and all who heard said that a new day was coming, a day the foes of Carthelion should fear.

Bart too was singing, in fine voice was he; Alas, had he for a moment stopped and listened, he may have heard a small voice at his rear saying, "I knew this was a silly idea, we shall be black and blue before today's march ends."

"Shush! You do not want them to find us, do you? You should not have come if you cannot stand a few knocks and bumps."

"Oh! All right, but I shall be glad when we stop."

There were two large sacks of irregular shape in the back of Bart's wagon, whose contents were not quite what they should have

been.

At least he might have got us some clean sacks, thought Barrin, scratching his head. I am going to smell like yesterday's supper if I stay in here long enough. He scratched the back of his neck, and tried to find sleep. Bart's voice did not help him too much.

Although sleep was at first elusive, Barrin's mind began to wonder, mainly about the happenings of the previous days. He was still not quite sure that stowing away in the back of a wagon was a good idea, especially with his sister to keep him company, but this was completely overshadowed by the fact that he had not informed his mother of their scheme, she would obviously worry about their disappearance. Barrin was troubled; he clenched his fists, I hope Jedro informs her of our plans in a few days time as arranged, he thought.

The wagon hit a large bump. Both Barrin and Mirriam gritted their teeth, but neither spoke. Barrin put a hand to his heart and sighed. "It is not going to get any easier," he mumbled. He began tapping his fingers on his chest, then he moved them a little closer to his neck, until they touched upon the medallion which lay there. Now why did the old man give me his medallion, he wondered. He liked the old man and his jovial ways, even though he had only known him a short while. There was something about him that could not be put into words, something which was undeniable. Barrin had wanted to shout farewell as the wagon had begun to roll, but common sense had prevailed, that would have been the ultimate in stupidity, especially since he thought the old man had been speaking to the Prince.

This day seemed endless; slowly Barrin's eyes became heavy. He thought of their plans for keeping out of sight while they travelled – at least until they were far enough from Brannock so as not to be cast off by the troop, to footslog it home.

It seemed a poor plan they had for staying hidden, especially the part where they had to disappear from the back of the wagon at the end of every march – alas it was the only plan they had.

Barrin's eyes were now shut, his right hand resting upon the medallion and his left was frozen half way through a 'scratch'. He pictured the old man's face, aged but not excessively wrinkled,

happy yet overwhelmingly sad. What was it he had said, when asked to tell a tale of old, was it – avoid such yarns from old folk like me, they inevitably have a bad end? I wonder why he said that?

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Barrin sat up with a start. The horn was sounding. He pulled the sack from over his face. I must have fallen asleep, he thought, today's march is almost at an end. He shook Mirriam, who slowly popped her head out of her sack, yawning.

“What is it, Barrin?” she asked, it was obvious she had not even heard the horn.

“The march is nearly over,” he said, it is time that we departed.”

They moved to the rear of the wagon on their hands and knees. Stealthily they slipped over the back, Barrin stumbled and Mirriam landed flat on her face.

“Drat!” she cursed, spitting out grass.

Barrin quickly regained his balance and helped Mirriam into a thicket close by. None too soon did they disappear from view, for the second horn which brought the company to a halt, sounded shortly after.

As the crimson sun was setting, the men began to make camp. Barrin and Mirriam lay silently watching the supplies being unloaded. They noticed that guards had been set around the perimeter. This itself proved to be a problem. There was a guard between the wagon and themselves. There seemed nothing else to do, but to spend the night in the grass.

Barrin's stomach began to rumble, Mirriam turned to him and said, “Yes, I am starving too, perhaps we shall be able to get something to eat in the wagon tomorrow, after all it is filled with supplies.”

“We have to get back into the wagon first,” whispered Barrin, “I hope they remove the guard before they set off. Anyway we may as well sleep, the morning will come soon enough.”

This did not prove to be true, neither of them felt very sleepy. Barrin lay on his back watching the stars climb high into the sky, rich jewels glittering in a sea of darkness. In the light of the wispy

moon, the distant mountains could just be seen, enchanting they looked, none of the defilement that had come with the Krril, could be discerned from afar.

As Barrin lay there he found himself listening to the sounds of the night. The nocturnal animals of the land were abroad. At times the sounds seemed menacing. Who knew what lurked in the wild lands after dark?

Mirriam also felt the creeping fingers of fear, sliding over her. "What was that?" she exclaimed, as a twig snapped.

"Shush!" said Barrin nervously. "Probably some small creature searching for food."

"There it is again," she said.

By now, they were both in a sitting position. A little snort followed the cracking sound. Mirriam breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well!" she said. "I do not believe Krril make sounds like that."

"Me neither," was the reply, "it is probably a badger or something looking for supper."

"Do not mention supper." With that comment, they both returned to their horizontal positions.

When the sun rose in the morning, it found Barrin and Mirriam huddled together, droplets of water clinging to their hair. It was a cool fresh morning, good for travelling, but not alas, for lying in the grass. All the ground was damp and rays of light twinkled through the heavily dewed thicket.

"Time to get up, Barrin."

Barrin moaned and then yawned. He had not had a very good night and his stomach did not feel too good. "Morning already!" he exclaimed. Actually, what he had thought was, that the night would never end.

"We have not long, little brother. The men are nearly ready to go."

"Do not call me 'little brother', how many times must I tell you?"

Mirriam gave a half-hidden smile. "Come, the guard has gone and the wagon is loaded.

They began to move silently towards the wagon. The sound of their feet was drowned in a multitude of bird songs. Up into the

wagon they climbed, and back in their sacks. Mirriam gave a sigh.

“Do not worry, we shall be able to get out when the wagon begins to roll,” Barrin assured her. “But, for now we had best remain covered. The driver may check the wagon before it rolls.”

As it happened, Bart did not check or he may have noticed two full sacks which were not there when the wagon was loaded.

The wagon was boarded at the front, up to the top of Bart’s head, so he could not see behind while he was driving. Bart had thought this strange when they had first set out, but then again, Gerome was a strange type of person and it was his wagon.

Barrin and Mirriam had found plenty to eat in the back of the wagon. Their hunger had overcome their fear of discovery and they were munching away greedily. When they had eaten their fill, they settled back for the day’s journey.

It was hard on the men, Barrin thought, to march all day, even though they did carry snacks on their person to eat while on the road. Perhaps Rowgar insisted on the constant march to come upon the Krril before they were fully prepared. It was obvious they knew of the coming of the Carthelions, but the less time they had for preparation the better. Rowgar would probably halt the company before the foothills and rest them up a while. With these thoughts Barrin made himself comfortable and let the day drift by.

When the sun again began to set, the horn was sounded for the ending of the day’s march.

Mirriam looked at Barrin and spoke softly. “Barrin,” she said, “perhaps it is better if we reveal ourselves. We are approaching Krril country and another night in the brush could be dangerous. Who knows what may be lurking about with the coming of darkness.”

Barrin had gone over this in his mind and had decided that Mirriam was probably right.

“But what if they send us back?” he asked.

“What is the difference between today and tomorrow?” retorted Mirriam. “We are too far upon the road to be returned to Brannock without an escort.”

“You mean, you hope we are too far upon the road,” said Barrin.

By the time they had finished their discussion the second horn



had sounded and the march had come to a halt.

Barrin looked at Mirriam and Mirriam looked at Barrin. They were apprehensive looks ... wary looks ... Could they hear footsteps? The cover at the back of the wagon lifted. There stood Bart in his stone-grey uniform, dumbstruck.

“What is the matter?” called Turly, who was a close friend of Bart, but Bart did not reply. Turly joined Bart at the back of the wagon, he too fell silent.

Rowgar himself noticed the lack of action at the rear of the wagon, as he made his way from the front of the column. “Come now, Bart,” he said. “Awe struck are we at the sight of food. It is not that long since you have eaten!”

“It is not the sight of food,” replied Bart. “Unless you intend to become an ogre.”

This puzzled Rowgar more, and he too went to look in the wagon. His face fell. “In the name of ... What have we here?”

“Er ... I am Barrin, sir, and this is my sister, er ... Mirriam, we are ...”

Rowgar cut him off, “So I see, but I still do not believe.”

What followed was not very pleasant, but as the old man had said, Rowgar did not send them home, for he could not spare the men to escort them back, or so it appeared.

When the company set forth the next day, there were two extra persons sat on the wagon with Bart, both of whom looked far better after a good night’s sleep and a warming breakfast. Their impish grins contrasted greatly with Bart’s look of complete discern.

They travelled all that day watching the scenery slowly changing from high growing grass and bushland to a more sparse area of growth, before the foothills. The grass here was shorter, though it was still quite thick. The sparse scattering of trees had died out altogether, but the occasional bush was still to be seen.

When the sun began its downward journey, the company came to an abrupt halt.

“There, in the distance,” Bart said, “can you see a rider approaching?”

“Yes,” they both said in unison, looking toward the lone tor of these parts.

“Must be Bradur, I cannot think of anyone else it could be,” continued Bart.

Barrin and Mirriam cringed.

As the rider drew nearer, the characteristic style of Bradur became clear, he certainly was not the best horseman in Carthelion but he was efficient.

His horse, Swift, as he was named was of noble breed, he would raise his head when cantering through the open lands as if he were Lord of the Wild. Bradur always commented that his horse was of nobler stock than himself.

Orders came down the line to make camp, it seemed that they would rest for the latter part of the day before entering the foothills.

A camp of sorts was put together and a messenger despatched to Brannock. He rode the horse of Bradur who would have no more use for a mount.

The men sat around in groups relaxing and telling stories. They appreciated the rest because they knew the real hardships were yet to come.

It was just before dusk when Bradur came to the supply wagon. He was accompanied by a fair haired young man, who bore the insignia of group leader. The young man did not tarry. After a few words with Bradur he departed with a surprised look upon his face.

Barrin who was stood near the wagon with Bart and Mirriam, watched the young man leave. It was the same man he had seen with Rowgar at the inn. He felt a shiver run down his spine.

Bradur turned to Bart, “Well Bart,” he said, “I see you have company.”

“That I have,” replied Bart, rather defensively, “but I knew nothing of them until we were two days out from Brannock.”

“It is just as well you did not have a wagon load of Krril,” Bradur quipped snidely, “or we may have had more than we bargained for.”

“It was not Bart’s fault,” said Barrin in a squeaky little voice.

“AH! It is young master Barrin, come to defeat Krrilion single handed,” boomed Bradur.

“No sir,” replied Barrin, “but I would like to follow in my father’s footsteps, for better or for worse.”

Bradur felt rather silly and guilty at his last comment, he remembered Barrin's father and the tales that Rowgar had told of his last stand, which had probably saved Rowgar's life. "I see," Bradur said with more humility in his voice. "Hear me then, Barrin, son of Belgar, if you live to be half the man your father was, we will be proud to have you with us, but alas what is to become of your sister?"

"I go where my brother goes," said Mirriam huskily. "I am quite as able as my brother, be I a woman or not."

"Well nearly a woman," said Bradur, "but that is not the point, you will both learn the harshness of the country, we will not expect you to carry a pack, but you will have to keep up, we cannot hold back for slackers, we have an appointment to keep."

"You need not fear for us sir, we can pull our weight." Barrin's voice was beginning to sound more confident.

"I hold you responsible for them Bart, take care that you do not misplace my trust." With that Bradur wished them a goodnight, then turned and left.

"Well, what do you think of that?" said Bart.

"I think you are our guardian," chuckled Barrin.

"Yes, me too," agreed Mirriam.

Bart looked at them both helplessly.

The following morning as dawn touched the peaks of the mountains, the company again set out, by mid-morning the terrain had begun to rise and white clouds were drifting by far above. All was well.

At mid-day they halted for a short break, the remnants of the supplies stored in the wagon were unloaded and the horse unhitched. The wagon would travel no further, so the horse was freed. The trio which it had borne felt a sad loss as they watched it disappear down the hillside.

"I hope it gets home all right," said Mirriam.

"Me too," retorted Barrin, "you can get attached to animals."

"It is for the best," Bart said. They all agreed and no more was said on the subject.

The rest of the day they spent on foot, pausing only once at a place known as the Gateway of Arandil, the now unguarded border

of Outer Carthelion. It was marked by two large outcrops of rocks which stood like dark monoliths against the sky. There was no sign to be seen of the great battle which had taken place here many years past, yet the men who passed between the monoliths turned their thoughts to that battle, each man conjuring visions as would suit his own personality. The gateway gave the men a feeling of closeness with the past and at the same time solitude in the present, they seemed alone amid the vastness of the never ending hills.

By the evening the company looked worn out but still cheerful. The night passed without incident; no fires were lit and the night guard was strong. A full quarter of the company remained awake on each watch; swords were unsheathed continually, because of the fear of a surprise attack by the Krril.

Three more days passed, marching through the day, ever alert in the night.

At the end of the fourth day, the men settled down for a night of vigilance. Clouds had been gathering all day and the night was as black as pitch. The ground underfoot was rocky and hard. The gentle slopes over the rolling hills were now two days gone. They had been climbing a steep mountain causeway, with peaks looming high above them. The day's progress had been slow and tiring, but this they had expected. It made them all the more thankful for the warmth and protection of their blankets, which helped to shut out the cool night air.

When all had become quiet and the darkness had closed in about them, a shrill cry was heard, it cut the air around them and echoed in the mountains above, like a cat in torment and pain. The silence was shattered. Again the cry was heard, again it echoed through the mountains, and below the blood of the men ran cold. The guards stood with their eyes transfixed into the darkness, those in their blankets lay frozen, never had they heard such a sound of horror.

The night became still again, then the voice of Rowgar was heard. "All right you men, now you know what a Krril sounds like from close quarters, we are now in the territory of our enemies. Because you hear them it does not mean you will see them, they could keep this up for days. Time is on their side. In the meantime, I want the guard doubling. It means less sleep but at least you will

still be alive in the morning. They will come when they are ready, if they come at all.”

Barrin felt strangely comforted by Rowgar’s voice, he knew of the Krril and what Rowgar had said rang true. He comforted Mirriam, and they both spent a restless night of sleep.

With the morning came a sharp wind from the North. The skies were heavy with rain. Above them, the mountains rose and vanished into a thick layer of cloud. Below a stream could be seen making its way across the barren rock. There was no bird song, or vegetation to be seen anywhere, the land was harsh and cruel.

Barrin had heard stories, that the mountains had not always been this way, before the days of the Krril, shrubs were to be seen on the steep slopes and the valleys were green with grass. The trickling streams had supported small animals that made their abodes on the banks. In the days of old, Tark, mightiest of the eagles of the White Mountains, could be seen gliding down the valleys, portraying majesty and grace, but now in the bleak light of day, these tales seemed just like a dream.

Barrin packed his blanket and handed it to Bart, Mirriam did the same and handed hers to Turly. They both felt rather guilty about this, but they could only manage to carry themselves without dropping behind.

When all was ready, they again set out, rain was now falling, making them all feel that little bit more miserable and cold.

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As the days passed, the blood-curdling cry of the Krril became more frequent. The men were becoming very weary from too little sleep and too much marching, but still they pushed on. The going was still difficult even though they had begun their descent into the Valley of Shadow.

It was while they were having a short break from their descent that the wind dropped and the rain ceased, leaving only the rain-burdened cloud and silence.

The company began to feel uneasy. Their eyes looked upward searching for movement in the crevices above.

A silence such as this was uncanny, especially after the sounds of the blustering wind and splashing rain. The men should have been pleased at the let up in the weather, but this was not the case. They felt the same sort of closeness that they had experienced before they first heard the cry of the Krril. Few had heard the shrill voices of the Krril before this march and even less had met them face to face. It now seemed that the latter might change.

Faintly in the distance a low rumbling could be heard. It was hard to tell from which direction it came.

A shout was heard in the direction of the column's head. "AVALANCHE, QUICK DOWN INTO THE VALLEY IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIVES. IF WE ARE CAUGHT HERE, WE ARE ALL DEAD MEN."

The men found their voices as they began to run downward, their packs still strapped to their backs hindering their progress. Rowgar, for his part, fought his way upward, towards Barrin and Mirriam. He knew they did not have a chance by themselves.

Rowgar found the children stumbling forward trying to keep pace with Bart and Turly. "Quickly," he said, "over the edge of the causeway."

Over the edge went all five, clinging desperately to the rock face for their survival. For them time came to a standstill, none dared to move for fear of falling.

Bradur reached the Valley of Shadow at Valley's Meet, the majority of his men in hot pursuit. The company was in total disarray, but at least it was still intact.

Have we misjudged the Krril, thought Bradur. Have we underestimated the bravery of Krrilion their leader, or was the avalanche his cowardly way of attack, without showing his face.

Bradur surveyed his men searching for Rowgar, but he was not to be seen. Twenty paces before him stood Tarrol, he was hurriedly issuing orders. Maybe he had seen Rowgar, Bradur thought, but he never got the chance to ask. A gurgling scream of pain came to his ears as the man to his rear fell to the ground, a spear embedded in his chest. Then came the cries, the cries they had become so accustomed to.

"THE KRRIL ARE UPON US," Bradur shouted. "THEY

HAVE CHOSEN THEIR TIME WELL!”

Down through the valley poured the enemy, screaming as they came. From both East and West they charged, expecting little resistance from the men of Carthelion; the men who had already marched so far and were now in disorder.

“HOLD YOUR RANKS,” yelled Tarrol, in a clear sharp voice. “FOR YEARS WE HAVE AWAITED THIS OPPORTUNITY TO AVENGE OUR KINSFOLK. REMEMBER OUR DEAD FRIENDS. REMEMBER OUR ORPHANS AND MOST OF ALL REMEMBER OUR LOVED ONES. THE ONES WHO NOW DEPEND UPON US.”

A shadow passed across Tarrol’s face at that moment and all those who stood nearby witnessed a strange savagery in his eyes.

Tarrol drew his sword and held it before him pointing up to the sky. He glanced at the hilt and then raised his eyes to the tip. “Come Krrilion,” he whispered, “I am waiting for you.”

The men of Carthelion took strength from Tarrol’s voice, baring their own teeth for battle. Their swords sang as they left their sheaths. “ABARATH A CARTHELION,” cried Bradur, “FOR THE KINGDOM OF CARTHELION AND DEATH TO ALL HER ENEMIES.”

Bloody was the battle of Valley’s Meet. It raged through the morning and late into the afternoon, swinging this way and that, retreat and reform, attack and defend, but as the sun became low in the sky and the clouds parted, quiet once more lay on the land.

The lofty snow capped peaks glistened and stood silent, casting their great shadows upon the valley, where the little mountain stream, now swollen with the rains, ran red, with the blood of those who had fallen.

The company again began to gather itself together. Hundreds of men were still living, yet more lay unmoving on the ground. Bradur stood haughtily, facing the dying embers of light in the West. “Let them come,” he rapped, “Let them bring their hideous hordes down upon us, they will not be victorious. We will cut them down as weeds; we will destroy them. No creature of the underworld will keep us from our destiny. Let our enemies fear our coming!” Then a sadness swept over him and his voice became subdued. “To the

task ahead,” he said solemnly, “let us tend our wounded and gather up the dead, we will lay them to rest as best we can and say what words we know, but let not our hearts fail us, let not the lives of our fallen comrades be in vain, we have a great journey ahead and though many of our friends are no longer with us, their spirits will march onward, they will guide us on the way ahead. Come fellow men, let us be to our duty.”

The men of Carthelion gathered their dead, working in the last light of evening and through the day that followed, a huge stone tomb they built, and on its great stone door they inscribed: -

ABARATH A CARTHELION ER DECO  
TRANQUETA AR SUMMA

‘For the Glory of Carthelion they died, let none disturb  
their peace’

The Krril, they left where they had fallen, as a reminder to all their foes and especially to Krrilion, of the power of the realm and its determination in the face of all odds to regain its long lost lands. Krrilion would not forget.

On the morning of the twelfth day out from Brannock the company of Bradur again moved on. Many men had spent much time searching for Rowgar and the children. Tarrol had even tried to retrace their steps from Valley’s Meet, through the mass of melting snow. He was like a man possessed, but it did not avail him, naught did he find.

Bradur finally had to admit to himself that they were lost, probably in the avalanche in which many men had met their end, no longer could he delay for the moon was growing fuller nightly and Darrian, his Prince, was depending on him.



# ***HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KRRIL***

The drifts of snow and ice slithered slowly from their moorings high on the mountain face; as they descended they began to gain speed; downward they fell, downward through the cloud, down to the valley below.

The rumble had now grown to a roar, Barrin clung to the rock face as best he could, hardly daring to breathe and thinking black thoughts. The others clung there too, Rowgar had one arm around Mirriam trying to support her, although he could barely support himself.

Then it came, crashing on to the causeway; rocks bounced and snow sprayed. Snow was in their hair and in their eyes. Small stones peppered their hands, but they held firm, they could not feel the pain, their minds were now locked in blank concentration.

Slowly the onslaught came to an end; the occasional puff of snow or splintered rock passed them by. How long they had been there, they would never know. Their sense of time had deserted them, probably only a short while, but it seemed like an eternity.

“Can you support yourself, Mirriam?” Rowgar barked. His grip was giving way. He had to act quickly.

“Yes,” she replied weakly.

“I am going to try and get back on to the causeway, it is our only chance.” Rowgar removed his arm from Mirriam gently, so as not to upset her hold, before beginning his ascent. He was only a few hands down from the edge, but any movement was precarious. With care he climbed to the causeway, clearing snow for somewhere to stand. His final push had been too much for the fine ledge on which he had been standing; it dwelt on the rockface no more. Down it fell, bouncing off the steeply sloping mountain base on its earthward journey. Rowgar watched it fall for a scant

moment, then he began removing more snow from the edge of the causeway, to give the others room to squat.

First he hauled up Mirriam, followed by Barrin, then Bart. Turly had made his own way up. They all looked blank; their faces were set in incomprehension rather than fear.

“It does not look like we will be going anywhere in this lot, does it?” said Turly, standing to his full height of a little under nine hand spans.

No-one answered. Rowgar was looking around, trying to figure out how to by-pass the snow. Finally he said, “We cannot go downward, the snow must be twenty hands deep down there and we cannot go forward, the causeway is filled to its limit.” He paused for a moment and fixed his eyes the way that they had come. “Back we must go, I can see the edge of the drift, it is our only hope.”

Rowgar had again begun clearing the snow, when he heard the distant scream of the Krril. He halted and listened. Orders were being shouted, then came the clash of steel, the cry of pain. The snow around him seemed to muffle the sound and for this he was thankful, they all were. Mirriam covered her ears and Barrin looked pale. Turly, himself looking pained, rubbed his square chin, then nudged them all forward. “Come now,” he uttered, “there is nothing we can do.”

At a snail’s pace they moved along the eastern causeway and much time had elapsed before the snow in front and below them disappeared.

“Now we must decide,” said Rowgar thoughtfully. “Do we go down into the valley below, or try to retrace our footsteps back to Brannock?”

“Neither way is good,” Bart murmured.

“That is true,” said Rowgar, “but unless you want to perch here for the rest of your days, we have to come to terms with our situation.”

“If only the noise would stop,” said Barrin, “then perhaps we could think more clearly.”

“Indeed,” said Turly. “There must be a fierce battle at Valley’s Meet, but at least Bradur has not been overwhelmed or the fighting

would have stopped long ago!”

“The signs are hopeful.” Rowgar seemed to be trying to lift his own spirit as well as his companions. “The Krril must break if the battle continues much longer, open war is not their style, so let us put our minds to our predicament. More than half the day is gone, we should be well on our way by night fall, whichever direction we choose.”

After much debating, in which Rowgar made strong suggestions, the small company decided to go downward. They thought to circumnavigate the snowslide, by crossing the small mountain stream if necessary. Then by following the watercourse, they could gain entry to Valley’s Meet, where the stream entered into the Valley of Shadow.

Rowgar used the rope he carried for the descent. He anchored it firmly on to the causeway and they descended one by one. The operation went without incident, if not sweat. When they were all safely down, Bart tried to unanchor the rope several times from its anchorpoint, but with no success. “Nevermind,” he said, “it has served its purpose well.”

“Listen!” said Mirriam.

They all paused, accentuating their senses.

“I hear nothing,” Barrin quipped.

“Exactly,” said Rowgar, “the battle must have come to its end.”

At that moment the sun flickered through the clouds, casting a chilly light over the valley.

“I hope it has gone well,” whispered Turly.

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They camped in the Valley of Andir that night, not far from where they had descended. No-one had felt like travelling further that day.

“Where do we go from here?” Barrin enquired, addressing no one in particular.

“To the stream as we planned, unless you have a better idea,” said Turly.

“No,” replied Barrin. “I hope the stream is not difficult to cross

with the rain and all.”

“I dare say it will have swollen somewhat but we will find that out soon enough, it is not far from here,” said Bart, rubbing his hands. He still had not got the numb feeling from his fingers, that he had gained forging through the snow.

“I will be glad to get some rest,” Mirriam said with a sigh, “I feel completely beaten.”

“Lay your heads down and sleep,” suggested Rowgar, “I will keep watch.”

“You cannot keep watch all night,” Bart retorted, “wake me at midnight and I will keep watch until daybreak.”

With that statement Bart lay down on the hard stony ground and pulled his blanket over himself. He immediately fell into a deep sleep. The others did likewise, even fear could not ward off the tiredness the day had brought.

Rowgar seated himself and rested his back against a rock. The valley was drenched in the light of the moon. The snow of the avalanche that lay before them had a strange and eerie glow. He turned his head to the stream before them. He could hear its running waters in the silence that surrounded them, but it was hidden from his view. Beyond the invisible stream Rowgar saw the giant outline of Gabe Andir, dwarfing the mountains that stood before it. It seemed to menace him but he could not imagine why, it was only another mountain after all. With that thought his eyes slowly began to shut, he jerked them open once, and then again but on the third time they remained closed, peace fell upon him.

When the first beams of light struck the mountain, Rowgar jerked back to wakefulness. His mind cleared quickly. Thank goodness, he thought, nothing went amiss in the night, I would never have forgiven myself. He raised himself to his feet, and stretched his cramped muscles.

Gradually the light became stronger and the others began to stir. Bart was the first to awake. He lay on the ground staring at the sky, guilt slowly creeping across his face. He sat up warily, looking toward Rowgar who was strolling by the edge of the fallen snow, not far from where they lay. Rowgar caught his eyes, but said nothing.

“I am sorry sir, truly I am. I must have been that beaten last night, I slept like a log, an uncomfortable one mind you, my back aches.”

The sound of Bart’s voice woke the rest of the company.

“Not to worry,” said Rowgar turning his head away. “We all make mistakes.”

The other three all rose, removing sleep from their eyes and flexing aching limbs.

“What is for breakfast?” asked Mirriam sheepishly, brushing her dark tangled hair from her brow.

“The same as you had for supper,” replied Barrin, “salted meat and a mouthful of water.”

“Ugh,” she grunted, “things are becoming desperate.”

After they had finished their thoroughly unenjoyable breakfast, they picked up their blankets and packs and moved off toward the stream. It was only a short while before they neared its course, but as they drew close, it became obvious that they would not be able to cross, nor would they be able to move toward Valley’s Meet. The snows and boulders of the avalanche had blocked their path right up to the banks of the fast flowing water.

“Now what?” said Turly.

Rowgar pointed South, back up the course of the stream.

They all turned and trundled off up the valley.

“We should be able to cross soon,” said Rowgar. “The stream will become narrower as we head upward.”

“I hope so,” said Mirriam, “it looks more like a river, than a stream to me.”

Too right, thought Bart.

Two leagues had passed before they finally waded to the opposite bank, through the freezing water. They had removed their footwear to cross, and had it not been for the numbness of their feet, they would have been in pain from abrasions inflicted by the sharp stones on the streambed. Several grunts and mumblings passed between them before they set off toward Valley’s Meet and when they did set off, the uneven valley slowed them down. It took them a full muscle aching day before they again closed upon the snows left by the avalanche.

“It is but a short distance now,” said Rowgar. “If we follow the course of the stream round to the right, behind the outcrop of rock, we should be able to see down into the Valley of Shadow.”

This did not strike Barrin as a very good idea, his head ached and the thought of what may be down there filled him with dread. “Perhaps the morning would be better,” he suggested. “My feet are tired and my body aches, even the thoughts that fill my head are muddy. We would be much better prepared for – who knows what, in the morning.”

All felt the same as Barrin, except Rowgar, but he was only one and he was not prepared to pull rank on anyone.

“Be it as you wish,” replied Rowgar. “If Bradur was triumphant yesterday, I feel sure he would have moved on as quickly as possible. We should make haste to follow tomorrow. Even if he has many wounded, he will push ahead with all speed!”

That night Bart took first watch trying to make amends for the previous night. It was a quiet watch, Bart neither heard nor saw anything unusual. The valley seemed deserted except for themselves.

The watch swapped before midnight and again between midnight and dawn. Rowgar took the last watch. He, like Bart, found the valley peaceful. He never questioned how silent the valley really was, because he knew the valley was virtually devoid of animal or bird life, why should there be any sound? He pondered the supplies they had left and was glad that he had filled their skins the previous day with the snows, which had fallen from the mountains. He did not trust the stream water, not with the desolation that surrounded it. Many a league we have to travel yet, he thought, we must make our meagre supplies count. Rowgar had been carrying the three skins they possessed himself, because Turly and Bart were carrying the extra blankets of Barrin and Mirriam plus the few rations that they possessed. Dawn will soon be here, he mused, then we ... He was cut off in mid-thought, his body slumped over hitting the ground with a thud.

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Rowgar opened his eyes, he seemed to be lying on the floor of a large cavern, his vision was blurred and his head throbbed.

“Rowgar, are you all right?” a voice squeaked.

As his vision slowly cleared, he saw Mirriam leaning over him, her hands behind her back. “What happened?” he uttered groggily.

“Krril,” she said. “They came upon us in the night, the first I knew was when I felt a foot in my side. I opened my eyes to see a spear stuck at the end of my nose.”

Rowgar grimaced, “It is my fault,” he said. “My thoughts were elsewhere, I should have seen their approach.”

“It could have happened to anyone,” a voice said from the rear of the cavern. “I dare say if they caught you off guard, they would have caught me also.” It was Turly’s voice; he, Bart and Barrin were all together and bound securely.

Rowgar realised Mirriam was also tied, but she had managed to hop across the cavern floor with her legs bound together. His own bonds made their presence felt. They bit deeply into his hands and legs. “Where are we?” he asked.

“To the best of my knowledge, we are halfway up that great mountain that overlooks the stream. They fair dragged us here, dumped us in this cavern, making quite sure that we were not going anywhere; then they left,” said Bart.

“Well,” sighed Rowgar, “it seems that all we can do is wait.”

How long had passed before they heard light footsteps entering the cavern, they could not tell. The place was timeless; it had probably been there for thousands of years.

They all looked apprehensively toward the entrance, expecting – they knew not what. Eight Krril came into view in the dim light which engulfed them, they were making a soft sort of ‘Krriling’ noise as they approached. Small, hunched and hideous they looked, the flesh which covered their strong but spindly frames looked smooth and dull. They wore little clothing – mainly skins, which left them very open to the harshness of the mountain weather.

Fear could be seen in the face of their captives. Only Rowgar had looked into their eyes before this day. His feelings were more of loathing than of fear.

The captives were dragged to their feet; the ropes that bound

their feet were cut before they were pushed toward the entrance. A Krril walked at either side of each man, one with Barrin and one with Mirriam.

They did not reach the opening of the cavern, but turned to the left, where stood an archway, cast in shadow. Under the archway they passed; then down long winding tunnels. Down deep they went, into the heart of the mountain. They found it difficult to see; the corridors were poorly lit with burning torches. Ahead there was a different sort of light – greenish in colour. It flickered on and off as their road curved this way and that, until eventually they stepped out into a huge hall, cut out of the solid rock of the mountain.

It must have taken scores of Krril many a year to open a cavern out like this, Rowgar thought. His eyes drifting around the hall, passing over many wall drawings and many entrances. They must lead out on all sides of the mountain, his thoughts continued, whoever dwells here does not intend to become trapped.

As they moved further into the hall, two figures came into view. They were still some distance away but one appeared to be seated on a large stone chair or throne. Rowgar assumed these persons or whatever they were, to be of some authority and he was indeed correct.

There was a throne set upon the barren floor and upon it perched a very large Krril, but the figure to his right appeared human. This aroused Rowgar's interest, he did not believe any man would dwell with the Krril. In fact, from twenty paces the man looked just like Gerome – Rowgar shrugged that thought away, turning his attention to the staff that the man held. At first it looked no more than a plain old staff, but as Rowgar drew nearer to his hosts, it seemed to have a dark beauty in its fashioning. Its ends were rough and knurled, but down its length it was smooth and black, it seemed to glow with an eerie dim light of its own.

The group of Carthelions soon reached the throne, where they were pushed to their knees. Mirriam's teeth clashed together with the jolt of impact.

Their herdsman drew back and the Krril on his throne looked down on them, his eyes boring deep. He began to crow in a tongue completely unintelligible, which only served to send more shivers



down their spines, then the man at the Krril's side spoke up. "Krrilion bids you welcome; welcome to the halls of the Mountain Krril."

Barrin thought he recognised the words, as though he had heard them before, but he could not imagine where.

"My name is Loekan, it is good of you to visit me here, I doubt you have heard my name before, though I have no doubt you know of Krrilion – you do call him Krrilion, do you not? King Krril. I think that he would approve of that. Now as not to delay you on your journey much longer, we shall have a little talk and then you can be on your way."

"You lie!" said Barrin, in a flustered voice. "We were forced here against our will, you have no intention of letting us go."

"Really," replied Loekan, with a faint smile touching his beardless face and a cold laughter in his eyes.

Rowgar felt uneasier with Loekan than he had with the Krril, he could sense hidden power.

"To business," declared Loekan. "We have no time for formalities especially when we are accused of bullying. You will now tell me what I want to know." He motioned to a guard, who moved forward and placed his spear in the middle of Turly's back.

"You will not get a word from me," said Turly. Sweat was on his brow and his voice sounded nervous.

Barrin glanced at Turly and saw a picture of fear, he also noticed that the Krril had its head on one side, it looked as if it was listening to something. Barrin put his hand on his chest unconsciously, he could feel the medallion resting under his tunic; his hand tingled as it lay on the medallion, but he paid it little attention, his mind was elsewhere. He turned his head to Loekan, who was staring at Turly, then his gaze dropped to the staff which Loekan held, it was so black that it seemed to dim the light in its vicinity – or was it a dark glow emanating from the staff engulfing the brighter light of Krrilion's hall. The light seemed to ebb and flow – grow stronger then fade, like a luminous pulse. It went in tune with the tingling in his hand, rhythmic and slow.

The spear plunged into Turly's back and emerged from his stomach, disembowelling him enroute.

Miriam screamed – Barrin and Bart turned their heads away. Barrin could feel his stomach heaving. Turly’s face showed complete and utter incomprehension, before he keeled forward onto the ground.

Rowgar had managed to raise himself to his feet. “Damn you Loekan,” he growled, and spat his contempt in Loekan’s face.

Loekan raised his staff and with a blur of speed, struck the side of Rowgar’s neck. He tottered and fell back to his knees.

The guard having removed his spear from Turly, who lay unmoving on the floor, now placed it at the rear of Rowgar’s throat.

“No,” sobbed Miriam, “no more killing, I will tell you what you want to know.”

Krrilion purred with approval, he seemed to understand the speech of men, though he could not speak it.

Barrin and Bart could not bring themselves to object, not at the cost of Rowgar’s life. Rowgar himself was still groggy.

“Where are Darrian and Gerome?” questioned Loekan sternly.

“Darrian is heading around the mountains to the East. Gerome is still in Brannock,” she said hesitantly.

“Still in Brannock,” Loekan repeated with a troubled look crossing his brow. He did not seem interested in Darrian. It was as though he already knew the plans that the council had made. “And how do you know he is still in Brannock, young lady?”

“I was hidden in a nearby wagon while Gerome was speaking to the Prince,” she replied. “He may follow later when the fighting is done.”

Loekan laughed.

Krrilion turned to Loekan and in his strange half bird, half cat like tongue spoke softly.

Barrin raised his head. He thought the language intelligible, but it was too soft to hear clearly. Then another thought hit him hard, the old man – was that really Gerome?

Loekan replied to Krrilion, speaking the language of Carthelion. “It will be as you say.” He then looked at the companions. “You may go. Krrilic will escort you to the hallway exit. Follow the path before you. It will lead to the western face of the mountain, but be warned, if you do not follow the pathway, your lives will be

forfeit.”

Mirriam looked astounded. “That is all you want to know? You are going to release us?”

The smile came back to Loekan’s face. “Of course, my dear, what use would I have for such fools. You who would camp not a league from their great leader Bradur, and become ensnared,” he laughed again, a menacing laugh that made Mirriam cringe. “And, as for you Rowgar, petty leader of men, you shall become the bane of your people.”

Rowgar did not know what Loekan meant.

Krrilic entered the hall and threw down their packs before them, then he cut their bonds.

“Go now,” said Loekan, “before I change my mind.”

They bent over and picked up their packs, which still contained their meagre belongings, and followed Krrilic to the exit. No words were spoken, they could think of nothing to say.

When they reached the arch of the adjoining tunnel, Krrilic halted. Bart turned and looked back towards Turly. “I do not want to leave you here,” he said, his eyes becoming watery, “but what else can I do.”

Rowgar heard him and whispered softly. “If we ever leave here alive and of that I have great doubts, I swear I will avenge him. The deeds that have befallen here will not go unpunished.”

They left the great hall and began to head downward; alone they went, at first in silence, their footsteps echoing from the walls around them.

After a little while, Mirriam spoke. “What a mess,” she said softly, speaking more to herself than those around her.

The walls picked up her voice and echoed it softly around.

“Do not think about it,” said Rowgar.

‘Do not think about it,’ replied the walls.

“At least Bradur was victorious, we still have hope.” As Rowgar’s last words repeated themselves over and over, they heard a clacking sound behind, like heavy footwear against the hard rock. They paused and listened. The sound became louder.

“Come,” said Bart, “let us be on our way, whatever is making that sound, I do not want to meet. Who knows what atrocities are

lurking here.”

They moved off at a quicker pace, but the clacking became louder, drawing nearer and nearer. Faster and faster they walked. The clacking was now setting up its own echo against their footsteps. Down the long winding corridors they went, passing adjoining tunnels, into which they dared not look. ‘Clack, Clack’ came the sound. The chill of fear began to creep over them. Louder and louder it came. Barrin’s face was now covered with perspiration, fear was biting deep. ‘Clack, Clack.’ They were now almost at running speed. Ahead daylight glinted. We will be safe there, Barrin thought, not really knowing why. His speed increased still more. He was now running. The light bobbed and wavered as they twisted and turned. Onward they went, now they were all running. Panic was upon Barrin and Mirriam. Faster they ran, ever faster, but the steps behind were keeping pace. They were now a heavy drumming. Closer and closer and!

They ground their heels into the rock, and stopped abruptly. Before them stood – not a man, but a giant figure of doom. It stood motionless. They could go no further. Rowgar turned swiftly to face their pursuer, but saw nothing, just the road that they had taken, empty and silent. He turned again, his three companions stood as if turned to stone. His eyes moved to the lone figure. He could not see the eyes for the face was covered by a heavy iron helm. Below the helm a breastplate hung, made of the same heavy iron. In its left hand was held a large mace, deadly to look upon. The other hand held three swords by their sheaths.

A piercing laugh echoed, and what sounded to be the flapping of wings, in the corridor behind them. Rowgar turned again, but still there was nothing to see. Then came the voice, the voice they would never forget. “Do not look alarmed,” it said, “my trusted friend has merely brought your swords, you would not like to upset him, would you? He can be very dangerous when he is frightened.” Then they heard the spine chilling laughter of Loekan.

He is playing with us, thought Rowgar, curse him.

The figure blocking their way moved to one side and threw down the swords upon the floor. They clanged with the rattle of steel.

Rowgar and Bart moved carefully forward, and picked up the swords. Rowgar never moved his eyes from the iron-clad figure as he raised his sword. What if I were to seek my revenge now, he thought, but he knew it unwise, even if he could fell the monster before him, it would achieve little, it was only one.

They moved to the entrance, Rowgar's eyes still fixed on their target; then out into the warmth of the afternoon sun. They began their descent down a mountain trail turning every few paces to ensure that they were still alone.

Eventually they reached the base of the mountain. Bart and Barrin slumped to the floor with exhaustion. Mirriam stood as if in a swoon, her back toward the rapidly cooling sun.

"We cannot rest long," said Rowgar. "Though we are tired and low of heart; even if pursuit from Gabe Andir is unlikely, I fear there may still be stray Krril in the area. We must leave the trail before dark."

Shortly they rose again and began to drag themselves forward. Fortunately it was not long before they found a sheltered place within a crude circle of rocks, which would help to fend off the night air. They spoke very little, and what was said only concerned their resting place. Mirriam had said nothing. She was still too much in shock. No one forced speech on her. They simply made a watch rota and settled down for the night.

Morning came joylessly. They had only a scant breakfast, though they had long been without food. Rowgar took thought and decided that their best course of action was again to try and follow Bradur. It did not seem a brilliant idea but it was the only one he had.

The lay of the land was strange to him and no map did he possess, so he thought to seek out the stream, which he now believed to flow at the other side of the mountain.

He explained his thoughts to his companions, though Mirriam did not seem to hear. They had no objections, they too, were lost.

They picked up their packs and the sword of Turly and began to move off. As the morning drew on the sun became warm; they reached the edge of the water but it did not look familiar, though it did look dangerous to cross. They took counsel and decided that

even if it was not the stream for which they searched, the waters should come together not too far in the distance.

While they spoke Mirriam began to sob. Barrin put his arm around her, but could think of no words of consolation – long they stood together. Tears ran freely down her soft cheeks. A great sadness came over them all.

“Perhaps it is for the best,” said Bart. “It does no good to keep things bottled up inside.”

“You speak wisely,” replied Rowgar. “We all have our misgivings.” He then spoke to Mirriam, whose tears had now eased a little. “Do not feel sad,” he said, “there was naught that we could do for Turly. The swiftness of his passing was perhaps for the better. He would not have talked and Loekan would have got his information somehow, his pits will be deep and his ways ruthless. Do not feel shame either for it is not justified. I owe you my life, for what it is worth. The information for which it was bought, would only confirm what Loekan already knew. He seems devious and sly beyond anything we could have expected from the Krril alone. Take heart little one, this skirmish may be over, but the war has not yet begun.”

With those words, Mirriam pulled herself together. “Loekan may yet come to a bad end,” she said raising herself to her full height.

Bart turned to Barrin. “Take this, young sir, the sword of Turly. He no longer has need of it.” Bart’s face was overcome with grief as he thought of the good times that he had shared with Turly. “Take it and use it well.”

“Thank you, Bart, but I feel I am not worthy to carry it.”

“Come now,” said Rowgar rubbing his neck, “where has the spirit gone that was so keen, not many days gone. War is not all games, you know.”

Barrin tried to force a smile. “I will try to do it honour, sir,” he replied.

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For two days they followed the stream, which had now merged

and grown wider, but still Rowgar did not recognise the land about them, the edges of a marshland had come into view on the far bank and the stream was turning quickly into a river. They talked as they went, about Bradur who it seemed had survived the onslaught of the Krril and of Darrian and his journey around the mountains. At times the conversation drifted back to Outer Carthelion, and the lives that were now behind them. It helped to pass the time of day.

After five days of travel their weariness began to overcome them. The sun seemed hot after their journey over the cold mountains and their food was almost gone. Nothing could they glean from the land, it had been waste from the journeys onset. More days passed, but no one was keeping count. Their supplies had all gone and still they dared not drink from the waters which they followed, for fear of poisoning.

Eventually Mirriam dropped to her knees. "I can go no further," she said. "Leave me and go on. I can only burden you now."

"We will have no dramatics here," said Bart. "We go nowhere unless we all go together." He knelt down and helped her to her feet, they walked on. Bart helped to support Mirriam at times and Rowgar had to help Barrin.

That night they slept exhausted and unwatchful, until the sun rose high in the sky.

Mirriam and Barrin were loath to go on, but they had no choice. By mid-day they were stumbling. The sun had become hot and they withered before it. Hope was deserting them. The land was desolate and unyielding.

By mid-afternoon, Bart and Rowgar were carrying the full weight of the children. They could not go on like this; the weight was too much.

Bart collapsed and lay exhausted on the ground, Mirriam lay against him. Her tongue was swollen and her throat parched.

Rowgar put Barrin down as gently as he could, then lay on his back. He could find no shade and the sun glared down on him.

While Rowgar lay half-awake and half-dreaming, he thought he saw the sky dim and then grow bright again, as though a huge bird had passed by. Then again it happened. This time he saw a great wingspan blot the sun, gliding silently earthward. My mind

becomes delirious, he thought, perhaps if I sleep a while ...

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It felt cooler, Rowgar could hear the rustle of trees; melodic voices seemed to fill the air. A dream, Rowgar thought, or dare I believe this is real. He reached for his eyes for his lids were heavy. He felt a cloth, cool with the dampness of water, resting lightly upon his brow. He removed the cloth and partially opened his eyes. Two blurred figures stood beside him.

“Ah! You have awoken my friend. We hope you feel a little better for your rest?” said a young lordly figure with a kindly voice.

“Where am I? How long have I been here?” Rowgar asked, his voice hoarse and groggy.

“Questions, my friend. There will be plenty of time for your curiosity, but I will answer such few as to put your mind at ease. You are in the household of Delthinius, Lord of Gresia and Isor, as for the time; we have tended and fed you in and out of consciousness for four days. We found you in the Wastelands, on the border of our domain. I am Reoch, adviser to Delthinius and this is the daughter of our Lord, Nennian is her name.”

Rowgar looked a little surprised, then turned his head to face Nennian, his neck still pained him and caused him to wince.

“Are you in great pain, good sir?” Nennian enquired.

“No,” replied Rowgar. “It is only an old bruise I acquired along the way.” He looked into the face of Nennian, and such beauty he beheld that he again thought he was dreaming. For a moment his senses left him, then the children came to mind. “What of my friends?” he enquired. “Are they all right?”

“Yes,” replied Reoch, “they are all resting, as you should be.”

“I have no time for rest,” retorted Rowgar. “I must find my company. There are battles to be fought. I must not let them down.”

“Your company will wait, unless you intend to follow them on your hands and knees. I suggest that you do as I say and rest. Delthinius will speak with you when you feel better.”

“I feel better now,” retorted Rowgar. “Let me speak with your Lord.”



“As you wish, but he too prepares for war and has little time to spare. Dress and refresh yourself. I will return for you shortly. Nennian will help you, if help you need.”

Rowgar accepted graciously.

Shortly afterwards, Reoch returned as he had promised. Rowgar was ready when he arrived; his patience had now tempered somewhat. Nennian stood by the window watching the trees rustle and wave in the gentle breeze.

“Come,” said Reoch, “my Lord Delthinius awaits you in his quarters.”

Rowgar, feeling very unsteady, edged his way to the door where Reoch awaited him, he turned before leaving and looked toward Nennian, “We will see each other again?”

She looked away from the trees and smiled. “We will meet again,” she whispered.

Rowgar followed Reoch down a long passageway with rooms on either side, until at last they came to the abode of Delthinius. Reoch knocked lightly and entered. Rowgar followed close behind.

Delthinius sat at a large oak table, its surface highly polished. He stood as Rowgar entered. “Welcome, Rowgar of Carthelion, our house is honoured by your presence.”

“Thankyou, my Lord, but how is it you know my name?” Rowgar bowed his head, but his eyes remained fixed on the tall slim figure before him. A figure which reminded him a little of his own Prince.

“I have spoken with your young escort, Barrin. A hardy lad, quick on the recovery ... as most children are. Pray be seated.”

“Thankyou again, sir,” replied Rowgar, as he sat down.

Delthinius nodded to Reoch, who then left the room silently.

“Tell me,” Rowgar began. “How did you find us and why did you not just leave us where we were? We are not of your lands and of no consequence to you!”

“Come now,” said Delthinius, “would you leave two men and two children to die in the Wastelands. You do not do us justice. As to how we found you, none enter Gresia without our knowledge, our eyes are upon the wing, none may cross our lands unless we will it.”

“I did not mean to insult you,” replied Rowgar, “but friends are few in the lands we have seen and we have nothing of value to offer you.”

“Indeed! What of the Orb of Zarrion, which lies upon young Barrin’s chest, inset in a gold medallion? Do you not deem this of value?” Delthinius spoke as if talking to an old friend, a manner that gave Rowgar a feeling of security; it seemed that he had learned much about Rowgar from Barrin. “The craftsmen, who made this have long since departed,” he continued. “Never will the like of it be seen again in our lives.”

“The Orb of Zarrion!” replied Rowgar. “I know naught of this, neither do I know anyone by the name of Zarrion.”

“You surprise me, Rowgar, you know not of the Timeless Wanderer whose counsels are always wise and whose beard is as long as his years. The one who supports his age on a stick and yet never passes on.”

Gerome, thought Rowgar, he seems to fit the description, and Zarrion is not a birth name. “Yes, I think I do know of whom you speak. Gerome, we call him,” replied Rowgar. “But I also detect something of a plot in the air.”

Delthinius laughed, “Zarrion rarely does what he speaks and rarely speaks what he does, but fear not, he is true to the cause of justice.”

“You seem to know him well, may I ask where you have gained your experience?” Rowgar enquired, reaching for his neck, which still felt uncomfortable.

“Zarrion passes this way on occasions, though his last visit was perhaps not in your lifetime, we remember well, for we are a long lived people. He stayed with us only a short time, but it was time enough for him to warn us of the troubled days to come. ‘When the Orb of Zarrion again crosses your path, prepare for war,’ he said. ‘The Loch have infested the fair lands of Carthelion and unless Lochgor falls, you will never find rest upon these lands, or any of the lands of Ineham’ – and this we believe. It was he who helped to save our people from the destruction of Isor, in an age long gone. He led our people over many leagues, to where we now live, though many of our people strayed on the journey, even into the

land of Carthelion.” Delthinius paused and looked into Rowgar’s face and saw bewilderment. “Of course you will not know of the Kingdom of Isor. It was our homeland in ancient times, when the world was a more peaceful place ... Have you noticed our speech is similar? I do not have to alter my tongue much to sound as one from Carthelion.”

“Yes, I have indeed noticed,” said Rowgar. “When I first heard the voices of Reoch and Nennian, they sounded more of a melody, but when I came to my senses and thought about it, they sounded not unlike my own people, even before they spoke in my native tongue.”

Delthinius smiled, “Those of us of the higher household were taught the difference in our speech by Zarrion. He bade us remember it well, for on a time, it would be of use. Of course you, yourself still use many words that descended from the lands of Tukamar, it was unlike that of Isor, but was widely used in all the lands about us, in the days of Tackurion and Camirion, when the Kings of Tukamar waged ceaseless wars on Lochi ...” Again, Delthinius paused, “Do you know of Tukamar and the ancient Sea Kings?” he queried.

“Very little of Tukamar and even less of her rulers.”

“Forgive me, I talk as if I were speaking to a fellow Gresian. The records of those days are logged in the ‘Annals of Kings’ which are available to anyone who cares to read them but you have not had the chance to do so.”

“I doubt whether I would be able to translate your writings even if I had the chance,” replied Rowgar.

“Maybe not,” mused Delthinius. “However it is not important, your young companion, Barrin, has a great interest in the battles of old, and I deem he will not give me peace until the story of Lochi is told, so if you would care to join us this night beside the fires...”

“That I surely will, but tell me who was this ‘Lochi’?”

“Was – ‘Is’ may be a better word,” a troubled look crossed the brow of Delthinius. “Some called him Zarrloch, others Warloch, and now ... and now, perhaps Loekan.”

“WARLOCH – LOEKAN, are you sure?” spouted Rowgar.

“Yes and No, I feel sure he is, but I have no proof.”

“Loekan is a man,” stated Rowgar flatly.

“A Zarr,” corrected Delthinius. “A delver in hidden powers.”

“In dark powers?”

“In his case, yes.”

Rowgar leant back in his seat thoughtfully and put a hand on his neck.

“Tell me, Rowgar, of your dealing with Loekan.”

“I did not say ...”

Delthinius frowned.

Rowgar began again, “I will be glad to tell of my dealings, after all I still feel the pain of his staff in my neck.”

Delthinius cast a worried glance at Rowgar.

“The pain is not great,” said Rowgar assuringly, then he began to tell of his journey from Outer Carthelion.

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Reoch made his way to the room of Barrin and Mirriam, leaving Delthinius and Rowgar to talk. He had become acquainted with the children the previous day. When he arrived he saw Mirriam sat on her bed. He stood and watched her filling her mouth with what looked like ceocan berries.

Mirriam was indeed popping berries in her mouth – a great quantity of them. She did not know of what type they were, but they did taste good.

“It is good to see you are feeling better,” said Reoch as he entered the open doorway.

“I feel fine, thankyou,” she replied. “It is hard to think that only four days ago we were dead on our feet.”

“Well, you still seem a little on the scrawny side, but we have our ways of healing the starved.”

Mirriam blushed, she had never really thought of her appearance.

“I see you have washed and changed, we can go walking now, if your legs will bear your weight.”

“We can indeed,” replied Barrin, butting in.

“Come then and see our fair land.”

They both rose. Alas their enthusiasm was far stronger than their bodies, Barrin tottered toward Reoch and Mirriam's head felt very light.

"I think we will not go far though!" quipped Reoch.

"Perhaps not," agreed Barrin.

They left the house and walked the short distance to the edge of the wood, birds were singing all around them and the grass rustled with the tiny feet of small animals.

"The sights are good to behold," said Barrin. "I thought I would never see grass and trees again. The woods must be full of wonderful creatures."

"Yes," replied Reoch, "we are fortunate here. The waters that run by our fair woods – though not the purest, are reasonably clear and do not harm those who drink from them, though I do fear that the land will turn bad in the end, if the Krril are not dislodged from the mountains. The Wastelands you have trodden spread northward day by day, following the polluted waters here to Azera. Fortunately the filth is still sufficiently diluted, but daily the water grows fouler."

"We, too, have many problems in Carthelion," said Mirriam, "even now we bear the brunt of the Krril's evil ways ... How do they survive if they destroy their own land and pollute their own waters?"

The Loch supply their needs at present," replied Reoch. "But, before time, they simply moved on when their lands became desolate. That is how the lands beyond the river became waste. It is not unlike penning sheep in a field, begging the pardon of the sheep of course."

Mirriam giggled. "That does not explain the polluted waters," she said.

"No," Reoch answered, "the sorcery behind this is beyond their powers. We suspect Loekan has a hand in this, curse him. One day he will get his just dues, but let us be on our way now to the stables of our Lord, and no more talk of Krril and Loch, we should forget their evil doings for this day."

They spent the greater part of the afternoon looking at the great steeds of Gresia. Beautiful animals they were, especially

Greythrong, horse of Delthinius. He was tall and strong, with a mane of purest white. A fine horse, thought Barrin, he will do justice to his Lord.

As the afternoon drew on and the daylight noticeably subsided. Reoch took the children to watch the afternoon assembly of the youth of Gresia. It was very similar to the gatherings that were held at Barrin's school, the only real difference was the children themselves, they seemed – sort of clean and orderly, in fact, there seemed to be an air of serenity about the meeting, something which was unknown in Brannock. Barrin and Mirriam shrugged this off as no more than an oddity.

After leaving the assembly Barrin and Mirriam returned to their rooms. They were exhausted but in high spirits. Barrin thought to have a short rest before the night's gathering and Mirriam felt the same. They both lay back with a feeling of new life.

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Rowgar had finished his story and was now discussing certain aspects of it with Delthinius, hoping perhaps to gain a better insight into the thought and plans of Loekan.

“And you say the creature blocking your escape was large with an iron helm and breastplate. A very powerful creature.”

“Yes,” replied Rowgar.

“I would say then that you stood face to face with a Loch Warrior, a large one at that, they are rarely taller than men, though their weight is far greater. It would appear your company which should now be well inside Northern Carthelion has no route of retreat, but again if that is the case, why should Loekan let his presence be known.”

“It seems that all his deeds are treacherous and his words lies, we must keep an open mind on all things.”

“Of course you are right,” replied Delthinius, “there is one last thing though, the wound you received from the staff. From what you say of the staff, it could well be the Staff that we call ‘Earthen’, a foul and dangerous weapon. Would you mind if our healer tends it for you?”

“I mind not,” replied Rowgar, “the injury does still trouble me.”

“I will arrange it then.” Delthinius rose and Rowgar followed suit.

“Until later then,” said Rowgar bowing his head.

“I shall join you shortly,” said Delthinius, and with that Rowgar left. His feet were still unsteady but he felt a little stronger.

Not long after reaching his room the healer arrived. Rem was his name, fair of face and light of heart as were all the people of Gresia, though he bore many more years than Reoch on his shoulders. He tended Rowgar’s wound and as he did so, his face began to show alarm.

“What is it?” asked Rowgar. “You look troubled.”

“Brace yourself,” said Rem, “this may hurt somewhat.”

Rowgar did as he was bid, he felt a sharp pain in his neck, then Rem held before him a shiny black splinter.

“Is that cause for alarm?” said Rowgar.

“Remember that it came from the Staff of Loekan,” replied Rem.

At that moment Delthinius entered, he saw the look on Rem’s face. “Is it as I suspected?”

“So it would appear, my Lord.” Rem indicated toward the splinter.

“Do I play a guessing game or will someone tell me what ails you both, is the splinter poisoned?” asked Rowgar as he raised himself to his feet.

“In a sense,” replied Delthinius. “The splinter you carried is a part of the Earthen Staff ... It is said that the Staff Master knows the whereabouts of the Staff, wherever it may be. Even though you only bear a splinter, I have no doubt that he knows of your presence here in Gresia, and if he knows of your presence, he must assume that we will aid Carthelion.” Delthinius nodded his head, “AND HE WILL BE RIGHT, perhaps this is another plot, but all is not lost. The time and place of our assault must remain a mystery to him ... however he may call for aid from Rholoch?”

Rowgar seated himself again ... “And you, Rowgar will be the bane of your people,” he mumbled.

Delthinius slapped him on the back, “Raise your spirit man, do

you not know that Loekan seeks to destroy the soul as well as the body, let us not mourn what has passed. Prepare yourself, we dine in the woods tonight, no hall have we to hold all our people, on this our last great gathering, before we go to join battle.”



# *THE LEGEND OF TACKURION INSINIMUS*

As darkness began to settle on the land of Gresia, there was a great gathering of people on the edge of the green wood, many a fire was kindled and the folk were merry. It made a change for the companions to have freshly roasted meat after the long days of their journey. They were, of course the star attraction, many questions they were asked of their journey and of their homeland. Barrin and Mirriam were only too pleased to tell of their travels and of the place of their birth, but a silence fell if there was any word spoken of the hall of Krrilion. This wound would be long in the healing. The conversation would then quickly change and the merriment went on. Songs were sung of the fair island of Isor before its ruin; the music seemed to bring the ancient land to life once more in all its beauty and splendour. It made those who heard, long for that which had been taken from them so many years ago. The trees rustled in the background and the waters of Thelion could be heard ever so faintly in the distance, enhancing the dreams of the Isle of Isor.

Rowgar lay back against the trunk of a great elm tree, a lantern swinging gently above him. He looked toward the sky, his mind drifting far away. He had escaped from the rigours of the days gone by; though it would not be for long he intended to cherish these moments of peace while he was able.

Bart sat and spoke with Reoch, sometimes asking questions and sometimes answering them, the haggardness of his face had slipped away, he too was happy.

Barrin joined Delthinius and Mirriam around one of the fires, his curiosity had been aroused by the songs of Isor and he thought now was the time for Delthinius to tell his story.

Delthinius had read the look on Barrin's fair but quizzical face.

“I deem that you have waited long enough for my tale, young squire and now I will tell it.”

Many more gathered round, though they had heard the tale before. The people of Gresia never tired of such tales. They believed the key to the future was locked in the deeds of the past, especially those of the House of Delthinus.

Rowgar, Bart and Reoch joined the gathering which had grown quite large. They sat and they listened in silence.

“To begin my tale I must go back many years to when the world was still young, back to the lands of our ancestors and also to the great Island Kingdom of Tukamar. In those days the Earth was fair, trees and flowers grew in all lands to the south of the outer world and Ineham was at peace.

For many years the High Ones of the Mountain of Vision walked freely among our species, spreading joy and wisdom throughout the land, but on a time, they said, ‘The Earth on which you live is fair, grand to behold and that is good. Alas, we the guardians of your people must now withdraw, the world is large and we have other duties to fulfil.’

Then Elebriouse himself spoke, ‘We grieve for the parting which has now come upon us, so I leave you a token of our being; the Axe with which I cut the fair lands of the world from the barren rock and wilds. Do not let it be used in anger. In thought and in justice it will serve you well, should ever the need arise, but beware, there are dark powers hidden in the bowels of the Earth. Let not the power of light and dark become entwined lest the land itself become rent asunder!’

With these words they departed leaving the Axe with the first King of Tukamar, Takion Insinimus was his name, a wise and noble King. For a wife he took Diniel, a Princess of Isor. The only time that the people of Tukamar and Isor came together in wedlock, and never did they come together in language, save in the House of Kings. Diniel bore two sons, Tenar and Triar. Tenar succeeded his father as King of Tukamar. Under his rule, the land became fairer than was ever dreamed possible and the Axe of Elebriouse lay at rest. Triar became the King of Isor, he was like his brother in many ways and the lands of Isor also flourished. The people of Tukamar

made many settlements on the mainland of Ineham in the years of *Tenarion* and they mingled with the peoples of the lands which are now known as Carthelion and Rhone. All went well. A thousand years of bliss had the peoples of Tukamar and Isor. The sadness that had come with the parting of the High Ones had long since gone; they were only remembered in stories and legend, but when the ten and third King of Tukamar took his throne, a darkness which before time had only been known in the stories of the High Ones, arose in the north of the mainland.

The King of Tukamar, at the time of the awakening, was Camion, and when he became aware of it, he knew not what to do. His people began to draw away from those lands and some returned over the waters to tell their tales of woe. Camion had not had any dealing with war, and was loath to raise the Axe from its place of honour in the Citadel of the Summa Matre, but his son Tackur was proud. He began to make weapons of war, arming his men for the conflicts to come.

Isor, at that time was at peace with all. Its people had not ventured abroad, though there were comings and goings from Tukamar, for the peoples of both lands were always friends.

Word slowly began to spread of the ill that had come to the mainland, but the people of Isor did not take heed, they thought not that the darkness may come, even to Isor.

After three years of preparation, Tackur moved against the dark that threatened now all the lands which face the East. It was the first day of spring when he set sail with his fine fleet of ships. The wind blew from the Summa Khama and gave them quick passage to the estuary of Taern. He unloaded his ships and began to march southward, thinking to destroy his foes who had strayed southward, while they were cut off from the main horde.

Only one day had he marched when his enemies came down upon him. The warriors of Tukamar survived that day only through bravery. Though they had been taught in the use of weapons their skills in battle were poor. Tackur realising this withdrew back to his fleet and licked his wounds. Not until many years has passed did he again come in open war. It was in this first disastrous battle that Tackur first learned the name of the enemy. Loch they called

themselves and their name has not changed since.

When Camion reached his ninetieth year he stood down from the throne and handed his powers to Tackur, whose armies had grown great. His ships raided the shores of the Loch incessantly. His men had grown wise in warfare and no longer did they fear the Loch or their Master, Lochi. Perhaps this was the beginning of the downfall of Tackur, or Tackurion Insinimus, as he was now known. He decided upon a day at the beginning of summer to launch an invasion, to drive the Loch far back into their own lands, if indeed he could not completely destroy them.

The now mighty fleet of Tukamar again sailed into the estuary of Taern, crimson flames they bore on their sails of white, setting the horizon ablaze with their splendour. Tackurion now held the Axe of Elebriouse in his right hand, four quarts weighed that Axe to others and only men of great strength could hope to wield it in battle. A winged helm he wore made of the finest steel. His shield was embossed with the Axe of Elebriouse thus Tackurion felt not its weight. The Loch drew back at his coming. Those who did stay to fight were overcome with little loss.

It was on the Flatlands of the Taern that Tackurion first looked into the stern evil face of Lochi, who stood alone save for a single minion. A horned helm he wore and a Staff he carried, the Staff we call Earthen. Tackurion felt the power locked within this Staff and he stayed the Axe of Elebriouse and thus Lochi alluded him.

The host of Tukamar then swept southward over the plains, westward towards the Great Forest which lies to the south of Cryon and southwest to the edge of our now fair land. With the Loch now in disarray and fleeing, Tackurion took thought to establish his new lands and he halted his advance.

After he was satisfied that all was well he took his leave and returned over the waters to Tukamar.

On his return home, he was heralded by his people as a hero. The Lords who ruled in his absence made a great feast for his homecoming. It was at this feast, at the height of the celebrations that Allonica, daughter of Arakir caught the eye of Tackurion. Gay and happy was she, her eyes shone with the radiance of the stars. In that hour Tackurion's heart was lost to a maiden he had never

before set eyes upon.

In the autumn of that year Allanica became Queen of Tukamar. In her esteem Tackurion named the fair haven of their western shores.

For two years they lived in great joy before their first child was born, Camir he was named and the following year another child, Elori, a girl for which they had hoped. With their children their happiness reached new heights. Tackurion had turned his thoughts from war and lived now in peace with his family. Often they visited their distant kin on Isor, for the line of Triar still ruled there. It was not many years hence that Zarrion, Gerome as you know him, appeared in our ancient lands. Old he was, much as he is today; he wore an Orb of great and mystical beauty around his neck. The Orb shone a fiery red when he wore it on his person, but when removed it turned to a radiant blue. The great craftsmen of Isor were so enamoured by this Orb that they insisted in giving it a just mount. They set it in gold and it was hung upon a golden chain. It then appeared as a radiant star, but the gold has since tarnished in its light, though it is still a thing of great wonder.

Zarrion wandered the lands of Isor giving counsel and aid when he could, for his knowledge of healing far surpassed that of any other. He became renowned for his tireless efforts but always his words were those of woe.

One day he was summoned to the palace of the King. He came as he always did, whether to the High Lords or to the peasants of the land – he made no distinction. There before him sat Treor, King of Isor and by his side was Tackurion, who spent much of his time in the court of the King while visiting Isor.

Treor looked upon Zarrion and spoke, ‘We welcome you sir, to the court of the King, pray be seated.’

‘Thankyou your Highness, but I am as well stood, my back does not take kindly to seats,’ replied Zarrion.

‘As you wish good sir,’ Treor smiled. ‘Tell us of the lands from which you came, for I am very curious, your fame has spread across my lands like a forest fire.’

‘There is naught I can tell of the lands of my beginning,’ replied Zarrion, ‘let it suffice to say that I came across the waters from a

land far to the north of Rholoch, a land of peace and meditation.’

‘Well, if there is naught that you can tell of your lands, though my curiosity grows even larger, give us at least your counsels, for it is said that they are wise, even if they carry words of foreboding. At least you would not deny us this!’ Treor’s voice carried both pleading and sarcasm.

‘This I will not deny you, but do not scorn my words, for though this which I say will not please you, they are the words of truth.’

Treor sat forward in anticipation but Tackurion did not move, he kept his silence.

‘Firstly I would tell you of the Loch, as I passed through their lands, veiled and disguised, I saw huge armies preparing for war. Fierce they were, clad in iron and heavily armed. Further South, when I entered the lands ruled by Tukamar, I saw disease spreading amongst the people of the land. It was then only in its early stages, but that is three years past. It spreads and grows slowly, but nevertheless the people are weakened, if not yet in great alarm. It turns their eyes from their borders and inward toward their own lands. I fear the hordes of Loch will pour over their borders at any moment, that is, if they have not already done so, sweeping away all that stand before them. I think you are not safe here, even on Isor, for the Loch have many ships with many oars. Slaves they have too, to row them. They anchor to the North, but should Lochi spread his borders, the ships will follow. I warn you now, beware. Let Isor be well guarded for Lochi will save Tukamar until the last. Tell your people to prepare and those who wish to leave, bid them depart with all haste. You Sir,’ Zarrion looked upon Tackurion, who had now begun to show concern. ‘Protect your heir well and remember the runes on the Axe that you bear. Lochi carries with him the Earthen Staff which carries power not yet dreamed of, take heed.’

Treor and Tackurion sat several moments in silence, then Treor stood and in a sharp voice spoke to Zarrion, ‘I welcome you to my court in good will, old man, I ask nothing of you but information as from where you came, and a few words of counsel, and you answer me with the doom of my people and tell me how to run my affairs. Is this the way you repay my hospitality? Such heretics as you

should be thrown into the pits of the Ikon, where the flames would cease your tongue forever.'

'Stay your anger, Treor,' Tackurion spoke with calm in this voice. 'This old man is no heretic, his deeds in your land do him justice and it was you who asked his counsels.'

'Is that reason for insolence?' retorted Treor.

'It was not insolence that he spoke,' replied Tackurion, 'only words from his heart. I do not believe that what he has said will come to pass, but I see no reason for him to lie, indeed, who knows the runes of the Axe except those of of the House of Insinimus. Perhaps this old man is a sorcerer of type and what he says is only for our defence. What say you, Zarrion?'

'Indeed what I have spoken is for your defence, but I speak with my head as well as my heart, I do not cherish the thought of your destruction.'

'Then go,' said Tackurion, 'and speak of this to no one. Let the destiny of Tukamar and Isor lay in the hands of those that rule.'

After Zarrion had left, strong words passed between Treor and Tackurion. Treor found no reason to think Zarrion more than an insolent fool, but Tackurion who was twenty years Treor's elder, could see truth in some of the things that Zarrion had spoken of. At the least it was decided that Camir would indeed return to Tukamar to join his Grandfather, who lived out his old age in peace, but the rest of the family would remain on Isor. It was thought that rumours of what had been said would eventually reach the people. It was also known that the counsels of Zarrion which he gave to the people of Isor, were always of woe to come. It would help to fire the rumours if Tackurion departed.

Treor began discreetly to build a store of arms, he did not want to cause alarm, especially if his thoughts on Zarrion were correct.

Summer turned to autumn and life on Isor was tranquil. There were few reports from the mainland, because of the difficulties that they were now having with a strange illness which had crept upon the people of those lands. Tackurion was disquieted by the illness, but thought not to act, as it appeared to him unwise. Rumours were indeed growing upon the island, and he did not wish to escalate them, certainly not without Treor's approval, of which he would

not get. He was now fifty years and five and had learnt patience. His strength of mind and body was great. It was the summer of his life. The people of Tukamar rarely became old of body before their seventieth year and the House of Insinimus was certainly no exception.

It was with the coming of winter that the first ill news reached Tackurion, his father had passed on peacefully. When Tackurion had enquired as to the final words of his father, he was told, 'Let not the powers become entwined' – the words inscribed upon the Axe. Tackurion was grieved for the loss of his father, and the words that he had spoken would not leave his mind, but he found consolation in his wife and daughter, who was now in her sixth year. Her eyes would brighten his day and she would bring laughter to his lips. When he watched her at play in the fields the gathering clouds of doom would draw back and the sunlight would shine through. Allantica and Elori were the fulfilment of his life now that Camir was in Tukamar. He could wish for no more.

Early that winter the winds came howling from the western approaches. Storm clouds gathered over Isor. It was an ill wind that blew and the people began to fear Zarrion's words.

Then the day came when the wind dropped and silence filled the air, as if they were in the eye of a hurricane. The air became heavy with anticipation – for they knew not what! Sweat clung to men's brows though the air was cold.

Like a sudden plague of death, Lochi descended. His fleet like a dark cloud of death appeared off the western shores. Out of a strange and uncanny mist they came and no warning did the people of the coastal regions have. Some cowered and many more fled as the marauding Loch burnt and pillaged their homes. No mercy did the Loch give. All who stood in their way were butchered without remorse.

They swept quickly inland. Word had barely reached Treor before the Loch themselves came upon him. Scarcely did he have time to escape from his palace with his life.

Twenty men only departed with him. Ten, he sent to warn the villagers – 'Take flight' he warned, 'Head for the northern haven of Eos, where boats may be found.' Two he sent to the great sun



reflector upon the volcanic ridge of the Ikon; he hoped the summit might still stand above the cloud. There they could send word across the seas to the Summa Matre and give warning to Tukamar, though it be too late for Isor. Those who were left accompanied himself and his family. They too went North.

Of Tackurion, he abode not at the palace but at the country residence of the family. No warning did he have of the coming of the Loch.

As the wind again began to rise and the clouds hung black, they drew nigh, lightning lit their path and thunder concealed their footsteps. Over the gardens toward the house they flitted, like ghostly shadows. Blood upon their hands and hatred in their eyes.

None too soon were they observed. The few guards who abode with Tackurion quickly armed themselves and formed a circle around Allanica and Elori. Even though Tackurion was not at hand, they would defend until the last, no matter what the cost, for they were men of Tukamar.

While the lightning flashed and the wind whistled in the eaves, great poundings came at the main door. The door burst open and the iron-clad atrocities of Loch entered. Gargling sounds they made, then one broke into a hideous laugh. Around the defending circle they moved, some carrying broad swords and others mace.

Allanica cowered in the centre of the circle, holding Elori who had begun to cry. She cradled her daughter's head in one hand, pulling her close with the other, trying to give her comfort, where there was none to give.

A horrendous cry was heard and the Loch sprang.

Tackurion returning to the house heard that horrid cry. He sprang from his horse, unhitching his Axe as he leapt. He ran to the nearest entrance and thrust himself through. He entered the main hall and the sight that he beheld shook the foundations of his soul. Upon the floor lay his wife and child, they had been horribly bludgeoned, and left to die in their own blood. The last of his men were fighting for their very existence, but he did not see them. His eyes saw only his wife and child. He knelt beside his loved ones, his mind in a state of shock. One word did Elori utter before she passed beyond the realms of the world. The word that he loved to

hear most, the one which carried no formality, 'Daddy'.

'Elori,' he choked, 'I am here, I have come home.' But he felt the life drain from her as he touched her forehead.

The fighting had ceased in the hall, to one man only did life remain and he lay in a corner severely wounded, clutching his sword. The Loch stood in silence and glared at Tackurion, who was humbled upon the floor. This was the man they were to fear.

Six Loch there were still afoot and again they began their loathsome gargling as they slowly approached him.

Tackurion at first seemed numbed, then hatred welled up inside him. He looked up and saw the advance, and his face grew dark. His hands began to tremble and his eyes burnt savagely. The Axe he clutched tightly, until his knuckles shone white. He sprang to his feet and cried out in pain and hatred. 'FOR THIS I SHALL SEE LOCHI DEAD!' The Loch faltered and stood aghast. The awesome vision they beheld of Tackurion, in his *hour* of anguish was the vision they took to their immortal dwellings. Tackurion struck with the force of twenty, his Axe howled through the air, only a blur to the eye. The iron of the Loch was no more than corn before a scythe. Their ends came quickly.

Tackurion now stood alone. There was no life left in the hall, save Karanir who lay unmoving. Tackurion raised his helm from its mount and threw about him a dark cloak; he left the building as if bewitched. The meaning to his life had gone, he would seek vengeance.

The horse of Tackurion awaited his King on the lawns, where they had parted. The turbulence of the storm it did not fear, it was to beasts as Tackurion was to men, Lord of its kind.

Tackurion mounted and rode into the darkness, his purpose was set. He followed only the lure of the Staff. He could feel its presence in his groin.

Swiftly he passed over the lands of Osar. Few Loch stood in his way and those who did never told their story. Like a spectre he passed on to the foothills of the Ikon; on he rode to the sacred hill of Triar, at the base of which stood the Tree of Peace and atop in stone was carved the Throne of the Kings, where gatherings were held to pay homage to the land.

There now sat Lochi, his Staff held high above him, where the lightning danced to his insidious thought. Below, the grass hissed as though alive with a thousand snakes and Lochi was glad.

Through the fire of the sky and the agony of the Earth came Tackurion. His steed reared high and Tackurion raised his Axe maliciously. Lightning flashed, silhouetting man and horse against the blackness. The mightiest mortal warrior ever to roam the Earth was he and Lochi became aware.

As the clouds fled by and the thunder crashed, Lochi turned and held forth his Staff. ‘Hear me, Tackurion Insinimus,’ he growled, in a deep mocking voice. ‘Will you desolate this land and bring about your own destruction. For the Staff, you can never conquer and I shall live on!’

Their eyes locked together. A cloud of hatred cast its shadow upon Tackurion’s face.

‘Let not the land of Isor protect your foul deeds, Lochi, though my end may come, I shall follow you even in death. The Axe I bear will not again be stayed by you, not while there is hope of your downfall; for you are the Master of Evil.’

With those words Tackurion attacked. The Axe fell upon Lochi’s raised Staff. The Earth shuddered and cracked. From the face of the great volcano, lava spewed. This was the armageddon of Isor, the last battle of good and evil before the Ikon erupted.”

Delthinius paused, even though he had not seen the destruction of Isor, the vision was in his mind.

No-one broke the hush, for they too felt the tragedy of those far distant days.

Slowly the vision left Delthinius and in a quiet voice, he said, “and that is the tale of Tackurion.”

“But what of Treor and the people of Isor?” asked Barrin.

Though it seemed to pain him, Delthinius continued. “Of the people of Isor, many took to boats at the haven of Eos, of course many thousands could not board, Isor had no great fleet. Those that boarded ship were swept toward the mainland. When the storm rose for the second time the wind blew from the East, they had no choice. Though they tried to tack into the wind, it still drove them backward, until at last, they lost control of their vessels.

Zarrion was at the haven when all this came to pass, he took matters into his own hands and ordered things as only he could in the absence of Treor. The King and his family never did reach Eos, of this little is known. Much of what we do know came from Karanir, last of the men of Tukamar. His was a miraculous story but it was many days before he told it. Few Isoreans could speak the tongue of Tukamar fluently and not until he reached the mainland was the full tale understood.

Of the final meeting of Lochi and Tackurion, only Antela bore witness. He was the watchman of the Ikon. He descended from the great sun reflector on the summit when he began to fear for his family, at the rising of the second storm. He was picked up in the sea three days after the eruption, by a ship of Tukamar, which had been off the eastern coast of Isor when the disaster struck. The ship itself had good fortune surviving the tidal waves that followed the changing of the land, many more sank. The giant waves battered even the coast of Tukamar itself, but Tukamar was prepared. The watchers on the Summa Matre, the highest mountain of Tukamar received the signal of Treor's messengers, though the messengers perished. They also saw the billowing smoke and feared the worst.

After the passing of the storm, the tall ships of Tukamar set sail for Isor. Many lives they saved for the land had become infertile and deep with ash. The people they found were starving and cold.

To Tukamar they went, but did not abide there long. After the winter had passed they begged to follow the rest of their people and their wish was granted.

On the mainland Zarrion waited with the survivors of those who went before and together they began their long journey to Gresia, although some did remain on the eastern plains. We here today are the descendants of those people, but now we are ever vigilant. Many grievances did the people of Isor suffer on their journey, for though the main hordes of Loch perished on Isor, many remained in the south of Ineham. Zarrion's words had been true, the Loch had swept over their borders, before coming to Isor, now leaderless they roamed in packs.

Some years later when Camir came of age he took terrible vengeance for the slaughter of his family, not least the death of his

father, Tackurion. His armies swept over the lands, even into Rah, but then his anger turned to sorrow and he drew back to Tukamar. He left the mainland to its own devices.

The people of the southern region named the land in the fashion of Tukamar, Carthelion, as you know, Kingdom of the South. Even some people of Gresia went to live there and the peoples mingled and raised their own heir. Ramno he was named, but all this came to pass long ago, our people have now become apart. Those of us true to Isor remain here in Gresia, hoping one day our ancient land will become fertile again, but alas we again face Lochi, the Warloch of old. He did not perish on Isor, nor did his Staff. We now believe that he takes the guise of Loekan, to weave his webs of evil. Who else could wield the Earthen Staff?"

Rowgar shrugged his shoulders. "I know little of what you speak. We in Carthelion have not heard of such places as Rholoch or weapons such as the Axe of Elebriouse or the Earthen Staff, in fact it is the first I have heard of our Lord fatherer, Ramno – his ancestry I mean."

A faint smile came to the lips of Delthinius. "It is not your fault," he replied. "I talk of matters so long ago that we only know of them ourselves because of the writings that we keep. How could you know of such places as Rholoch, deep in the heart of the Loch homeland where none but our enemies tread, or the Axe of Elebriouse which lay for so long in the ruined lands of Isor."

"You tell a sad tale, sir," said Bart in a sympathetic voice.

"Too true," confirmed Reoch in a strong confident voice.

Delthinius looked at Reoch and nodded his head, indicating that they should throw off the shrouds of time and age old sorrows.

Reoch stood, "Come now," he said, "let us raise our spirits. Let us not be downhearted before we depart."

The gathering did indeed raise its spirit and the feast lasted until the early hours of the morning. After the story of Tackurion, the party began to brighten, slowly at first, but it gained speed quickly. The minstrels played their music, not of sorrow but of gaiety. All were happy and joyous and when at last the night's activities came to an end, they all bid one another goodnight and returned happily to their homes. Many to fine houses of stone and some to the small

cottages of thatch. Of the people who dwelt within the woods many spent the nights beneath the stars for it gave them an air of hope, they felt free under the vastness of the heavens.

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The next morning Barrin and Mirriam were late to rise, neither could remember going to bed, but both felt better for their sleep.

That morning they visited the Room of Numbers, an eerie sort of place. The room was large and a musty odour hung in the air. It looked like a sort of ancient archive. There were old books standing on dusty shelves and strange drawings and symbols upon the walls. One thing in particular caught Barrin's eye and he just had to confirm what he thought.

Barrin pointed to the only thing in the room which looked new, it rested on a rich blue material and was encased in a transparent box. "Is that ...?"

Rem, who was acting as their guide put his hands on Barrin's shoulder. "Indeed it is, young sir. The Axe of Elebriouse was brought here from Isor a year ago, by our seafaring folk. It is not often that our people visit Isor for the land is still desolate and the journey arduous and hazardous."

"You found it after all these years!" chipped in Mirriam.

"It was never lost," replied Rem. "It has been embedded in the petrified Tree of Peace since the days of Tackurion, defying all attempts to free it. Then, on this last occasion it was released – we know not why it came away so easily or why our seafaring friends even tried to release it, but we believe it is an omen."

Barrin and Mirriam stood beside the Axe. "Is it as heavy as it looks?" queried Barrin, running his eyes up the sculptured shaft.

"It took two men to lift it onto its resting place," replied Rem.

"I can believe that," said Mirriam. "It must stand as high as Barrin."

Barrin frowned, "If it stands as tall as me, it must also stand as tall as you – well nearly."

Rem grinned, "Neither of you stand much above seven hands."

They both frowned at him.

“One day I will be as big as Rowgar,” stated Barrin in no uncertain terms.

“Or Bart,” said Mirriam giggling.

“Then you have not much to grow,” said Rem to Barrin, looking thoughtful.

“Yes I have,” replied Barrin, “Bart is big in hidden places.”

Mirriam shrieked with laughter.

Rem gave her a funny look. “I, too, detect that Bart has a big heart.”

Barrin ignored Mirriam, “May I touch the Axe?”

Rem lifted the transparent lid off gently. “Go ahead you cannot harm it.”

Barrin felt a sensation of heat on his chest where his medallion lay under his tunic as he reached a hand toward the Axe, but it did not deter him. He touched the Axe shaft and ran his fingers along its length. “What are these strange signs carved upon the shaft?” he queried.

“They tell of the building of the world,” replied Rem. “See that line of circles which appear to grow larger and then shrink again.”

“Yes,” replied Barrin.

“Mmm,” replied Mirriam who had just about calmed down.

“Well they indicate the heart of the Earth and heavens. It is said that all the Earth is made from these tiny pulsating hearts, little spheres which grow larger then smaller again. They are infinitely tiny though. All things are made from smaller things, like woven rope is made from many smaller ropes. The runes near the circles tell us that the difference between earth and thought also lies in these tiny hearts. Thought occurs when the circles shrink, and earth when it grows.”

Barrin scratched his head. “I do not understand.”

Rem put a finger to his forehead in thought. “When the spheres get larger they push away from each other, but as thought is opposite to earth because its time is opposite the spheres seem to ... No, that will never do.” Rem sighed.

Mirriam was smirking and Barrin looked confused.

“Let it be good enough for me to say that things made of earth always fall to the ground but thought is like sunlight and spreads its

wings. They are both the same thing though and time makes them appear to attract one another.”

Barrin looked even more confused.

“Why are they always opposite?” asked Mirriam, looking devious.

Rem was looking frustrated. “Come, follow me,” he said. He walked to a large dusty spinning wheel which obviously had not been in use for the making of clothes for many a year. “Watch,” he said pushing a spoke.

The wheel turned.

“I have moved one spoke – does it draw nearer the next spoke – does the wheel look any different?”

“No,” said Barrin.

Mirriam shook her head.

“Earth and thought,” said Rem. “One moves – the other moves to compensate, now do you understand? We perceive things the way we do because of our standpoint, we cannot perceive all.”

“Er, yes,” said Mirriam – then she took a deep breath.

Barrin gave a little jump into the air. “What goes up certainly comes down,” he said. “Now, what are all these figures on the wall?”

Rem followed Barrin’s line of sight. “Oh they are just comparisons between the numbers of different lands.” Rem walked to the wall and pointed to one set of figures. “These are the numbers of Tukamar, they count differently to ours in Gresia. After we count to ten we continue to ten and one, then ten and two. In Tukamar they only counted to eight; sixty and four to me was a three part number to them. You in Carthelion count in twenty’s or a score as you say. Five score to the hundred.”

“It all sounds complicated,” commented Mirriam.

“Actually it is very simple, their word for eight was AUR, nine was AUR-TER and ten AUR-NA. It is what you get used to, their figures repeated themselves just like our ten and one, and ten and two and so on.”

“You have forgotten to put a naught on our numbers,” said Barrin.

“No such number,” replied Rem.



“Of course there is,” interrupted Mirriam. “Look I have one coin in my hand.” Mirriam took a coin out of her pocket and held out her hand. “Now, if I remove the coin I have naught in my hand.” She removed it and smiled.

Rem looked at her hand. “I cannot see anything, where is it?”

“Where is what?” asked Mirriam looking puzzled.

“Naught,” said Barrin smiling.

“You cannot see nothing,” chipped in Mirriam.

“Exactly, nothing does not exist, that is why it is not written on the wall ... Perhaps I am being a little unfair, we do say naught here in Gresia, but it is an imaginative figure. You cannot add it to anything or take it away and no amount of nothings make something.”

Barrin looked cynical, “You will be telling us the world is round next, and that the sun does not rise in the morning – it is really the world spinning around.”

Rem laughed, “In the heavens where everything moves daily ... and nightly, and there is no certain fixed point of reference, we must consider the ground we stand on as firm, the sun does truly rise, young Barrin, no-one will ever disprove that – though some may deem that they have.”

“I am pleased to hear that,” said Barrin.

“Talking of the sun, let us go and see if it is shining. This room gives me a creepy feeling,” said Mirriam.

“As you wish,” replied Rem as he walked back toward the Axe to replace the lid of its container.

They all walked to the door together. Barrin took one last look at the Axe before they left, putting his hand on his medallion at the same time. Let not the powers become entwined, he thought, did I see that inscribed on the Axe, he shook his head and walked into the daylight.

The rest of the day passed gently. They practised riding on the woodland paths, then sat and watched the waters of Thelion flow by. They were glad in spirit and the day was fine.

In the evening they relaxed and listened to the tales of Gresia. Naught did they see of Delthinus and Reoch, but friends were easily made. Bart joined them that night and all was well.

Again the following day was filled with pleasures. Bart stayed with the children most of the time. He told them how he carried them to their beds after the feast and they looked rather sheepish, then giggled. He told also that the messenger who had returned to Brannock many days past, carried news of their well being. This pleased them for they had begun to worry about leaving without giving proper word.

“Mind you, it was not the only reason the rider was despatched,” said Bart, “I dare say that Bradur wanted to see his horse returned in safety,” he grinned at his own remark.

With the passing of the day, Rowgar returned to their company and told of the preparations that had kept Reoch, Delthinius and himself so busy. So busy in fact that he had forgotten all about the Orb of Zarrion, that Barrin carried. He also informed them of their imminent departure. Bart seemed loath at the thought but he shrugged it off in his usual light-hearted manner.

They all ate supper together that evening. As the moon rose in the sky, they parted for their beds. They were tired but they felt secure, for this night at least.

# *JENGIS*

Deep in the bowels of Gabe Andir, in caverns that were carved in the rock of the Earth, before the dawn of time, a lonely figure made its way downward. Down to the hall of his Master, far from the fading daylight, where darkness ruled supreme. Jengis, he called himself. Old in years yet wise from their passing. He knew his days were numbered, but he still had a use. While his limbs were still active, he would not be cast aside – not yet.

Jengis entered the hall of Loekan – in thought, so this is the hall our Master has acquired from Krrilion, that pompous, self-made ruler of the Krril. The one who lurks in dark corners, never daring to put himself forth in the midst of battle. Jengis grunted his dissension at his own thoughts, then raised his eyes to meet those of his Overlord, but his gaze he could not hold, the eyes of his Master were too powerful.

“You have arrived then, Jengis. I thought that you may have had business that kept you elsewhere,” Loekan sneered wickedly, as he leant against his Staff.

“No Master. I came as soon as I received your bidding.”

“That is good,” replied Loekan, speaking the tongue of the Loch, which to men may have seemed no more than guttural grunts. “I grow impatient, there is much to be done. I ride North and West in great haste, but for you I have another errand. You will ride with Gorfang, to the banks of the River Drek, which men call Taern. There, at our new outpost of Endreck, the legions of Rholoch await. Guide them to the three towers of Lochgor. Do not fail me – failure I cannot abide. I shall await you at Lochgor. You must not tarry, that could be fatal – for you!” He drawled his last words then snapped his fingers.

Gorfang entered, he was a huge and powerful Loch.

“Jengis knows of your errand,” said Loekan, moving his eyes to the new arrival. “Now be on your way.”

Gorfang moved part way across the hall, then turned to Loekan. “And when the errand is complete, I shall then lead the warriors of our race ... under your direction of course!” Gorfang spoke while he fingered his mace, a demonic expression upon his face.

“You will do as you are bid,” Loekan answered.

“Who is to bend my will?” Gorfang’s voice became harsher. “The aged Jengis that stands before me or perhaps the hunchbacked vermin who dwell in these holes!” He laughed hoarsely and his muscles rippled.

Loekan stood in silence, evil emanating from his every thought. He fixed his eyes on Gorfang, and the laughter died. Gorfang’s breathing became laboured and his body was thrust against the barren walls.

“Of all the scum I have had to deal with, you are the least,” Loekan’s voice became dominant, his shape seemed to grow and loom ominously before Gorfang. “The Axe of the Iceraker I have blunted. The net of the straying Sea Witch I have shredded and you dare to question me!”

The pressure upon Gorfang’s chest that held him pinned to the rock rose to an intolerable level, he tried to call out but his breath was gone. Then, as suddenly as it had risen, the pressure released and Gorfang fell to his knees.

“I have something to retrieve when it has served its purpose, my time is wasted here with you.” Loekan smiled evilly, then continued as if musing to himself. “The little tin soldiers of Gresia will embark on a journey to their doom. I may let some of my emissary’s play with them on their road. They will think that they have found my little ploy and think themselves hidden from me, poor fools,” he laughed, “they do not appreciate my smaller refinements. Even the warriors of Elebriouse – damn their halls of ice, think I know not of their whereabouts!” He laughed again. His curdling laugh made even the blood of the Loch run cold, though they thought that they knew him well. “Now, begone,” he rasped, “and beware of the fleas of the buzzard on his flat topped mountain, they spread their wings far, though they are now sorely pressed.”

Jengis left abruptly and Gorfang tumbled after him, his mind a whirlpool of confusion.

Loekan stood in silence and his presence subsided into the gloom, a gloom heavier than the darkness of the caverns of the Krril, heavier than sin itself.

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Gorfang and Jengis emerged from the subterranean darkness as the sun fled the sky. Their guruks stood in wait below, tended by the servants of Krrilion. Powerful beasts they were, bred to stand long journeys and the overpowering weight of the Loch.

Gorfang descended from the mountain exit with Jengis close behind. They had recovered from their ordeal with Loekan and Gorfang had again become arrogant.

The memory of Gorfang being squeezed against the bare walls of Loekan's abode brought a smile to the face of Jengis. It was fitting for the young upstart to be put in his place. Jengis knew Loekan had great plans for Gorfang, but they would have to wait awhile, until he realised that there was only one Master, a Master that was not to be questioned.

They both mounted their guruks, snatching their reins from the Krril with a look of contempt upon their faces.

One of the Krril hissed in disgust. Gorfang raised his foot as if to place it in the mouth of the disdainful Krril.

"The Master has not yet finished with these animals, you would be wise not to displease him again!" said Jengis.

Gorfang grunted and replaced his foot in its hold.

Down the Valley of Andir they cantered. Though speed was of the essence, the ground was too dangerous for haste, even so they soon entered Valley's Meet, where the great stone tomb of Carthelion stood before them and the bodies of a thousand Krril littered the ground where they were slain. The stench was terrible; the bodies had lain there for two days and it seemed that they would stay there forever. The foul smell did not bother the Loch, nor the fact that the Krril had been slain by the host of Carthelion, only the tomb bothered them, they thought it blemished the scenery.

Jengis paused at the tomb entrance and translated the runes

inscribed. He was the only Loch with this ability, not only could he understand the meaning of the ancient tongue of Carthelion; he could also speak their modern language. This was the reason that he still survived.

As he read, the words touched him somewhere in the hidden recesses of his mind. He quickly discarded them and laughed. "Come," he said to Gorfang, "let us leave this infested place, it may endanger our health."

They rode onward, following the footsteps of Bradur. Jengis knew the host of Carthelion was not far ahead, he would have to take care not to fall into a trap. It would not do for his errand to be delayed.

The darkness drew in around them and they felt comforted, the guruks travelled more by sense than by sight and the eyes of the Loch were keen under the light of a clear night sky, they could see without difficulty.

"We will have to encompass the horde of petty men, that march before us," growled Jengis. "It is an inconvenience we will have to suffer."

"Why so?" answered Gorfang, grinning. "Why not ride straight through, they have not the power to halt us."

"Do not be a fool," Jengis rasped. "There were many score of Krril slain in the Valley's Meet. Their numbers must be many, we have not the time to deal with them all."

"Do not call me a fool," Gorfang's anger had begun to rise, "or I may silence your tongue forever."

Jengis ignored the threat, he thought it was not worth his time to answer.

As the night drew on Jengis crossed the stream ford and veered his course close to a mountainside, he did not have much space for manoeuvre around the Carthelions but he would try to avoid them, though it was against his nature.

The pace of the guruks slowed considerably on the harsh ground. Both Jengis and Gorfang were ever alert to danger. They consistently scanned the land to the East, although they could not see very far, never thinking that an attack may come from elsewhere.

Under the overhanging western cliff they trundled. Then, without a sound or warning two men leapt from a low ledge. They caught the Loch square. Both Loch were toppled from their mounts by the impact, crashing heavily to the ground.

Gorfang, though dazed was quickly to his feet. He felt a sword crash down upon his chest and heard the clatter which arose when the sword met the iron of his breastplate, but he did not flinch. His head quickly cleared and with his huge fist tightly clenched, he pummelled the head of his assailant till he lay dead.

The second assailant was also in difficulty. He had lost his sword in his dive from the rocks, though he still bore a knife, the blade of which shone dimly in the moonlight.

Jengis saw the blade of this foe lunging toward him. It skimmed the armouring of his breastplate supports which rested upon his shoulders. Jengis snarled viciously, then clasped the hand which bore the knife. His knee he thrust forcefully into the groin of his attacker, not once but twice. The man crumpled forward, his breath gone.

Footsteps could be heard making their way swiftly to the scene of the skirmish. Jengis motioned to their mounts. Gorfang did indeed turn to his guruh, but only to obtain his mace, which hung by his helm, then he again faced the oncoming sound.

Four men appeared. Gorfang's eyes lit up. He was not used to his prey coming to him, in the past he would have had to search it out, in trees and in hollows. Now things were looking brighter.

The men paused as the great Loch came into view, they were taken aback by the gargantuan creature that drooled before them. As they stared in disbelief Gorfang sprang. The blows that he struck were final, none could withstand his awesome power.

Jengis had remounted his guruh and now sat watching; he could see Gorfang was delighting in his work, ecstasy was upon him. Jengis waited patiently, and while he was waiting he saw another man appear to the left of Gorfang, tall and dark, with a strange firmness about him – like a rock, Jengis thought.

Gorfang had also seen him; he turned in his direction leaving his other enemies piled high in a bloody heap. A gargling sound came from his throat, as his enjoyment rose to unparalleled heights.

Jengis looked on in anticipation, arms folded before him. He sensed something different. “The man shows no fear,” he gargled softly.

Gorfang struck with the full power of his body behind his mace, but it found only thin air in its path. The man had side stepped and the weapon of destruction passed harmlessly by. The Loch did not have time to regain his posture. The sword of the man sang through the air and hit his breastplate square. It did not penetrate, though the iron buckled. Gorfang bent forward in pain; he did not see the second blow, for instants later it struck home, at the rear of his head and his days were ended.

The man looked up, before him charged the guruk of Jengis. He raised his sword in defence – it was too late. His weapon was wrenched from his grip by the broadsword of the Loch. A turn and again the man faced the guruk, expecting another charge, but it did not come to pass.

Jengis was looking elsewhere, towards someone else. He was looking at the latest arrival – a young man, tall and sturdy. There was something familiar about this man and it was not just his looks. He could feel his presence more clearly than he could actually see him. It was a presence that he had not felt since his younger days. The days when he stood shoulder to shoulder with his Master in battle.

A picture began to form in Jengis’s mind – a picture he had not forgotten in countless years. “No! It cannot be,” he gargled, “the Axe bearer is dead.” Jengis turned back toward the man he had disarmed.

“Live and let live,” he called. Then he turned his guruk and continued his journey.

The man stood bewildered as the guruk vanished into the night. Only moments later the man was surrounded by many of his followers. They did not see their friends lying dead before them. They saw only the huge Loch laying dead on the ground with its head almost severed. “Hail the valour of Bradur, mightiest of warriors,” one man declared. “Hail,” came the chorus of many. Bradur was glad, though his heart wept for those who had fallen.

Jengis rode on through the night, his lips twisted in a wry grin.



He told himself that he had been wise to spare the slayer of Gorfang. This deed would cause more confusion in what must be a leader of men, than his death would have achieved, though deep inside, he felt that was not the only reason. Nevertheless things were going well. He did not cherish answering for Gorfang's death, but he felt better with him out of the way. In fact he felt much better, fortune was indeed smiling on him.

Across the tributaries of Thelion and far north to the Plains of Dianon, Jengis journeyed. He took great care in crossing water and travelled with speed across the open plains. He knew there were enemies abroad on the ancient lands of Dianon; a place where men had never been wholly driven out – ‘A legacy from the Ancient Kingdom of Isor’, he remembered the Master stating. Angry strays who had not marched with the main body of rabble to Gresia, they were to be watched. Jengis tried to remember back in time to the days before the founding of Carthelion, but it seemed such a long time ago, all that entered his head was detached pictures, he was barely aware of what an Isorean was but if the Master said keep an eye open for them, he would take care. The Master was always right. That was why they lived in the plentiful lands of Northern Carthelion instead of men. It was the right of the strongest to live wherever they chose, that he understood.

Ever onward he rode, across the vast reaching Flatlands to the North. The terrain was lush and life sprang from the ground everywhere. This annoyed Jengis for it delayed his passage. Thirty days he had ridden when he boarded the marshes to the south of the Drek. He had swapped his guruk several times for ones with new life, for he travelled day and night, stopping rarely for rest though his old bones hurt him sorely. In his youth this journey would have been naught to him, but now he ached all over. Refreshment he received regularly, there were many scattered outposts across Carthelion guarded by the strength of the Loch. The guardians of the outposts all tried to appease him, for they knew from whom he came. He still commanded great loyalty himself, from the majority of his race at least. Power always brought loyalty, but there were those of the higher circles who would see him removed, for their own gains. As yet this was no great problem, not while their Master

still required his services.

On the night of the thirtieth day, he halted by the side of the Marshland. He could take no more hardship without resting. Sores covered his legs from top to bottom, with the continual rubbing against the rough hide of his guruk. The Loch used no saddles, just reins and a foothold, which stretched across the back of the beast down to foot level. This did not aid his hindquarters at all; they were sorer than his legs. His hide was not much softer than that of the guruk, but there had been many beasts and only one Jengis.

The marshes held beauty but they were full of vile creatures. Jengis knew this, for all creatures not of the race of Loch were vile. This thought cheered him a little as he stood looking into the pleasantness of the bog. He pondered about what would befall when he made his rendezvous with Darachlon. It must be Darachlon who leads the legions of Rholoch for none will dispute his authority, strength or skill, he mused.

In his pleasant surroundings Jengis dropped his guard, he did not see the creeping tentacle, that had emerged from the deep undergrowth before him. It slid silently behind his legs. Then with a whiplash action it seized its prey.

Jengis felt his legs being yanked from beneath him. He toppled to the ground and began to slither through the undergrowth toward the dense reeds and the watery bog beneath. He struggled and groped for anything, with which he might stay his movement. A small spiky shrub came to hand, he clutched it in his fearsome grip, but when his body had been extended to the full, the shrub became uprooted and he continued to slide forward. Frantically he fumbled for his broadsword, which he kept upon his person.

Time was running short when Jengis finally managed to release his sword. His feet had already vanished from view and he could feel a cold slimy substance enveloping them, a very nice but dangerous feeling. He lashed out at the cord which had ensnared his legs. A burning pain shot through his right foot and thrashing sounds came from the reeds.

The biting pressure on his legs subsided, he was free. Slowly he raised his knees to bring his feet back into view. The tentacle which had held him bound was still lapped in position, lying limp. His

foot had been painfully grazed near his ankle joint and blood was dripping to the ground. He winced as he removed the offending bond. Jengis had no idea what the creature may have been, apart from the vile of course, and he had no intention of trying to find out.

Slowly he hobbled back to his guruk with the tentacle in his hands. He stood awhile before mounting, looking at the long piece of slimy flesh that he bore. No doubt the creature had meant him to be its meal, it was good that the situation had been reversed. He sank his teeth into the slippery substance, then rolled it about in his mouth with his tongue; it did not taste bad at all.

Jengis approached the banks of the Drek two days hence. Most of those days he had spent on his mount picking spikes from his fingers. His foot had improved a little but the rest of him felt worse.

The view he encountered when he neared the water raised his spirit. The northern bank of the Drek was covered with the klaves of the Loch. Hundreds of them scattered about in random fashion, he knew each klave would hold at least four of his kind. That meant their numbers were many.

The aches of his journey were forgotten as he reached the waters edge. Looking eastward first, he saw no means of crossing the waters but when he turned west, a crude wooden platform could be seen, many tall trees must have been felled, he thought, to construct this. The logs were all lashed together tightly and secured on both banks by strong hide ropes. It was good that the river was still he thought, this structure would not stand much flow, without breaking free. Even now, though he could see no movement in the water, the ropes were straining. Jengis dismounted and left his guruk to graze. Then he made his way over the short distance to the platform.

Loch were by now gathering on the opposite bank, to meet the new arrival. They waited for him to make his way across the river.

Jengis took his time crossing the platform. It seemed sound enough, but the water was deep and he had no intention of falling in armour clad. He looked at the opposite bank. There before him, stood Darachlon, arms folded and yellow tinged teeth showing behind his warped smile.

Darachlon acknowledged Jengis with his left arm placed squarely across his chest. Jengis returned the gesture, after reaching the far bank.

“Our army has awaited instruction for many days now. We received word to gather on the banks of the Drek when the moon was full, not the last time but the time before. Why have we been held in readiness so long without word?” Darachlon began to show signs of anger on his gnarled face, his smile had gone.

“My errand was given to me not many more than thirty days past. Our abode was then in the halls of Krrilion, in the mountains south of Carthelion,” answered Jengis.

Darachlon raised the hardened skin above one eye, in a very human like gesture. “You have indeed ridden hard, Jengis. I am surprised that you were given such a mission by yourself!”

“I was not by myself,” replied Jengis, looking angered himself, at the insinuation in Darachlon’s voice. “Gorfang rode with me, he who is much like yourself.”

“And where is Gorfang now?” questioned Darachlon.

“Dead, quite dead. Slain by a warrior of Carthelion on our first day’s ride from the mountains.” Jengis allowed himself a smirk at his own words.

Darachlon did not find them amusing at all. “The mighty Gorfang slain by one man alone, you jest, what man could perform such a deed and why are you still alive if the warrior was so great?”

“I did not say the warrior was great. I merely said he slew Gorfang. I disarmed him before I left. His comrades were close at hand, my time for trifles such as these is short, my errand came first, so I left them to play their games of war by themselves.”

Darachlon was beginning to feel foolish. He had not the answers for the cunning speech of Jengis, but he would put him in his place. “Tell me, old warrior, what were the words of the Master, enough time has been wasted on idle talk already, if we are to march South, say so, we have already secured a means of crossing the water and are in readiness to move.”

“I am to lead you to Lochgor in great haste. The men of the South have decided, in their folly, to make war upon our mighty race!”

This interested Darachlon, a good hunt, he thought, sport of the likes that only the aged were lucky enough to have participated in. “You may indeed point the direction in which we have to travel but the ground is flat and your presence is not required at the head of our legions, you may take a patrol of mounted Loch, and guard our rear, in case of attack by wild animals or stray men!” Darachlon snickered at Jengis, then turned to the Loch at his side. “Prepare to march,” he growled.

His underling scurried to obey his orders. Jengis turned to recross the river and rejoin his guruk. A few furs perhaps over the guruks hide, he thought and a steady jog at the rear. It should ease my aching bones.

# ***THE LANDS OF THE DRUIAND***

Peace and tranquillity lay on the land of Gresia as night drew back. The host of Delthinius sat astride their mounts awaiting the first rays of dawn.

Rowgar and his companions awaited the outset a little further down the way; they sat and watched the final preparations which were now almost complete. It looked a magnificent gathering; the men of Gresia were all clad in mail with bright cloaks upon their shoulders. Some of rank wore helms and armour of shining steel and some even carried shields.

“Tell me,” said Barrin, looking at Rowgar, “how come the men of Gresia dress so? I thought they were a peaceful people!”

“That they were,” replied Rowgar, “but after listening to the tale of woe that Delthinius told, I think that the Gresians, nay the Isoreans, intend to recapture their dignity. A great people they once were, but peace betrayed them. The journey of their forefathers must have been arduous and degrading. It is many hundreds of leagues to the eastern shores from here and many moons they must have spent in flight.

The openness of their gathering the other evening showed their contempt for any spy who may have been about and now they hope to gain entry to Lochgor over open plains, they have become a proud people. Hopefully our ride to Northern Carthelion will be undetected, then at least we will have surprise on our side. Delthinius places much faith in the speed of our steeds, and thinks to come upon the Loch at unawares from the West.”

“From where?” queried Barrin, pushing his fair hair from a quizzical brow.

“I will explain later,” said Rowgar. “Look, the sun rises.”

And as the sun rose over the distant horizon, the banners of

Gresia were unfurled. At either side of Delthinius were the bearers. To his left was the mighty banner of Gresia, crossed swords of silver overlaying the rising of the sun, to his right the banner of Isor, the Tree of Peace in its full majesty. A fanfare sounded and Delthinius raised his sword. The first rays of the sun made it gleam in the sharp morning air, like ice it appeared with diamonds set in its hilt. No words did he speak for none were required, he motioned onward.

When the column reached the companions, they fell in behind the banner bearers.

"I bet we look out of place," said Bart, but a voice from the head of the ranks allayed his fears.

"It is what is in your heart that matters most," said Reoch with a smile.

"I suppose that it is," said Bart looking more confident. "You know, Delthinius reminds me much of Darrian, their youthful looks and even their styles."

"Perhaps they have a common ancestry," said Rowgar, maybe even back to the House of Triar. Who indeed knows, looks do have a habit of repeating themselves."

"Maybe so," said Bart.

"But do not forget that Delthinius must be at least two score and ten years of age," continued Rowgar.

"He is what?" said Bart looking astonished.

"Well, he was here when Gerome last passed through these lands, before our lifetimes; he cannot be that young, for I am no spring chicken," replied Rowgar.

"I must have missed that conversation," mused Bart.

"LOOK," shouted Mirriam, and pointed to the sky. Three great birds flew from the rear of the ranks. They came swooping low over the head of the column, then rising again they separated and slowly became dots in the distance.

"What do you make of that," said Bart.

"I think that they are beautiful," replied Mirriam, "imagine being able to spread your wings and soar high above the mountains and rivers and fly wherever you please."

"I am quite high enough here, thank you." Bart was not a

horseman; though he loved the animals, he had rarely rode one.

“I think it must be marvellous too,” said Barrin. “They must know the full lay of the lands and it is said that their eyes see many things that are invisible to people. I wonder where they come from.”

“From the North,” replied Rowgar. “Reoch says that there is a high plateau in the distant hills. I myself have never seen it, but I think that Reoch may know more. He seems to have an understanding of those great birds. He also knows the lands to the North.”

At midday the column halted. Rowgar dismounted and began to open his pack, lifting the top cover he saw a small brooch, made of gold with a silver tree worked into its surface. The Tree of Peace, he wondered, who could have placed it there? Then his thoughts went back to Nennian. Who else could have done such a deed? He smiled to himself, I have many things to fight for, he thought, and daily the stakes get higher. He lifted his pack and set off to join the others who were now sat in a glade. “We will meet again,” he whispered.

Rowgar seated himself and quite out of the blue he said, “What of the Orb of Zarrion, young Barrin, we know naught of this?” It was the first time that Rowgar had thought of the Orb since he had been told of it in the household of Delthinius.

“The Orb,” repeated Barrin, guessing that one of the Gresians had told Rowgar of its existence. “It was given to me by an old man, the old man who gave you the wagon. I did not realise who he was until I heard Mirriam speak his name. That reminds me, how did you know of Gerome?” His eyes fixed squarely on Mirriam.

“Me!” exclaimed Mirriam.

“Yes, you, you spoke of ...”

“I know,” replied Mirriam, looking at the ground. “In the halls of Krrilion...I said the first thing that came into my head. I have never seen Gerome, or at least not to my knowledge.”

“You made a good guess,” said Rowgar. “If the old man who gave Barrin the Orb is the same old man who gave us the wagon, then it was indeed Gerome you overheard.”

Mirriam shrugged her shoulders.



“Perhaps I should have guessed sooner,” said Barrin. “Where we live we see little of the Prince and never had I seen Gerome before, though I knew his name.”

Barrin reached into his tunic and lifted out the Orb. “Here it is,” he said, lifting the chain over his head. “I thought it was made of brass that had tarnished. I know not of gold except its worth, my family never possessed anything of such worth and my mother who fends for us now has little of value.”

Rowgar was stung with pain; he could never keep the thoughts of those brave men who had fallen in battle far from mind. These thoughts led to visions of burning homesteads and the screams of their occupants. Never would the nightmares be still. “It is not your fault that you know not of metals,” he said. “Even though gold is of great value, the workmanship here is worth more.” He held his hand out for the Orb.

Barrin gave him the Orb freely.

Taking it in his hand, Rowgar felt the smooth surface. It was small in size but great in beauty. He raised it before his eyes, and again his mind began to wander ... He saw the face of Hilda, the wife of Belgar; he saw her anguished face as he had told her of Belgar’s fall. He saw Tarrol – though Tarrol was his friend there was something about him that he could not find words to describe. Why did the fire of hatred burn so fiercely in one so young? Tarrol’s face began to disappear to be replaced by a rider, clothed darkly, bearing an axe. The axe seemed familiar – of course it was the one harnessed on the steed of Delthinius.

Rowgar shook his head to clear his mind. His visions disappeared and he saw only the Orb in its fashioned gold surround, a thing of beauty. He removed it from his line of vision and juggled it in his hand. He had expected it to be heavy but its weight he could barely feel; the oddest thing though was its unearthly glow. It did not seem to be light reflected from the sun, but a power of its own; it reminded him of the Earthen Staff. He quickly dispelled the thought. “A fine work of art, though its greatest value lies in the Orb itself, it is one of a kind.”

“Do you think that it holds strange powers?” queried Mirriam.

“If it does only Gerome will know its secrets and alas he is not

here,” replied Rowgar.

“I find it fortunate that the Krril did not find it,” chipped in Bart.

“Too fortunate for my liking,” said Rowgar, passing the Orb to Barrin. “Let it not concern us at present; the Krril and Loekan are many leagues behind us.”

“How far do you think we have come since Brannock? It must be a great distance!” stated Mirriam.

“Not as far as you may think,” replied Rowgar. “I do not know the distance, but we travelled like snails.”

“Indeed,” said Bart, getting an apple out of his pack. “I bet we travelled twice the distance of a bird just to reach Gabe Andir, the tracks through Tor Palin are not straight and the mountain causeway took us far from our course. It is a pity that we could not have journeyed all the way down the Andir Valley, but I hear that the southern end is impassable.” Munch! He took a great bite of his apple.

At that moment Reoch strolled up, “I see you have all made yourselves comfortable.”

“But of course,” replied Barrin as he slipped the Orb chain over his head. “We treat our feet with respect of late.”

Reoch laughed, “Do not become too relaxed or you may fall asleep and be left behind.”

“Really,” Bart said apprehensively, a smile crossing his face.

“No rest for you Bart,” announced Rowgar. “We will need all the help that we can get when we reach Lochgor. Our countrymen will be sorely pressed.”

“Why do we receive no aid from Tukamar?” enquired Barrin. “Surely this war is in their interests too!”

“I doubt that they even know of the war,” answered Reoch, “and even if they did I doubt if they would come. No news have we had from over the sea for hundreds of years; remember the story Delthinius told is now a legend and not something that happened yesterday.”

“But what happened to the brave warriors of old?” queried Mirriam. “They cannot just have vanished, their descendants must live on!”

“Even of that we know not,” said Reoch. “We know only of the

three Kings to succeed Tackurion, those who tried to lift the Axe from the Tree of Peace upon our desecrated land. It is said that when King Telemar failed to raise the Axe, he turned from the Tree of Peace and spoke to his followers saying, 'I deem it is not for us to again take the burdens of the Earth upon our shoulders, let us return from whence we came and be at peace.' Telemarion's followers believed him for he was a man of vision. Only his second son did not return to Tukamar, and he was lost in history. All the others returned and never again have they set foot on these lands. What they do now, no-one knows, perhaps their tall ships sail into the rising sun, for the waters to the west of Tukamar are now filled with mists and strange currents. The waters seem enchanted."

"Three Sea Kings could not lift the Axe from the Tree of Peace and yet your people removed it easily ... just one year ago." Barrin looked thoughtful as he spoke.

"An omen?" Bart queried.

"It would appear so," replied Reoch.

"Where is the Axe now?" asked Rowgar. "Is it the ..."

"Yes, it is the Axe which you have seen mounted on the steed of our Lord," said Reoch.

"Delthinius has the strength to wield the Axe?" queried Barrin with an astonished look on his face.

Reoch remained silent.

"The horse carries the Axe with ease," said Mirriam.

Bart almost choked on his apple.

Reoch gave Mirriam an odd look.

Rowgar merely looked thoughtful.

Mirriam looked from one face to the other. "Now what have I said?"

"Well! I doubt that Reoch appreciates his Lord being compared with a horse," said Rowgar.

"I was thinking more on the lines of the horse wielding the Axe in its teeth," said Bart, fighting to keep his face straight.

Mirriam gave Bart a disgusted look.

"The horse does not feel the weight," mused Barrin. "I would have thought even a steed such as this we talk of would have felt the weight of that Axe."

“It has been noted,” said Reoch. “It does seem that the Axe was meant to be taken into battle, though Delthinius dislikes the idea.”

“Why so?” asked Mirriam.

“Did you not listen to the tale of Tukamar and Isor?” replied Reoch. “This Axe was the downfall of our people. We carry the Axe to the fortress of the Loch, which no doubt conceals the Earthen Staff.”

“I see,” said Mirriam.

“Not if Loekan has the Staff,” commented Barrin.

“That depends who Loekan is. If he is whom we suspect, he will be at Lochgor when we arrive, but do not ask me how the ancient leader of the Loch and Loekan can be the same person. It is beyond my understanding.”

“He is a demon,” said Mirriam with conviction and hatred in her voice. “A wizard of the worst kind.”

“A Zarr,” mused Reoch.

“A Zarr?” repeated Bart.

“Oh! It is just the name we use for the likes of Wizards and Alchemists, I think we adopted the name from Tukamar.”

“The makers of magic,” commented Barrin.

“Magic,” repeated Reoch. “That is an odd sort of word.”

“He means they work outside of nature,” said Mirriam.

“Ah yes, you mean the null point between earth and thought. The point which is ... but yet is not. Rem knows a lot about that sort of thing, shall I ask him to tell you about it?”

“NO ... I mean he has already told us,” said Mirriam.

“Oh!” exclaimed Reoch.

Rowgar, who had slipped into the world of his own thoughts, turned to Reoch and said, “Tell me, how do you obtain news from the lands over the water?”

“From Isor! Our hardy sea-folk journey there in the hope that they will find trees and flowers growing in the barren earth. We have a few vessels harboured to the West at Seron Eor. They sail around the coast of Carthelion and Rhone, on to our ancient homeland but this happens only rarely. The distance is immense and the vessels do not return for many seasons. Always we hope for better tidings, maybe one day we shall receive them.”

“I see,” said Rowgar. “I hope that you receive good tidings soon. I share your grief in this matter.”

“Er ... If you do not mind me saying, I think that we should mount up. Everyone else seems to be preparing to leave,” said Bart.

“Indeed we should,” said Rowgar with a large smile on his face. “Our destiny forever leads us onward.”

Late into the day they journeyed. The fragrance of the land about them was sweet and they did not mind the long spells on horseback. The troop made progress though they were slowed by the supply wagons which followed behind.

Barrin and Mirriam rode side by side; they spoke little except for passing comments about the surrounding lands. Their vigour was now restored in full. Barrin fingered the Orb which again rested upon his chest, with unconscious restlessness. He did not notice the slight glimmer of red, which tainted its smooth surface. He rode on happily.

Delthinius still led the column. His face showed no emotion; he rode with great majesty as did the Kings of old. Reoch had joined him and they now journeyed together. Reoch did not seem to have the dignity of Delthinius but his eyes shone with a great wisdom and depth of understanding.

As they approached a small fresh water spring he turned to Delthinius saying, “This would be a good place to make camp for the night, Lord. The men have travelled many leagues this day and we are not yet desperate for time.”

Delthinius nodded to him and Reoch brought the riders to a halt.

When the camp was made and the guards posted, Mirriam and Barrin sat by the spring. The ground beneath them was covered with a springy layer of Derrianthrim; it cushioned their tired limbs and perfumed the air with a freshness of its own.

“I see you do not wear the sword of Turly,” said Mirriam as she lay back on the ground.

“No,” replied Barrin. “It weighs heavy upon me. My build is small and I have not the muscles of Turly. I keep it hitched upon my horse. It is within reach should I ever need it.”

As he spoke he stared into the small pool into which the spring water ran. He could see his reflection clearly. The faint tinge of the

Orb he noticed, but thought naught of it, for the sun had become red in its downward passage and all that reflected its light bore also its colour. The Orb, he thought would be safer tucked again under his tunic. This he did without another thought, then continued to stare into the water. Slowly the image he saw began to change. He saw not his own reflection but the image of a tall robed figure. As the image became clearer he could see the serenity of the face and the light of the eyes. The figure held before him a great axe with its head resting upon the floor! Tackurion, thought Barrin, but dispelled the idea. This was no mortal warrior. To the right of the robed figure appeared an old bearded man. Barrin recognised him. It was Gerome, of this he was sure. To the left appeared another figure, not unlike Gerome in appearance, yet his face appeared harsh, no beard did he wear and his lips were thin and twisted in a cruel smile. Loekan, thought Barrin, who else could it be? The robed figure turned first to his right and though surprise crossed his face, he smiled and held out his hand in a gesture of friendship. Then he turned to his left and his face became sad. The land around them Barrin could now see, fair it was with rolling hills covered with green and violet and amidst this beauty, he saw the axe lifted menacingly and words of sorrow came to his ears. 'This ill cannot be permitted,' they said, but the axe held still and a second voice he heard, a voice Barrin knew well. 'Would you dare destroy a part of the foundations of your creation, before the seeds of conscious life are sown! Though you think me vile, you cannot sever half the roots of your dream without destroying the whole. Not from your hands will my end come, and if not from your hands whom else may hold the power of my destruction?' Glee crossed Loekan's brow. 'Your axe I will counter and the Earth will be mine, to do with as I please. Go now and join your kin and plot your defence, but I tell you this, your efforts will come to naught for I shall become greater than you who caused my creation!' Then an insidious laugh cut the air and the pool cleared to show only the reflection of Barrin in the dying light.

He sat for a while pondering what he had just seen, was it just an illusion he thought, but that he could not answer. Turning to Mirriam he began to speak, but Mirriam did not hear for she was

fast asleep.

“BARRIN, MIRRIAM, SUPPER IS SERVED.”

Barrin looked over his shoulder and saw the plumpish figure of Bart, a score of paces away with his hands on his hips.

“COMING,” replied Barrin. He gave Mirriam a gentle shake, not liking to disturb her, though he knew it was necessary.

She opened her eyes, then yawned, as was the custom of both Barrin and Mirriam.

“Morning already, is it?”

“No,” smiled Barrin, “but no doubt that you would have slept while then, had I not disturbed you.” His smile broadened. “It is time for supper and you would not like to miss one of Bart’s specialities, would you?”

“You mean salted meat and a mouthful of water?” she quipped, shutting her eyes again.

“Well if that is the way you feel I suppose I shall have to eat for the both of us.”

At that point the aroma of freshly cooked meat and herbs reached their nostrils. Barrin stood, then set off in the direction of the smell.

Mirriam was quick to follow and was soon in hot pursuit. “HEY WAIT FOR ME,” she shouted.

“I thought you were not coming,” replied Barrin. “After all, who wants salted meat?”

Supper went down very well and Bart received some very rare compliments. He had only cooked for six persons; the rest were served by their own cooks. This they preferred, the men of Gresia were dubious at the cooking of outsiders, only Reoch and Delthinius braved the ordeal and they were pleasantly surprised. Barrin and Mirriam were astonished, they did not know Bart could cook at all, but they held their faces straight and when talking to Bart they smiled sweetly.

The evening was fine and they talked gaily under the clear skies, until at last they settled down on the soft ground and wrapped themselves in their blankets, all felt content within themselves and they slept.

As the night crept onward, Barrin became restless. His mind had

returned to the pool. He again sat on the water's edge, staring blankly into the dark water. The water began to swirl and boil. In its centre a rider appeared, galloping his horse as though there was not an instant to lose. Barrin could sense urgency in the way he travelled. Darkness surrounded horse and rider. Then the feeling of evil lurking ahead came to Barrin, he wanted to shout a warning but his lips were frozen. The feeling of evil grew and anticipation began to show on Barrin's face. Then from nowhere three iron-clad figures leapt before the horse. Hate emanated from the rider and Barrin saw the glint of steel. The attackers fell to the ground in the blink of an eye, hacked to their deaths. The evil was gone completely, only the hate remained. Barrin could now see the tool of the attackers downfall – THE AXE.

The scene changed, the rider was upon a hill, hate and evil were everywhere, Barrin broke into a cold sweat, he heard the crash of thunder and a strange hissing that filled the air, before the rider was another iron clad figure but this one was different; his face Barrin could see, cold and merciless it appeared, strange also for it did not look human. The two mighty effigies faced one another and again came the flash of steel as the lightning glinted on the Axe head, but this time it did not strike home. A dark luminant staff blocked its path. As the Axe and staff met, the pool exploded in an arc of light, which made Barrin's eyes hurt. Slowly the light subsided and so too did the feeling of evil but the evil did not disappear completely. It just became dormant. The light and an overpowering surge of confusion cloaked the wrongness of that cold merciless face, and when the pool cleared again, Barrin saw a blurred figure moving slowly as though walking beneath the sea. A staff he carried and all about him the water glistened and flickered. Barrin saw what seemed to him a goddess, beautiful, yet terrible, her image wavered with the water. Kariol, thought Barrin. Empress of the sea, though he knew not from where the thought came. Then as suddenly as the image came, it was gone, dashed by the power of the staff, but the staff was not totally victorious. Its energy was consumed by the flickering lights of the water. All became still. For an eternity it seemed and through this eternity the power of the staff grew. Evil again was filling the senses of Barrin. Power begat evil and evil



begat power. Just as Barrin felt he would burst with this intake of wrong, the sea erupted and the waters drew back, light shone down between the parted waves and through the light he saw a mound, upon the mound stood Loekan, the Earthen Staff raised high in triumph. About him were hordes of ironclad atrocities. Barrin was overcome with ill, "NO," he screamed, "this cannot be, NO NO NO NO." He felt himself being shaken, "Barrin, Barrin, wake up." It was the voice of Rowgar.

"A dream," said Rowgar. "Just a dream."

When morning came, Barrin awoke feeling very tired. It seemed he had been engaged in battle all night rather than sleeping, though his sleep was untroubled after Rowgar had left him.

Mirriam had noticed the tired look in his eyes but said nothing; it was not unusual for Barrin to look this way.

After they had breakfasted they began to break camp. Barrin looked much better for the food in his stomach and this pleased Rowgar, who had been troubled by the previous night's ordeal.

The wind this morn was fresh and small dark clouds passed overhead; they would make good time, thought Rowgar as he finished packing his belongings.

When all was set, the riders mounted their horses and began their day's journey. Rowgar rode beside Barrin. He was curious at the cause of Barrin's bad dreams. He thought it not like Barrin to scream out in the middle of the night, not even the hall of Krrilion had disturbed him that much, perhaps it was the hall that he was dreaming of. Memories do recur at the most unlikely times. He turned to speak to Barrin and as he opened his mouth Barrin spoke.

"What was that creature we saw in the entrance of Gabe Andir, the huge one with the iron breastplate?"

Rowgar looked surprised at the question. "A Loch I think," he said. "I spoke of it to Delthinius and that was his conclusion."

"Are they all that big?" he queried, eyeing the vale ahead.

"No," said Rowgar, "I think not, I have never seen a Loch, but the stories of them are many. They are garish creatures but stand no higher than men. They are thick set with bulging muscles and hair covered forearms, not a pleasant sight."

"Yes, I thought so," retorted Barrin.

“What makes you say that?” asked Rowgar.

“Oh! Just a dream I had. I saw many of them; it was a horrible dream. It is not clear to me now, but I remember one face above all, not like the Loch we encountered, though their sizes were similar. Lochi I think it was, in his struggle with Tackurion. I know this sounds strange for I have no idea what either look like, but the Staff and Axe they bore and the power that surrounded them – I just cannot think who else it could have been.”

“Yes, I see,” said Rowgar, “dreams are made of strange stuff, maybe your dream was really how it was. Who knows the working of the mind, who indeed?”

With that comment the subject was left to rest. They rode for the best part of the day without further incident and the days that followed were not unlike. Slowly the lush lands began to rise as they neared the hill country of Druiad. The slopes were gentle and they hindered the troop little, although they had to encompass some of the higher ground. In the afternoon of the sixth day they came upon the banks of the Druin. The river was not large as it came freshly from the hills. The water was clear and fresh and Delthinius thought to spend the night at its edge for the weather showed no signs of breaking up and he was complacent. Reoch, however, would have preferred to cross the river that afternoon, he glanced warily at their surroundings and to the sky.

A few hours of sunlight were still left to the troop and they decided to make the best of it. When all was secured, many of them decided it was time for a swim. A time to freshen up and wash the dirt of the previous days from their bodies. Bart, Rowgar and Barrin prepared to join the men in their romp in the water, but Mirriam, who was already blushing like a beetroot, did not know what to do with herself.

“I see your problem,” said Bart. “You could always leave your clothes on. I suppose they could do with a wash too.”

Bart’s remark was not meant to sound comical, but Barrin saw something funny in it and he began to laugh. Mirriam glared at him with scorn in her eyes. This brought his laughter to an abrupt end.

“It is not what Bart says that makes me laugh,” said Barrin. “It is the way he says it.” Again mirth began to get the topside of him,

but he managed to suppress it, with great difficulty.

Bart seemed puzzled; he did not see anything funny in what he had said.

Rowgar, who had remained silent throughout the conversation at last spoke up, "Perhaps if we move up stream a way, we may find somewhere a little more secluded. I think that Mirriam wearing her clothes would only solve half the problem, as the other half is already swimming about in the water."

Mirriam smiled at Rowgar appreciatively.

"But I had better check with Delthinius first," added Rowgar.

"That is fine by me," said Barrin. "I will accompany you." The hint of a smile still had not left his lips, but he had regained his composure.

They found Delthinius by one of the supply wagons, he was taking note of their provisions, not a lordly job although a necessary one. Delthinius believed to do a job right, you did it yourself. Of course on many occasions he relied on others, he could not be everywhere at once.

"Greetings, Rowgar," said Delthinius. "I see you have come to lend a hand, we need trusty men like you to take account of our position."

Rowgar was lost for words and as his silence became ominous Barrin spoke up in a rather apologetic voice, "Well, sir, we did not actually come to lend a hand. It never crossed our minds."

"Well what was on your mind?" said Delthinius sharply, winking at Rowgar.

Rowgar was taken aback by the gesture, he thought it not Delthinius's way to jest.

"We er ..., we were going to go for a dip in the water but we have a little problem with Mirriam. It is er – a little embarrassing for her with all the men around. We did not know you needed a hand!" Barrin had become nervous at the tone of Delthinius's voice.

"I suppose you want to go up stream out of the way," quipped Delthinius.

"Yes, that was the idea," said Barrin meekly.

"Well, if it is the idea of Rowgar, I have no objections – but take

heed, do not wander too far from the camp and stay within sight of the guards. I want no mishaps.” Delthinius turned again to continue his work.

Barrin and Rowgar looked at each other. Rowgar shrugged his shoulders.

They left Delthinius and joined Bart and Mirriam, by the hitching rails. “You know,” said Barrin. “Delthinius is in a strange mood. I have never seen him like that before, maybe he has been in the supply wagons too long.”

“No, I doubt that,” said Bart. “He was tending to the horses not ten paces from here when you were having your hysterics; he cannot have been with the supply wagons more than a few moments when you got there. I would have said earlier but you left in such a hurry.”

So, he heard, thought Rowgar chuckling to himself.

“Now what have I said,” grumbled Bart, looking more puzzled than ever.

“Oh nothing!” replied Rowgar, straightening his face.

Barrin did not look very pleased at all.

“Come,” said Mirriam. “If it was all right with Delthinius, let us go, unless you want to bathe in the dark.”

“Yes it was all right with Delthinius,” Rowgar replied, “if we keep in view of the guards. We can do this and still keep a reasonable distance away.”

Mirriam nodded and they set off up the river. They went a few hundred paces until they were out of clear view from the camp, though they were still within sight.

Mirriam still felt a little embarrassed with Bart and Rowgar being present and no doubt they felt the same way but they had been together now for what seemed like many seasons and they rose above their shyness quickly. They were soon wallowing in the water.

“BE CAREFUL,” shouted Bart. “There is a fair flow of water here, it may not be deep but it hurries swiftly down to the Grasslands.”

“Warning taken,” replied Barrin, though he paid little heed to Bart’s words. He was having too good a time.

Fortunately a good time was had by all without injury or mishap. The day had been good to them and when they finally returned for the night, they were thoroughly exhausted. Sleep came easily, without worry or fear. They slept soundly.

The night was cool for the time of year and by dawn a mist had gathered about the Druin. Visibility was down to thirty paces and Delthinius did not like this at all.

"It may conceal our crossing, but it makes our journey more hazardous!" he exclaimed. "I would imagine the people of these lands are watching us."

"Yes, my Lord," answered Reoch. "Our presence must already be known, we have not tried to conceal it. The Druiand would pose no problem on a clear day. This mist though changes the odds somewhat. They could be within bowshot now and we would be none the wiser."

"I agree," said Delthinius, "it may be better to hold our ground until the sun shows his face, though there is really no more danger than on a nighttime."

It was late morning when the mist began to rise, and as it rose it became clear that the people of Druiad did know of the presence of the Gresians, for across the water were many horsemen.

A hundred men, thought Rowgar, certainly not enough to cause any problem, unless there are more at hand. From where Rowgar stood he had a good view down into the Grasslands, where the grass grew tall, as far as the eye could see. Ahead and to the East his vision was restricted by the hills and vales of Druiad. "A good place for an ambush," he said to Bart, "if these people are indeed hostile."

"We shall find out shortly," retorted Bart, "those riders are going to cross the river, should we join Delthinius?"

"No, I do not think that we should interfere, although what they have to say may be of interest."

"Then we should go," said Barrin interrupting. "We have our own quest to think of."

"I realise that," Rowgar retorted. "Let us move a little closer, we may be able to catch the line of conversation without becoming obtrusive."

Rowgar and Barrin walked to the near side of the guard post which overlooked the river. Bart followed close behind. The guard acknowledged them as they approached, then signalled them to halt.

Delthinius, who was now not twenty paces away, stood silently awaiting the riders to dismount. He noticed the approach of Rowgar and signalled him onward. Rowgar proceeded with Barrin. Bart went no further, he seemed content to stay with the guard, who now stood aside to let Rowgar pass.

When they reached the meeting point, three of the riders had already dismounted. Rowgar thought these to be the leaders, though there was no way to be sure. Two of them were dressed similarly in loose fitting green tunics; the other wore a habit and held his head low, so as his face could not be seen.

Reoch approached from the rear with Farron, a strong but wiry man, whose eyes seemed to be everywhere at once, he was the head of Gresia's security wardens.

On Reoch's arrival, Delthinius spoke to the Druiland, who up to this point had remained silent. "Greetings," he said. "We of Gresia welcome you to our camp."

The strangers looked at one another, then the one at the centre spoke, "You come, invade land, NO NO, go back." He adjusted his headband and awaited an answer.

"We cannot go back," said Delthinius, "we have an urgent errand to the North. We will not disturb your lands and in but a few days we will be gone."

"No, not pass, back, go back," repeated the Druiland, then he turned to his companions. "Seria ingor cara manlo!"

His men immediately mounted. The speaker turned to Delthinius as his companions headed back from whence they came. "You go straight," he said. "No trouble, you off our lands three suns." He pointed to the sun, gave a wry smile, then mounted his horse. As he headed back over the water, then East, the rest of his riders fell in behind.

"It is a trap," Barrin spouted, "he will be back and not just with a hundred men or so!"

"I must admit that he did not sound too trustworthy," said

Rowgar, thoughtfully. "You sound very sure of yourself lad."

"Of course I am. Did you not hear what he said to those friends of his?"

Delthinius and Rowgar stared at Barrin.

Barrin began to feel uncomfortable.

"Yes, we heard," said Delthinius, "for the use it was. I did not understand a word."

"And I certainly did not," uttered Rowgar softly.

Barrin began to flush up, then Reoch intervened.

"I believe what Barrin says to be true. The power of Zarrion hangs about his neck."

"Surely they would not attack the full might of Gresia," said Farron. "These people of the hills and Grasslands have not the strength of arms to assail us, our spies inform us that there are no more than a thousand fighting men in this region and they are poorly armed."

"I agree," said Delthinius, "they would be fools to attack a host of thrice their number, fully armed for combat."

"Bradur did not expect the Krril to pour down the 'Valley of Shadow' either," a voice said from behind them.

They all turned in unison, there stood Bart.

"I did not mean to interfere," he said apologetically.

"There is no harm done," said Delthinius, "remember Bart, the Krril had the driving force of Loekan behind them and the aid of the Loch."

"It was just a thought, sir." Bart decided he should have kept his mouth shut.

"Who is to say Loekan is not at work here, my Lord?" Reoch frowned.

"But that is absurd," Farron broke in. "We would know of this."

"Do not pit yourself against Loekan," said Reoch. "For he is the Lord of Shadows, his emissaries weave their webs of evil under his cloak of darkness. Their ways are not what you may expect. Do your spies report on the hooded ones? They are the true Druiand. They are few in number and I personally know naught of them, except their existence."

Farron fell silent.

Delthinius turned to Barrin. "Tell me," he began, "what exactly did you hear from the mouth of the Druid, you seem the only one to understand them. I beg you, tell us."

Barrin seemed lost for words at first. His mouth felt dry. He had been thinking on what he had heard and this confused him. "Well, I thought that I heard him tell his fellows to return and prepare, but I am not sure anymore. If no one else heard, perhaps I am imagining."

"There is only one thing that they could be preparing for," barked Reoch, "and it is quite likely a welcoming party for us, though not the type of party that we would wish for."

This was the first time that Rowgar had heard Reoch raise his voice. He is very convincing, thought Rowgar, the same sort of persuasive voice as Meldir; they both carry the same sort of undertones.

Delthinius interrupted Rowgar's line of thought. "Come," he said, "let us move swiftly lest we fall into a trap. Outriders we will need, one on the west flank and one to the rear. Two should scout ahead and two to the East."

Farron moved swiftly and his men were quickly despatched.

"Let the company mount," continued Delthinius, "there is not a moment to lose."

Men ran this way and that, preparing to travel with the utmost speed. Amid the confusion Rowgar, Barrin and Bart made their way back to Mirriam, who was waiting by their packs.

"What is all the confusion about?" she asked. "I cannot tell what anyone is saying."

"We are moving out in a hurry," blurted Barrin. "Delthinius suspects an ambush."

"That is true," confirmed Rowgar. "It is also true that we may now have a problem with speech. We will have to watch the situation from now on; we cannot understand the Gresian speech when they revert to their native tongue and no doubt in battle that is all we will hear. We tend to forget the majority of the Gresians cannot speak the tongue of Carthelion, though it be similar to their own. This is what comes of being surrounded by the kin of Delthinius. They may number many but they are still a small



minority.”

“You mean all the people we speak to are relatives of Delthinius?” queried Mirriam.

“No, not them all, several of them – yes,” replied Rowgar, who was packing his horse and gesturing the rest to do the same. “During the preparations back in Gresia, Delthinius told me that all his household, since the fall of Isor carry a silver ring on the small finger of their left hand.”

“But Reoch does not wear one,” interrupted Mirriam.

“Yes I have noticed that too,” said Rowgar, beckoning them again to hurry. “All the hierarchy of Gresia cannot be kin of Delthinius, or at least I would guess not. Bradur and I are not of kin to Darrian are we?”

“That is not the same,” said Bart. “Our nation was carved out by individuals, many not of royalty, the same cannot be said of the Gresians.”

“You have a point,” exclaimed Rowgar. “But this topic will have to wait, time is running short.”

Rowgar mounted his horse and waited for Bart and Mirriam who had only just packed. “Hurry!” he said, as he tried to control his mount.

They hitched their packs and mounted.

As the troop proceeded toward the river a horn sounded from the hills behind. All eyes turned southward. Upon the near hill galloping his horse was one of Farron’s men, then he fell from his steed silently.

Delthinius barked commands and men began to order themselves.

“WHAT IS HE SAYING?” cried Mirriam.

“ARCHERS TO THE RIVERSIDE AND SWORDSMEN TO THE REAR.” shouted Barrin.

“WHY BOWMEN TO THE RIVERSIDE?” called Bart, he had trouble raising his voice above the commotion.

“Because they have not time to prepare themselves properly!” Barrin looked up to the crest of the hill where Farron’s man had fallen and there before his eyes were hundreds of riders, no more than five hundred paces from the edge of their defences.

Down the hill rode the Druiand, war cries issuing from their lips.

The swordsmen of Gresia had not time to make formation, but their swords they drew, flashing in the new found sun.

Forward they moved toward the oncoming Druiand. Another horn sounded, shrill above the cries of the attackers. The riders of Gresia broke into a gallop. Before the impact of the moment had really sunk home to the foursome, the armies collided and a clash of steel reverberated through the air.

As Rowgar looked about, a thought struck him. "THIS IS NOT THEIR TOTAL FORCE," he yelled to Bart, "EVEN TAKING US BY SURPRISE THEY COULD NOT HOPE TO OVERRUN US WITH THIS AMOUNT OF MEN, THEY ARE OUTNUMBERED BY SIX TO ONE."

At that moment he caught a glimpse of Farron, who was conversing with someone to whom he was not familiar. Rowgar quickly joined them and spoke with urgency.

Bart could not hear what was being said, but he saw Rowgar point up the river toward the place where they had been bathing the previous day. Bart motioned Barrin and Mirriam to follow him, then set off toward Rowgar. They approached as orders were being given by Theor, companion of Farron. They saw bowmen sheathing their swords and dismounting.

"Prepare yourself," said Rowgar, looking at Bart. "I fear the worst is yet to come."

The bowmen unhitched their bows from their horses and moved up the hill, to give clear aim to the East.

"I hope that you are right," Farron called to Rowgar. "We will bring our own downfall if an attack comes from elsewhere, with no mounts beneath us."

Rowgar was not wrong. The twisting valley of the Druiand came alive with the beat of hoofs. Anticipation began to rise, as the second assault from the Druiand materialised.

Many were their numbers, when they came into view along the banks of the river, driving their horses fiercely, in a headlong attack. They made as if victory was for the taking.

The bows of the Gresian's remained cocked. No arrow flew,

until the whites of the eyes of the Druiand could be seen. Then from a single word they were released.

The sky became full of sound, the darts, like a cloud, descended upon their oppressors. Such was the onslaught of those deadly darts of death that the attack floundered. Riders and horses fell to the ground, pierced by the wings of doom. In turn many riders were unseated when their mounts tripped and stumbled over their fallen comrades. Anarchy was rife as the bowmen again made ready to aim. Once more the stings were released, descending on the turmoil like hornets.

The Druiand were hopelessly beaten, those who still rode, turned about and headed back up the valley as fast as they could travel. Those on foot ran afterwards, their glorious attack had come to nothing.

The shafts of the Gresians were again held in waiting, for the word which would send them on their flight. Rowgar saw this and cried with all the force that his lungs could muster, "NO, NOT AGAIN, THEY ARE BEATEN."

Farron turned from the rear of the bowmen where he was stood. "What is this Rowgar, do you become soft? Are these not our enemies who seek our destruction?"

"That be as it may," retorted Rowgar. "They are still people. A beaten people. What good would it serve to massacre them? Would it make you feel better?"

At this suggestion, Farron scowled and turned toward Theor, who held the bowmen ready. "Stay your men," he said in his own tongue, "they are routed."

Delthinius and Reoch approached Farron from the scene of the first battle. Though fighting still continued, its outcome was certain. The Druiand had no hope, their plans had failed. The Gresians were doing no more than mopping up. Only a few Druiand had refused to surrender. Those were the proud ones.

"Well done," said Delthinius to Farron. "You have done us a great service. This battle could have been disastrous had you not acted wisely."

Theor looked up at Delthinius and spoke, "The credit is not all ours, Lord, we were warned of our peril by the Carthelion." His

voice floated through the air like a melodic tune as did all the words of the Gresians that were not spoken in anger.

Delthinius turned his head toward Rowgar. “We have much to thank you for.”

“And we have much to thank you for also,” replied Rowgar.

Farron looked the other way. He was not pleased.

## *PLATEAU OF THRAWK*

The forces of Gresia did not travel far that day. When the toll of battle had been counted they crossed the River Druin and made their camp two leagues to the North. No prisoners did they take, those that lay down their arms were released as a sign of goodwill. Farron was loathe at this deed and many more gave him their support, but Delthinius said, "What are we to do with our captives – bear their weight and supply them our rations all the way to Northern Carthelion or murder them here on the banks of the Druin?" To this there was no answer and Delthinius had his way with no more objections.

The party of four came through the battle unscathed except for the sickness, which it brought to Mirriam's stomach, though even this feeling was less than it was aforetime. This also applied to Barrin; the sight of death did not move him as it once had.

"How much further have we to travel?" queried Barrin, as he joined his friends around a small fire.

"That I do not know," answered Rowgar. "I have seen plans of the lands around us, but it is difficult to say exactly. I think that we should enter Carthelion before Prince Darrian, he has many leagues to travel."

"How will the Prince feed his men?" asked Barrin.

"He has dealings with King Reyon of Rhone. Reyon will not send his army to aid Darrian but he hopes for their success, lest he becomes surrounded by the Loch."

"If he is concerned he ought to help more," chipped in Bart.

"Yes, I would have thought so too," added Barrin.

"It is not as simple as that," continued Rowgar. "Rhone has had no dealings with the Loch and they are not troubled by them. To send their young men into battle for what many think is not their concern may cause great unrest. Rhone like Carthelion is not governed solely by one man. They have their councils. Many of

their council members are strongly opposed to bloodletting of any kind.”

“Have you travelled in Rhone?” asked Bart.

“Yes,” Rowgar replied, “I was there for the meetings with Reyon, which were held well before the decision to regain our ancestral lands was made. Meldir was sending feelers out, before the final decision to move was taken. I accompanied Carrich on his journey to Galiborn.”

“I know little of Carrich,” said Bart, “he lives a higher life than I could dream of.”

“I know what you mean,” said Mirriam.

“Do not think ill of him for his ways,” retorted Rowgar, “he has not always lived the life of nobility.

“I thought he was kin of the Prince,” piped up Barrin, although he knew less of Carrich than Bart did.

“No, that is not true,” said Rowgar, “he was adopted into the old King’s household. Tale has it that he lived in the outer regions far to the west of Brannock, the lands of Meldir’s origin. Of course you two youngsters will not remember King Doran, but Bart will!”

“Who could forget him,” chuckled Bart, bringing back old memories. “He may not have made any great achievements in his time but his boisterous nature made him well loved!”

“That is surely true,” said Rowgar. “I remember Bradur telling me of the first meeting Doran had with Carrich. The King was out hunting deer and Krril – whichever he came upon, in the foothills of the White Mountains, toward the northwestern edge of Tor Palin. Bradur, who was a young man at the time rode with him, along with another ten men or so ...”

“Since when has Bradur been a horseman?” Barrin interrupted.

“Never,” said Rowgar, “but he rode well even then, at least as well as the rest of the King’s company. None were of the cavalry. Doran took whom he pleased, not whom he thought was the best for the task. That was always his way and this outing was no different. It was late one summer’s afternoon and the King was about to turn for home – he had to be in Brannock three days hence for a council meeting. Without warning from out of the hills came a large party of Krril. They had boxed the King’s retreat and things

were looking black.

Doran formed his men in a circle and prepared to meet his fate. Suddenly there came the sound of a horn, blazing the ‘Men to arms call’ of Carthelion. The Krril panicked and fell into disarray. They had fallen into a trap of their own making. Up the hills to the North they scurried. The King and his men in hot pursuit, until the Krril vanished back into their holes. Doran turned and looked for the troop which had saved him in the nick of time but one man only did he see, Carrich. Looking puzzled, he and his men rode to the stranger. ‘Hail, friend’ he said, ‘where is your commander and the rest of your troop?’

‘Troop!’ exclaimed Carrich. ‘Of what troop do you speak, Sire?’

Doran’s puzzlement grew. He looked around at his men, who also looked bewildered. ‘Surely you are not alone!’ he said.

‘No,’ replied Carrich. ‘I have my sword, my bow and my horn.’

Doran stared for a moment, then burst into fits of laughter. Bradur had difficulty calming his mount against the hoarse bellowing laughter of the King and when the situation sank home to the rest of the men, they too began to laugh. From that day forward Carrich was taken under the wing of the King. This all happened a score of years past, unfortunately the King met his end only five years after this meeting at the hands of the Krril. They had the last laugh. Carrich by then was well established in the King’s household, he joined the ranks of the horsemen and grew in status swiftly. Alas he will say little of his past, only that the downs to the West were never free of the Krril and that he sought to play his part in their downfall by moving East, to join the armed forces.”

“I see,” said Mirriam. “To look at him now, one would ever believe he came from low standing.”

“I know what you mean,” Bart sighed. “I wish that I had known all this earlier. Carrich’s entry into the household must have been hushed.”

“Not really,” replied Rowgar, “he was a nobody when he entered, his encounter with the King was talked about for a short while and then forgotten. He was no different from anyone else in the lower order of the household. Not until he became of rank did people notice him and even then no-one really questioned from

whence he came. The same sort of mystique is also attached to Meldir, but he is closer to the people than Carrich.”

“We seem to have a funny bunch of leaders,” commented Bart. “We do not know the upbringing of some of our most trusted commanders.”

Rowgar allowed himself a smile. “I think that they deserve our trust and besides, there is no question of Darrian’s bloodline, we can trace it to the birth of the realm. And Bradur, is he not the leader of all our forces. None would ever question his loyalty – nor his orders.”

“Tarrol would,” quipped Bart.

“Tarrol!” said Barrin quizzically.

Rowgar cast Barrin a glance.

“He is a group leader,” stated Bart.

“He suffers from a little too much courage,” said Rowgar. “It is difficult to keep him from the throats of our enemy – even when it is wise to avoid battle, but less of this talk, we should not discuss our fellow comrades like this.”

Miriam thought Rowgar a little blunt with his speech, although no-one else seemed to notice anything amiss – or if they did they said nothing.

Barrin had again begun fiddling with the Orb under his tunic. “I wonder,” he said, “do you think the Orb enables me to understand strange tongues, for the words of Gresia seem intelligible to me?”

The change of subject seemed to relieve Rowgar. “To that question I have no answer,” he replied. “I have had many dealings with Gerome, but his power he must hold in reserve. The only odd thing that I ever noticed about him is the way that he is aware of everything that goes on about him, yet he is blind.”

“Yes, I know,” said Barrin. “I wonder if the Orb aided him?”

Everyone shrugged their shoulders.

Barrin looked thoughtful for a moment. “Was it Gerome’s idea for all our people to leave the safety of Outer Carthelion?”

“All those who belong to the northern province – No, that was a decision taken by the council.”

“I do not suppose it matters where the idea came from,” said Bart. “What will be, will be. I do think the families of our men



should have stayed at home though, what happens if we are defeated?”

“Do not think such thoughts,” answered Rowgar. “They make the journey to ensure the hearts of our men do not falter. It raises the stakes to death or glory, this is the way Bradur would have it.”

At that moment Rem appeared. “Ah! There you are,” he said, “I have been seeking you.”

They all stood.

“No, do not stand for me,” he said.

“But it is only courtesy,” replied Rowgar, “when meeting a long lost friend. I was not sure you had ventured forth with the company from Gresia.”

“Indeed I did,” a smile came to Rem’s face. “But I spend most of my time in the ranks, it is easy to get lost in so many.”

“What brings you to us this day?” enquired Rowgar.

“Oh! I am just checking on your health and I thought maybe a little conversation may raise my spirits. It is good to speak with people from different lands.” Rem scratched his head.

Miriam noticed the sparkle of a ring on the small finger of his left hand.

“Let us be seated,” said Rowgar. “I apologise for the lack of furniture.”

As they became seated on the ground Miriam, in a sly voice said, “I hope you do not think me nosy Rem, but is that the ring of the House of Delthinius on your hand?”

“That it is,” said Rem, “but do not think we are cousins. We are probably no more related than you and Rowgar. I do not even know where our common line parts, it is so many years since our tree spread its branches.”

“Then why do you still wear the ring?” Miriam enquired.

“Oh, this came about with the loss of Treor, King of Isor countless years ago. Only two of his kin survived those terrible days when Isor fell to ruin and only one came to Gresia. It was decided that all the descendants of Gainor the first Lord of Gresia, would carry the insignia of Isor with them. Look upon the ring.”

Miriam leaned over to see. There upon the ring was the etching of the Tree of Peace. “The ring does not fade with time?” she said.

“No,” replied Rem. “Zarrion aided their making and the sands of time age them not. Twenty and five there were, though never have they all been worn.”

“Why not?” queried Barrin.

“Because there has never been twenty and five heirs of Gainor,” replied Rem.

Miriam gave a suppressed giggle.

“The people of Gresia multiply but slowly, the most you may have seen together was probably when Delthinius told his story of Tukamar. We do meet on occasion though and all our knowledge is as one. If there is ever a future tragedy, we do not want the ancient line of Treor to perish completely.”

“That means that Delthinius is really King,” said Bart looking surprised.

“The House of Gainor will not bear the name of King, until they again set foot on Isor. These were the words of Gainor himself, and his words are the words of truth.”

As the night bore on the conversation turned this way and that, until they all lay under their blankets and wrapped themselves in sleep. Rem never did ask of their health.

Daybreak came and the journey continued; the forces of Gresia had been reduced in size but not greatly. Their wounded remained behind, with men of healing and a small guard. It was thought that the Druind would be of no more danger. They had been severely beaten and would need time to re-order themselves.

This day passed quietly and so did the next as the company skirted the edge of the hill country. It was better to travel in the low lying hills than in the Grasslands below, for the grass grew high and hid treacherous ground beneath. The northern tributary of the Druin posed no problem and the riders passed over without incident. Slowly the Grasslands to the West became bare, until the land became barren as far as the distant horizon. The heat of the day had become more intense and the riders no longer wore their mail. The sky was clear, not often did the southern rain clouds penetrate this region. Only in the winter months did the rains fall, when the wind changed to the Northwest, even then the country was cold and it was more likely to snow than rain. It was a harsh

land, but vegetation still grew on the low-lying hills, on which they trod.

On the ninth day out from Gresia, the troop made camp on the edge of the Withered Plains of Rah. The air felt cool as it drifted gently down the hills. The sun stood on the horizon throwing shafts of light over the plains it had conquered and turned to sand, its glory blazing in a last show of strength as it disappeared slowly beneath the rim of the world.

Dunes stood dark against the dying light, their shadows stretching out before them. Barrin sat and stared as the dying embers of the day faded into twilight.

Miriam came to his side and they sat together. "I wonder if anyone lives out there," she said ponderously.

"I doubt it," Barrin replied. "Who could live amidst such desolation?"

"Too true," she answered, "but it has a strange beauty that I find difficult to describe."

"Perhaps the solitude," Barrin remarked. "It must be a timeless world, marked only by the shifting sands."

As they talked the sky grew darker. The horizon was now a deep red above the sun's setting place, higher it changed to orange then yellow. Barrin raised his eyes upward, the yellow continued into blue which darkened to blackness at the zenith. Further North the Scythe and Star of Elebriouse, emblem of an Outer Carthelion banner, shone like pearls, but south of the Scythe roamed the Eternal Warrior, a deep burning red. Nightly he shone brighter, as though coming forth to witness the deeds which were to come. This thought crossed Barrin's mind and made him shudder. "Come, let us join the others," he said. "I can hear music and Bart should be preparing supper."

Bart was indeed by his cooking utensils. It was not every night a fire could be lit, only when they felt it was safe to do so. They had become more wary of the dangers which might lurk in the night, since the appearance and planned assault of the Druiand.

Bart had spent quite a while trying to find something to burn, his efforts had eventually borne fruit but it looked a strange mixture to Barrin. There were clumps of dead grass and a few dried twigs. On

the top of this pitiful collection sat a score of black stones. Barrin could not quite grasp what Bart was hoping to achieve with them but said nothing. He did not want to sound foolish.

Bart took his rick and tunni stones from his pack, that bottomless pit which he carried everywhere with him. A quick flash of the hands and the stones smashed together. Flame sprang up as the powder from the tunni stone ignited and settled on the dead grass. The grass burst into flame easily and the twigs soon followed suit. The stone however proved more difficult to light. The fire of twigs and grass had almost vanished before they were kindled. Slowly they began to burn with more ease. Bart added a few more as the flames grew higher until the heat was enough for his purposes. Again he delved into his pack.

Barrin thought the pack much too large for Bart, it was enormous, made from hide with many compartments. It was of similar type to Rowgar's but Rowgar stood a full hand higher than Bart's brown mop and his pack did not look out of place. "Poor old Bart," Barrin muttered to himself. His own pack was completely different; he and Mirriam had obtained them in Gresia. They were woven and had the quality of expanding to whatever you put inside, which in the case of Barrin, was not a great deal. Much of his gear hung from the thongs of his horse, which kept his burdens from his shoulders.

"I see you are not far away when the time to eat comes around," Bart said as he noticed the children stood to his left.

"One must not miss life's small favours," Mirriam replied.

"Well, you had better make the best of it while you can. It will not last forever," Bart continued his preparation.

"Do you mean we have not enough supplies to last us while our journey's end?" asked Barrin.

"It will be a close thing," replied Bart. "My sympathy lies with Bradur though, he has not enough food to last him to Lochgor, not nearly enough."

"How will they survive?" queried Mirriam.

"They hope to find nourishment on their route," answered Bart, "but it will be difficult, herbs and such are easy to come by, even things such as clover, dandelion or hops can be made palatable, but

to feed an army, this would not suffice, even with the aid of wild berries and roots or even small game. They will be in serious trouble. I think that Bradur hopes to meet with folk of the Carthelion of yesteryear. Many hundreds did not or would not make the original journey to the Outerlands, some must still remain.”

“Bradur’s plan sounds very flimsy to me,” said Barrin. “It sounds more like he has thrown his fate to the wind.”

“That may well be the case,” agreed Bart. “Mind you, there may be larger game roaming the land. I hope that there is.”

“He will know by now,” Mirriam sighed. “He will be well within the southern reaches by now.”

They all agreed.

“At least they carry maps of the land,” said Bart. “I hope they hold true. It was a long time ago when those maps were made, who knows, we may well be making an assault on the wrong place.”

“You are a cheerful lot,” Rowgar’s voice drifted out of the dark as he approached the fire. “Reoch assures me that Lochgor is still what it was.”

“Has Reoch been there?” enquired Mirriam.

“No,” said Rowgar, “but he has his information.”

“Spies you mean?” Barrin enquired.

“I think that Reoch’s spies fly the airways,” answered Rowgar, “though, Farron uses the unfeathered type.”

“Did he tell you this?” Bart looked at Rowgar with anticipation.

“Not in so many words, he keeps this pretty much to himself, but he did say all would be revealed in the next few days.”

“Well, that is something to look forward to,” said Mirriam thoughtfully. “Talking of feathered friends, what happened to the great birds that followed our path? I have not seen one since we reached the Druin.”

“Perhaps they have business of their own,” Rowgar frowned.

“If that be the case and they are indeed allied to Reoch, they found a fine time to depart.”

“No doubt there was a good reason,” Rowgar said thoughtfully, then continued, “the last one I saw was flying high toward the Northeast, no more than a speck in the sky. That was the day that

we took to the water.”

Bart began to stir his boiling pot which he had rested on a light metal framework above the fire. “No doubt we will find the answer to this riddle in good time, for the present, let us concentrate on our bellies.”

“A good idea,” said Barrin licking his lips. “It is well you obtained a pot in which to cook.”

“It is also well that it came from Gresia, my own pot back in distant Brannock must weigh four times the amount of this one. Their culture seems higher than ours, but then again, they have had far longer to develop it.”

The conversation continued as Bart cooked, but they all fell silent during the meal, being more occupied with eating than talking, and it was not long after supper that they all retired, most slept face down to give the days blisters and sores a chance to heal. No-one save the guards heard the beat of wings that crossed their dormant bodies in the dead of night.

At the break of day the riders journeyed on. Their course began to turn eastward. The dry barren lands of Rah fell away behind them. All that day they journeyed, save for a short pause for refreshment and a chance to stretch their legs.

The night came and all was peaceful. When the moon rode over the hills, the beat of wings again drew the attention of the guards but there was nothing for them to see. This time one of the guards thought to inform Farron, though he was loathe to do so. Farron would not take lightly to being disturbed. The guard approached Farron’s sleeping place, his mind undecided on what to do. He began to turn as if to return to his guard post, when a voice spoke softly from out of the dark.

“Is there anything that you require, guard? This is a strange place to be when you are on watch.”

The guard being startled, turned to face the place from which the voice came. There in the darkness he saw Theor, his face dimly lit in the moonlight.

Theor was a small and an unusually dark man for a Gresian. He had not found rest this night, so he sat in meditation, considering, like others, what had befallen and what was yet to come.

“I did not mean to disturb you, sir,” whispered the guard. “I came in search of our chief, but as he sleeps soundly, I thought it unwise to waken him, for the matter I wished to inform him of seems trivial, not worthy of his attention.”

“Nay,” replied Theor. “If the matter was indeed trivial, why did you leave your guard post?” Theor rose to his feet. “Come, let us go where we can talk without disturbing those who rest.”

Theor headed back toward the post at which the guard should have been on watch, taking his bow with him. He seldom went anywhere without it.

“Now, tell me, what is it that disturbs you so?”

“Well, sir, for the last two nights I have been on watch – yesterday in the early period of the morning and this night I took first watch.”

“Two nights together,” retorted Theor. “Is not that too much to ask of one man?”

“Farron only has three personal guards, sir, the rest of his men have other tasks. Since the attack of the Druiand, we all have been kept busy. The rest of the men that guard the camp, are of the cavalry and Farron ...”

“I see,” said Theor, “please continue your story.”

“Well, sir, before the sun’s rays reached the horizon, I heard the beat of great wings. I thought it strange but nothing to be alarmed about, so I let the matter pass. This night the wings returned once more – perhaps a large owl or bat.”

“Then why disturb Farron?” Theor pushed the question hoping for a better answer.

“It is my duty to report anything unusual, sir and though you may think I am imagining, I thought those wing beats far too powerful for a bat or owl. Rumour has it, that Loekan is aware of our plans and should anything befall us through my neglect, I should never forgive myself.” The guard fell silent.

Theor understood the predicament of the guard and knew how the silence of the night could play tricks upon one’s senses. “I will join you tonight,” he said with more solemnity, “I cannot find sleep, so little is lost.”

The guard’s face grew brighter; he did not fear the night but to

have Theor with him, lifted much of his responsibility.

The first watch went smoothly. Then around midnight the watch changed. The new guard also found pleasure in Theor's company. It was someone with whom he could pass the lonely hours and Theor did command great respect.

The night continued in peace and not long before dawn Theor decided to return to his blanket. He bid the guard goodnight and took one pace forward, then stopped dead in his tracks and looked around – he listened, his senses were aroused.

The guard realised what Theor was doing; he remained silent, listening for any sound that may reach his ears. Faintly the flap of wings became audible in the stillness; they grew steadily louder in a rhythmic beat. Theor's eyes glanced around but the darkness seemed to close in around him. The moon had set and only the stars gave their light to the land.

The creature of the night seemed to draw close, hovering as if searching. Theor put dart to bow, as he searched the air. He began to perspire; the fear of evil was upon him.

“Hawken?” whispered the guard.

“No,” replied Theor, “the birds of the plateau are our friends. The friends of Reoch.”

A short distance away Barrin turned in his sleep – his dreams were bad. He dreamt that he was standing in a long corridor and the light was dim – menace lurked before him and behind him stood a wall, there was no escape. The shuffling of feet could be heard in the corridor. They steadily drew nearer. He wanted to shout for help but his throat was parched and dry. No sound came. The shuffling grew louder and louder. His arteries throbbed as his heart beat hard and fast. Nearer and nearer came the shuffling. He wished he could close his eyes but they remained fixed ahead. His Orb called to him. ‘Awake, Barrin, awake!’ Barrin knew he was dreaming but the dream would not let go.

‘Awake!’ came the cry.

Barrin concentrated and in his dream he forced his eyes shut, to close out the nightmare which approached. He could feel a dreadful presence nearing him. With a last mighty effort he flung his head to one side and forced his eyes open again, ‘Begone foul dream,’ his



conscious cried.

The dream was gone, but the nightmare had just begun.

Barrin's sleepy sight cleared quickly and for a moment he thought his ordeal over. He could see the stars twinkling above him – a moment later they were gone.

Barrin's face became terror stricken. In the darkness he could see taloned claws coming toward him – he screamed – then his windpipe was blocked. He felt icy fingers sink into his throat, and saw lights flashing before him. He heard the beating of wings – then the whistle of a dart in flight, a thud, then what seemed like the eternal scream of a tortured demon ... All fell silent and darkness prevailed.

“Quickly,” barked Theor, “get Rem, there is not a moment to lose.” Theor ran quickly to Barrin who lay still, with blood oozing from his throat. He heard the thrash of wings as he ran; he knew it to be the creature taking to the air, bearing his dart in its side.

There was no need to get Rem. He and many more were already racing across the camp.

Miriam was the first to Barrin's side. “NO,” she cried, “this cannot be.” She knelt and threw her arms around him crying.

Rowgar and Theor were on the scene only moments later, but they did not know what to do.

Rem arrived and begged Miriam to move aside before Barrin lost too much blood, alas in her grief she did not hear him.

Rem tried to lift her away from Barrin but she clung to Barrin tightly.

Farron saw the plight of Rem and with firm hands he gripped Miriam's arms, then he wrenched her upward.

Miriam kicked and screamed but Farron held her firmly. With a last mighty effort she twisted her body to free herself from the iron like grip – it was no use. Farron was far too strong ... Miriam let her body go limp, she sniffed and let tears run freely down her face.

Rem called upon all his powers of healing to aid Barrin, while Rowgar and Bart comforted Miriam.

Farron, who stood near Delthinius and Reoch, turned to his guard and in a controlled voice he enquired what had happened.

“It was a great bird sir, that attacked young Barrin, but I know

not from where it came.”

“It is the second time we have been troubled sir,” broke in the guard who had taken the first watch. “Yesternight I heard the beat of wings before the dawn came but I thought it a creature of these parts, nothing to cause concern.”

“Why was I not informed?” Farron’s voice became harsher. “My orders were that everything should be reported, no matter how small a matter.”

“It is not his fault,” Theor interrupted. “He came to waken you this night, but as I was already awake, I thought to take the burden from your shoulders.”

“It is fortunate,” said the watchman who was on duty, “only the shaft of Theor could have struck home from such a distance, under the light of the stars.”

“Perhaps the shaft may not have been required had Farron been awakened,” said Reoch stiffly.

The guard bowed his head in acknowledgement of Reoch’s judgement.

“Tell me, Theor,” continued Reoch. “What type of creature was it that attacked young Barrin?”

“To that, I can give you no firm answer. Only that it was large and feathered which rules out a bat. The guard did think at one point it was from the eyrie’s of the hawken, from the plateau, but that we know is impossible, none of that noble kin would attack friends – nor do they fly by night.”

Delthinius raised an eyebrow.

Reoch kept his composure. “We shall have to be more alert!” he said. “This was not a chance passing of a nocturnal creature.”

“The words you spoke several days ago of Loekan’s presence seem to have found standing.” Farron looked at Reoch as he spoke. “Though you may wish you were wrong.”

Rem approached and knelt beside Mirriam. “It is all right young miss, your brother will become well again, though it will take time.”

“Thankyou,” Mirriam murmured. “It is good to know.” Her face became brighter as she sat and looked into Rem’s eyes. “What foul creature would do such a deed and why, what danger does Barrin

pose to anyone?"

"Perhaps it is not Barrin," replied Rem solemnly. "I fear the Orb is the cause of this assault. Whatever it was that attacked Barrin and I think it to be a bird of human prey, had a purpose in mind."

"Indeed it had," said Rowgar.

"May I go to Barrin now?" queried Mirriam.

"Of course," replied Rem, "but do not disturb him, he sleeps peacefully. The rest will help mend his hurts."

Mirriam sat with Barrin the rest of that night and travelled with him the next day, in the rear of a supply wagon. His neck had been bandaged and he had been made as comfortable as possible. A scar was visible on his left cheek which Mirriam hoped would heal without leaving its mark, although this was one of her minor worries. It must have been a horrible experience, to awaken in the night, faced with those claws of malice. She shivered at her own thoughts.

Theor rode with his bowmen this morning. He was thanking his maker that his dart had flown true the previous night. He also bore in mind that had it not been for Barrin's cry, he would not have detected the attack. Theor had not seen the approach of the great bird, nor had any of the guards. He put this down to the darkness, although this explanation did not quite ring true.

With the coming of the afternoon the great flat-topped mountain of the middle lands came into clear view. It towered above the surrounding hills – a single monolith; white fluffy clouds drifted around its summit, they seemed no larger than small white mice from the distance of the company.

"When shall we reach the plateau?" enquired Rowgar, as he rode beside Reoch.

"No more than two days," replied Reoch. "I will be pleased when we reach its base."

"Why so?" enquired Rowgar. "Even if this be the lair of your winged friends, what aid may they be to us?"

Reoch turned his head to Rowgar with a faint glimmer of a smile on his lips. "You have guessed some of the truth, Rowgar, but not it all. Here is the eyrie of Thrawk; he is of the race of Monitors, as Elebriouse himself is. The only member of this

kindred whom shows himself openly, though few have set eyes upon him. From him comes the knowledge of the Staff, he sees all the lands about us, for he is the Watcher.”

“The eyrie of Thrawk,” repeated Rowgar. “Is Thrawk some sort of bird – hawken perhaps or maybe an eagle?”

Reoch smiled. “Thrawk rules the eyrie's of the hawken; their smaller kin, the eagles of this land do not dwell there ... Do not ask me to describe Thrawk, you will see him for yourself.”

“Are you expecting aid from this ... Thrawk?” queried Rowgar.

“A little help – alas I believe Lord Delthinius expects him to join us.”

“That would be a boon if Thrawk is of the House of Elebriouse.”

“I think that he will be disappointed,” commented Reoch, with a distant look on his face.

“Why so?” queried Rowgar.

“Delthinius hopes that Thrawk will wield the Axe of Elebriouse in battle – that will not come to pass.”

Rowgar mused to himself a while, then said, “I wondered why he had brought the Axe, considering the destruction it caused on Isor, and the fact that Delthinius is not man enough to put it to good use.”

Reoch shot Rowgar a sharp glance, “I believe that Delthinius has the power to use the Axe. The question of him being man enough does not enter my thoughts. He is of the House of Treor, his line do not need brute strength to move the Axe. The question here is – is he fool enough to use it, especially in the presence of the Earthen Staff?”

“It is no demeanment not to be able to put such an Axe to use,” said Rowgar. He thought that Reoch had misunderstood him. “I would probably fall over backward if I lifted it above my head.”

“Probably so,” agreed Reoch.

Rowgar shot Reoch a sharp glance, but Reoch was smiling.

They rode a little further, then Rowgar turned to Reoch curiously. “Why would Thrawk refuse to help us?”

“He will not refuse, but you must understand that his power is limited. To hold the soil of the earth in one’s hand, one must be

born of man. If one of the House of Elebriouse wished to be as a mortal, he would renounce the power of the Telematre for that time. Thrawk is not mortal; he is part of the world of thought, only such items which came from this world are his for the using.”

“Like the Axe!”

“He will not use the Axe. The Axe was a gift to man, to use how their wisdom told them.”

“Then none will wield the Axe,” said Rowgar bluntly.

“That is not for me to say.”

“You are talking in riddles, Reoch.”

“You expect me to know everything, Rowgar, am I not of flesh and blood, like you? I have to put the facts together as you do. My sources of information may be greater but I still have to presume much.”

“Then at least tell me what you presume.”

Reoch pondered a moment then said, “I presume we are in for a difficult time. I sense the power of Zarrion in the Orb which Barrin carries. Though Zarrion may be in Carthelion his thought travels with us and so does the thought of the Warloch. I have no doubt in my mind that the Warloch and Loekan are none other than Lochi himself and that being the case there is no doubt that he knew of the Orb when Barrin entered the halls of Krrilion.”

“Then why did he not seize it?”

“Because he wanted the forces of Gresia to march northward.”

“To aid the fall of Lochgor?”

“To be massacred on the banks of the Druin.”

“He misjudged.”

“Yes, he misjudged, but he has not done yet.”

“The attack on Barrin?”

“Most certainly.”

“What was that thing that attacked Barrin?”

“Who knows? The only thing I do know is that in legend there is reference to a creature known as the ‘Lorical’, it is known as the bringer of doom. It is said that before the fall of Isor, Tackurion Insinimus heard those wingbeats, as did many of the ordinary people. Again before the fall of Delsorar, where the three towers of Lochgor now stand, they were heard, not to mention the borders of

Gresia, where our young men gathered for war in the days when the Loch stood at the Gateway of Arandil.”

“You were involved in battle during the siege of the Gateway?”

“No, we were not involved. We merely made threatening noises. It was a confused time, and much we learned of the fall of Northern Carthelion came from the lips of Zarrion in later days.”

“I see,” said Rowgar.

“Do you really see?” said Reoch. “The powers that be, are now gathering. It is sad that Zarrion chose not to travel with you. His wealth of knowledge will be sorely missed.”

Rowgar pulled at the reins of his horse, turning it to the left – “A TRUE BLADE WILL HAVE TO SUFFICE, FRIEND REOCH,” he shouted, then he cantered his horse down the column.

As night fell, Barrin began to stir; Mirriam was still beside him when he opened his eyes. His head swam and his ears buzzed, nevertheless he tried to sit up. This he could not manage for blackness began to overcome him.

“Rest easy,” Mirriam whispered, “all is well but you need a great deal of rest.”

Barrin tried to reply but his throat hurt; he could still feel the claws around his neck. Mirriam opened the rear cover of the wagon and called to Bart. Bart, in turn, informed Rem, who came as quickly as his legs would carry him. He climbed into the wagon and seated himself at the opposite side of the wagon to Mirriam, overlooking Barrin.

“I see that you have rejoined us,” he said smiling. “You have been a very lucky lad but now is not the time to talk of it. I will have you one of my potions made, it may ease your discomfort.” Rem knew it would be painful for Barrin to even take liquids, but he had to try and build up Barrin’s strength. Rem motioned to Bart, who stood waiting. Bart had his instructions on what to prepare and it was not long after he vanished that he returned, bearing a wooden bowl filled with liquor, which gave off a strange herbal aroma.

Rem helped Barrin to sit upright. He sensed the agony which Barrin was going through. He put the bowl to Barrin’s lips then tipped it gently.

Barrin sipped then tried to swallow. His face knotted in pain.

“It will become easier,” said Rem softly, but little more did Barrin take.

Rem and Mirriam stayed for quite a while by Barrin’s side. When they finally departed, Bart took his turn at keeping Barrin company, followed by Rowgar towards daybreak.

The next day’s travelling proved very uncomfortable for Barrin; he slid in and out of sleep, little nourishment would he take. The actual thought of swallowing made him grimace. Still he uttered no words, his medallion he clutched to him as if to find comfort.

That night his friends again stayed close by his side. Rowgar had begun to worry about Barrin’s health, not through his wounds, but the lack of food. Rem changed the bandaging around his throat at regular intervals. Mirriam would look the other way on these occasions. The marks left upon Barrin’s neck were grotesque. It reminded her of how close he had come to death.

When travelling resumed the next morning, the troop caught their first sight of the hawken of Thrawk, which had been absent for many days. The plateau stood huge now against the blue sky. It gave a sense of overwhelming power.

As the troop drew close, the hawken never left their company, there were only a few, but they kept constant vigil. Theor looked dubiously upon them. He knew them as friends for they had shown their worth many times in the protection of Gresia. He knew of Reoch’s dealings, as did most of high rank, but the wing beats of only two days past would not leave his mind, they sounded so similar to those he now heard, especially when the great birds hovered close then rose again into the sky.

Delthinius called the company to halt that afternoon. Camp was made and guards set. Reoch did not really see the need for them, but Farron was adamant on this matter. Rowgar agreed with Farron on this point, even though ice still hung in the air between them.

When all was prepared for the night’s stay, the men sat around in groups, an air of apprehension could be seen on their faces. Only a few had travelled this way before and their tales were of wonder, many of the troop found the stories difficult to believe.

The sun grew large as it approached the horizon. Its light bathed the camp with a snug warmth. All waited now in silence.

A cry came from one of the keen eyed guards of Farron. "LOOK," he yelled pointing to the sky to the West.

All eyes turned in the direction of his indication. High in the sky, circling in a downward spiral rode the Lord of the Skies; his scant armouring glistened in the rays of the setting sun. As he drew close, the men stared in awe, some even covered their eyes as the silhouette of mount and rider passed before the sun. Those who looked on became blinded by the light of the great ball of red fire and when their eyes became clear again, Thrawk stood alone. His bearer had taken again to the skies.

Delthinius and Reoch covered the ground quickly to where the Skylord stood. They stood before him and bowed their heads.

"Hail, Thrawk, Prince of the Sky," said Delthinius, his voice giving honour in its sounding.

"Hail, Lord of Gresia, King of Isor. It is my pleasure to welcome you here in my domain." Thrawk bowed his head in recognition of the standing of Delthinius.

Delthinius recoiled a little from the power of Thrawk's voice which seemed to enter his head but not his ears.

"Greetings, Thrawk, son of the Telematre," said Reoch.

"Greetings to you also, Reoch, son of man," replied Thrawk. "I trust that all goes well with you?"

"We have had our setbacks, but we are still a force to be reckoned with," stated Reoch.

"And the Carthelions?"

"They are well, save for the boy," said Delthinius. "He has suffered at the talons of ..."

"The Lorical," added Reoch.

"Are you sure of this?" queried Thrawk, his face unchanging.

"As sure as can be," replied Reoch.

"It seems the forces of destruction are again at their height. The evil of the Staff is in the air and the power of Lochgor creeps across hill and vale. Loekan plans his final victory." Thrawk spoke as if Loekan was indeed the Warloch.

"Lochi, the accursed," said Delthinius with hatred in his voice. "Can you not aid us in our plight. Would not a messenger of Elebriouse himself make the ground beneath the feet of Lochi



tremble?”

“I will aid all I can, but you wish me to carry the sacred Axe into battle, that I cannot do. The Axe in the hands of a Monitor is a tool of creation. It was a medium in days long gone with which we shaped the world with our will. Such a tool I cannot put to death and destruction.”

“In days long gone you defended our realms, why now do you forsake us?”

“In the days of creation it was our duty to see no ill befell you, but the creation is finished. Only in the outer world may our powers now be used.” Thrawk maintained his composure as he spoke. It was as if the doings of man had no meaning to him.

“Is this why the hawken have deserted our skies in recent days? Is this why Zarrion remains in Carthelion?” queried Delthinius.

“No, that is not so. The hawken fly north to the frontiers of the lands of Lochi. They watch and they listen. Grave danger may come from that region. ... Of Zarrion, he is a power unto himself. He prepares for battle in his own way. It maybe that his strength is now in decline. He feeds on goodness as Loekan feeds on hate. They ebb and flow in opposition.” Thrawk stared into the eyes of Delthinius, reading the hopelessness which lay there. “It is the strength of man who will free this world,” he said solemnly. “It is not for the ‘High Ones’ to take their glory.”

“Glory is a strange word,” said Reoch.

“Indeed it is,” confirmed Delthinius. “There is no glory if we fail before the walls of Lochgor. We will be hard pushed to break them if Lochi brings the Staff to bear; its presence gives him the power of old.”

“It does more than that,” said Thrawk in a more menacing voice. “It conjures memories of old. It creates an atmosphere that has not been felt since the fall of Isor, when Lochi sat upon the Throne of Kings. That was a day he will never forget. Despite his great powers, he could not stay the might of Tackur, King of the East and Tackur was no more than a mortal man.”

“Tackurion Insinimus is dead,” stated Delthinius bluntly.

“His cry for vengeance and promise of retribution lingers on in the heart of every man who walks the land of Ineham. Did he not

seek an end to the evil of Lochi until his last breath?"

"That I cannot deny, nor shall I rest while breath is in my body, though I do not wish to bring ruin upon Carthelion as Tackurion did upon Isor. Must we destroy all in the pursuit of this sorcerer?" Delthinius held his hands out as if to impress upon Thrawk the tragedy of the situation.

"No, that is not the way," replied Thrawk. "You personally will not raise the Axe against Lochi, yet I sense his final downfall is at hand, of that I feel sure." Thrawk smiled, "The power of the Telematre is with you. We did not build Ineham only to see it destroyed by the Warloch. If there is any manner in which we may aid – be sure we will."

Delthinius gave Thrawk a quizzical look. Reoch remained silent.

"We are the Monitors of the world, not the Masters, we receive our guidance as we try to guide you. We will overcome in our own way."

For a brief moment Delthinius thought he could see the plateau directly behind Thrawk, as if the Monitor was transparent. It was perhaps at this point that Delthinius realised the truth of the situation. He realised why the hawken could carry Thrawk upon its back with no hindrance to its flight. Their minds seemed to be on the same plane of existence, but their bodies were not.

A smile came to the face of Delthinius, he looked at Reoch who was also smiling – they were all smiling.

From the encampment not far away, the men's eyes were fixed; the conversation between their Lord and Thrawk seemed to last for an eternity, though in actuality it was only a short while before they turned toward the camp. Delthinius led with Thrawk, and Reoch followed close behind. The company parted to give them a walkway, most looked on in astonishment as Thrawk came amongst them. He was tall with neatly cropped golden hair and the wind did not disturb it. He wore only a loin cloth with a sheath and belt, which was plated with gold and silver, and armbands studded with gems. They appeared to reflect the setting sun brilliantly, like perfect mirrors.

Farron dropped in behind as the threesome made their way

toward the supply wagon where Barrin lay. His hand was upon the hilt of his sword.

Delthinius gave him a look of disdain, but it did not deter him. Farron trusted not his own mother. Since Barrin was injured nothing had passed him by; he took note of everything. He now followed two sets of prints toward the wagon, not three and this made him suspicious. "Farron plays with fire," came a voice from the ranks and another voice answered, "Whenever does he do otherwise."

Reoch entered the wagon first to find Rowgar and Mirriam sat beside Barrin, they moved to the front of the wagon to give space. Thrawk entered behind Reoch.

Rowgar looked on him in amazement. Mirriam's eyes nearly popped from their sockets. Never had she seen the like of the one that crouched before her. His solemn face and taut muscles affected her strangely. He bore a sword in its sheath but it made no sound as it came to rest upon the wagon's boards.

Barrin looked up from his place of rest. He did not know Thrawk but the look upon his face was familiar and it comforted him, the eyes were familiar. The one he had seen greeting Gerome by the pool in his trance had eyes like this.

Thrawk held out his hand and Barrin took hold with a feeble grip, the best that he could manage. The eyes of the Monitor looked down upon him, fathomless they seemed. Barrin felt himself drifting, his throat felt at ease. He could sense gentle fingers touching the bandages around his throat and where they touched a warm tingling sensation followed. Why are not all the people of the world so gentle and kind, he thought, then he slid back to the lands of dream.

Thrawk lay Barrin's hand by his side. He saw the Orb clutched in his other hand. "The Orb of the Timeless Wanderer," he said solemnly, "let it serve you well. The world is a restless place, filled with fear and emotion, for they are part of its being. Do not rush hastily to your destiny, for it will find you wherever you may be. Let your thoughts guide all your actions and have a care for the one who bears the grief of all great lands upon his brow. We are all servants under him. Even the Helmsman in his great halls of ice

reveres him, though his own shoulders be heavy with the burdens of the world, for he feels for each and everyone of us.”

“Our efforts will not be in vain!” said Reoch. “I know that Elebriouse turns his thoughts from other domains hither, for under the guidance of the highest he carved all the fair things we hold dear and he is their Lord. He will not forsake them, nor will he desert the peoples who abide here in their time of need. Have faith in the goodness of the land and all will be well.”

Thrawk and Reoch rose to leave, Rowgar and Mirriam did not notice their departure, their eyes were blank, their thoughts elsewhere. Delthinius stood outside the wagon, he had remained there to have words with Farron, but when he heard the words spoken from inside the canopy, he fell silent. He and Farron had listened together – Delthinius bade Thrawk farewell, though even his eyes appeared distant. Only Reoch stood with Thrawk when his mount returned, they appeared to clasp hand to forearm in a gesture of parting friendship. Thrawk looked to the glow in the west then took to the eastern sky from whence the setting sun had withdrawn its light, and not again was he seen while the company remained in their encampment.

Peace was upon the camp that night and all slept a dreamless sleep. When the morning came it seemed to the people of Gresia that the day before had been part of a waking dream.

Barrin’s wounds seemed much better, he could take food, and speak a little. Delthinius, in his wisdom decided to halt the march, until Darrian’s appointed date drew nigh. He presumed that Loekan still had means of following their trek, so he would leave their final attack route until the very last moment.

Bart questioned Rowgar and Mirriam of their dealings with Thrawk, but little could they say. They felt differently now toward the ways of the world, though they knew not why. “Perhaps he left some hidden message for us all,” said Bart. “For us and for our children. I, too sense something strange, though I spoke not with him, the ways of the creators are both strange and wondrous.”

# ***THE POISONED DWARF***

Bradur, Mathin and Tarrol sat in a close circle, pondering their next move. The rising of the first new moon was now two days gone. Things had gone badly wrong since they had been forced into battle in Valley's Meet. Their food was in desperate supply and they were continually harassed by the Taern-loch. The only fortune they had met with was in the form of a small hunched man, a leftover from better days. He had eased their burdens slightly, as he knew where to look for wild fruits and the like. His greatest asset was the knowledge he bore of the pathways across the wild lands. He had been found wandering near the edge of Bradur's encampment. When questioned he had said that the countryside was covered with the loathsome Loch and one had to tread stealthily when seeking allies. Mathin had welcomed him to the camp, as a great boon to their plight but Tarrol thought him suspicious. He spoke openly of his dislike for the small man and labelled him the poisoned dwarf. Bradur was unsure what to make of him, but as he had only recently filled the vacant post of Rowgar, with Mathin, he thought to abide by his judgement, it would help to give him confidence. He still had not completely given up hope for Rowgar, for he knew him to be a resourceful man. Without a corpse there was always a chance that he may have survived.

"What now?" asked Tarrol. "We cannot proceed all the way to Lochgor without food. It would still be an achievement to arrive with a fighting force, even if we had supplies."

"Our fortune may yet change," answered Mathin. "We at least have a guide to ensure our journey is as straight as possible and he assures us that there are groups of fighting men on which we can rely, before us."

"Fighting Loch, perhaps," grunted Tarrol.

"Our cause is far from lost," said Bradur. "If we have to crawl to

Lochgor upon our hands and knees we will get there. A heavy burden lies upon our shoulders and we will not shirk it.”

“Fine words. Perhaps your knees are tougher than mine. We will not be of much help if we arrive on our bellies.”

The scepticism in Tarrol’s voice only served to irritate Bradur, though he knew that his words were true.

“If no-one has anything constructive to say, we may as well continue the march,” said Mathin. “Sitting here gets us nowhere.”

Bradur rose, “Inform the men that we march on, try to raise their spirits, that is the duty of leaders.”

Tarrol climbed to his feet, he could hardly lift his own spirits let alone those of his men, though his determination to see an end to the Loch was not subdued. He acquiesced to the command of Bradur for he realised that he was right. The men’s spirits did need raising.

It was just past mid-day when the march resumed. The column was led by Bradur and Mathin. Tarrol had returned to his own group. He was now a senior group leader, but he had his own men to look out for.

Gendy, the strange dwarf, who had joined the company, scurried along beside the burly figure of Mathin. He knew where his voice would be best received.

“How far to your friends now, Gendy?” queried Mathin.

“Oh! We should reach them by the evening of the morrow.” He sniffed the air after he spoke, as if trying to detect familiar scents. “They do not have a permanent camp because of the danger from the Loch, we will have to wait for them to contact us. I am sure that they will – for it is in their interest also, that you succeed.”

“And what of rations, little man. Can your friends help at all, we have many mouths to feed?” Mathin stroked his short, prematurely grey beard.

“Some stocks they will have, but I fear it will not be nearly enough. There are wild herds of aurochs that roam the land. If anyone knows where to find them, these people will, but remember that they are not my friends. I am an outcast with my disabilities, though my hunched little body is no fault of my own.”

Mathin looked upon Gendy with sympathy and for the first time

he noticed a twist in the little man's right arm. We ought to think ourselves blessed to be born wholesome and fit, he thought to himself.

The rest of that day the march continued. Bradur requested Tarrow to keep scouts on the flanks of the company and also ahead to warn of any danger that may lie before them. On some occasions the scouts had failed to return and on one occasion in particular they had found the scout horribly butchered. The thoughts of the men had turned to revenge but Bradur had held them at bay. "It is only a ploy," he said, "to spread our forces, we will lose far more of our friends seeking revenge than we will remaining as one. The time for revenge is close at hand, let us not destroy our chances and the hopes of Carthelion by rash judgements."

These were mainly the words of Mathin, for Bradur often thought like his Captain, though his temper was more furious and his sorrow deeper. On this occasion Mathin's words had sunk home to Bradur and he had portrayed them, like only he could.

Night came, and quiet reigned in the camp. The troops were tired and hungry, joviality had long since departed. They knew that there were many leagues before them. The tall grass beneath their feet made their legs ache as they forged their passage. The harassing of the Loch and the search for food also hindered their progress. Some were surprised how healthy the land was, they had expected the same desecration that was found near the land of the Krril, but the Loch obviously knew better than to destroy their own life giver.

Many men stood guard that night as they did on all nights; the sound of the deep-throated Loch could be heard passing their messages to and fro. Bradur knew that they made their presence known to disquiet the men and they were doing a very thorough job. For himself, he no longer heard them, he had one aim in mind and that was all he could think of. He would throw the towers of Lochgor to the ground and see them smashed into dust; his dream would not fail him.

Daylight came and with it the long march, hopes were running high for a meeting with the people who still strove for their independence in Carthelion, but to naught did their hopes come,

nor on the next day or the day that followed that. The men became edgy as they trudged on; hunger and thirst were becoming a way of life to them. Tarrol's hatred for the dwarf had grown steadily with the days but Mathin still spoke of him loyally.

On this day, one score, ten and five out from Brannock, Tarrol sought the dwarf, for his anger had begun to boil over. He searched all the line of the troop but to no avail. Eventually he confronted Mathin. "Where is the midget whose voice speaks with poison?" he said distraughtly.

"That I do not know," answered Mathin. "He has probably taken to hiding from your wrath, he has looked most troubled for the past day and is there much wonder. Look at yourself, are you a leader of men or a little boy who has broken his toys."

Tarrol could not stand by and be scorned, his patience was ended. His hand reached for the handle of his sword. "You wish to test the manhood of Tarrol, warrior of Carthelion, Mathin? Then draw your sword and prove you justify the position you now hold. It was a sorry day when Rowgar was lost."

"You think me a fool, Tarrol, have we not enough hardship without killing our own. Is your pet hate really worth so much to you?"

"Nay, no more than your little pride and joy," retorted Tarrol.

"Your tongue does indeed need silencing," said Mathin, angered. He reached for his sword, but before he could unsheathe it, a hand clasped his.

"What is the meaning of this?" Bradur's eyes looked cold as they flitted from one to the other. "ANSWER ME!" he barked.

"A personal problem," answered Mathin. "Tarrol's head is too hot for his body, it is perhaps time his mouth was silenced."

"Tall words from a dwarf lover, tell Bradur where your little pet has gone."

Mathin fell silent.

"Where has Gendy gone?" queried Bradur, looking with concern at Mathin.

"Perhaps foraging for food, sir, we do not eat well, in fact of late we do not seem to eat at all."

"Have your scouts seen him, Tarrol? What did they say when



they reported?” Concern became apparent in Bradur’s voice.

“They have not yet reported, sir,” answered Tarrol.

“Is that not unusual?” asked Bradur. “We have been at rest here quite a while and it is gone noon, do they not still report at mid-day?”

“Well, yes, but perhaps they have been delayed.” Tarrol’s face began to show worry.

Bradur looked around at the surrounding countryside but he could not see far. There were many trees and hills. They were not in hill or woodland country, but there were enough of both to supply cover. Thick brambles grew in places and there were plenty of tall weeds and flowers about. Probably a very nice place under the right circumstances, Bradur thought, but now it all appears eerie.

It was quiet, too quiet, there were no birds in the air, giving their daily chorus, no scurrying about in the bushes. Even the crickets which had kept them company for the past days had ceased their call. Bradur looked at Tarrol. “Walk down the column,” he whispered. “Tell the men to prepare themselves for an ambush, tell them also to keep their voices to themselves, lest we are attacked before we are ready!” Bradur continued talking to Mathin, trying not to show his fears. Tarrol set off down the column; he did not speak with the men but motioned with his hands, a basic sign language which they all knew – if not well. Slowly hands crept to their weapons and a slight hissing could be heard as their swords were withdrawn from their sheaths.

After giving Tarrol enough time to reach the rear of the troop, Bradur strode over to the horn bearer. “Men to arms,” he said in a quiet voice. The man rose putting his horn to his lips, as the first note was struck, the men of Carthelion sprang to the ready.

The Loch were upon them, as though they had risen from the ground itself. Many men were still startled with the sudden onslaught, although total disaster was averted. The men of Carthelion fought gallantly, though weary from their travels. They knew that their end would come if they did not fight with valour. In the first few ferocious moments of battle, the men of the realm recovered their stamina and spirit; they fought heroically, for their

very existence depended upon it. Swords flashed and mace hammered, until the swiftness of men began to tell. The Loch were too bulky and heavy in comparison, their mace cut the air too slowly. Men now used daggers also, as sword met mace the daggers struck beneath iron breastplates and the Loch fell. Bradur used only his sword, with two hands he wielded it. No ordinary Loch could stand its impact, even when it struck the iron. The strength of Bradur was great and his sword which he called 'Saranloch', since the slaying of Gorfang, was sharp, on occasion it would slice through the armouring of the Loch and bring instant death. Mathin and Tarrol also proved their worth on this day. Mathin fought with great skill, his tireless effort proved valuable. Tarrol rallied his men as he fought. He yelled orders and words of encouragement as he battled his way down the column enthusiastically.

As quickly as the assault had come, it dissipated. Without sound of recall, the Loch fell away back into the bush and disappeared. The men did not follow, they knew better than follow a fox into its hole. All was again quiet save for the moans and cries of the wounded. Bradur rasped orders and the men began to form a large circle. The injured were carried into the centre and tended as well as could be under such adverse conditions. Bradur knew how grave the suffering was all about him and he knew also the difficulty it would cause when they tried to move on, but for now his main concern was their survival; he was unsure if the Loch would attack again, not knowing their strength made it difficult to come to any conclusion. From the recent attack it seemed they had similar numbers but one could never be sure.

The day drew slowly on and all remained peaceful until the sky grew dark, then the garglings of the Loch began again. There were a great many of them – this was obvious. Bradur kept his men at the ready.

As the night dragged on the men became very weary. Their previous day of marching and fighting had left them exhausted, eventually Bradur had to give the order for men to take it in turns to rest. All weapons had to stay by the men's side and the men must try and rest at their posts. The company knew the reasons for this

and did not object, they rested the best they could.

When the morning came, the birds did not chatter, all that was heard was that incessant gargling. It began to play on the men's minds but there was naught that they could do, except cover their ears.

As the morning wore on, Bradur became unsure of what course of action to take. He knew that the Loch were in waiting all around the small clearing where he stood, but he could not stay holed up forever. The men could not stand the strain of little sleep and no food or water.

The day is going to be hot, the sky is clear and the sun beats down, how long can we stand this punishment. Is it not better to die in battle, than await here for slaughter like sheep, when our strength fails us? These were the thoughts of Bradur. He knew his actions would need to be firm and quick. He consulted Mathin and between them they decided to fan out from the centre point in an attempt to goad their oppressors.

Soon all was ready; every man who could carry a sword did so. At the word of Bradur the circle began to enlarge itself. It reached three times its original size, then the Loch struck. Snarls of hate left their lips as they surged forward into the ranks of the Carthelions. Some gargled with pleasure as they wetted their mace and broadswords.

The Carthelions were in disarray. Some stood and held their ground as did Bradur and Tarrol, others tried to regroup again in the centre, but it was too late, they were being overrun, there were too many Loch, far too many.

Bradur became grim to look upon; his mind had one purpose. He fought on through great strength of body and power of will. Tarrol stood beside him, his hate of the enemy drove him onward; he loathed the Loch and would not give his life easily, not while there was still an *ounce* of strength left in him.

"A HORN!" came a cry, "I CAN HEAR A HORN!"

Bradur heard the cry and he listened. The Loch looked hesitant, again came the deep noted horn. Bradur raised his head and turned to the direction of the sound. "IT IS THE CAVALRY OF RHONE," yelled Bradur. "BUT I FEAR THEY WILL NOT

ARRIVE IN TIME, THEY ARE TOO DISTANT TO HELP.”

A toughened foot-soldier turned to Bradur, “Do they ever, except in fairy tales.”

“FIGHT ON,” shouted Tarrol, “THE LOCH SENSE VICTORY, THEY WILL NOT RETREAT.”

Never was a truer word spoken. The moment’s hesitation of the Loch was gone and their ferocity had returned with new vigour.

“FALL BACK,” cried Bradur. “BACK TO THE WOUNDED.”

What was left of the men ran to the centre point of the circle, where some of the men had already tried to regroup and failed.

There were no more than a handful of Carthelions still standing, not even enough to encircle their dying comrades.

The Loch stood back for a moment, some raised their eyes in the general direction of the oncoming horsemen. The Loch knew they were still around a quarter league distant, because there was little sound of hoof or man, even if their view was restricted, their ears were not.

“They prepare for the final kill,” said Tarrol. “Let us not make it easy for them.”

The Loch stared at the Carthelions with glowering eyes as they made a stealthy and almost mocking approach.

The Carthelions stared back, their faces taut and strained.

A Carthelion charged at the Loch with his sword held high. The Loch parted as if to give him passage, but there was no passage to be had. The Carthelion was tripped and the Loch gathered around. Trampling him to the ground.

“COME,” yelled Tarrol. “DO WE STAND AND SEE OUR MEN DIE LIKE THIS?”

Tarrol grimaced his face for his final attack.

“Wait,” rasped Bradur. “Listen.”

Tarrol listened. He heard hoofbeats – the hoofbeats of a single horse.

The Loch also heard the hoofbeats and they turned in the direction of the sound. A single rider appeared as if from nowhere.

Both Carthelions and Loch turned to face him.

Tarrol’s jaw fell as he saw the rider. He knew the darkened face.

The horse came to a halt in the small clearing where Loch and

men were engaged in battle. The rider turned his head slowly from left to right as if weighing up the situation, then he turned to face the few remaining Carthelions. He remained silent.

All eyes were fixed on the rider, his large frame motionless. He commanded the situation without so much as an eye blink.

The Loch looked uneasy, they were silent as if hypnotised.

“Arknar, Arknar Sabarath a Telori, Sabarath a Tallanica,” growled Tarrol, in a low voice.

Bradur turned his stare from the rider and faced Tarrol.

“Vengeance,” Tarrol whispered, “for the death of El ...” he paused.

“Of what do you speak, Tarrol?”

Tarrol did not answer.

The rider’s hands which rested upon the horse’s shoulders began to move. Then with a whiplash action his right hand reached to the side of his mount; he withdrew the deadliest looking axe and held it before him at arm’s length, clutching the shaft by both hands. The horse reared and the rider began to laugh but the laughter seemed distant like an echo from the past.

Neither man, nor Loch moved.

“ONWARD RHONIANS,” came a battle cry from the opposite direction to the rider. The stillness of the moment was shattered. Thousands of hoofbeats approached, riders zigzagged through the bush as the might of Rhone descended.

Bradur swung around as did the rest of the Carthelions, and there before his eyes and beyond belief were the cavalry of Rhone; banners streaming behind them. They swept down the eastern gradient like a tidal wave. All before them of the race of Loch were hewn down like wheat, in the summer harvest. Bradur raised his sword no more; his strength had left him. Tarrol dropped to his knees and blessed the ground he knelt upon. Yet the greatest surprise was yet to come.

The leaders of Rhone turned from their pursuit of the Loch and cantered to where Bradur and Tarrol stood. They wore light mail and helm; the helm containing a face shield, which hid the faces of those who wore them. Three riders were in this type of dress and as they came to a halt, the shields were lifted.

“Ryan, son of Reyon, at your service,” said a sturdy red haired man.

“You need no introduction, sir,” replied Bradur as he bowed his head. “We are indeed grateful for your arrival.”

The next to raise his face shield was Barod, a much older man than Ryan, but he carried his years well. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance again, Bradur. It has been a long time.”

“It is well that it was not a moment longer,” replied Bradur. “Or we should not have met at all.”

Barod smiled, then dismounted to greet Bradur more warmly. They clasped one another’s hand in great friendship.

Last, but not least the third man raised his shield. Bradur looked up but he did not speak. The horseman looked down and with a broad warm smile, he said, “Do not I receive any welcome? I, who have journeyed from your own lands.”

Speech came at last to Bradur, but only slowly. “I – I thought you.”

“You thought I was past it, walking with the women and aged of our people, following in the wake of Darrian,” Meldir’s smile grew even broader.

“Well, yes,” answered Bradur, “but I see that I was wrong, not only have you appeared in the nick of time, you have also brought us aid, which was sorely needed.” Bradur’s face began to lighten. “Tell me, how you come to be riding with the cavalry of Rhone, for I did not expect aid from these people, though I am thankful for it.”

“Nor I,” came the voice of Tarrol, “but let us first see to our wounded and again secure our camp.” With the strength of these words Tarrol began to walk to the remnants of his footmen.

Ryan looked down upon him as he went. “Is this all the thanks he gives us for saving his life?”

“I apologise for his behaviour, sir,” said Bradur. “Strain is upon him, no rest, no sustenance and his men cut to shreds; had I listened to him earlier this may have been averted.”

“I think, had it been Darrian himself, he would have spoken in like manner; his ways though are perhaps a boon to those who fight with him.” Meldir spoke with sincerity in his voice.

“In that case I think we should take his advice,” said Ryan as he

began to dismount. "Let it not be said that I kept anyone from their duty," he smiled as his feet touched the earth. "Come, let us give what aid we can, there will be much time for talk later."

The rest of the day was spent securing a camp and tending the wounded. Those who had perished were gathered together and a mound was raised above them, amongst the fallen was Mathin himself. This saddened Bradur greatly, and Tarrol though not a dear friend in life grieved for his passing. When the body of Mathin was brought before Tarrol, he looked firstly upon the face of his Captain and then out into the shadows of the darkening land. "IS THIS THE WAY YOU REPAY HIS LOYALTY?" he cried, then drawing himself to his full height he said in a solemn voice. "When this war is done, I shall be back, poisoned dwarf, I shall seek my revenge and your death will not come swiftly, this I vow."

Those who looked upon the face of Tarrol as he made his vow, knew he would keep his word if he could, for his face was uncompromising and vengeful.

When the light failed, the leaders of Carthelion and Rhone gathered themselves together and spoke of the days that had gone before. For his part, Ryan spoke of Darrian's passing through Rhone and the way it had lifted the hearts of those who watched. "Many voices were heard, who beforehand had remained quiet," he said. "They began to ask why the people of Carthelion should bear alone the burden of the Loch, when all lands were in grave danger of being overrun. The people of Rhone knew not the ways of the Loch, save in legend, but still they were moved. I must admit that the sight of thousands of cavalrymen, all with grim determination written on their brows affected me also."

"But you did not join them?" queried Bradur.

"No," said Ryan. "We were not then prepared for war and our counsels had fallen into disarray."

"Then what made you decide later to join the 'crusade'?" Bradur asked.

"Meldir gave the final push. After Darrian had passed by, the dependants of these brave men entered our lands, a sorry sight they looked, old men, young children riding mules and carrying their meagre possessions. They stopped for the night outside our fair

town of Woodside. The people of Woodside gathered around in curiosity. Many hundreds flocked to the site to see what was afoot. That is when Meldir took it upon himself to speak with them. The crowd hushed at the sound of his voice, as though he had cast a spell upon them. ‘Welcome,’ he said, ‘Welcome to the encampment of the travellers of Carthelion. I would take this opportunity to thank you all for not only allowing the passage of our army through your great land but for the supplies you have provided for them and for us on our long journey. We, the dependants of those who have gone before possess little, for our pathways are arduous and we can carry little weight. Many leagues we have before us and only the possessions that we hold dear do we take. Yet if it were not for you good folk our journey would not take place at all. If there is anything we have with which we may repay just a little of our gratitude, you have just to name it, and if there is naught we carry with which to pay our debt, I promise you the freedom of Carthelion, whose vast green pasture lands are large enough for all our peoples; we who are friends by the Southern Seas. What we have is yours also. Let it not be said that we do not honour those who provide for us.’ He then bade them all good night. ‘I must go now,’ he said. ‘On the morrow we travel on. May Elebriouse watch over you.’”

“Just like Meldir,” Bradur murmured softly.

“You remember his words well,” said Tarrol.

“Yes,” replied Ryan. “I was among the crowd. You really had to be there to receive the full impact of what he said.”

“I only spoke the truth, sir,” Meldir sounded apologetic.

“We know that,” said Bradur, “I know also that you could make one feel sorrow for the humble bumble bee as it dug its sting into your neck.”

Laughter broke out amongst them but Tarrol kept his sombre face. It was not a time for jests.

Barod continued where Ryan left off. “After the speech of Meldir, the crowd demanded action, but there were still many voices in the council which were against any armed combat. After spending all of that night in meeting, it was decided that a strong force should be sent through the Pass of Tark into Carthelion. King



Reyon himself would not lead such action; he was required at home to keep the council in order, so the onus fell with our Prince who accepted the charge with enthusiasm. If the war goes well, he will indeed be the man for our throne, when the King relinquishes his powers.”

“Not so much of the flattery,” interrupted Ryan.

“It is but the truth, Sire,” said Barod.

“What of your journey here?” Tarrol brought their debate on modesty to a quick close.

“That was more or less uneventful,” Meldir cut in. “We saw little of the Krril or the Loch. I did not really expect to. I knew when I joined the Prince as guide, that the mountains would be peaceful. The Krril would all gather around the Andir Valley awaiting your entrance, you, of course knew this also.” Meldir looked at Bradur and Bradur nodded.

“It seems that the Loch have also paid your company too much attention,” said Meldir. “They have allowed us to ride thus far unchallenged.”

“How did you find your way here?” queried Tarrol.

“I have a map of old Carthelion,” answered Meldir. “I knew the route on which you were bound, though I hoped you would have made a little more progress. I now find myself glad to meet you at all. It seems the odds you have been up against may have been great enough to destroy your company entirely. That would have been a sorry day for us all.”

“We are not far from being totally annihilated now.” Tarrol held remorse in his voice.

“Never a truer word spoken,” confirmed Bradur. “It is fortunate your forward rider arrived when he did. I have never seen so many stunned faces at the sight of one man. He certainly brought the Loch horde to a standstill.”

Ryan looked at Barod and Barod shrugged his shoulders. “We have no forward rider,” said Ryan.

“Surely you have,” said Bradur. “A tall, dark, sturdy man, he carries a fearsome looking axe.”

Meldir shot Bradur a glance.

Ryan shook his head.

Tarrol remained silent.

“A Carthelion perhaps,” suggested Barod.

“If he was, he is the first warrior I have seen in these lands.” Bradur put a hand to his chin.

“There must be some of your kinsfolk still living in these parts,” said Ryan.

“You are right,” said Meldir. “He must have been a Carthelion.”

“If that is true I wish there were more of them to join us, our forces are sadly depleted,” said Bradur.

“Nevertheless you have survived,” said Meldir, “it is well we heard the battle but where is Rowgar?”

A silence fell over the group, it lasted for many long moments before Bradur answered. “We fear he is dead, he and the children were lost on the mountain causeway which leads to the Valley of Shadow.”

“Children?” queried Meldir, looking disturbed. “I know of no children.”

“Of course not,” said Bradur. “They were found in the supply wagon two days out from Brannock. We could not spare the men to return them, so they travelled with us. I believe Rowgar was trying to assist them in the midst of an avalanche. That was the last we saw of any of them.”

“This is the wagon Gerome provided?”

“Yes,” said Bradur. “Is that of some significance?”

“If the wagon was provided by Gerome then no doubt the children were also supplied by Gerome.”

“Why so?” queried Tarrol, becoming impatient.

“I see you know not the ways of Gerome, Tarrol. If you knew him better, you would not question me so. I, for myself, believe that the children and Rowgar are safe. Gerome would not send them to their deaths so mercilessly, without good reason and I see no reason for them to die.”

Gerome does not control the Krril and he cannot stay avalanches,” growled Tarrol. “You talk in riddles.”

“Stay your temper,” barked Bradur. “Your manner becomes intolerable.”

Tarrol fell silent and slunk back resting upon his arms.

“Sometimes it is the small things in life that guide the large; many a great deed would not have come to pass if a stray arrow had struck its perpetrator dead. These are the things we should bear in mind. Gerome spoke of an attack in Valley’s Meet, but he thought it of no avail to warn you, lest you became trapped on the causeway. It would have done more harm than good. He said that the Loch would try and circumnavigate your camp, when you left Valley’s Meet, his words told also of our meeting here.”

Tarrol looked at Bradur. “Have you told Meldir of our encounter with the Krril or Loch?”

“No,” said Bradur, looking bewildered.

“What is Gerome, some kind of oracle who sees the future?” questioned Tarrol.

“No,” said Meldir. “He only ripples the foundation stones of events. His wisdom lies in the knowledge of where these ripples will lead, sometimes they grow even into waves. I think now they are gaining in strength, but to what end I do not know.”

“He sounds very much like you,” quipped Barod.

A smile came to all their faces and the tension was eased.

Tarrol felt strangely comforted by Meldir’s words though he did not show it – he had an uncanny feeling that Meldir was right.

They talked until late about what had come to pass since the parting at Brannock, not least the re-kindled flame of Meldir who was thought no more than a wise councillor, but as all things must come to a close, so the discussion ended. The men of Carthelion had their first peaceful night for many a day and their stomachs were no longer empty.

At mid-morning they again set out. The cavalry of Rhone rode their horses at walking pace and the men of Carthelion followed. They were proud men and would not ride, save those who were injured, though many a Rhonian had offered his mount.

Past the mount of the dead they trod, heads bowed in a last salute. On a hill which overlooked the ‘battleplain’, Bradur raised his head. Before him an eagle of great majesty rode the thermal updraughts of Carthelion and beyond he saw the wide blue horizon. “We will be there to meet you, Darrian,” he whispered.

# ***LOCHGOR***

The ride had gone well thus far, Darrian with his horsemen were rounding the northern tip of the mountainous region, known as the Headon Hights. The rough barren country which lay at the mountains feet quickly changed to greenery as the host of Carthelion spilled out into the Northern Flatlands.

The hopes of Darrian were high, no opposition had he met so far. All which they required, had been provided for by their supporters in Rhone. Victory was in the air, he could sense it.

The cavalry rode in random fashion as they entered the wild open lands. They feared no sudden assault for they could see far into the distance, lest an army of Loch lay upon their bellies in the wavering grass. Darrian did not take this thought seriously, the going had been too easy; he had become lulled into a sense of security.

Mid-afternoon came and the host came to halt. They dismounted and let their steeds graze. "It is good to be alive," said Darrian, "the wide open spaces and the breeze blowing through your hair. The mighty birds of prey, stalking the sky and look over yonder, is that not a herd of deer?"

"That it is, Sire," replied Carrich. "A fine sight they make too, you will rule a fine land when the warring is over."

"Yes, indeed I shall. It will not be long now, before we are hammering on the gates of Lochgor."

"Another ten days only, my liege, and the Loch will feel the might of Carthelion. I, for myself, will be glad when the fighting is done with, we have been fortunate to pass this far without incident."

"You are right, of course, Carrich. It will be well when we can return to our daily duties. I feel that we have come unhindered because of our strength. It worries me though that our people who follow behind may be in danger." Darrian looked thoughtful as he

spoke but Carrich waylaid any fears that he may have had.

“There will be no danger yet, not while our people cross the lands of Rhone. It will take them many days to make that journey, with their children and possessions, we can return to their aid before they set foot in the Land of Scavengers, the land we have so recently passed through.”

“Indeed we can,” replied Darrian, “I wonder where the creatures of that land vanished to!”

“Perhaps into caverns at the base of the mountains. I hear some live in trees in the lush part of that land, but as I have never ridden these parts before I do not really know,” Carrich gazed around him as he spoke, he felt an air of apprehension.

“You know as much as I,” Darrian retorted. “I would probably not recognise a Scavenger if I saw one, come to that I have not met a Loch either.”

They both laughed.

“What say you to walking for a while, Carrich? We could stretch our legs and cover a small distance at the same time.”

“To that I would not object,” Carrich replied. “The exercise will probably do us good.”

Darrian motioned to the hornbearer, who came immediately. “We will walk for a while my good man, please inform the men.”

Darrian and Carrich began to walk, holding the reins of their horses. The hornbearer put his horn to his lips, the message he gave was clear if not discreet. The followers of Darrian fell in behind the tall slender frame of Ramagil, their ‘gridrider’.

Only a hundred paces they covered, when before them appeared four bowmen. “Halt,” stated one, “you go no further.”

Darrian was startled by their sudden appearance. Their camouflage was perfect for their surroundings. None had detected them as they lay in wait.

Carrich looked upon them. “Are you serious, sir? Do you really expect to slay thousands of swordsmen and archers with four arrows?”

“To the first part of your question I would answer yes,” said the one who appeared to be chieftain. He drew back his arrow and his bow tensioned. “Only four of us you see, because we stand;

perhaps there are forty or four hundred of us, but no matter how many, you only require one arrow. Do I need to answer the second part of your query?"

"I think not," said Darrian, looking uncomfortable. "Maybe you would care to join our crusade rather than waylay us. It is good to see men of great courage so near the stronghold of the Loch." Darrian spoke his words well as he fixed his eyes on the middle-aged speaker with the unruly fair hair.

"You ask us to join you and yet we do not know who you are, save that you are trespassers on these lands."

"On these lands! These are the Flatlands of Carthelion, owned only by their rightful heir," snapped Carrich.

"And where is the rightful heir – he departed many years gone by. To the South he went, with what people he could gather. The only rule in this land, is the rule of strength and that strength lies in Lochgor, though we oppose it fiercely." The chieftain looked on proudly as he answered his own question.

"Then join us, I say again," Darrian's voice was sincere. "We go to throw down the walls of Lochgor and rid this land of this pestilence which it has suffered for so many years. What say you?"

"Are you mad? The walls of Lochgor will not crumble at the sound of your horns, whom are you who makes such haughty brags with only cavalry in your wake?"

"I am Darrian, son of Doran. Prince Regent of the Realm of Carthelion." Darrian's voice began to rise and gain power as he continued. "This land I claim for the people whose forefathers dwelt here. You will not halt us here, nor will the walls of Lochgor stand before our might. Because you see only cavalry, it does not mean that cavalry is all there is. Be warned fellow, you have hindered us enough."

The chieftain let his bow go limp and bowed his head. The power in Darrian's voice had left him in no doubt as to whom he spoke. "What can I say, sir, for I have made my life's greatest blunder. I am Namarium of the people of Dianon, we who joined with Carthelion in good faith, so many years before the coming of the Loch. I beg your pardon for damaging a friendship of peoples which existed long before my time." Namarium fell into silence.

“Raise your head man,” said Darrian. “If you do indeed value our friendship, do as I have bid and we shall fell the walls of Lochgor together.” Darrian held out his hand in friendship. Namariun took it in his own and dropped to one knee, but Darrian bid him rise. “We are allies, Namariun. We of Carthelion are glad to renew our friendship, but we are not your Lords. You live the lives of free men, let it remain this way.”

“Carthelion will be much the wealthier for your allegiance, your bravery is to be wondered at,” said Carrich.

“And your cunning,” continued Darrian. “They vanish well into the earth and their claim to be more in numbers than they really are may persuade smaller companies than ours to detour from their route.”

Namariun raised his hand. All around Darrian, sprang archers of Dianon.

“Perhaps he did not exaggerate as much as you thought,” Carrich smiled.

Darrian looked about him. “Yes, you could be right.”

Namariun did indeed agree to join with Darrian, his archers numbered only two score and ten but this did not matter, it was the joining of the people that was most important. Namariun could not accompany Darrian on his ride for the people of Dianon possessed no horses but he and his small band said that they would follow on foot.

They spoke long before they parted to make their own ways to Lochgor. Darrian spoke of the hopes of the people of Carthelion and of the lives they had led on the shores of the great sea. Namariun told of the lives of the ‘Hunted’, which the people of Dianon now called themselves.

Their people had dwindled in number since the bloodletting of Carthelion three score years past. They once were a strong people, he said whose origins came from over the sea, but their histories told not from where. It was the belief of his people, that they bore kinship to the Kings of Carthelion though there is no proof.

Darrian answered Namariun by telling of his own ancestry, as far as he knew and of the Carthelions when they were one land; of Ramno he spoke, Lord Fatherer of Carthelion and his dreams of

building a free land. Alas before the days of Ramno, he knew nothing of their kingdom and many gaps there were since that time but he knew the line of Ramno held true. There were ancient runes to show this inscribed on tablets in the hall of Ramno. “Unfortunately the information on the runes will eventually be lost,” said Darrian, “for the language of the runes is no longer spoken, save in great or sad occasions – they are a memorial to the past.”

When the talking was done, Darrian set out with his cavalry – a straight line he set for the gates of Lochgor. Namariun deviated from the direct path; his bowmen had to find food for themselves as they went. Their dress was for travelling swiftly, no burdens did they carry save their bows and knives. Twice the distance of foot-soldiers could they travel in one day, blending in with the land as they journeyed. Their eyes were keen, especially when travelling lands which were not their own. The Flatlands were not unfamiliar to them but they now only entered them for good reason. On this occasion they had espied a lone Loch. They followed but could not overtake it for it travelled with great haste, eventually they had given up. Namariun was loath to give up the chase, he thought the Loch must carry urgent news northward and Namariun was a knowledgeable chieftain, he was seldom wrong.

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Darrian kept his course for many days while the moon grew old in the night sky. The weather had held fine for them for the most part, only on two occasions had it rained since they left the mountains.

The terrain was becoming hilly and trees were to be found, scattered randomly across the countryside. They knew they were drawing close to Lochgor. In some was born the sense of fear and in others the feeling of excitement, none were left untouched by the air of anticipation.

Two nights before their appointed meeting day they laid camp not more than five leagues northeast of Lochgor. The guard that night was heavy. Darrian still hoped that they had been unobserved.



If all went to plan, they would gain their best vantagepoint on the morrow and as the sun rose on the final day, they would descend upon Lochgor. This they knew was a lot to hope for, thousands of men could not be concealed on their travels – a lot would depend on fortune.

Daylight came with an overcast sky. The column mounted and began its final leg. The morning passed with a slight drizzle in the air but the climate was warm. The trees that stood about them became closer packed and of strange varieties. There were many that stood tall with strange branches that were straight and sloped slightly earthward, they gave the impression of giant cones. The ground their horses trod upon was also different. There were many types of flowers and herbs but they all seemed drained of colour and the grey of the sky did not help to cheer things.

Morning turned to afternoon and still no incident; the eyes of the column were wide, searching every tree and hill for signs of hostility. They were becoming edgy at the changing landscape, it appeared totally alien to them.

At mid-afternoon they halted, before them standing ominously against the sky, stood Lochgor. Its northern tower loomed high above them, as they viewed it between the hills which stood on either side of their pathway, hills which were densely covered with trees. The road forward seemed like a shallow valley, alas it was naked to the watchtower.

“Our position is not good,” said Carrich. “We are open to yonder tower, not to mention ambush.”

Darrian was staring at the single tower and the high stone walls less than a quarter league before them. “Move the men back,” he whispered, as though the trees had ears.

Back they moved, around a hundred paces to where the hollow curved and they again became hidden from view.

“Do you think the Loch are aware of our presence?” Darrian asked.

“It is a good possibility,” replied Carrich, “especially if we are heading for the main entrance, as it would appear.”

“Then why have we not seen any Loch?” queried Darrian.

Carrich did not answer directly. He firstly looked around then he

said, "There is a silence all about us, it is unusual, our luck is becoming stretched."

"At least we have found the right place," said Darrian, trying to lift his spirit above the foreboding that hung all around. "Why do I see only one tower?" he queried.

"We are below the level of the fortress," replied Carrich. "It was told that when men first set eyes upon this grotesque landmark that the towers stood one at each 'corner'. North, South and West. We see little of the fortress here. From the West the towers can be seen together, for the High Plains look down upon them. The western tower will appear large from that vantagepoint, flanked by two smaller ones, with a central Citadel. We see only the northern watchtower from here. Though we now journey westward, our trail leads us to the northern tip. Even if we stood against the tower we would see little more, the walls follow the rise and fall of the hillside and they are long walls."

"So I am led to believe," replied Darrian looking curiously at Carrich, who seemed to have eyes everywhere. "We shall have to form our plan of action this night, now that we have some knowledge of what we face. It appears the last three hundred paces to the walls are barren, no doubt to give the Loch clear aim, we shall have to consider this deeply."

"I could not agree more," replied Carrich, "but for now I suggest we remove ourselves from this place, those woods have eyes, I can feel them boring into me."

Darrian motioned his men to turn about, the message ran quickly down the line and soon they were heading back the way they had come.

As they drew slowly away, the feeling of another presence grew stronger and stronger. Finally they could see the woods on either side begin to thin. Not far now thought Darrian, but alas it was too far.

A deep-throated cry sounded from somewhere in the dimly lit trees. The men of Carthelion turned to face the sound and as they turned the sky became full of lethal spears which had been cast with the force of hatred. Horses reared and men fell to their deaths. The air became full of sound. Some men tried to control their

mounts, others fled from the valley to safety.

“CHARGE,” cried Darrian above the bedlam, “LET US NOT BE OVERTHROWN BEFORE WE REACH OUR GOAL.” Darrian’s voice held the power of command and though his followers were in disarray, many men obeyed him. They struck out into the woods, swords drawn. Only flitting shadows could they see before them, but as they entered the woods, the shadows became real.

Many horsemen were stunned by the sight of the Loch. They had not expected such grotesque creatures. Some were dismayed at the sight but others hardened their resolve. The fighting was hard and brutal and for a great length of time it seemed to last. Men and Loch became engaged in battle over a wide area and those who fought were only aware of their friends close at hand, the trees hid comrades and foe alike. Many men strayed far into the woodland and found great difficulty finding their way back, some returned not at all. By the ending of the day, it became clear that the Loch had been defeated, though the Carthelions had taken heavy losses, losses they could ill afford.

Throughout the battle Darrian and Carrich remained near the pathway, as a focal point for their forces and it was to the pathway the men returned when the fighting was done.

Darrian tried to estimate how many of his followers were missing, but it was impossible. The pathway they trod was no more than thirty paces wide and his men straddled from where he sat, right up to where the woodland became sparse, over a thousand paces distant.

Darrian looked troubled as he spoke to Carrich. “We were fools to think that we could travel undetected, for such a force as ours it is impossible. Sometimes I think our numbers hinder rather than help us. It seems clear to me that the Loch expected us. What say you Carrich?”

“That is obvious Sire, they no doubt have their sources of information. Our losses were unfortunate today, but I believe there is room for hope. We were hopelessly outmanoeuvred, trapped on ground not made for horsemen, yet we were victorious.”

“That is because they were outnumbered,” retorted Darrian.

“And why were they outnumbered?” continued Carrich.

“I see your point,” answered Darrian. “In such a perfect ambush they could have been rid of us forever, had they had the numbers. Either the forces of Lochgor are less than we thought or they are engaged elsewhere.”

“Probably elsewhere, if Bradur’s trek was a success, he must have drawn many to himself and the walls will not be left undefended. Who knows, perhaps there are others like ourselves, who seek the downfall of the tyrants.”

“Maybe so, but wherever the ‘might’ of the Loch lies, those who guard the walls know our location and strength ... and if they know of us, we may as well let our presence be felt. This evening we make rams and slings and on the morrow we shall see what is behind those walls.” Darrian spoke adamantly.

“We should send a small party to make contact with Bradur,” suggested Carrich.

“Of course,” replied Darrian. “How long do you think it would take horsemen to reach the southern tower?”

“The length of the wall is not much over a half league, but to circle the woodland it may be five times that distance ... if the way is clear.”

Darrian thought for a moment. He was contemplating the size of Lochgor as much as the time it would take his riders to reach the southern tower. “Despatch the riders,” he said. “I only hope Bradur is there.”

As darkness settled on the strange world that surrounded Lochgor, the men of Carthelion ceased their activities and became motionless. The cloud which had persisted all that day began to break letting the stars shine through, and the Eternal Warrior gazed down upon them with his single blood red eye. Those who camped near the edge of the hollow saw the thin sliver of the sickle moon, descending steadily over the watchtower, they looked on in contemplation.

At the first sight of light in the morning sky, the riders began to stir. The archers of Carthelion moved with stealth. Through the trees they moved with swords at the ready and bows hitched upon their shoulders. Their quivers were strapped firmly to their backs

filled to the limit with carefully made arrows – each archer cut his own, only he knew what was required for his own personal talent.

In the valley the rams which had been made from the strange trees were lashed behind the horses, they would be dragged as far as possible. Those who were to bear the rams to the gate itself carried slings of hide. Each man knew his role and the rams were grooved to ensure the slings did not move, once in place.

The cavalry moved down the hollow at walking pace. The two rams were drawn behind the horses and the ram-bearers followed at the rear. Again the watchtower came into view, its top battlement drenched in sunlight as the sun strove to raise itself clear of the horizon. Silence lay in the valley and upon the hills, there was no sound or movement, save for that of the advancing army. So unnatural was the setting that the men longed for action, at least they would then know their fate.

Carrich turned to his understudy and spoke. “I wish you to take position with the archers Ramagil, I fear we are risking too much riding together. If we breach the walls, who knows what may wait for us within. None before us have trodden this ground, we will be the first to set foot inside.”

“Have we no knowledge at all, sir, of what lies inside? I thought at the last uprising of the Loch, our people set eyes upon this fortress.”

“That is true as far as you say, they did set eyes upon the walls. There were a handful of people that stumbled upon this place as they made their way southward to join the routed army of Carthelion. For a score of years after the main onslaught did they drift South, although some thought to stay in Carthelion even though all was lost, for Carthelion is a large country and they thought to evade the Loch. Most of the people came to an unfortunate end, others found their way to the White Mountains and were aided by the garrison of Outer Carthelion, but no tale was ever told of Lochgor’s secrets.” Carrich turned away from Ramagil and looked at the high tower. “It took only ten years and four to build this fortress,” he said, “an uncanny feat of building.”

“Whom was it who ordered this fortress built?” enquired Ramagil.

“The same creature that defends it – the Warloch!” answered Carrich. “None have ever set eyes upon him, or at least none have lived to speak of him. The tales of those years have now faded and become distorted. It is best to forget them and keep our minds open.”

“I will bear that in mind,” said Ramagil, he then veered his horse to the North. He dismounted in clear view of the walls and awaited the appearance of the archers.

A short while only passed before the archers appeared, they made a long line before the battlements and then began to move forward. The cavalry grouped in the clearing beside the woods where the shallow valley rose to become flat ground, they parted at their centre to allow passage of the rams.

“All is ready,” reported Carrich.

“Do you not think this a strange design,” said Darrian, looking at Carrich as though he had not heard him.

“Yes, indeed,” replied Carrich. “It is almost as though they wanted us to break the gates. We spread our archers to cover the ‘V’ shaped walls, but really these battlements do not overlook the gates, only the watchtower is of great danger.”

“Draw the archers in more closely,” said Darrian. “Make three lines and focus on the tower.”

Carrich passed word to Ramagil, who stood with the bowmen on the north-western wall, then rode swiftly down the line on the East. The archers began to form into three lines as they moved ever closer. Not until they were well within shooting range did they halt. There were two group leaders on either flank of Darrian and he left the firing range in their hands.

The battlements remained quiet, as if deserted. It was a haunting feeling that encroached on those who watched. Many a rider and bowman could be seen to glance behind, they felt trapped between the alien world they had passed through and the daunting walls before them. Darrian had this feeling also and wasted no time in preparing the rams, before taking his position on the southern flank.

The ram-bearers lay their slings upon the ground and the rams were quickly unhitched. The men rolled them upon their slings and lifted. Only twenty paces had they to bear them, but that was not

their chief worry, they knew that they were already within range of the battlement and at any moment they could be attacked.

Ramagil surveyed the scene as the ram-bearers advanced. The set up seemed all wrong but he put this down to the shape of Lochgor. Darrian was trying to bring the might of Carthelion down onto the single cornerstone of the fortress – the tower, which meant the lines of archers had to bend around the tower and along the northwestern wall. He motioned his men to watch the tower.

The ram-bearers put all their strength into the last paces to the gate, their teeth were gritted and their faces strained.

It was when the first ram struck the gate that the Loch showed themselves. There was much noise on the battlements and spears were hurled down upon the ram-bearers. From the walls of the tower a dark liquid issued, which released choking fumes as it fell.

The archers of Carthelion were quick to reply, hundreds of arrows flew toward the tower and the surrounding ramparts, but few found their targets for there were few defenders to be seen.

Screams came from the lips of the ram-bearers as the falling liquid touched their flesh. Every droplet hissed and spat as it burnt the skin that it touched.

The second ram struck forward. The men in the ranks began to shout the bearers on as if in reply to the noise from the fortress. The heat of battle was rising and their blood was running hot.

The ram struck once and the gates groaned at the impact. Arrows flew towards the fortress as the bearers moved back for a second thrust at the gate. Again the ram struck and this time the gates gave way.

The horsemen who waited by the woods saw the gate broken. They looked at each other and then without word of command they broke rank and charged forward. The bowmen, in their paths parted to allow them access to the gate.

“HOLD,” cried Darrian. But it was of no use, there was no stopping his battle crazed men.

Darrian galloped his horse forward, yelling to Carrich as he went, “KEEP THOSE ARCHERS HERE.” He drove his horse for the tower, hoping to cut across the path of his men. Those who saw his approach stayed their mounts and fortunately one of these riders

was the horn bearer. “SOUND THE RECALL,” commanded Darrian. The man did as he was bid. Darrian’s eyes burnt with anger as his cavalry came to an abrupt halt. Many score had already passed through the gateway, heading straight into the unknown.

Darrian rode to the gateway himself, to see what was afoot. He was only a few paces from the broken gate when a deep rumbling vibrated the stonework. He lifted his eyes to the arch of the gateway, just in time to see the emergence of spiked iron shafts. He halted his horse and stared. A moment later the shafts fell heavily to the ground, spiking the earth on impact.

Darrian’s horse reared but was soon under control. “A gate,” whispered Darrian as he saw the crossmembers which held the spiked shafts in position. “An iron gate.” He dismounted and ran the short distance to the ironwork. His hands gripped the barred gate and he peered into the house of the Loch. A sickly look crawled across his face. Before him was a courtyard filled with his own men. The courtyard was surrounded by high walls, very high walls and no exit – no exit at all.

\* \* \*

Bradur would not hold his men in wait until the sun rose. He thought to scale the walls while darkness cloaked his advance. There was no cover for his foot-soldiers and he feared daylight losses.

Ryan sat upon his mount eyeing the star lit landscape. They were situated to the west of the hilly woodland, where they had prepared long ladders the day before. The countryside was strange to him, but no stranger than the blanket of silence that lay about them. To the Northwest he could see the sharp rise in the land which led to the High Plains. The southwestern wall of the fortress stretched more than a thousand paces to the limit of vision. The sheer size would have been enough to unnerve leaders of lesser standing.

Tarrol led his men forward. Though their numbers had been decimated, he was insistent upon making the first assault. The quiet of his surround did not bother him unduly. He knew the atmosphere



well.

Ladders were thrown up against the battlements and men began to climb. No sign of an enemy could be detected. Not since the previous day, when distant sounds were heard, had there been any signs that the place was not completely deserted. Tarrol knew that they were being watched, like they had been watched before.

The foot-soldiers slipped over the walls on to the rampart, on the western side of the southern tower. It was difficult to see what lay before them, in the gloom below. Some tried to find entry into the watchtower and some took it on themselves to follow the rampart along the walls length, though the troopers could not follow the battlement into the fortress.

Tarrol, after discerning what he could of what lay about him, returned over the wall and reported back to the waiting host. Bradur looked on him with puzzlement but said naught.

Meldir spoke first, "What is it Tarrol, why have we not received the signal to bring the rest of our forces forward?"

Tarrol shrugged. "There is nowhere for them to go. Beyond the battlement lies a courtyard with high walls, there seems to be no way out, nor is there anyway into the southern tower or around the courtyard."

"Trickery is in the air," said Meldir.

"Perhaps so," mused Bradur, "but we have no time to dally. There may be no simpler entrance into this stronghold. Let us move our archers forward to the ramparts, then move across the courtyard. We will have to scale the inner walls also but what choice do we have?"

"None," replied Meldir. "If it were indeed the sound of Darrian's oncoming we heard yesterday, the fortress must be besieged from more than our direction. That, itself should give us rise for hope."

"Indeed," said Ryan. "I will put my archers at your disposal, the sky begins to grow bright, your Prince will be ready for his main advance. Let us divert what forces we can away from him."

Orders were quickly given and the archers of Rhone advanced to the stronghold, then climbed the scaling ladders. When they were in position, half the ladders were raised and dropped to the

courtyard within. As the sun first struck the watchtower, the men of Carthelion were descending into the gloom below.

Bradur stood beside a scaling ladder on the outer wall. He looked upward towards the battlements of the southern tower, which dwarfed the tiny forms of man.

“The walls of Lochgor reflect the strength of he who built them,” said a voice.

Bradur swung around. “Gerome,” he said. But he spoke only to the back of Meldir’s head.

Meldir turned to face him. “Did you say something?” he queried.

Bradur paused for a moment in thought.

“Yes, I said we should take care. He who built these walls must have a great power at his command.”

Meldir smiled.

There was a continuous line of troopers climbing the ladders, most of them being the riders from Rhone. They moved with what speed was possible over the outer battlement and into the courtyard.

When the troop numbered three hundred in the courtyard, many of the scaling ladders were pulled down and carried to the far courtyard wall. As the ladders were placed in position the silence of Lochgor was broken. The Loch had timed their defence well.

The walls surrounding the courtyard came alive, from either side of the trapped troopers came heavy stones, cast into the air by the slings of the Loch, deadly they were, when they found their targets. From the forward wall spears rained down, the ladders of the troopers were cast down from this wall, some with men upon their rungs.

The archers of Rhone retaliated – the air filled with arrows. Men faced Loch across the courtyard, but the Loch also occupied the side walls of the courtyard, the walls which could not be reached by the men on the ramparts. The odds were weighted in their favour.

Many men came over the battlements to join those in the courtyard and the archers who fell on the rampart were replaced. The scaling ladders were lifted back in position on the far courtyard wall many times, until eventually men reached their goal. The push was becoming successful and hearts began to lift.

Outside the gates the riders waited. They too would take their turn on the ladders, except for a few who would remain to watch the horses. Meldir kept his eyes about him, he was not sure that their only danger lay within. As his eyes roamed the terrain, he began to feel uneasy, until he stared only at the woodlands to the East. They were no more than two hundred paces from them. He thought he saw shadows flitting between the trees but he was not sure of this.

Barod noticed Meldir staring and wondered what could be afoot. “WHAT IS IT THAT YOU SEE, MELDIR?” he called.

Ryan heard the call and he too turned toward the woodland.

“If my eyes do not deceive me, we have company,” said Meldir, with urgency in his voice.

Ryan called to his hornbearer. “Turn the rest of our riders towards the woodland. There may be danger from that quarter.”

The hornbearer sounded the appropriate call and the men began to turn. They wondered at the reason behind this command and it was not long before they found out.

Loch began to emerge from the trees, many score there seemed. They did not rush to the offensive but advanced with slow deliberation. As the forward ones moved closer, their places were filled by replacements from the trees, until there were several hundred hideous gargling creatures – and still they came.

Barod rasped orders. There were still nigh on a thousand men under his command, he would give the Loch a fight for every step that they took.

The Loch advance continued. It was hard now to tell how many there were. Their numbers were so swollen, it was useless to make estimates. The riders of Rhone drew their swords, they had the advantage of being mounted and they would make use of it. They charged headlong into the advancing horde.

The commotion below drew the attention of Bradur who now stood on the rampart; he was dismayed when he saw the battle below. The numbers of Loch were tremendous but he would not turn from his own task, he had his own war to conduct and would not lose his foothold, too many had died to gain it.

The battle raged on and the riders of Rhone fought gallantly, not

the least Ryan, he joined his men at the onset, if they were to perish, he would die with them. Indeed, this seemed to be the only outcome. The Loch would not be denied their victory. They fought savagely. Fear seemed unknown to them.

The horsemen of Ryan drew back, they formed a final group, no more than two hundred strong. This would be their final assault, no-one could say they had not given all, if indeed there was anyone left to tell the tale. Ryan raised his sword and a fanfare played, his face covered with astonishment. He turned his mount and looked toward the High Plains, never in his life had he been so glad to see the sight of his fellow men.

The archers on the rampart also heard the fanfare, they too turned to the High Plains. Bradur stood in amazement; who are these people, he thought, that sit upon their mounts like Lords and play a fanfare in the midst of battle.

The war on Lochgor virtually ceased, Loch and men alike stood and watched. Mail sparkled in the morning sun as the riders cantered downward upon Lochgor, in formation. Their leader drew his sword and raised it to the sky. The riders on his flanks unfurled two glorious banners that rippled in the wind.

“A sight to behold,” said Bradur under his breath.

The sword was lowered to point onward, the horsemen drew their blades as their horses broke into a gallop, the unsheathing could be heard even on the battlements of Lochgor.

Ryan waved his men out of the way, they could only hinder the shining warriors who now approached. The gallop broke into a charge, and many men on the rampart turned their eyes away at the coming collision.

The Loch held firm and faced the oncoming attack, their numbers were still great and a fight to the death it would be.

Delthinius led his men forward. They plunged into the heart of the Loch. Swords whistled and sang as they cut the air, and Loch fell by the drove. Ryan swung his men into action behind the host of Gresia, the battle was turning their way.

Two men of that charge did not enter into battle with Delthinius for they espied Bradur on the battlement. Bradur was again engrossed in his own war. The foot-soldiers of Carthelion and their

allies from Rhone were still doing battle with the rockslingers on their flanks.

Bradur had decided to go down into the courtyard before joining Tarrow on the far wall. As he began to move toward the nearest ladder a hand clasped his shoulder. He turned to see who it was. His eyes first caught sight of Bart. "Bart," he said, his face full of surprise. "It is good to see you," he gripped Bart's hand in a gesture of friendship. "What happened to you and Rowgar, and where are the children?"

Bart motioned his head to the left. Bradur turned almost to his rear. There before his eyes stood Rowgar, bearing a smile which stretched from one ear to the other.

Arrows flew and mace fell, swords sang and spears impaled but on the rampart of Lochgor beside the southern watchtower two figures embraced, for the moment the war had passed them by.

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Darrian stood on the battlements of Lochgor, his head bowed in sorrow. A trance like stare he held on the courtyard beneath. His men who had entered the watchtower gate had been massacred. He knew none had survived the awful onslaught that had followed the closing of the iron gate. Men and horses lay side by side. Some riders had been crushed by their mounts, others felled by stone or spear.

He had done all that was possible, his men had used rope to scale the walls, a difficult task but they were defended by their archers. There had not been many Loch on that front rampart and those that were had no visible means of escape, it seemed that they had been expendable. Darrian thought the inner battlement across the courtyard to be the main defence line, it seemed probable that the Loch used mobile units within the fortress to defend particular sections of the wall, the place was just too large to defend all at once. The only question that remained was why the Loch had suddenly disappeared. They had victory in the making when the noise of battle ceased. It went from a deafening howl to complete silence in only a few moments. Darrian could only imagine that the

Loch were under pressure from elsewhere, lest they had more deceptions at hand. Nonetheless he would find out shortly.

Men were making their way over the dead in the courtyard to the far wall. They would hitch their ropes and ascend to that battlement. There was no entry into the fortress via the rampart nor was there any entrance to the watchtower. A very strange building, thought Darrian, he wondered what secrets lay within.

Ramagil was the first to set foot on the inner wall rampart, he gazed to the South but little could he see. The walls disappeared over the nearest hill and even from the height he now stood he could see naught. His eyes turned inward, there he saw a high domed roof in the central Citadel. It looked ominously quiet. Before it were more battlements, a daunting place. There seemed to be a moat encircling the walls but from this distance he could not be sure. The roofs of thatched buildings hindered his vision. There were many of these structures scattered before him in all directions.

By now others had joined him on the rampart, they too gazed about. Ramagil turned to face Darrian and with his arms he signalled that all was well.

Archers began to cross the courtyard, they would cover Ramagil as he descended to the thatched buildings beneath the inner rampart. Enough warriors had been lost already, there was no sense in taking any chances.

When all was prepared he lowered himself down. On reaching the ground he glanced around, then feeling reasonably secure he began to search for an entrance back through the battlement. This proved to be the easiest task so far. Mounted only eight hands from the earth was a long black handle. Ramagil could still see no opening but the temptation to give a pull at the handle got the better of him. He drew the handle back slowly and to his surprise the wall began to move, cracks appeared where before there was nothing. A huge section four paces wide by three high began to open. The stonework was pivoted vertically in its centre by something he could not see.

His relief at the opening soon turned sour as he again caught sight of his dead comrades within. He looked over the courtyard to

the iron gate of the watchtower. He saw men slowly lifting it using levers and chocks which had been hurriedly made from the timber of the woods.

It was not long before the bodies of their fellows had been moved to one side, to allow the passage of mounted troopers. Darrian led his horsemen forward, they passed through the courtyard with their eyes fixed forward, never again would they act without forethought or command, they had learnt their lesson the hard way.

Once inside the defences the company split into large groups. All the habitats would have to be searched before they dared to risk an assault upon the Citadel.

Darrian worked his way southward, with Carrich, two score of men in their wake. The search was slow and both became impatient for they both hoped to find Bradur and Rowgar inside the southern battlements. At times through the morning they thought that they heard sounds of battle – muffled and very distant.

The sun passed its zenith as they searched the hundreds of dwellings in their path. All potential places of ambush were searched including the clumps of fruit bearing bushes which were scattered around. The enormity of the fortress made them feel uncomfortable and very vulnerable to attack.

“These must be the bushes of the North,” said Carrich pointing at the nearest clump.

“I would agree,” replied Darrian, “they are certainly not native to Carthelion. Perhaps the Loch brought them southward. They must have their own diet.”

“That is logical,” agreed Carrich. “I would not risk eating their fruits though, the Loch diet may be far different from our own.”

As he spoke, they reached the summit of the second rise, from there they could view the southern watchtower.

Darrian halted in his tracks, mail clad riders were entering below, in the fashion they themselves had. There were also horsemen already inside of a different type, they wore no mail with the exception of three, the rest wore tunics not unlike those worn in Outer Carthelion.

“Should we greet our friends?” enquired Carrich, smiling

broadly.

“If they are indeed friends,” replied Darrian.

“You become ever cautious, Sire.” Carrich spoke with a faint glimmer of mischief on his face.

“You taunt me, Carrich,” said Darrian, but he too felt an uplift in spirit. It was good to see that they were not alone.

Darrian and Carrich rode down toward the host. They immediately drew attention from those who gathered there.

Ryan sat upon his steed, a few paces from Delthinius. They saw the riders approach and cantered forward to meet them.

At the foot of the rise, they met. No words passed between them immediately, for Darrian’s eyes were fixed upon Delthinius. Delthinius returned the gaze. It was a most uncanny sight, their likeness surprised even Carrich.

“I see you both gaze at your own reflections, please pardon my saying so.” Carrich spoke calmly, hoping to break the silence.

Darrian snapped out of his stare. “Forgive me, sir,” he said, “but my friend Carrich speaks truly. I find myself a little surprised. I am Darrian, Prince of Carthelion. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Darrian turned toward Ryan. “And you, sir, though we have never met. I sense you are the son of Reyon, King of Rhone, you bear his likeness greatly. I am honoured ... if a little surprised by your presence.”

“You are indeed right,” came the reply. “I am the son of Reyon. My name is Ryan as you probably know, and the honour of this meeting is truly mine.”

Darrian bowed his head as if to excuse himself, then he turned to Delthinius.

“I come from the land west of Carthelion, Gresia, we call it, though that is not the place of my peoples origins. I am Delthinius, Lord of that land. I, too, share the pleasure of our meeting.”

Carrich sat and eyed them both. The appearance of Delthinius on the scene did not unduly surprise him, only the similarity of looks, but as he looked deeper, many subtle differences appeared. Carrich noted that Ryan had not seen a great resemblance in them, or at least he did not show surprise. Yet, he himself had, and the Prince and Lord themselves had. It was something to muse on,



perhaps it was something more than appearance. ‘Yes of course,’ he said to himself and smiled inwardly.

They talked for a while amongst themselves, then Bradur, Tarrol and Rowgar appeared from the courtyard, talking and smiling broadly. Bradur saw Darrian immediately. He and Rowgar strode up the rise. It was a happy reunion, small talk passed between them for quite a time, but eventually this ceased and the graver matters came to hand.

“How have you fared?” enquired Carrich, looking at Bradur.

“It has been a tragic journey,” replied Bradur. “I doubt if a score of the men we set out with have survived, had it not been for Ryan we would not have reached Lochgor at all, and had it not been for Delthinius we would not have entered in.”

Darrian looked stunned, but Carrich took it well.

“This is true,” said Ryan. “We were defeated at the gate, the Loch were too powerful. Beyond all hope we were, until the Gresians arrived. They were completely unlooked for, as you can imagine, it made our hearts glad. Had they come just a little later or for that matter had they been allied to the Loch, all would have been lost.”

“We did try and time our arrival better,” Delthinius looked thoughtful as he spoke, “but we were waylaid on our journey. The Warloch who commands our foes knew our every move ... We were going to enter the lands of Carthelion many days past, but it is well we did not, our force alone could not have thrown down the gates of Lochgor.”

“Where were you waylaid?” enquired Darrian.

“On the ford of the River Sren, Sire,” answered Rowgar, who stood beside Delthinius. “We did not give battle though, after a day of pondering we rode straight through the ranks of the Loch. We took them by surprise. I think that they expected us to stand and fight. Our losses were not great, but it does mean there are still Loch abroad on the High Plains.”

“Perhaps they come from Rholoch,” added Delthinius.

“You will have to forgive my ignorance,” said Darrian, “but I know not of Rholoch or the River Sren, nor did I know Rowgar rode with you. I thought that he accompanied Bradur.”

“It is a long – long story,” said Bradur.

“That I can believe,” replied Darrian. “Rowgar rides with riders from a strange land. You arrive with a much welcomed force from Rhone,” Darrian paused a moment. “I should have known.” He turned to Bradur. “Do you remember Gerome’s words in the hall of Ramno?”

Bradur thought for a moment. “I remember your words, Sire,” he said.

“Mine!” said Darrian.

“Yes,” replied Bradur. “If the walls of Lochgor do not fall down before the trampling of our steeds, we shall sit at the gates and wait for help.”

Several strange glances were cast at Darrian.

Darrian looked a little embarrassed and so did Bradur.

“They were more humorous times,” stated Darrian.

“A strange attribute of man, even in his darkest hour he can find time for a jest, be it filled with sarcasm or not,” said Carrich.

“A truth of life,” reaffirmed Ryan.

Darrian looked around ponderously. “Come, let us be about our tasks, there is much to do before we can make an assault on the Citadel, and the Citadel must fall before Meldir arrives.”

The other leaders all looked at each other. “You will have to be quick,” stated Ryan with an odd look on his face.

Darrian thought the statement a little strange, he cast Ryan a quizzical glance.

Ryan turned his head to the rear, to look at the base of the southern tower, where men were gathered, then he turned back to Darrian. “Well, he is only a few hundred paces from here.”

Darrian looked surprised. He half smiled, then his face turned to concern.

“He is the one who led the forces of Rhone to your aid,” said Ryan.

“Do not fear,” whispered Carrich to Darrian. “Our people who make the long trek have no need of Meldir.”

Darrian turned to Ryan and said, “I must thank him.”

Ryan could not understand why Darrian did not look pleased at Meldir’s arrival, he never considered that Darrian would have

preferred Meldir with the many thousands of families, who slowly worked their way around the mountains, looking after the interests which Darrian considered paramount.

Darrian seemed to shrug the question of Meldir's arrival to one side. "There is still much to be done," he stated to all in earshot. "I think it best if we gather later to make a full assessment of our position. I have suffered heavy losses, many of my force are dead or wounded. I now wish to speak with all my men who have survived and also see all those who have fallen put to rest in a dignified way, as soon as possible."

With Darrian's last statement, the group of leaders nodded their approval then went their separate ways for there was indeed much to be done. All that afternoon they laboured. Many there were, laying the dead to rest on the plain that overlooked Lochgor. It was a sorry sight to see; shallow mounds were raised and at the head of each mound a sword was placed, standing upright in the ground. A large area did the resting place cover, it would serve as a reminder to all who saw it of the tragedy of war.

Camps were set up in the deserted grounds around the Citadel and a heavy guard was posted. The habitats of the Loch were not used by men, for the stench of those buildings offended their nostrils. The Banners of Carthelion, Rhone and Gresia were placed by their own camps, rippling gently in the breeze. To those who dwelt around the Citadel it seemed that the hardest battle was yet to come. There was no easy way to enter the central fortress and the presence of the moat before the walls only complicated matters. The war was not yet over.

Barrin and Mirriam entered the outer perimeter late that afternoon. Rem and four riders had accompanied them. It was thought best not to involve them in the fighting for Barrin had already had a hard time and the forefront of battle was no place for children. Barrin's wounds were now healed but the scars on his neck and face, which he had received from that winged monstrosity, were still prominent. Mirriam thought the worst scar was in his mind for he had not been the same since that fateful night. His mood was sombre and much time would he spend sitting and staring into his Orb as though in a trance.

They took up their abode in the camp of Delthinius. This was the idea of Rem, he wished to keep an eye on Barrin. Bart was also allowed to stay in the Gresian camp. Rowgar had suggested this to Darrian and Delthinius, neither had objected. Rowgar for himself abode with Darrian, his duty lay with the forces of Carthelion.

That night there was much planning. All those who bore command, came together at the camp of Darrian. They sat in a circle surrounded by an armed guard. From Carthelion there was Darrian, he was head of the gathering. To his left sat Carrich and Ramagil, to his right Bradur and Rowgar. Delthinius was accompanied by Reoch, Farron and Theor, whose right arm was heavily bandaged. Meldir, who had had a rather sombre talk with Darrian that afternoon sat with Ryan. Barod was not present, he lay feverish with a severe head wound. Ryan was concerned for his life.

“I welcome you to the camp of Carthelion,” said Darrian. “Firstly I would like to thank you all for the part you played in our victory today, but as you all know it is only the first step, our main challenge still lies before us. Before we decide on the means of our assault on the Citadel, we should first pool our knowledge of the enemy. All information and ideas are welcome. Who would speak first?”

Delthinius spoke first, his knowledge of the Loch far exceeded that of anyone else. Many at the meeting were dumbfounded by what he said, especially when he spoke of the downfall of Isor, the Axe and his dealing with Thrawk. He spoke also of their journey from Gresia and of his fears of enemy reinforcements coming from Rholoch. Even of the Loch they had by-passed on the River Sren he spoke, and when he was done there followed a long silence.

“You are indeed a Lore, Master,” said Ryan. “The knowledge you have of the origins of our lands far exceeds our own knowledge, I wish we had time to talk of them more, but alas we have not. Perhaps Bradur would tell his tale, for much of my undertaking was done by his side.”

“That is true,” said Bradur. “I will give my account as best I can.”

All listened with keen ears and that included the guards, who

also had great interest in what their fates were going to be.

Bradur spoke for quite a while; he saw the frown come upon the face of Rowgar when he spoke of his encounter with the two Loch on their journey from the White Mountains.

When all had spoken, they questioned one another on various points. Delthinius seemed eager to learn of Namariun and of the people of Dianon, though it seemed of no great importance. Eventually their talk turned to the Citadel and plans were drawn up for its conquest. The means for crossing the moat and scaling the walls were discussed, all had their part to play.

Dawn approached before they had done, all were weary and thought to have a short while's rest before the rigours of the coming day. Darrian began to conclude the meeting when a small voice spoke up, not more than three paces from their circle. All turned to face the voice, it was Barrin, sat on the ground clutching his Orb.

A guard rushed over to remove him but he was stayed by Darrian. "I will speak of this to you later." His voice contained anger.

The guard backed away, he knew there would be angry words at his ineptness at keeping even a child from the meeting.

Barrin stood and walked to the council. They all knew who he was by the scars that he bore; Delthinius had explained his plight to them in detail.

Without leave being given to speak, Barrin turned his sight toward the leaders and began to talk in a low sincere voice. "Hear me, hear me, one and all, you who think to throw down the Citadel of Lochi, you who think that arms alone can defeat the one who has walked the Earth since the beginning of days. He who built this fortress from the rock of the Earth, fears no ordinary man, nor does he fear Lords and Royalty. His powers are far beyond anything that you may imagine." Barrin paused.

"What then does he fear?" asked Farron, looking rather sceptical. "Has he built this fortress to keep the wind out, does he worry about catching a cold in the draught?"

Delthinius put a hand on Farron's arm, to indicate to him that he had said enough.

"You think to mock me," replied Barrin. "You think I am a little

lost child. ...”

At that moment Rem appeared. “BARRIN! BARRIN!” he called. Coming upon the gathering swiftly, he said, “I beg your pardon, sirs. It is difficult to keep an eye on my patient all the time. The experience that he has been through still affects him; he will be all right after a little more rest. I hope that you have not been disturbed.”

“Not at all,” said Ryan. “We have concluded our business for this night. We now wait for the sun to rise.”

“It is well then,” replied Rem. He turned and led Barrin back to his resting place.

The meeting broke up shortly after Barrin and Rem had left, with no more than a few comments about Barrin’s appearance, although the expressions on some of the leader’s faces gave the impression that there was less said than there may have been.

Barrin, for this part slept the rest of the night peaceably, though there was little of the night left. When he awoke he found Mirriam and Rem by his side. “What is it?” he uttered groggily. “Why do you watch over me?”

“We keep only each others company,” replied Rem.

Barrin sat up, his Orb still in his hand. He looked at it, then slipped the chain over his head.

“Are you sure that is wise?” said Mirriam. “It may still trouble your wounds.”

Barrin seemed uncomfortable, but he assured her that he was all right.

“How goes the preparations for the assault on the Citadel?” he queried.

“They will be complete soon,” answered Rem. “They make haste for battle. Darrian worries about his people and especially his bride, who may now be coming to the outer borders of Rhone. He fears for their safety, crossing the Land of Scavengers. These are the words of Reoch, who sat in council last night. Delthinius thinks Loch reinforcements may come from Rholoch, so he also advises a speedy attack, lest we be caught between two forces.”

“Oh! I see!” said Barrin. “I hope all goes well. If Tackurion and his warriors of old were here, they would cast down the walls,

would they not.”

“Of course,” replied Rem. He tried to keep the look of concern from his brow, he did not like the way Barrin had begun to talk, he seemed obsessed with Tackurion, not to mention his Orb; he thought also that Gerome would appear in the nick of time and save them all with his ‘magic’, as he called it. It was all very worrying.

At that moment Bart appeared, in his hands was a tray, with four bowls of broth upon it. “Good morning gentlemen and Mirriam,” he said smiling. “I thought that you poor hungry souls could do with something to brighten you up and weigh you down.”

They all returned the smile, even Barrin. Bart had a way to get through to him, that no-one else seemed to possess.

“We should not be here long now,” he continued. “I reckon no more than a couple of days.”

“I hope that you are right,” slurped Mirriam, tucking into her broth. “This place is enough to make anyone shudder.”

“It is quite safe,” said Bart. “A close watch is kept on the Citadel all the time and the outer walls are watched by Tarrol, very little passes him unnoticed.”

“Of course you are right,” Rem took a bowl of broth as he spoke. “There are some fine men gathered about us. I deem the first move will be ours.”

“Will you be joining the assault, Rem?” Mirriam asked.

“No, not me. Delthinius says I am too valuable an asset to risk in battle, ‘who would tend the wounded,’ he said. There are others who have my skills and they will be held back also.”

“What of you, Bart?” queried Barrin.

“Oh, I will be at the head of our army, Rowgar says I am his number two!” Bart could not help smiling at that. More likely, one hundred and two, he thought.

“It must have been the way that you handled yourself on the ford of the River Sren,” said Rem.

“Yes, he did say I gave the best performance of any trooper of Carthelion, of course, had there been anyone else there, it may have been different. I think had Barrin been a trooper I should have come second.”

“You belittle yourself, Bart,” Mirriam spoke with sincerity.

“What would we have done without you, over the many days we have journeyed.”

Bart felt himself flushing up.

“I would agree with that also,” added Rem.

“Me too,” agreed Barrin.

It was too much for Bart, his face was burning red. “You all jest,” he said. “Now come and eat up, I have preparations of my own to make.” Bart collected the bowls, his own being barely touched, then made his way back to the cooking pot.

Miriam looked at Rem. “Do you think we said something wrong?” she uttered.



# *WARLOCH*

In the Citadel of Lochgor, stood a shadowy figure. Above him was the great domed roof of darkness, no sunlight entered this chamber, for it was the hall of He Who Commands.

The legions of Rholoch and Lochgor were bent to his will. In his left hand he held the Earthen Staff and about him was a circle of cold flame. It danced upon the barren floor with no means of replenishment, yet it did not falter or die. Its cool light threw menacing shadows of the one figure onto the circular wall which surrounded him, even to the lightless dome the shadow fell, deeper than black itself.

This was the dwelling of the Warloch and none entered in, save at his bidding. His form was that of a Loch and his face was stern and cruel. LOCHI, his servants called him, save when they used the term Master. He was then as he had always been, his shape nor figure had ever changed, save in the eyes of men, but even now they would see as the Loch did, for his power was again at its zenith.

Before him appeared the walls of the Citadel. The image was at first a blur, then it became crystal clear. There was a gathering of men, arrayed as for war. Banners were flying and swords were drawn, but it troubled him not. Silence was upon the hall as he watched the men trying to bridge his moat and scale his walls; time and time again they tried, but to no avail. Lochi was pleased, exceptionally pleased. Soon they would give up and rethink, while Darachlon drew ever closer.

The image before Lochi dissipated, his interest had lapsed. He thought now of the Orb of Zarrion. The Orb with which he had traced the journey of the Gresians. He grinned fiendishly at his little plot with the splinter of Staff. Did they think him a fool? His attempt to regain the Orb, did they think him serious, why should he require the Orb until it had served its purpose, but now that

purpose had ended, it would soon be his. Only one thing remained, Zarrion! Was he hiding like he did on Isor? Perhaps so, but why did the boy carry his Orb, could Zarrion observe events through it, in similar fashion to the way he could manipulate the Earthen Staff? Maybe that was the answer.

Lochi needed his Staff only when performing great ill, for his power could be focused with its aid on one task only. While his power was at its peak, he could control his hordes without it, they could feel his presence everywhere.

Lochi realised that the Axe held the same power as his Staff, but he thought the Axe was upon Isor and he knew its accursed wielder had perished. The memory of that meeting with Tackurion still plagued him on occasion. It had set his plans back countless years and made him less than happy. Of the Orb – in the hands of a child he thought it useless, so now his great triumph was near. He knew the servants of Elebriouse were at hand, but they could be handled. All there was to do now was wait – wait for Darachlon. Above his head he raised the Staff. “Make haste Darachlon, your Master commands it.” Lochi’s will reached northward, but it did not ride the airs of the world like that of Elebriouse, sheer force thrust it to its destination.

Darachlon pushed his legions harder. The power of Lochi was upon him, it drove him onward, ever faster.

# ***WARRIORS***

Darrian stood one hundred paces back from the moat which surrounded the Citadel. The strain of the past few days lay heavily on him. He had come to a dead end. It seemed an impossible task that lay before him. Three times already had the combined forces of Carthelion, Rhone and Gresia made an assault on this Loch stronghold and three times had they been thrown back. They had not looked like gaining a foothold and that was the worst thing. It was soul destroying watching his men perish before the walls.

Darrian racked his brain trying to think of a new approach to the situation, but he was out of ideas, he had already tried every approach he could think of, even to the extent of trying to wield the Axe which Delthinius kept hitched upon his horse. Ever since Delthinius had spoken of the Axe's origin, he had thought it an implement wasted, yet he did not know what purpose it served. He presumed that Delthinius had made the Axe's presence known after the first assault on the Citadel, just in case anyone else had any thoughts on its use. Darrian could tell by looking into the eyes of Delthinius that he thought the Axe had a part to play in the coming days, although he seemed loath to let anyone try and carry the Axe into battle, which seemed a contradiction in itself. **WHAT PURPOSE DID IT SERVE**, he thought? It was clear to Darrian that the High Ones of the Telematre had used the Axe to great advantage, it was a tool to them, a medium with which they could influence the world, not a weapon of war.

Darrian stared at the Citadel walls, which seemed totally devoid of the enemy, while his minds eye pictured the scene after the first attack. He saw bodies littering the ground and floating in the moat, then his mind jumped forward in time. Delthinius was standing with his Axe, beckoning those who thought that they could wield it in battle to come forward and see what they thought to its balance. That was a joke. Rowgar and Ramagil could barely lift it from the

ground. Farron lifted the Axe, but immediately put it down again with a look of disbelief on his face. Theor could not move it at all. For himself, he found it heavy, too heavy to handle in battle. Delthinius had given him a strange look when he saw that he could even lift it. It seemed that the Axe weighed differently depending who handled it, and that Delthinius was indeed testing people by allowing them to handle it, though what exactly he was looking for remained a mystery. Bradur could lift the Axe but it was obvious that it was sheer muscle power that allowed him to bear its weight. He was not known as 'The Rock' for nothing, mused Darrian, allowing himself half a smile at his own thoughts; then the smile faded. None could handle the Axe with ease, not even Delthinius himself. Tarrol had gone so far as to refuse to even touch the Axe.

Bradur joined Darrian and for several moments they both stared at the daunting walls of the Citadel. "Perhaps a siege," suggested Bradur. "I can see no other way. They cannot stay holed up forever."

"Had we the time, that would be the best course of action, but what of our people, entering the Land of Scavengers and what if aid does arrive from Rholoch, then what?" Darrian's voice was deeply troubled.

"Our people can fend for themselves," said Bradur. "I realise Lithien travels with them, but they have an armed guard. They undertook the journey to spur us on, not hinder us. The Loch of the North, we shall have to face anyhow. We may as well prepare our defences here as best we can, our forces dwindle, I doubt if we have eight thousand able men, including those of Gresia and Rhone. We cannot waste any more life, battering our heads against those walls."

"I see that, Bradur, I will speak with the others, as you say, there may be no other way." Darrian parted company and headed toward the camp of Gresia, he looked disillusioned.

The plans for a lasting siege were drawn up, neither Darrian nor Delthinius were happy at the prospect, but they could do naught else. Many guards were placed on the outer walls to walk the ramparts and an equal number on the inner walls to pass on any message that may come. Three mobile forces of riders were set up

to cover the total length of the battlements and it was a great length indeed. It taxed their forces sorely.

The gates of the Citadel were watched continuously by many archers, they could not afford an assault from within coming on them at unawares. The greatest difficulty was that of food. A detachment would have to be sent in search of the herds of auroch and deer which they thought to roam the land, lest they befell the fate which they prepared for the Loch, but care would have to be taken. Darrian had not forgotten the messengers he had sent to Bradur on their arrival at Lochgor, those who had never arrived. The fate of Namariun he pondered also, but there was still time for his arrival, he was, after all on foot.

Darrian returned to his sparse quarters that night, with a heavy cloud hanging over him. Maybe the coming day will bring new hope, he thought.

All the next day brought was rain, so did the day after. It brought a feeling of deeper gloom, but at least they had no water shortage.

The rain did not prevent Tarrol from scaling the northern watchtower of Lochgor. High it stood, almost reaching into the low hanging cloud, but this did not daunt him. He had come into contact with Farron and they had struck a great friendship. In some respects they were of the same temperament. Between them they bore the audacity to attempt anything, including the sheer walls that towered over them. Tarrol spent much time with hammer, spike and rope, to reach the battlement and his muscles did not forgive him easily. On reaching the battlement he lowered a knotted rope, which Farron proceeded to climb warily.

Tarrol gave Farron a helping hand over the battlements stonework and they both stood a moment looking down upon Lochgor.

“I presume we are alone here,” said Farron.

“There are no Loch on the battlement,” replied Tarrol.

“And within the tower?” queried Farron.

Tarrol shrugged his shoulders. “The view of a lifetime,” he commented, looking firstly to the High Plains to the West and then southward to the Citadel.

Farron also turned his eyes to the Citadel. "It seems no less of a bastion from here," he said.

"No," said Tarrol, "but it is good to look down on it, instead of up." Tarrol's voice was deep and filled with contempt.

Farron gave a wry smile. "Shall we proceed?"

With their muscles back to normal, they made their way to the tower entrance, inside, in the gloom they could see a central stairwell. Tarrol pointed toward the entrance wall, where two torches hung, they looked at each other then removed the torches from the wall.

"Do you think that we are expected?" asked Tarrol.

"I doubt the Loch expected us to scale the wall, though we must assume that they did," replied Farron.

"Sometimes you are suspicious," stated Tarrol.

"I am always suspicious," stated Farron.

They kindled the torches the Loch had conveniently left and began their downward trek.

"There must be access from elsewhere," said Farron, "lest the Loch jumped to their deaths during the attack and that sounds most unlikely."

"Perhaps they are still here," answered Tarrol.

"If they are it is time we were rid," replied Farron.

"As long as there are not more than a score of them," Tarrol gave a rare grin as he spoke.

They both held their torches in their left hand; the other hand bore their swords which were at the ready. Slowly they descended the stairs. They came across several small rooms built into the outer wall of the tower, each of which was checked thoroughly. The rooms were scattered in a random fashion, all with just one opening which led onto the stairwell. The logic behind this manner of building was beyond Tarrol, but then Tarrol was not a builder.

After what seemed a great length of time, they reached the bottom of the stairs. Farron guessed they were below the level of the ground. A passageway led forward from the stairwell, but they had no idea in which direction it led, their spiral descent had completely confused their sense of direction.

Tarrol could not understand why the tower had been deserted, it

seemed a good vantage point from which to view the land, not the least the camps of the liberators. His only answer to this was that the Loch had drawn all their strength back into the Citadel, not in his wildest dreams did he think that the ruler of Loch needed no watchtower to view his enemies in his own domain.

Farron and Tarrol now walked side by side; the passageway had led them into a large cavern. Farron halted and motioned Tarrol to do the same. He listened. "Can you hear anything?" he asked.

Tarrol listened. "Yes," he said. "It sounds like scraping, maybe just a rat, or some other wretched creature."

"You may be right," replied Farron. "But on the other hand, it may be something larger."

They moved forward stealthily, their shadows wavering close behind. Toward the sound they moved and ever it grew louder. Before them was an inset in the cavern wall, it seemed to be the source of the scraping.

"Whatever is inside must know of our presence," whispered Farron motioning toward their torches.

Both stood near the entrance and readied themselves for action. Farron was first to leap into the opening, his torch flickering light inside. Tarrol saw his face turn a deathly white. "What is it?" he said.

Farron motioned him forward.

Tarrol moved from his crouching stance and stepped to where he could see. His face fell also, they now knew what made that scraping noise and it was not very pretty.

The opening led into another cavern but this one was sealed at the far end. On the floor sat, what must once have been able bodied men and women, even children it seemed, but now, they looked no more than flesh covered bones. It was impossible in some cases to tell who was alive and who was dead, only one man stirred; he scraped some sort of utensil in an empty bowl.

Tarrol's nostrils detected the obnoxious stench of decay from within. It made his stomach feel queasy. He was surprised he had not noticed it sooner, perhaps the stagnant air of the place had helped to conceal it. Tarrol turned away in disgust. His stomach began to settle, then hate began to well up inside him. "They will

regret this deed,” he said. “Every last one of them.”

Farron turned away also; as they stood at the entrance looking into the blackness, small points of light began to appear in front of them.

“The Loch are before us,” cried Farron. “Make for the stairs.”

It suddenly dawned on Tarrol that those points of lights were eyes, they could be no more than five paces away. He leapt into flight behind Farron, and not a second too soon.

The cavern came alight as torches were lit, even Loch could not see in total darkness. They had followed the men’s light to their prey but now their concealment mattered no more.

Flaying his sword Tarrol reached the stairwell on the heels of Farron and quickly they ascended. Their legs bore them sturdily up the many steps, until light came at last into view. The Loch could not match their pace, their bodies were too heavy. Farron made for the rope as soon as they emerged from the darkness but Tarrol did not follow.

“COME,” yelled Farron. “WE CANNOT FIGHT A HORDE ON OUR OWN.”

“AND LEAVE THOSE PEOPLE BELOW,” retorted Tarrol. “NEVER!”

Farron looked upon Tarrol and saw his face was wrathful. Youth still shone behind his haggard features and for just an instant Farron glimpsed a warrior both noble and tall, whose eyes were both bold and terrible.

Farron sprang to the near side of the entrance, Tarrol stood on the far side. The first Loch who exited, never knew his life had ended. Tarrol’s blow struck him beneath his breastplate and as he began to keel Farron struck behind the neck, the force of that blow sent the Loch against the parapet, his feet lifted off the ground and he plummeted downward. The guard who stood on the rampart below was stunned for several moments, as the Loch landed beside him, its head severed save for the thinnest of strands.

Tarrol heard the horn of Carthelion as he hacked at his pursuers but he thought not of help, this was his battle. Many Loch fell on that battlement. Tarrol’s sword was long and keen, he used it well. Farron backed his action with a ferocity borne of desperation, and a



skill known to few, but the odds were many, and as his speed declined, he felt a sharp pain in his groin, he stumbled to the edge of the battlement, where he fell to his knees, clutching his stomach.

Below, Rowgar and many followers were climbing up the rope frantically, some used the spikes which Tarrol had hammered into the wall on his own ascent.

Farron heard the sound of men scaling the tower. They will soon be here, he thought, but his sight became blurred and dark flapping wings surrounded him.

Tarrol fought on, he had been forced backward to the battlement but his sword still sang a song of death. Those below who could not be accommodated by the rope, stood and watched in awe. Tarrol began to shout as he slew, "DIE LOCH, DIE – THE WARLOCH I WILL KILL." Iron clad monsters fell all about as he chanted, cursed and raved. For that amount of time which elapsed upon the watchtower of Lochgor, Tarrol became the mightiest warrior Carthelion had ever known and not until Rowgar had put his hands upon the stonework of that battlement did Tarrol falter. He turned to Rowgar and yelled, "THERE ARE PEOPLE IN THE WATCHTOWER CAVERNS BELOW." No more did he speak, for the mace of a Loch caught his head square and he fell silent.

Rowgar took up his fight, then many more joined him. The Loch were driven back and as they retreated, men took up their fallen torches, they re-kindled them from the last fire of Tarrol's torch flame and they took pursuit.

Rowgar did not follow; he knelt beside the body of Tarrol. "For what did you deserve this," he whispered, then he lifted his eyes to the heavy northern sky.

Only a short time after that the troopers returned from the depths of the tower. Tarrol's body had already been lowered to the rampart and Rem had climbed the rope bearing his bag of herbs, he tended Farron, for he still took breath. The faces of the men that emerged from the tower looked vacant and it was not long before Rowgar knew why. There were people emerging with the troopers, who for the main were being carried and they looked a ghastly sight. Rowgar gave a sigh. "This is why Tarrol fought like a demon, yet I think he would have fought to the death regardless, we have lost

one of our bravest warriors this day, let him not pass over in vain.” Rowgar spoke softly, more to himself than anyone who may have been listening, then he raised his voice a little, “Prepare stretchers, we will do for these wretched people what we can.”

At that moment a small child was carried by the place where Rowgar stood. He looked upon its pitiful face. “Yes,” he said, “let not Tarrol’s death be in vain.” He knew at that moment, had he been the one standing alone on the rampart, he too would have fought to his last strength. Some things in this world had to be fought for, no matter what the cost.

\* \* \*

As twilight approached, the rain heavy clouds began to disperse. A new mound could be seen on the High Plains and beside it stood four lonely figures. They stood a while in silence, then began a slow walk toward the southern tower. They halted half way down the hillside and turned again toward the final resting place, bowing their heads in a final farewell. As they raised their eyes again to the plains, the sun broke its cloud cover just above the horizon and the sky became red. The swords of the fallen threw long shadows upon the earth, and they themselves stood dark against the setting sun.

“It is a black day,” said Reoch, “but even in the darkness a light still shines. The captives of the Loch have found new freedom, those who recover from their pains should thank Tarrol and Farron for their liberty.”

“Indeed, they should,” agreed Darrian. “Ten Loch they slew upon that battlement, a feat I think none will ever match, we should take our courage from them. If we all fought as gamely as they, the war would soon be at an end.”

“It surely would,” confirmed Reoch, as he raised and turned his head to view the walls of Lochgor.

Walking beside Reoch was Rowgar and Delthinius, they kept their silence but Darrian’s words did not fall on deaf ears.

Rowgar, for himself was a little confused by the events of this day. He did not know why Farron and Tarrol had climbed the watchtower walls by themselves, he thought Farron too wary to

take such risks, unless Tarrol had talked him into it, but even stranger than that, was the 'laying to rest', it should have been Tarrol they buried not Farron. He could have sworn that Tarrol was dead upon the watchtower, and all knew that Farron was still alive, yet when Rem descended the tower, he declared that Farron had passed on and young Barrin who knelt beside Tarrol, with his head upon Tarrol's chest said he could hear a heart beat. Rowgar shook his head, he did not know whether it was a good thing that Tarrol lived. Rem said he had no chance of recovery, his skull had been fractured in several places.

When they entered the walls of Lochgor they made their way to where Bradur and Rem awaited them and to where Tarrol lay.

Bradur watched their approach as Rem tended Tarrol. He bore a worried and tired look on his brow. Bradur did not attend the 'laying to rest' of Farron because it was considered dangerous to leave the fortress with too few commanders, but he would visit the mound when his duties permitted him time to do so.

"How fares Tarrol?" queried Rowgar on arrival.

Bradur held out his hands in a shrugging gesture.

Rem looked up, "I can see no hope, I deem his wounds are fatal. He has lost a lot of blood and lies in a coma. I see little chance of him ever awakening."

"Perhaps it would be kinder if he did not," said Darrian. "Unless he regained full health, he would not thank you for saving him."

"I am sure he would not," said Rowgar with sadness and conviction.

Rem raised an eyebrow at Rowgar's certainty.

"It is a pity," continued Rowgar, "that we could not gain entry into the Citadel via those caverns. I think that there is a way, but the cunning which went into its hiding defeats us."

"It may be wise to leave those watchtowers be," said Reoch. "Who knows what may await us in the other two towers. I have no doubt that they have not been left, simply for us to occupy."

"But what if there are people in the other towers?" concern was on Bradur's face as he spoke.

"We do not know anything for certain," replied Reoch, "except that we have a war to win, we must conserve all our strength for the

benefit of the majority, we must not fail in our main objective.”

After much debate, which at times became heated, Reoch's argument stood firm and it was decided not to push forward with a search of the other towers but the northern tower would not be abandoned. It would be used to survey the woodland on the eastern wall. Four men at all times, would stay on its battlement, two of these to watch the entrance which led downward to the caverns; there was still much doubt about the safety of the tower. The other two men would look outward to the East and the Northwest, to watch for any sign of movement.

Darkness fell upon the fortress of Lochgor, as the watchmen scaled the tower, they would have a restless night. Those who slept below, did so uneasily. The alien surrounds ensured that they slept lightly, though it was not necessary, for the night passed without incident.

The morning came with a burst of fire, as the sun rose into the sky. Men's hearts lifted at the welcome sight, it was good to feel its warmth again.

The guards changed their watch and all went smoothly. Those who had spent the night high on the watchtower still seemed wide awake and their faces showed visible signs of relief. For those who were not on duty, the morning passed steadily, some played trax and gimbo, others just cleaned and sharpened their weapons but wherever men were to be found, there was talk of the Warloch and legendary warriors. The mouths of the guards who stood by the meeting of leaders not many nights before, when Barrin had arrived unexpectedly, had given out what their ears had taken in. Rumours were rife and as in all gossip, many of the facts were bent, twisted and blown out of all proportion, but still it helped to pass the time. Darrian and Ryan had made a point of visiting Delthinius. They had little time for social activities but Ryan's description of the fanfare the host of Gresia had struck up before their charge on Lochgor had interested Darrian intensely. His spirits had risen like those of the men with the coming of the sun; he thought a short while from his duties would do no harm. Delthinius was more than obliged to accommodate Darrian's request and showed him one of the strange horns they used to play the fanfare, but he could not

permit its use. 'It may throw confusion amongst my men,' he had said, 'when this affair is done with, we shall find time.' Darrian promised to take him up on his word.

Barrin spent the morning with Mirriam and Bart, doing nothing in particular. Reoch joined them for a while to see how they were faring and to him all seemed well. Bart had been telling a story of home when Reoch arrived, and Reoch listened intently. No-one knew a great deal of Bart, but from his story it seemed he was an only child and his parents had passed on many years ago. He had gone to live with Turly, as he had no relatives of his own. He now recounted some of the times he and Turly had spent together.

The story began sadly, especially with the memory of Turly still in their minds, but it was not long before they were howling with laughter. It seemed that Bart's simple life had been with him for all of his two score years, and some of the paths his life had led down were extremely funny, even Barrin seemed to shake off the foreboding which had hung upon him for many days. Eventually Bart became silent and the others got a few words in.

Reoch brought them up to date with events, leaving out anything he thought unpleasant and not really necessary; some events they knew of already, such as the death of Farron and the injuries of Tarrol, the food shortage they also knew of, but it was not the first time that they had gone without proper meals.

When Reoch had brought them all up to date, Bart continued to story tell, it seemed his audience would listen forever.

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After mid-day Bradur left the fortress walls, he went to pay his last respects to Farron and spent much time beside the mound. He had not known Farron very well, but the way he had fought upon the watchtower commanded respect. Bradur mourned his passing, though he knew the price they would all pay for the liberty of Carthelion would be high.

As he rose to return to the fortress, he heard the alert being sounded on the rampart. His mind sprang into action and his eyes scanned the land. To the South he could see movement, but it was

too distant to make out what it was. His first thought was, a Loch horde; he quickened his pace toward the gate. It was dangerous to be out here alone in the first place, he mused. Darrian should also have known better the previous day than to come out with such a small group. Had they been set upon the loss would have been catastrophic.

Bradur climbed to the rampart as soon as he entered the courtyard. From the walls he had a better view of the southern approach. Darrian was also upon that rampart and they watched together. It soon became obvious that it was not Loch which approached.

“LOWER YOUR BOWS,” cried Darrian. He did not trust the latch-action of the strange bows that the Gresians carried, though he had been assured by Theor that they were safe.

“They are men on foot,” said Bradur, “it seems they drive some sort of beast.”

“Is it the detachment that was sent out to hunt food?” queried Bart, who was not stood far away.

“If it is they have forgotten their horses,” replied Bradur.

Bart turned his head away.

Darrian’s face lifted as the footmen approached. The features of Namariun became clear, he looked similar in build to Ramagil but his face showed more signs of a hard life, his hair was lighter in colour also, even though Ramagil was fair haired himself.

It seemed that the Hunted of Dianon had been hunting themselves. It was a herd of goat they drove – domesticated, Darrian noted, they did not find them in the wild.

Darrian quickly descended the scaling ladder to greet Namariun.

“I see that you have indeed cast down the gates of Lochgor.”

“Only the outer ones,” said Darrian. “Tell me, Namariun, how you moved with such haste and where you acquired your stock?”

“Firstly, I did not move with haste, those of my people who travelled speedily, saw the fall of these gates. To your second question, we commandeered our beasts from an outpost of the Loch. They need them no more, as they will soon be departing this land.”

Darrian gave a hearty laugh, then beckoned Namariun through

the gate.

Delthinius stood by the inner courtyard opening. Darrian halted to introduce Namariun.

“Meet Delthinius, Lord of Gresia and the Island Kingdom of Isor.”

Namariun looked at Delthinius with wonder. “It is my pleasure, Lord,” said Namariun, then bowed his head.

“And you are Namariun, of the people of Dianon. It is good to make your acquaintance.” Delthinius needed no introduction. From what Darrian had said, he could be no other. “Perhaps you will join me later. I am sure we can find much to talk of.”

Namariun graciously accepted the invitation, then proceeded with Darrian through the inner courtyard wall. Namariun’s followers followed with their herd. It was a welcoming sight, to those who had not eaten fresh meat for many a day.

Namariun made no camp inside the battlement for the people of Dianon were always on the move, they slept in what shelter the countryside could offer them, they were content with what they could find in Lochgor. Trees provided shelter and the ground was soft under them.

That afternoon the new arrivals were introduced to the commanders of Carthelion and Gresia, not the least Ryan of Rhone. Their company was allotted duties no different from anyone else who abode there. By nightfall all was set in routine and the siege continued.

Barrin knew of the arrival of Namariun and though it should have been a happy occasion, to him it was not. The arrival of this company triggered a hammer in his heart, which began to pound with the running feet of destiny. He knew all their roads had come together, to decide the fate of the world for ages yet unthought of.

Miriam could see that Barrin was sliding back into his world of dreams, where ghostly shapes stood before him and beckoned him to their domain.

Much of the night Barrin spent looking at his Orb. Food he thought naught of. Bart could no longer lift him from his gloom. Rem tried his medicines but he knew that the sickness was in the mind and not in the body. He suggested that Barrin should try and

sleep. Sleep was a good healer and perhaps the morning would see him in a lighter mood. This Barrin conformed to, but his night was restless, his dreams were filled with shadows and even when the sun rose in the morning the shadows did not disperse.

Reoch was told of Barrin's condition by Rem, who was concerned greatly for the young boy. They had all grown together in their journey from Gresia. Reoch said he would do what he could, he was not a man of medicine but perhaps a few words would help.

Reoch strode toward Barrin's resting place, his morning duties would wait a while. He passed the horse grooms on his walk. "See you keep them ready for action," he said as he passed by.

The grooms looked at each other. "Are we preparing for battle?" one said, but no-one answered.

On his arrival at the children's abode, he bid Mirriam and Barrin a good morning, but only Mirriam returned the gesture. Barrin seemed deep in thought. Reoch seated himself facing them both, he looked into Barrin's face and also at the faint shifting red haze which engulfed Barrin's Orb. He perceived the depth of anguish which he had fallen into. "What troubles you, young master?" he said quietly.

"The storm clouds gather," replied Barrin, though his voice was so distant that it was barely audible. "We have woven the web about the spider."

"And now the spider will strike," finished Reoch.

Barrin looked up and met the eyes of Reoch and he read what was written there. "You know of our plight also," said Barrin, his voice becoming more coherent.

"I know only that our siege may help the Warloch, for he will not dwell in his Citadel forever. Plans he will have drawn up against us. His reluctance to come forth shows that he expects help from outside and if help he has sent for, it must surely come soon. Your heritage will be decided within these walls, but I do not despair, for the powers that watch over us, are no less than those of the Warloch. I believe the hearts of men will hold true and we will be victorious before the day is ended."

Barrin seemed to hearken to Reoch's words, his face became



brighter and he turned to look about himself.

The small figure of Bart was approaching.

“I cannot be much older than Rowgar,” mumbled Bart as he came beside Reoch, “but he climbs about the walls and I feel like an old granny.” Bart, of course had a tray before him.

Barrin turned back to Reoch and whispered in a solemn voice. “You are indeed very wise, sir,” then added, “but Bart is the better cook.”

Reoch laughed, it was good to hear Barrin with his old sense of humour, but he knew it would not last. The storm clouds had indeed gathered, the final raising of swords was nigh.

Bart put his tray down. “It is good to see you recover, lad, though if I find anyone else laughing at me, I shall go back to being a soldier.”

“But Bart, we have enough troubles already,” said Reoch.

Bart just smiled and Mirriam giggled.

“Will you not join us in our meal?” queried Bart.

“I think I may find time for a quick bite,” replied Reoch licking his lips.

“If you would care to come back at sun down I will prepare you something,” said Bart.

Reoch frowned.

“He who laughs last,” said Bart smiling pleasantly.

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Reoch’s thoughts on Barrin’s swift recovery were not unfounded. By mid-day Barrin had again become withdrawn but this time he was not alone, many in the host of men began to feel ill at ease, even the horses became restless.

The warriors of Gresia were kept on full alert. Delthinius had words with Ryan and Darrian concerning the foreboding that they all felt. “It is my belief that this day will not pass in peace,” he said. “The forces that guide and oppose us are gathered here, let us be ready for any eventuality.”

Darrian and Ryan did not question Delthinius for they felt the coming storm themselves.

The gates on the outer walls were again closed and archers set in position. Theor and Reoch had jointly taken the role of Farron. Ryan commanded his own men. Barod still lay seriously ill and hope for his recovery was fading. The destitutes, who were found in the caverns below the watchtower, were kept in a tight group on the northern side of Lochgor away from the Citadel entrance, where it was thought they would be safe.

Darrian surveyed the scene about him. The archers at the Citadel entrance had been reinforced. They formed an arc around the gates, keeping just out of range of the battlements. The view they had before them was clear, none of the thatched dwellings of Lochgor occupied this area. Turning to the battlements he saw his guards in position on the inner wall. The outer battlement was blocked from his view, this troubled him; he would have preferred it if he could have seen everywhere at once, since there could be a Loch attack from the Citadel or from any of the lands surrounding the perimeter of Lochgor. He had a sneaking feeling that he was in a trap of his own making, but he could think of no other course of action. All is ready, he thought, our mobile units are on full alert, and the men of Dianon also add their numbers to ours, that is good. Privately he hoped the waiting would soon be over; he had not discounted the possibility that they may have prepared for nothing and that the feeling of imminent danger was all in their minds. All he could do was hope, hope that they would soon be triumphant.

The afternoon passed slowly and by evening it did seem as though the preparations had all been for naught. To keep the troopers on full alert was almost impossible but Darrian knew of the reputed ability of the Loch to see well under dark conditions, so the threat of attack still lingered that night.

It was agreed that a rota should be set up – half the men would rest while the others stayed at their posts.

The night was eerie for those who stood on the battlements. Grey shapes flitted through the trees and many strange sounds came from the plains but naught could they see, only the ghosts of their imaginations.

The land was misty and the stars were dim, only the Eternal Warrior shone brightly in the sky, his flickering red light being

interpreted as a warning to all. It was said in legend that when the warrior's eye grew large and bright, the brothers Terror and Fear would stalk the land; fortunately only few believed this legend, although it still served to increase the men's unease; many times was a horn lifted to dry lips, but on no occasion was it blown. A sigh of relief came when the sky began to grow light, but the vision it brought was one of dread and the hearts of those who stood on the battlements misgave them. It seemed the rising of the sun belied the coming of a fine day.

Bradur came upon the ramparts early this morning; he looked out on what once was open land, but now the ground was covered with a great black shadow. The legions of Rholoch had completed their march.

The edge of the plains to the south side of Lochgor swarmed with the mighty Loch hordes, which had seemingly circled around the fortress. Inside the gates, the defence of the outer fortress was again in full swing.

Delthinius did not trust the openness of the Loch; he suspected an assault from the woodlands also. The outer gates of the northern tower were again checked for their security, as their strength had been reduced by the damage brought about by men, when they had forced entry. The iron gates were not trusted at all, as none knew how they were operated.

Darrian took command of the battlements which stood nigh to the watchtower to the South; with him stood Rowgar, Captain of Carhelion, his dark, hard features being in contrast to the fair Darrian, he waited for the command of his Prince. No fear showed upon his face, it seemed that he had been waiting for this day. His memory was long and the blame for the atrocities of the Krril, he lay squarely upon the shoulders of the Loch. Today he would gain his vengeance.

Bradur was despatched to the northern tower. His followers from the South now openly called him 'The Rock', and not without justification. In his right hand he bore his sword, Saranloch with which he intended to do the fighting of two this day. He had not forgotten his dead comrades. Ramagil accompanied him, he commanded the loyalty of all the archers who stood upon that

rampart, they knew him well for he was their gridrider, who had rode from the outer lands of Carthelion with them.

Ryan took the western tower, for his forces were depleted and it was thought the tower to the West would be put under the least strain. The Hunted of Dianon took leave of the mobile units to bolster the strength of Ryan, even then their total numbers were few.

There were three mobile forces inside the inner battlement which held themselves in readiness, they were commanded by Delthinius, Carrich and Theor.

Theor had at first been positioned outside the Citadel but Reoch had dissuaded Delthinius from this decision and he himself took the guard.

Carrich patrolled the south of Lochgor, he took with him two of the finest group leaders, he feared that his forces would have to split in the event of an inner assault from the Citadel.

Delthinius took the west side of Lochgor and Theor the north. All their men were mounted.

By far the largest company was that of Darrian, for he faced the new legions of Lochgor. He stood on the rampart eyeing them, when to his surprise a party rode toward the battlements. All halted out of accurate bowshot range of the battlements, save one, who continued on his guruk toward the wall.

Darrian was not familiar with the guruk which the Loch rode, but he had heard sufficient rumour that such a beast did not surprise him.

The Loch which approached the wall seemed old and it cushioned itself on the guruk's back by means of furs. Thirty paces from the wall it finally came to a standstill. The Loch craned its neck to see those who stood on the rampart. Its eyes seemed to fix themselves on Darrian.

"Hear me Prince of the outer lands," came a deep-throated voice. "For I speak the words of Lochi."

Murmurs broke out on the rampart, those who had heard the rumours which had spread throughout the camp about the fall of the island of Isor, recognised Lochi's name, but it was hard to believe that the demon of the past still lived.

“Say your piece,” rasped Darrian. “I think we have little to talk of save your withdrawal from Carthelion.” Darrian spoke bravely as was becoming for a Prince.

“You have until the sun rides high to depart these walls. If by that time, you still make your abode here, your lives are forfeit. Lochi awaits your answer. By his word alone does Darachlon now stay our legions, take not long in your deliberation.”

The Loch words themselves surprised Darrian, not the content but the fact that the Loch could speak them at all, it must be the one that Bradur encountered, he thought. Darrian lifted his eyes, to the group which had halted out of range. One of those must be Darachlon, he thought, probably the large one. He turned his head downward again to the old Loch which sat patiently astride its mount. “We have already found people that have been at the mercy of the Loch, do you think that we will readily leave our defence and trust the words of the most wretched atrocity which has ever set foot upon our fair land?” Darrian paused then said, “Your leader has much to answer for – and answer he will.”

“Prepare then, to meet your fate, most noble Prince. I deem your end will not come quickly. My Master has a way with such as you.”

“Begone Loch, you try my patience.”

The Loch turned its guruh, and cantered back to where the rest of the group waited. The large Loch that Darrian thought leader, raised its spear and with a mighty cry, it hurled it toward the gate. None would have thought it possible to sling a large iron spear such a distance, but the spear found its mark. With great force it struck the gate, and the thud was heard even on the inner battlements.

“A mighty Loch,” said Darrian coldly.

“Nay,” replied Rowgar. “Traucherous, is a better word.”

The Loch moved toward the battlements gargling. Many hundreds of which were bearing sling shot – a deadly weapon in those powerful hands. The slings were long to increase the speed of the rocks they hurled. The Loch had not the whiplash action of arm, but the rocks were heavy and they hindered the Loch little more than a pebble would hinder a man.

Guruks stood at the rear. Two of which bore a great ram between them. It seemed that the Loch would drive straight at the

gate regardless even of their own lives.

On the right flank of Darrian, there was a full legion of Loch, some mounted and others on foot. Those who rode carried heavy iron spears and those not mounted bore mace and broadswords, it did appear that they would not easily be deterred from their objective.

The rocks rained down upon the battlements thick and fast, but those who defended were not to be subdued. They retaliated with bowshot, of great accuracy and the Loch now knew that the walls would not be overrun easily.

Bradur and Ryan also faced the slingshot of the Loch, but on the north and westward approaches there seemed no legions to back the assault. Bradur thought the attack false, a ruse to keep them from the main offensive to the South. Though, this he thought to be true, he could not leave the North undefended, nor Ryan to the West for the Loch were full of deceit and they would not fall foul of the Loch plans, they would remain by their posts to the end, unless the battlements were breached elsewhere.

A watchful silence surrounded the Citadel at this time. It seemed for a while that the inhabitants were awaiting their comrades from the North to gain entry into Lochgor. Barrin and Mirriam were not situated far behind the lines of Reoch. They were perhaps in the most dangerous place in Lochgor, for the legions of Rholoch were pounding on the gates to the south of them, and the Citadel menaced them to the North, they were caught tightly in a clamp. Barrin had refused to leave this place for anywhere that may have offered comparative safety. 'If our venture does indeed go amiss,' he had said, 'it is better to fall in the midst of battle, than to be rounded up like animals and be subject to the scorn and taunts of the Warloch, which will also lead eventually to death, when he has tired of his chastising.' Rowgar had understood what Barrin had said and he did not try to force his hand, he said only, 'Take the sword of Turly and keep it by your side and perhaps Meldir will stay in this area with you to give aid if need be.' Then he had left to join Darrian on the rampart.

Meldir did indeed stay in the area; he set up his centre of communications on the very ground that Rowgar had stood upon.

Rem was also at hand, to tend the sick, he thought that he would be of most use in the centre of activities.

“Where is Bart?” asked Barrin as he stared into his Orb.

“I think he stands by Rowgar on the southern battlement,” replied Mirriam. “He always puts himself under Rowgar’s command, they have a great friendship, and none will interfere.”

“It is good to know,” murmured Barrin as he stood and let his Orb drop back upon his chest.

“Do you think the gates will hold?” queried Mirriam.

“No,” Barrin replied very distantly. “They will not hold, nor will the Citadel remain peaceful.”

At that moment a great crash came from the southern tower.

“They even now try to force the gates,” Barrin began to walk toward the Citadel as he spoke.

“WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU ARE GOING?” shouted Mirriam, her voice booming above the noise from the battlements.

Barrin did not answer. He thought it pointless, she would not hear him above the cries which were ringing around the walls. It seemed to Barrin that the fighting was fiercest behind him on the southern defences. He watched as two runners left the presence of Meldir. No doubt they are going to inform Delthinius and Theor of the position to the South, he thought. Many men went scurrying by him to the aid of this defence from Carrich’s mobile troop but Carrich himself did not go, he remained close to the Citadel.

Barrin came to a halt some ten paces behind the lines of Reoch; he drew his sword and leant upon the hilt, staring at the Citadel gate.

Without warning, the defences of the Citadel came alive. The battlements became full of Loch, bearing spear and sling. As the archers raised their bows to the battlements, the gates of the Citadel began to open. They did not open like ordinary gates, but lowered themselves to bridge the moat. They came down slowly at first, then accelerated as they neared the ground.

The archers were occupied with the battlements but one by one they turned their eyes to the gates, they knew they would face a direct assault and they prepared themselves as best they could.

As the gates touched earth, two Loch appeared side by side, they

sat astride armoured guruks, their faces hidden by iron helms. One bore a broadsword and one a mace. Together they crossed the moat.

Just for a moment the archers of Reoch hesitated but the voice of Reoch himself soon brought them back to reality. "SHOOT," he cried. "LET THEM NOT GAIN PASSAGE."

Arrows flew swift and straight, and the Loch fell, alas their guruks continued trampling forward, followed by what seemed another hundred mounted Loch. The archers fought gallantly, but they could not hold the tide.

Mirriam saw the danger and leapt upon Barrin forcing him to the ground.

The Loch on their guruks passed slowly by and made their way toward the southern watchtower. Over half the distance they covered before Delthinius came riding from the West to put off their advance. His sword flamed in the sunlight and he was followed by warriors both young and fair, they bore the flame of the Ikon in their hearts, never would they bow before the Loch.

The clearing before the Citadel became a place of deadly conflict, none would yield or withdraw. Columns of footbound Loch issued from the Citadel while the archers of Reoch cast aside their bows and drew their blades. Their war cries mingled with the hideous gargling of the Loch as they took to battle, they would fight until the last.

To the South the battle was going badly, the battlements had finally yielded to the onslaught of Darachlon. The outer gates had been broken down and the gate of iron had raised as if by some invisible hand. The Loch had suffered heavily as they crossed the courtyard, but they knew the secret of the inner wall. The wall opened effortlessly for them and the hordes poured through.

All Lochgor now thronged with the sound of battle. Those who occupied the inner battlement fought gamely to hold the lines of Loch who had entered. The Carthelions who occupied the outer battlement were now trapped and fighting desperately for their lives. Darrian was amongst those who found themselves surrounded, his situation was grave, few warriors now stood with him – still they fought on bravely. Rowgar saw their plight, for he had taken command of the inner wall but there was little he could



do save hope, and hope did not seem enough.

Theor had now joined the battle and messengers were being sent to Bradur and Ryan to pull back from their watchtowers; all men at arms were required before the Citadel for the numbers of Loch were great, too great for the courageous men who fought on against all odds. The day was looking black for those who sought to free the land from its oppressors, for many the sun would shine no more.

No-one noticed Ryan and Namariun join the battle before the Citadel. The fighting had become so fierce that none dared move their thought from their own defence. Ryan had left the western tower when he saw the Loch force entry to the South but this could not be said of Bradur. His view was hindered by the landscape and the Citadel and he knew not what befell to the South, not without word would he withdraw from his battlements.

A great length of time seemed to pass as the battle raged on and the strength of men began to fail. Slowly the hordes of Loch took command. Darachlon was at his height, none could withstand his mace; he now stood in the centre of the Citadel clearing, growling orders and gargling with pleasure. Many tried to put an end to his reign – none succeeded, even Namariun, a game warrior who moved swiftly could not come to terms with the power of Darachlon, he parried and dodged and at times brought his sword heavily down upon the great Loch but to no avail. Darachlon used his armour well, no blow found a way through his shielding. Had Namariun withdrawn from this duel he may have survived but he did not and as his actions became slower, the mace of Darachlon struck home. Namariun did not feel pain for his death came instantly.

Amidst the triumph of the Loch, the Master himself came forth; he stood in the gateway of the Citadel, his Staff clenched in his left hand and a great horn in his right, around his waist hung a dark broadsword, though he seemed not to need it. His horn he blew and his servants knew he would come amongst them, and their ravaging increased still further.

Theor saw the foreboding figure in the gateway and he thought to silence the horn forever. Two Loch stood before him as he

spurred his horse onward. One he cut to the ground with his sword and his steed trampled the other; on he rode over the lowered gateways until he approached Lochi himself. He raised his sword, "FOR THE DEATH OF ISOR!" he cried. Then Lochi smote him dead. His Staff being no more than a blur – it crackled with power as it struck home.

Barrin saw the fall of Theor as he crouched upon the ground. The Loch had passed him and Mirriam unnoticed. If any did see that they still lived, they paid no attention.

Barrin was not the only one to see the fall of Theor. Three warriors also gazed in that direction from a discreet position. "It is time," said one. "The moment for which we were born has arrived, though I had thought our task would be different."

"The Staff! We must take the Earthen Staff from Lochi," said another.

"And we shall no doubt die in the attempt," said the third. "I grow to like this land, must it end this way?"

"There is no other way," said the first. "I, too, grow fond of this land, but if the Staff is not taken from Lochi, there will be no land to be fond of."

They clasped hands, then parted.

Lochi made his way forward until he stood in the clearing. Several gallant men threw themselves upon him, but he slew them with ease, nothing seemed to trouble him, his power was too great for those who would see his downfall, and he knew this too well.

Barrin eyed the cruel face of Lochi; he recognised it from his dreams, the aura of evil was everywhere. He put his hand to his Orb, it felt warm. Then he turned his face to the sun, squinting his eyes against the light. "Help me Gerome," he whispered, "our time is running short." His eyes then fixed again on the Warloch.

Darachlon grinned as he saw his Master approach; he knew he would be pleased, the slaughter was going well. Darachlon turned to look for the 'high and mighty' Prince; he would bring this prize to Lochi himself. He would enjoy this for he had not forgotten the contempt Darrian had shown upon the battlements.

Mirriam's eyes searched about in desperation looking for someone who may give help, her eyes were swollen and her cheeks

damp. "We cannot be beaten this way," she murmured, "not like this, too many have died already, must we all die? What of Rowgar and Bart, do they still live, do any of our friends still live?" None could she see save Delthinius, fighting a desperate losing battle nearby.

The Warloch gloated and laughed, this was his moment; he had waited a long time for his final victory, now he would savour it, like he had savoured nothing before. His laughter grew to hideous hysterics, then came to an abrupt halt. He looked into the eyes of Reoch, then turned to his left, there stood Carrich and Meldir, not even Mirriam had seen their approach. Their eyes glowed with a power that brought thoughts of Thrawk to her conscious. They acted and moved as one.

"You think I know not who you are," mocked the Warloch as he looked into the eyes of Carrich. "Carantia, you are, serf of Elebriouse, and you," he said, moving his eyes to Meldir, "Manahlor, tell me where hides your Icelord?" Then lastly he turned to Reoch. "Last but not least," he said. "Antonion, why do you not crawl away to your frozen caves and conceal yourself from me. FOR I AM LOCHI, MASTER OF THE WORLD."

His last words shook Mirriam, but the faces of Lochi's adversaries did not change. Reoch's eyes flashed to Meldir and then Carrich, there were no words spoken, but a message was passed between them.

With no word of warning Carrich leapt at Lochi, his sword hurtling toward his helm clad head, Lochi dodged and struck Carrich a mighty blow with the Staff. The Staff emanated its utter blackness all about, turning light into darkness. Carrich fell heavily to the ground.

Meldir clasped his hands upon the Staff before Lochi had the time to retract it, they smouldered and burnt in its power, but he would not let go.

Reoch raised his sword in an attempt to fell Lochi from the rear. Lochi sensed this action and turned to clasp the sword hand of Reoch, placing his other around Reoch's throat. Reoch's face turned white as the life was squeezed out of him.

Meldir staggered from the clearing still clutching the Staff in his

hands. Its colour turned red and then white, hissing sounds came from it and flashes like lightning danced upon its length, but Meldir still clung tightly. He crashed upon a toppled shack, and flames leapt through the thatchwork.

Reoch still dangled from the hand of Lochi, his life had gone, but Lochi still chastised his dead body.

Barrin could watch no longer, he raised the sword of Turly and made to attack. "LET HIM GO!" he screamed.

Lochi swivelled his head towards Barrin with a single nonchalant mechanical action, and before Barrin could swing the sword, he felt the toughened footwear of the Warloch implant itself in his face, he fell to the ground, clutching at his eyes. His head swam with pain and through the pain he heard the voice of Lochi, scorning him. "Now where is your champion," he gloated "does he hang lifeless from my hand?" Lochi laughed and Barrin heard a screeching as if a great bird laughed with him. "Find me another champion," Lochi chided, "for I shall enjoy his death also, then I will take what is mine."

Barrin's throat was dry and his lips blooded, upon his chest his Orb burnt like fire. "Champion," he uttered, then louder, "Champion ... ESKARION," he cried. A force both powerful and mystical was upon him, which gained in strength from moment to moment. Somewhere inside, he knew his saviour stirred in sleep.

Mirriam crouched in terror, she wanted to help but her limbs had become frozen. The sky was becoming dark, ever darker. Barrin's voice she could still hear in its dying echoes, then the sun blotted out completely.

A great neighing came from the airs around and hoofbeats like thunder pierced the dark. Delthinius, who was still upon his horse close by, was not aware of the direction of the rider's approach in the dimness and when he did become aware of the rider's presence beside him, he could only stare.

The rider reached down to the Axe which was hitched to the mount of Delthinius. He snapped it free with ease. Axe in hand he rode towards Lochi.

Mirriam raised her head toward the rider, "Tarrol," she whispered incredulously, though her view was far from clear.

Lochi craned his neck slowly upward, away from the blooded boy. Before him, a great horse reared, its mane was long and black and its face curled in a hateful grin. Upon its back sat a dark warrior, he wore a winged helm and darkened cloak. His eyes were fiery and his face grim.

Lochi gargled. “The hero arrives,” he mocked. “Abarath a Carthelion and death to Lochi,” he laughed. “Do you come to slay me, brave warrior? Do you come to avenge the death of your kindred? Have you brought the Axe?” Lochi paused for just an instant. “The Axe of the Iceraker,” he said in a curious voice, “to smite me dead!” Then he rasped, “If so, make haste, I become bored.”

The flames from the thatched dwelling where Meldir had fallen, leapt higher, and smoke putrefied the air where Lochi stood.

The rider at first did not speak, he sat silently as his horse pranced from side to side. Then a voice hissed around the battlefield and all who heard fell silent.

“Arknar Warloch. Sabarath a Telori. Sabarath a Tallanica. Er Deco en Isor ... THE VOW LOCHI, WE HAVE COME TO KEEP OUR VOW. WHERE NOW IS THE STAFF OF THE EARTH?”

Lochi turned his head half way towards the burning shack, then his hand clutched tightly on his broadsword. His eyes narrowed and he spoke softly but one word, “Insinimus.”

The rider upon his horse also turned toward the burning shack, the flickering flames belying his smooth deliberation, then he cast an eye to the Eternal Warrior in the sky before turning his wrath on Lochi. His horse reared. “ABARATH A CARTHELION,” he cried – then in a lower more mysterious voice he said, “Abarath a Tukamar.”

The rider spurred his horse forward and steel met steel. Many times did the Axe fall and many times did Lochi divert its blade, until at the last Lochi gained a moment in which to strike back. The blade of the Warloch sank deep into the thigh of the warrior, he raised his sword again, then his face grimaced – for the Axe of the warrior struck his breastplate. The iron of that plate could not withstand such a fearsome blow and Lochi fell to one knee. He looked up at the shadow above him, a silhouette in the licking

flames. His face turned again to mockery and he grunted words in the tongue of the Loch. Alas, no ordinary man could understand these words, nor did any warrior see the final acts of those mighty foes, for they were engulfed in a swirling cloud of smoke. No more were these arch enemies to be seen on the battleground of Lochgor – alive, for no-one could stay in close proximity; the flames from the burning shack were dancing high and spreading over the sparse vegetation with an unnatural vigour.

Barrin felt himself being thrown upon the shoulders of a hardy soldier, and Mirriam recognised the face of Rem, as he dragged her away to safety. The sounds of battle again became prominent. The Loch had lost their leader and their driving force was diminished, but though no dominant will controlled them anymore they fought on viciously, each to his own for their central directive was gone.

The Loch drew courage from the dark for their eyes were keener than those of men but as the sun reappeared from the disc that had darkened it, their courage fled them – then came the final blow, Bradur and Ramagil appeared upon the rise to the Northeast, a company of foot-soldiers in their wake. “FOR CARTHELION,” cried Bradur, and his men charged downward. Their coming routed the Loch and they scrambled towards the inner gate in disarray.

Darachlon stood by the tower and he looked upon the scene before him. For the first time in his life a strange feeling came upon him, it was a feeling of remorse. He saw his followers scrambling for their lives. The destruction of his legions was at hand.

Jengis joined him before the tower and they looked upon one another as the remnants of their once great army bustled their way past.

“There are few left of our people to save,” said Darachlon, his voice filled with misgivings, “but those there are, I shall stand and defend. I give you my last order, guide whom you may back to the walls of Rholoch and order its defence as best you can. Our kind will never bond as one again, this I know. Go now before it is too late!”

Jengis saluted, his arm crossed upon his chest, he knew also that their day had gone, he realised also why he had felt strangely beside the great stone tomb upon the White Mountains.

Darachlon returned his salute and Jengis was gone.

The forces of Carthelion and Gresia bore down upon the watchtower to cut off the retreat of their foes, only Darachlon stood before them, his face was no longer contorted in a savage or scornful grin, it bore only the look of determination – and determined he was, he defended with every last energy and many fell before him.

Bradur saw the plight of the troopers, a host held in abeyance by the power of one. He seized upon a horse running free, and leapt upon its back. He galloped it towards Darachlon with Saranloch in his grasp.

Darachlon saw his approach and he drew himself up for his last stand. He swung his mace upward to ward off the blows of Bradur, which he did with great success. They fought a terrible duel, Carthelion against Loch, but for Darachlon it came to naught, he had exhausted his energy defending his own kind and Bradur overcame him, he slumped to the ground, wounded to his death. He was the mightiest of mortal Loch to fall that day and he fell not without his final purpose being fulfilled.

Rowgar yelled to Bradur from the inner battlement. “Our Prince, he was felled upon the perimeter rampart,” and pointed to the outer wall.

Bradur galloped through the inner wall opening. He dismounted swiftly and climbed the scaling ladder to the rampart, he saw Darrian lying upon his face. His heart was stricken. He turned Darrian over and saw that breath still passed his lips, he gave a sigh of relief, then called out to any who may hear, “BRING REM, BRING A HEALER QUICKLY.”

It was not long before Rem appeared, panting from his exertion. He had run the three hundred paces from where he was tending Barrin and his brow was covered with sweat. Kneeling beside Darrian he gave him a quick examination; the only mark he found was a huge bruise upon his head. Rem reached into his bag and brought out a pungent smelling herb; he held it before Darrian’s nose, and Darrian began to cough.

Bradur’s eyes lit up, he had seen herbs used on ladies in a swoon but never to cure a bludgeoned skull.

The Prince opened his eyes and slowly recognition came back to him. "I am still alive," he murmured. "What of the old Loch, two of them stood before me. I was upon my knees, my strength gone, then the sky darkened, the larger of the Loch ran for the scaling ladder and left the old one to finish me, so why do I still live?"

Bradur did not answer but stood erect and peered over the battlement. In the distance the remnants of the Loch made their retreat from the fortress. That was all the Loch save one. He sat upon a guruk and stared with glazed eyes upon the battlements of Lochgor. Bradur caught his eye and for long moments their eyes held together, then the Loch turned his guruk and headed toward his command. Bradur's gaze followed him a while. "Live and let live, he whispered, then knelt again by the side of his Prince. "I know not the answer to your question, Sire," he said solemnly, "but let us be grateful."



## *SHRINE OF EVIL*

A calm settled on Lochgor as the victors again began to order themselves. The number of lives lost could be counted but the cost could not be assessed. The sorrow that the survivors felt for themselves and for those who had fallen would be multiplied many times by the dependants of the dead. Some asked if it had all been worthwhile, but Bradur answered, "You know the fate which would have befallen the Outerlands of Carthelion had we not acted first, yet still you hold doubts on the validity of our efforts. It is well that those who have perished for the freedom of our lands cannot hear you now."

Barrin was again on his feet, his wounds, though gruesome to behold were only superficial. His face was cut and badly grazed, but there was no deep incision or fractures. His Orb still hung about his neck. It shone like a brightly lit ruby, the colour of sapphire had gone and Barrin guessed the reason why. His chest was burnt where the Orb had lain. A witness to the power which had been invoked.

Mirriam walked with Barrin outside the walls of the Citadel. She was thankful that they had lived through the ordeal which had been. Her thoughts she now focused on the future, something she had rarely done for fear of calamity, before that final battle of Lochgor, but now the way ahead lay open.

Barrin halted before the Citadel gates and looked upon the place of Theor's downfall. "Such a waste," he murmured sadly. "Is this the fate he deserved for all his efforts?"

Mirriam knew of what Barrin spoke and answered, "He did not die in vain, everyone had their part to play."

"Yes I see that," said Barrin. "Perhaps if Theor had not made his assault on Lochi, as useless as it may have seen then, the outcome of our efforts may have been different. All our actions, served to bring about his final downfall, the way that it was."

Mirriam detected a strangeness in Barrin's voice. He was definitely not the same little brother she had known only a season previous. She thought it to be the strain and torment he had undergone, since that awful night when Theor had saved his life. He will become himself again she told herself, the evil memories will diminish.

"Let us enter the Citadel, Mirriam, and see what we may find."

"NO," cried Mirriam, her face becoming flush. The flush passed as quickly as it came. "I did not mean to shout," she said, "but I fear it is an evil place, the likes of which we can do without."

"Of course," said Barrin. "I understand! I will have a look myself later."

"Why?" queried Mirriam. "Why must you set foot in that place of ... of?"

"Of what?" The tone in Barrin's voice never changed, neither did his expression.

"Well ... er, it must be a dreadful place, with the likes of the Loch living there, have we not seen enough of them." Agitation began to sound in Mirriam's voice. "Anyway the guard will not let you enter. I heard Rowgar say, no-one is to enter without permission."

"How are we really to know what lies beyond those gates, unless we enter, is it not better to know all we can of our enemies. It does not help to shirk our responsibilities."

"Responsibilities! What responsibilities? I think you rise above your station brother, we are only two children caught up in the wars of men." Mirriam's voice was now changing from agitation to anger. "Who do you think you are?" She gazed into Barrin's eyes; they were now dark and very deep, enchanting even. Her point of focus drew back to engulf all his face. He did not look like a child, meddling in the affairs of adults. Finally her eyes dropped to the Orb, she had noticed its change of colour earlier but had not thought it any stranger than many of the things they had already encountered, but now it seemed to take on a new significance.

"Should I answer that question?" said Barrin.

"I am sorry," said Mirriam. "I did not mean anything by what I said. It is only a day since you were subject to the brutality of that

monster, Lochi. I just do not want you to risk ...”

“I risk nothing, do not fret for me, sister.”

The word sister seemed to take on a different meaning as it rolled off Barrin’s tongue, but Mirriam did not understand what the meaning was.

“Let us go and find Bart,” Mirriam suggested. “He can lift the gloom we have brought upon ourselves.”

Barrin nodded, then popped the Orb under his tunic, his face showing a slight discomfort. Then he smiled; it was an honest smile.

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“They cannot vanish into thin air,” Bart looked puzzled as he spoke.

“Someone must have seen them,” replied Rowgar. “Who else stood fast at the Citadel gates? There must be someone left to tell the tale.”

“We saw them,” came a voice from behind.

Rowgar turned his head in surprise. “You were at the gate, Barrin! Of course you were, how foolish of me!”

“You were not to know,” said Mirriam.

“I did know,” Rowgar insisted, “it just slipped my mind.”

“The pressure of command,” Bart chipped in, wincing a little, as he caught sight of Barrin’s face.

“Be it as it may, it is still no excuse.” Rowgar looked annoyed with himself.

“What of Reoch and Carrich?” Bart enquired. “We are completely in the dark as to their whereabouts.”

“All we know is that they were seen with Meldir, as he approached Lochi,” continued Rowgar. “Rem informed us of this. We were led to believe that Meldir died by fire, several of our people saw him clutching a burning staff. His body must have been consumed by the flames, as Lochi’s body seems to have been.”

“As white as snow was the staff, they say, giving off a terrible heat,” said Bart, grimacing.

“We know,” Mirriam intervened giving a little shiver as the

memories came back to mind. “We were close by when Meldir wrested the Earthen Staff from the hands of Lochi.”

“Then tell us your story,” said Rowgar, “Delthinius and Darrian are concerned for their welfare.”

“Would it not be better if they told our leaders themselves?” Bart interceded, “Barrin and Mirriam should not have to re-live those final moments more than once. It must have been a gruesome ordeal for all concerned.”

Rowgar looked at Bart thoughtfully. “Perhaps you are right. I believe Darrian holds a meeting at this very moment in our own camp. He should have all the information we can give.”

“So much for lifting the gloom,” Mirriam mumbled.

Only four sat together in conference upon the warm earth. It reminded Rowgar of how many had fallen in their last effort to rid themselves of the Loch. The places of the fallen had not yet been filled and no doubt Darrian hoped that in the case of Carrich and Reoch this would not come to pass.

There were no guards in the vicinity of the four leaders. It was no longer deemed necessary. The meeting was bound to have its interruptions, this was understood by all.

Darrian acknowledged the approach of Rowgar and beckoned for him to join the meeting.

“I see you bring your friends, Rowgar, no doubt you require my attention.”

“Yes, Sire, I do indeed. I believe Barrin has the knowledge we seek, regarding the fates of Carrich and Reoch.”

This statement caused Bradur and Delthinius to sit erect, but Ryan did not show surprise.

“Be seated,” said Darrian, “any information we can obtain is more than welcome.”

The numbers of the meeting swelled to eight as the newcomers seated themselves. Barrin sat opposite Darrian, so he could talk directly at him.

“It would appear that you found yourself right in the middle of the action again, master Barrin. You are fortunate to still be alive.” Darrian spoke softly.

“Maybe so, Sire,” Barrin replied. His tone did not imply that he

felt fortunate.

Darrian thought he understood the reason why Barrin did not seem enthusiastic. Barrin's scars spoke for themselves. "Perhaps you could now enlighten us as to the fate of our trusted friends," said Darrian, his voice filled with concern.

"Indeed," continued Delthinius. "Reoch has been by my side for many years. If he is no more, I would like to know how it came about."

Bradur and Ryan remained silent. They awaited Barrin's tale patiently.

Barrin began his story to a hushed audience and not until it was complete did anyone else take it upon themselves to speak. Though he told a truthful story, he abbreviated the end which came to Reoch, for it was not a pleasant end, neither did he speak of the names with which Lochi labelled Reoch, Meldir and Carrich.

"So that is how their lives were taken from them," Darrian spoke with annoyance as well as grief. "Had they not been so gallant they may still be alive today."

"Not so," Delthinius spoke with conviction. "Had they not died in the manner in which they did, it is likely none of us would be here today. Do you not remember me speaking of the Earthen Staff at our first meeting?"

"You mean had the Axe again come in contact with the Staff, the land would have been destroyed," Darrian again showed concern.

"I still find it a hard story to believe," Bradur quipped.

"Your homeland does not lie beneath a mound of ash," retorted Delthinius.

"Forgive me, Lord," answered Bradur. "I did not mean to throw doubt upon your words."

"What I cannot understand is how Tarrol could raise himself from his death bed to wield the Axe!" said Ryan, interrupting. "No healer had the power to make him well, who in all Ineham has that sort of power?"

"Gerome had the power," Barrin murmured. Although his voice was low, all heads turned to stare at him.

"Gerome," uttered Bradur, his voice sounding of disbelief. "But

he is over a hundred leagues away.” Then thoughtfully he added, “Is he not?”

Barrin reached into his tunic and produced the Orb. Its glowing red colour surprised them all, save Mirriam and Delthinius. Delthinius seemed to be drowning in realisation.

Rowgar looked at Bart and Bart at Rowgar. They were getting used to surprises but this still caught them off guard, for they knew the lore of the Orb of Zarrion, while the others, Delthinius and Mirriam apart, knew only to whom it belonged, save that its colour should be that of a sapphire.

“I see that there is some significance in the colour of the Orb,” said Bradur, “but I do not see why this should lead us to believe that Gerome has been at work, nor does it throw any light on the whereabouts of Carrich and Reoch, even if Meldir’s body was engulfed in flame, theirs was not. There was very little to burn before the Citadel gates.”

“More significance than you think,” Delthinius spoke quietly, as though he was deep in thought. “The Orb to my knowledge has never shown the colour red, except when it has been in the possession of Gerome himself. This does indicate that at least his power has been at work here. The reason why the Orb still retains its colour, can only mean one of two things.” Delthinius paused looking troubled.

“You mean that his power is still at work or ... or.” The thought of what may have happened, seemed to come down on Darrian like a hammer blow.

“You mean that Gerome is dead,” Bradur spoke flatly.

“Come now,” said Ryan, “do you not think we are being a little hasty in our conclusions, we have no material evidence. Perhaps the stories of the Orb’s colouring have changed through the ages, besides, from what Bradur says the man is a great many leagues from here.”

“They are not stories passed by mouth,” replied Delthinius. “They are written in the Annals of Kings, which do not lie. We, of Gresia, still possess these writings, inscribed on the Foils of Aramus, which are as timeless as they are accurate; some are even inscribed in the runes of Tukamar. These include the reign of Treor,

of which a part tells of the coming of Zarrion or Gerome as you name him, to the Kingdom of Isor.”

“How did Meldir know to disarm Lochi of his Staff?” These were the first words Mirriam had spoken, since she had seated herself, most of the gathering had become oblivious to her presence. They now sat looking at her puzzled.

“But then again,” she continued. “Lochi did seem to know all of them. Mind you, he must have been mistaken, he got their names wrong.”

“Why? What did he call them?” said Delthinius, the puzzled look still remaining.

“Antonion, Manahlor and Carantia,” barked Barrin.

A silence fell, then amid the quiet Delthinius burst into laughter, which for him was unbecoming.

No-one shared his joke.

A short while passed and Delthinius again became calm. His laughter had changed to sadness. “It would appear our close friends were not as close as we thought.”

No-one, save Barrin had any idea what Delthinius meant, but they did not interrupt him, they bided their time.

Delthinius looked about him and saw that they all waited for an explanation. He did not give them his own words, merely a translation from the Foils of Aramus, which were written in the runes of Tukamar by the hand of Tackion.

“For many years we, of the Kingdom of Tukamar have lived in bliss, under the protection and guidance of those immortal beings who weave the dreams of reality, but this day our hearts are saddened, for this is the last day in which they will accompany us down the walkways of life. We grieve the passing of Elebriouse, the maker of all things we hold dear. We grieve the passing of Antonion and Carantia, guardians of the realm, for they are our protectors, whose endless vigilance stays the power of evil which we now know to inhabit the out-lands and last but not least, we grieve Manahlor whose wizened hand taught us how to preserve and defend the knowledge and beauty which is our heritage. Let us preserve his gift most of all ... Does that answer your question Mirriam?”

The words of Delthinius were still sinking home, when Barrin continued the line of thought from his own insight and experience.

“They then passed on to the higher planes, beyond the sight of mortal eyes. Only Gerome may have had knowledge of what events followed, for he travelled far, not least to the lands of the North, which lay beyond the kingdoms of men. I saw him in a pool of crystal water. To his left stood a figure of grace and serenity, but there too stood a figure of dread and evil. He was the mirrored image of Gerome himself. Loekan was his name, Warloch of the Citadel, Prince of Darkness.

In dreams he bore the form of the Loch. He marched his armies over farm and rock. Until at last a warrior came, Tackurion was his name; and with the Axe of the High One, the works of Isor were undone; but the land on Lochi took its toll, down deep he sank to the realm of Kariol, Empress of the wild waters whose domain knows no bounds, for the seas of the world circle around. Through the ages he lay dormant but not forever. He and his legions again came together. Through the blood of the land they waded. The strength of man could not defeat him unaided; at the last aid came, but even then, at the Warloch’s end, Lochi scorned his slayer. Now the oath of Tackurion is fulfilled, though Tarrol Eskarion, he did kill. Now they all pass from the world together, to the timeless lands where they shall dwell forever.”

More silence, Mirriam’s head was boggled and buzzing, Bart’s was in a whirl. Ryan and Bradur comprehended little, they grasped the implications of what Delthinius had said, but Barrin left them confused. Rowgar began to see the light, though slowly at first the pieces of the jigsaw came together.

Delthinius looked at Barrin and said, “Tarrol Eskarion, you say – Tarrol, the King unknown, to me he seemed like a man possessed, though his heroism is unsurpassed.”

“Possessed, indeed,” whispered Barrin.

“Thrawk said that Lochi would fall at the hands of man,” continued Delthinius, looking into Barrin’s Orb. “It really is not hard to see where the power came from to lift Tarrol from his deathbed, it is sad that we have had to finally lay Tarrol to rest upon the High Plains.” Delthinius paused a moment then continued.



“Perhaps we of Gresia should have done more. I, for myself, should have guessed that the true Prince of Darkness was Loekan and that Lochi was his evil guise. Maybe it was the goodness of Zarrion that made it impossible for me to believe that he and Loekan came into the world together – as brothers so to speak.”

“You did at least attach the names of Lochi and Loekan to the same loathsome creature,” Rowgar commented.

“That is true,” agreed Delthinius, “no doubt we all guessed the wrong form to be Loekan’s true shape. It was probably Loekan’s likeness to ourselves that we dismissed him as the fake. It seems we are too vain in our own self appraisal.”

“I am afraid I follow the tale not fully,” Darrian intervened. “It seems that some here know more of what has come to pass than others.”

“I would agree with that whole-heartedly.” Ryan was obviously as much in the dark as Darrian.

“None of us have all the facts,” said Delthinius, “but I will give you a quick summation of how I piece the events of what has gone before. Barrin may be able to add a little more. We shall see.

At the dawn of time, there was Elebriouse; he was alone in the world save for a few kinsmen, of how many there were we do not know. He shaped the world into a place of beauty and sowed the seeds of mortal creation in all its wonder. I deem Elebriouse was set this task in a place other than the world we know, by an entity we cannot imagine, but nevertheless the task was set and Elebriouse completed his work. However there was created more than he intended, whether the coming of these additions – the Zarrs, were inevitable, I cannot say. Maybe they were, for I find it strange that Elebriouse did not put his works to right, if it were within his power.

The peoples of Tukamar and Isor were the first to taste the bliss of creation and they lived under the guiding hand of those who have already been named, alas this peace came to an end. The peoples of Tukamar became estranged from the world and Isor perished in death and destruction, of how this came to pass I have already spoken, but what I did not know previously, was the fate of ‘Lochi’. It seems he was swept into the depths of the sea, when the

Ikon erupted and water swept over our lands. For long years he must have dwelt beneath the waves, suppressed in his actions by the power of Kariol, enchantress of the sea, but though her power is great, she did not succeed in putting an end to his evil ways, like Tackurion she failed. It must have tormented Gerome greatly to see Loekan again bringing destruction to the land. He must have eventually realised that he was the only one who could put a final end to his outrages. Whether he decided at Tackurion's downfall when he aided the refugees of Isor or when he saw that not even a servant of the high mountain could put an end to Loekan's terror, I do not know. Perhaps it was not until the fall of Carthelion that he decided to act, whichever it was, he realised the burden of Tackurion's oath lay squarely upon his shoulders and as we see he helped to fulfil that oath, though it may have brought his own end also. It is questionable whether one could live in the world without the other. They were like the two halves of man we carry inside us – the good and the evil, only they were two separate entities. ALL THAT NOW REMAINS IS THE ORB through which Zarrion worked his wonders – such as lifting Tarrol from his deathbed and of what that signifies?"

Delthinius looked at Barrin quizzically.

"I cannot answer that, sir, I know the effects it has upon me, but if there is any deeper meaning, it eludes me."

"What are these effects?" queried Darrian.

"I have strange dreams," Barrin answered, "also I have the ability to understand strange languages, my memories become clearer and I know things that I have never learnt, not in the normal sense anyway."

"Give us an instance of this," asked Ryan.

"I think you have had several instances already," Delthinius interrupted. "Were we not given warning of the coming of outside help, were we not told our efforts would come to naught if we were unaided?"

Ryan did not pursue his point, whether he was convinced or not was another thing.

Rowgar became troubled at Barrin's words; he did not fret for himself, the secret he had kept for so many years could harm

Mirriam and Barrin far more than himself. Could Barrin remember the night of the burning homestead? He turned to Barrin as if to speak ...

“Excuse me, sirs!” A trooper had come up beside Bradur completely unnoticed; he had a look of urgency on his face. Not really knowing whom to address, he spoke to the meeting as a whole.

“We think we have found the central chambers of the Citadel.”

“And what have you uncovered?” asked Bradur.

“Well ... nothing yet sir, we cannot open the doors. Ramagil thought it may have been of interest to you.”

“He has done wisely,” said Darrian. “We can adjourn our meeting for the time being, if all are in agreement. What we may find behind those locked doors may aid us in any decisions which we still have to make.”

Ryan and Delthinius nodded their approval.

A shiver ran through Barrin’s spine. His eagerness to enter the Citadel had suddenly turned sour.

They all rose to leave, Mirriam put her hand on Barrin’s shoulder and shook her head.

“I must go,” said Barrin. “I may be the best suited for anything which may be found.”

Mirriam turned to the others.

“He is right,” Delthinius spoke with understanding in his voice. “I doubt whether we shall find anything of danger in there, besides, there will be two Princes, a Lord and some of the best fighting men that have ever been, by his side.”

Mirriam gave a forced smile.

“I will stay behind with Mirriam!” Bart exclaimed. “That is, if I may be excused. I have no enthusiasm for entering such a place.”

“As you wish.” Darrian thought it a good idea for Bart to stay with Mirriam, it would stop her brooding.

Barrin reassured Mirriam once more, that everything would be all right, then the small group set out at a healthy pace to join Ramagil.

They passed over the moat and through the gateway. “A clever device,” commented Darrian, “a type of drawbridge.” Ryan and

Bradur gave their agreement, Ryan adding that it may be a good thing for them to copy this one idea of the Loch. Delthinius and Rowgar were too lost in thought to pay much attention, there would be time for that later.

The buildings inside the gateway were set well back, some of which obviously catered for the stabling of the guruks. The building design was weird and as they crossed the open area a feeling of foreboding beset them. The central domed structure was large but as they entered the narrow walkways which wound their way through the buildings, it became lost to view.

“You will have to bear with me,” said the trooper. “We have found only one entrance to the central hall and it is not as easy as one would at first imagine to get there.”

“Never a truer word,” commented Rowgar.

Barrin hugged his arms closely about himself; he was beginning to feel cold.

The walkways were deep in shadow. The sun though still well above the horizon could not penetrate the cool high standing walls of the Citadel, but it seemed more than the lack of sunshine that brought pimples to Barrin’s flesh.

Delthinius felt the cold also, a soul chilling cold; he looked around to see if anyone else felt as he did.

Rowgar rubbed his hands together as he gazed at his surroundings, he would be glad to return to the sunlight but like everyone else, he kept his tongue silent.

From time to time, they would pass a trooper, still searching the outbuildings, to see what secrets they held. They would cease their activities and bow their heads as the group passed. It was not often so many of so high a rank could be seen together.

“How far now?” asked Bradur.

“We are almost there,” answered the trooper. “We approach the last turning.”

They took the final turning and the walkway ahead of them opened out into a small square type of courtyard. The walls of the central structure lay before them. It was still impossible to get a true idea of its size, the walls rose high before them but only the forefront of the dome was visible. At each end of the courtyard the

walls vanished behind a cluttering of smaller buildings.

Ramagil awaited them in the square. His tall slender figure stood out against his troopers. They were talking idly when the party entered the courtyard. Ramagil noticed their approach immediately.

He turned, then strode toward the oncoming group. They met in the centre of the square. Ramagil bowed his head and addressed himself to Darrian.

“Forgive me, if my messenger disturbed you, Sire, but I thought it best that you should be informed as to our actions. I have taken it upon myself to have a ram brought, it may be the only way we may gain entry.”

Darrian looked upon the large iron doors which barred their way, his eyes then lifted to look upon the smooth walls to which they were fitted. A feeling of unease crept through him. So this is the sanctuary of ‘Lochi’, it is certainly well suited, he thought.

“You have done wisely, Ramagil, it is fitting that we all attend the opening of the final doorway, that which conceals the lair of the Warloch. Tell me, has there been anything else of interest, uncovered in your search?”

“No, Sire, or at least nothing of which I consider to be of great importance. I find it strange though that we have found no remnants of the Loch. It seems that they must have all been thrust into the forefront of the battle.”

Darrian considered what Ramagil had said for a moment, then said, “Perhaps they are behind those doors.”

Ramagil gave a wary glance round, “Maybe I should bring more men, Sire, a score is hardly sufficient if what you say turns out to be true. We did search in greater force originally but as nothing was found, we began to separate, lest it took us forever to search the place.”

“I doubt there being any Loch still in occupation,” said Barrin. “‘Lochi’ thought himself too powerful to surround his own dwellings with guards.”

Ramagil turned to Barrin, he had not noticed his presence until he spoke. He grimaced a little at Barrin’s face though he had seen it before, the Orb also caught his eye but he knew nothing of it.

“Another two score men at arms should do,” Bradur broke in. “See to it immediately!”

Darrian looked upon Bradur with a questionable expression.

Ramagil seemed unsure what to do.

“Do I have to repeat myself?” Bradur spoke with a powerful voice. “Does no-one else feel the strangeness in the air?”

It was quite obvious to Bradur that all who were present felt ill at ease.

“It is irrelevant whether the place is occupied or not,” he continued. “It is foolhardy to come to the Shrine of Evil unprepared, should we risk the life of the heir of Carthelion to prove our manhood.”

Had anyone but Bradur made that statement, he would have been sorely frowned upon, but Bradur’s bravery was beyond question.

“It may be wise to bring torches as well as men,” Delthinius took the tension from the moment. “I can see no way for light to enter those walls, we do not want to spend the rest of the day groping in the dark.”

Darrian turned to Ramagil and gave an imperceptible nod.

Ramagil bowed his head again and set off toward his men, barking orders as he went.

There was little conversation between the groups as they awaited Ramagil’s orders to be carried out. They were all lost in their individual thoughts.

Delthinius was brooding on the downfall of ‘Lochi’. Many had heard Tarrol’s voice before that final duel, but few had understood exactly what he had said, the reference that he had made to Elori and Allonica puzzled Delthinius, they had died upon Isor in the distant past. Although it was possible that Tarrol had heard the tales of Isor from any of a score of mouths, he could not understand why Tarrol should take it upon himself to avenge them, unless he was partly under the control of Zarrion and this he did not wholly believe, though he could think of no other plausible answer.

Ryan’s thoughts had drifted to his homecoming in Rhone. It had been a successful venture, but what a price to pay, his riders had been decimated from thousands to a few, even his faithful servant

Barod had passed on during the final battle. He would certainly have a tale of glory and woe to tell.

Rowgar focused on revenge; he had not forgotten Turly's end in the hall of Krrilion, or the death of Tarrow. He also brought to mind Tarrow's oath which Bradur had spoken of, concerning the poisoned dwarf. His time would come, he would seek revenge before he made his way to Gresia in search of Nennian. Ah, Nennian, he thought, and for a moment his troubled face eased and a warmth swept over him.

Darrian fidgeted as he waited, as yet he had no thoughts of joy for he was still worried for the safety of Lithien, and this was not all that troubled him, he still had the Krril to the South and the Loch to the North. There were also the survivors Tarrow came upon in the depths of the watchtower, not to mention the people of Dianon, whose lone survivor, a boy not much above a half score in years, was now in his care. Darrian's lot was not a happy one.

"Sire," came a call. Ramagil approached quickly. "We have the men and torches, the ram will be here in a few moments."

"Good," replied Darrian, "form the men in a defensive wall, we may just disturb a hornet's nest."

The ram-bearers entered the square, bearing a great ram strung upon ropes.

"Follow me," said Bradur. He set off toward the doors. The gloom seemed to gather as he approached. The air was heavy.

On arrival he gripped the great iron handles of the doors. He gave them a shove in a token gesture. They flew open. The dark flooded out.

Bradur stood aghast, not at what he could see, but at the sheer evil which emanated from within. It felt like a thousand malicious eyes peered out at him. His heart began to pound and sweat came to his forehead. He breathed deeply only to be met with a foul acrid odour, which repulsed his senses.

He was not the only one to be affected by the horror which emanated from the darkness, the whole gathering in the square saw the dimming of the light and felt the eeriness which now surrounded them. The acrid odour was somewhat less in the square but it was still pungent.

Bradur fought his fear down and wrenched his eyes from the utter black. "It seems there is no need for a ram!" he called. "We have an invitation."

The host that were gathered together had fallen into a glazed stare. Bradur's voice snapped them out of it.

"Bring the torches," commanded Ramagil. Eight men fell behind him and followed to the doorway.

Ramagil and Bradur looked at each other for a moment in the entranceway.

"Light the torches," Bradur said.

One of the troopers produced his rick and tunni stones and they had light.

Bradur took a step inside the building, only to be met by an icy chill, his torch dimmed perceptibly, to those who watched.

The torchbearers followed Bradur into the gloom. Before them stretched a corridor, it was impossible to see where it led. The walls drew the light from their torches and absorbed it into their fabric, only a few paces ahead were visible.

Ramagil stationed a torchbearer at regular intervals, no more than six paces apart. Five bearers were stationed when Bradur again met with a closed door. Ramagil came up beside Bradur and they stood for a while gazing at this new obstacle.

Darrian came to the outer doors. He was also met with the icy fingers, which reached out from the corridor. He glanced at the three whom accompanied him, their faces were unreadable.

Barrin's Orb still shone with its ruby redness, no different from when they had talked outside the Citadel gates.

They entered the corridor, which was now dimly lit. They could just make out the torches at the far end of the line. One thing they all noticed as they made their way forward was the complete lack of sound and that included their footsteps.

Rowgar glanced at Barrin, then turned his eyes to Bradur as he came into view.

Bradur grasped the door handle before him and gently pushed. The door moved slightly open. From inside came the flickering of light. Ramagil reached for his sword.

The source of the light quickly became apparent. A single flame



licked upward. Its source was not distinguishable nor were the limits of the hall in which it burnt.

Bradur moved forward as if mesmerised; his eyes fixed upon the dancing flame. Ramagil also watched the flame until ...

The door flew shut soundlessly. Bradur did not even notice it. He approached the flame heedless of his surroundings. More flame sprang up around him. It was a cold flame, so cold.

Ramagil came to full alert when the flame was hidden behind the closed door. He pounded his fists upon the barrier before him, but no-one heard.

Rowgar, who was now only a few paces behind Ramagil, sprang forward. He threw his full weight recklessly against the door but nothing happened, nothing at all.

Inside the room, the flames leapt higher and the room grew cooler. Bradur's attention became less fixed on the single flickering, as the surrounding flame dowsed its light. Slowly as if waking from a dream, he came out of his trance like state. His first reaction being that of startlement. He began to glance about the hall. His shadows danced about him in a hundred different places. The realisation of how he had come to be in such a predicament came to him immediately but it did not help his plight. He fought to hold down panic, which for Bradur was a strange sensation.

A great beating of wings came to his ears, his eyes lifted to the dome above, but all he could see was blackness, not even the flame seemed to bring light to that skyward pit.

Tramp, Tramp, Tramp came the sound of heavy feet, they were accompanied by the deep guttural sounds of the Loch. The sounds seemed to come from all directions, echoing from the once soundless walls. There must be an entrance, Bradur thought, as he reached for his sword, but yet there was none visible.

The tramping grew louder, drawing nearer. A shrill cry of laughter reverberated high in the cold, still air.

"Prepare to meet thy doom," Bradur said to himself, then he drew his sword from its sheath. "It will cost them dearly for my life," he said.

The entrance door heaved under the battering force of a great ram, but from this no sound reached out to Bradur's ears. He heard

only the sound of tramping feet. They were almost upon him. His eyes flashed white in the flame. He again heard the shrill crying laughter and again the beat of wings; they were coming toward him. Talons hung mercilessly in his line of sight. He ducked, but a searing heat crossed his forehead and blood trickled down his face. Once more came the onrush of wings, he raised his sword but giant claws snatched it from his grip and his hand was blooded.

The wings beat before him and feet tramped all around. The winged creature screeched with delight and the Loch gargled with pleasure. Bradur looked around helplessly. "Damn them all," he cursed.

The door crashed open, for an instant Rowgar thought he heard a flapping sound, but then it was gone. He saw Bradur upon his knees beside the single flame, alone. The flame seemed magnetic and Rowgar shielded his eyes. He made his way to Bradur and amid the flickering of the light he saw the blood upon Bradur's face and hand. In the darkened silence Bradur looked up at him, his eyes were questioning and sorrowful.

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Darrian caused the entrance to that chamber of the Citadel to be sealed for he could not bring light to its darkness nor heat to its cold. The flame burnt on imperishably, it could not be dowsed. 'Who shall enter this place of dread of his own free will,' Darrian had said, 'if the bravest of our warriors escapes barely with his sanity.' No-one had answered.

Barrin agreed whole-heartedly with the sealing of the door, though he had said, 'I deem only the bird of prey which dwelt within had substance, the rest was no more than a creation of Bradur's mind. I, too, felt the evil that was sealed within those cold barren walls, but the perpetrator of that evil is no more, only his works now reflect his vile nature. His shadow will linger a while yet but let us hope it will not be forever.'

The central chambers of 'Lochi' were searched, but only in a sparse manner by many nervous warriors. If there were indeed any secrets to be unlocked in that fearful place, they still await the key.

Bradur gave the name 'Caralac' to that dwelling. It was a name from the old tongue, for he could find no word to describe its horrors in the language of Carthelion. Place of mind torture was its translation – 'Helinir' in the melodic tongue of Gresia.

The similarity of language of Gresia and Carthelion did however allow Barrin to create a word in his own tongue, though it had until that time no base or meaning. 'Hellgate' was the name and it was logged in the Annals of Kings by Delthinius against the single pentangle of Tukamar.

## ***WIND OF CHANGE***

Autumn came to the realm of Carthelion and the land turned golden beneath a mellow sun. The leaves of the birch and oak whispered softly their tales of sorrow and joy in the warm breezes that flowed effortlessly across the countryside.

Darrian walked hand in hand with Lithien on the bank of a small meandering stream. They were less than twenty leagues north of Lochgor, but it was far enough to eradicate its memory.

The woodland by the stream had come alive with song in the short time since the Loch had been swept back over their borders. Many thought it a miracle performed by Elebriouse himself and others were simply glad.

The fairest song of all was sung by Lithien herself. She sang of the wonders of Carthelion and of its grief. It filled Darrian's heart with sorrow and hope, he had seemed bemused ever since his headlong rush back to the Land of Scavengers, three days after the fall of Lochgor. Bradur had performed most of his duties since then, though Darrian still maintained a loose hold on the comings and goings of his people.

Today he maintained a hold on no-one, except perhaps Lithien, though it seemed more likely the other way about.

"Must we always dwell in the eyes of the people?" Lithien asked. Her voice did not plead but it always hurt Darrian to give an answer she would not like, so he made the effort to smooth the edges of his reply.

"When all is again settled," he said, "and we have our own towns and villages, the people will look less to their heir for guidance. We shall have a home built here, out of the way of scurrying feet, where we may spend much time together in happiness."

Lithien accepted the words of Darrian but they brought to mind the ceremony which was still to come, when they would sit

together as King and Queen before all the people of their land and probably many from Gresia and Rhone.

“Will Delthinius be at the crowning ceremony, it would be a honour to have him there.”

“He pledged to me that he would be,” replied Darrian. “He has not returned to the land of Gresia, to the Plains of Dianon he went with the lone survivor of that gallant force which came to our aid in our time of need. Faorin, son of Farron has taken the majority of the Gresian warriors, back down that long trek to Gresia.”

“Farron! Was he the one who stood by Tarrol upon that high watchtower?”

“Indeed, he was. I believe that is why Faorin wanted to lead an army back to Gresia.”

“Why so?” Lithien looked quizzical.

Darrian replied thoughtfully, “I think he wished to take revenge for the life of his father. He expects to meet the Loch they encountered on their ride to Lochgor.”

“Surely he is not obsessed with revenge. It would give me no comfort to take the lives of others to avenge the loss of my friends.”

“Ah, sweet Lithien, not all are as pure as you, but perhaps I do think the worst of people when really I should think the better. In this case I hope the words of Barrin are true, he said not to fear the Loch to the West, for Thrawk is not as idle as some may think. You remember I spoke to you of Thrawk?”

Lithien remained silent but Darrian did not seem perturbed by the lack of an answer. She usually fell into silence when he idolised her.

They continued to saunter down the edge of the stream, Darrian’s eyes were fixed upon Lithien and his mind was somewhere in the clouds above the Plateau of Thrawk. The world of harshness and reality had for the moment departed him. He dwelt now in the realms of his imagination. The large stone which lay upon the ground before him, never entered his line of vision. In fact it is doubtful whether he realised anything was amiss until he was engulfed by the coolness of the stream.

Lithien, who was not completely humourless, sat upon the edge

of that sparkling water and sang a lament to her noble Prince.

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Bradur walked the deserted ramparts of Lochgor, accompanied only by his thoughts. He welcomed the chance to be alone for his life had become more hectic than ever it had been before.

He remembered life as it was before they had forsaken the Outer Realm of Carthelion. His had always been a lonely existence. He put it down to the responsibilities he bore and his rank. It was difficult for the men of his command to speak to him without feeling that overpowering air that was forever with him. Only Rowgar treated him as a true friend. Others spoke to him formally – those of the hierarchy of Carthelion, but he always detected that friendly manipulation which had been the hallmark of Gerome and Meldir.

He glanced at the southern watchtower. There were two guards perched high on its battlements. They raised their bows in acknowledgement of their commander. It is good to see that they are still alert, Bradur thought, we do not want to become so complacent that we are caught off our guard.

The watchtowers were the only points of guard through the daylight hours. It was thought sufficient as they commanded the full view of the countryside which surrounded Lochgor, save for the deep woodland areas. Each tower had been sealed from its subterranean umbilical cord. They had never found a route between the towers and the inner sanctuary of Lochgor and this cast doubts as to their safety. Bradur himself was convinced that there was a route, already sealed by the Loch – or merely hidden, he did not know, but he would not take chances, his ordeal in the Caralac, made him see fleeting shadows every time he entered the Citadel.

Bradur moved his eyes from the watchtower and turned them to the woodland to the East. Most of Carthelion's greenery had turned gold or red or yellow, but not here, not by the walls of Lochgor. The pale colourless trees, still bore their deathly shades. There were some that stood out green but they thinned out as they approached the walls. Bradur had wondered many times from what land these

trees had come.

“Ah – there you are,” called Rem from the opposing inner battlement. “I would discuss with you tonight’s rota for the watch upon the towers.”

How out of place, Bradur thought, for the healer to be commanding men, but alas he was the only Gresian left in Lochgor that could speak the tongue of Carthelion.

“Of course, Rem. I will join you in the courtyard in a few moments.” Bradur answered as he made his way to the scaling ladder which led down to the courtyard. He frowned a little at the sight below for the courtyard still held grim memories for him, but he thrust them to the back of his mind.

Rem entered the courtyard from the far wall opening, the scene of so much bloodshed in the days gone by. He had noticed a distinct change in Bradur’s personality since he had been trapped in the Caralac. His face had aged and his hair showed silver in places. Perhaps a lot of the old spirit had gone, he thought, but it has been replaced by something more mature, maybe his role in life will be that of a statesman. Rowgar would certainly be able to fill his post as head of the armed forces, his spirit still burned brightly, in fact it seemed if anything to have been fuelled by what had come to pass. He seemed always to be making amends for something, but for what?

“Hail Rem, how is it with you and yours?”

“We pass the days quietly, most of my men who remain here are eager to return to Gresia, we only await the return of Delthinus and the inauguration of Darrian.”

“We build a small hall with all haste for the ceremony,” said Bradur. “It would not be fitting for a King to dwell and hold council in a mud hut. It will be the starting of a settlement; already the ordinary folk are building their dwellings in the close vicinity. It is not many leagues from here.”

“Will you still guard the walls of Lochgor?” asked Rem.

“It seems that we must,” replied Bradur. “We have not the sorcery to throw them down, not with the speed that ‘Lochi’ had them built. We will have to suffer their presence on the land for many years to come. Sometimes I wish I could return to the Outer

Realm, the way you may return to Gresia.”

“Alas, Gresia is not our true homeland. Do you think we will find rest there? Delthinius has already ordered the sailing of a scout ship, back to our ancient homeland of Isor.”

“But this is not the first time this has been done,” Bradur commented. “Why should things be different now?”

“It is a belief that Delthinius holds,” answered Rem. “I do not know your knowledge of the Axe of Elebriouse, but our Lord blames its misuse on our lands for the ill that befell us and he says that while ever the Axe dwells on Isor, our lands will remain desolate.”

Bradur thought for a few moments then said, “If it were indeed this Axe which Tarrol bore, in his confrontation with ‘Lochi’, then it can no longer dwell on the Isle of Isor.”

“Exactly! This was our first thought when the Axe was removed from the petrified Tree of Peace. It had to be a good sign.”

“Lodged in the Tree of Peace,” repeated Bradur. “I thought those southern lands where Tackurion did battle were submerged now beneath the waves.”

“Those waters have long since receded,” Rem replied. “Our home may yet become what it once was, but what of you, Bradur? Have you no plans? Is it not time you made your own home – take a wife perhaps and live a more settled life?”

Rem hit a sore point. Bradur did indeed have a wife in mind, but he always tried to keep her memory submerged, for it seemed he would never have chance to return to where she dwelt, thoughts of her always hurt.

“My men will take the first watch tonight,” Bradur said. “Your people can take over at midnight.” With that flat statement Bradur returned to the battlements, watched by a sympathetic Rem. Bradur stood and looked outward to where he had before time seen the old Loch seated upon its guruk. He did not speak, there was only the walls to listen.

Rem looked up at him from the courtyard and sighed, Bradur seemed to him much like the walls of Lochgor, strong, solid and made from the rock of the Earth. Rem brushed his hair from his brow, then turned thoughtfully and slowly made his way back to



his own people.

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Barrin sat beside the grave of Tarrol. The sun was casting long shadows once more across the land.

Tarrol's sword painted a large cross upon the earth at Souls End. Barrin looked upon it forlornly and spoke quietly to himself. "Mighty was his fall," he said. "If only I had known sooner, at least I may have thanked you for your deed, though sometimes I think it may have been better if you had failed."

Rowgar walked silently up to where Barrin sat. The truth could not be hidden forever, he told himself, maybe I should have spoken up, before he found his own answers.

"You did what you thought to be right," Barrin answered the thoughts of Rowgar as if he was mind reading.

"Perhaps it was a mistake to allow you on our march, I thought it best at the time. I could have spared a few men to escort you back to Brannock and yet I did not."

"Would that really have helped, is it better I know the truth, though it be painful, or should I forever live a lie?"

"I cannot answer that, though I have thought on it many times. When I was unsure what to do, I did nothing and things remained as they were."

"As is the case with most of us," Barrin added. "What did you know of my father and mother?"

"Very little," replied Rowgar, "only that they were homesteaders and that really speaks for itself. Only the hardy built homesteads in that region, the danger from the Krril was always present."

"I would like to return there someday, and sit a while by the side of my parents, I remember their faces now, not only in the flames do I see them but before when things were happier. I know that they cared for me, even after the fire when I was at play upon a hill in an autumn setting, I felt her presence beside me. It seems so long ago now."

For long moments they both sat in thought, then Barrin asked,

“What became of Belgar, he who would have taken the place of my father? I remember only his eyes and the deep forgetfulness that they brought. I know the tale, was it really as it was spoken?”

“Indeed it was, save the part where I, the sole survivor was heralded as a hero – fool may have been a better title. I should have known better than to walk into an ambush, the blood of those brave men lays upon my hands and my hands alone.”

“You cannot blame yourself for what happened, after our homestead was burnt to the ground, had Bradur been in command, he would have probably taken up the chase also.”

“Aye, but Bradur never had the need for a rear guard to defend his retreat. He would have come back victorious or not at all. Even Tarrol would have put up a better show. His temper may have been quick but his heart was in the right place. In reality he was the only one who salvaged anything from the whole affair and I had to make excuses for him not being present at the final skirmish. Where is the justice?”

“Wherever is the justice?” answered Barrin. “I have no doubt Tarrol proved himself on many occasions since that time, not to mention his heroics here in Lochgor.”

“Never a truer word spoken, Tarrol remained calm a while after his return to Brannock from the homestead, his fire seemed quenched, but not for long. He was back in the forefront of affairs in no time at all.” Rowgar paused a while and looked at Barrin. “Tell me, is Mirriam to know you are not her brother – not the son of Belgar?”

Barrin smiled sadly. “I now step into your shoes Rowgar, I really do.”

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Stone by stone the hall of Carthelion rose from the ground. Its situation was good for it held a commanding view of the surrounding lands. It would be a fine hall on completion, but not nearly as grand as the hall of Ramno, though it would hold the same respect.

Beyond the hall on the outskirts of the temporary dwellings, lay

a small spring fed pond. Its setting was pleasant, enhanced by a scattering of trees which had taken root in the near vicinity.

Miriam sat by the southern edge of this pond, brushing her hair in the reflection of the water. It had been a long time since she had spent any time improving her appearance, in fact it was unusual for her to spend any time at all.

Bart sat on the eastern edge; he watched her brushing her hair, as he lazily threw daisies into the water, disturbing Mirriam's otherwise perfect reflection.

He now held the rank of group leader for Bradur had said, 'Anyone who has survived the ordeals that you have had to contend with, without so much as a scratch upon their person, must be worth higher honours than that of a mere foot-soldier.'

Bart had blushed and replied, 'Perhaps it is my ability to keep out of the thick of the fighting.'

Bradur had simply laughed.

It was amusing to see Bart look around for someone of authority, every time that he was addressed as sir, but no doubt he would get used to the idea of being a commander.

It seemed that Bradur was breaking him in slowly. He had given him charge of the hall's construction, but as Mirriam probably knew as much as he, of building techniques, the builders themselves saw to all the work involved. They did put Bart in the picture on occasion though, so he would have something to report to Bradur. Sometimes he would have a look at the hall's progress himself, but otherwise life was carefree, and he welcomed it.

"You are indeed turning quickly into a woman," said Bart. "A fine one at that, if I may say so."

"And you, into a lecherous old man, if I may also say," replied Mirriam.

"Would you deny an old man one of his few pleasures in life?" Bart threw another daisy in to the pool, to Mirriam's annoyance.

"You mean the pleasure of lechery!"

"You know full well what I meant."

Miriam decided to give her hair up as a bad job. "Tell me, Bart, is Rowgar really taking riding lessons?"

"SPECIAL LESSONS, on special royal household horses, fancy

footwork and such. Ramagil himself instructs him, though I do not envy his task!”

“Why not?” queried Mirriam, as she rose to her feet.

“Rowgar’s mood can become fiery,” replied Bart. “Bradur made it quite plain that while ever he trained with the cavalry, he would obey Ramagil’s commands. As you know Ramagil now takes the place of Carrich.”

“Yes, I had heard, but what is the difficulty? Surely Rowgar accepts Ramagil as his commander? And besides he can already ride.”

“It is not quite that simple. I was present the first day that Rowgar took to his special horse. It went well at first, but after a while riding, his mount came to a halt and began to munch the lush grass. It was beyond Rowgar’s powers to lift the horse’s head from the ground. Ramagil thought it funny and so did the two men who accompanied him, even I, who was stood close by had to smirk. But alas, Rowgar did not see the joke. The wrath he unleashed upon Ramagil made even his horse rear. It was fortunate that Ramagil rode the incident. It is needless to say that they are not now the best of friends.”

“But why should Rowgar act as such? He has never raised his voice in anger to a friend while I have been present.” Mirriam walked round the edge of the pool as she spoke.

“I think that he is greatly disturbed. I know for a fact that he wishes to return to Gresia with Delthinius, I believe that his heart’s desire lies there, and yet he vows to avenge the death of Turly and Mathin. His is truly an unenviable plight.” And after a short pause Bart added, “Who knows, there may even be more which troubles him.”

“I think that is quite sufficient,” said Mirriam. “I find Barrin also a little strange, but his is more of a sadness, it overwhelms him at times. Sometimes I think it has something to do with the medallion he wears, the Orb of Gerome, I wish he would give it to Delthinius or someone else, anyone would do.”

“I fear that the Orb is in Barrin’s care for life, but take heart, Gerome would not commit anyone to a life of misery, or at least I think he would not.”

“I hope that you are right,” Mirriam replied, “but less of this sorry talk, what of you Bart?”

“Ah, now that is a sorry tale. Here I am put out to labour and toil on our Prince’s new hall, scorned by my only lady friend . . .”

“All right, that is enough,” Mirriam broke in. “I do not think I could bear to hear your tale of woe. What of Darrian, he must have a happy story, I am sure.”

“Even he has his own troubles, but I think he is happy and content for the time being, who would not be with a lovely lady like Lithien. It is said that they write ‘A Tale of Carthelion’ together.”

“I wonder what prompted them to undertake such a task.”

“I believe that he wishes to keep the names of those who have fallen, alive, also he is infatuated with the Annals Delthinus still preserves. I know this, for he said, ‘The Glory of Tukamar and the Serenity of Isor live on forever, and the names of those who have fallen for the freedom of Carthelion should be remembered always.’”

“A noble gesture,” Mirriam spoke softly as she seated herself against Bart. “It is good to think our descendants will have some record of what has come to pass in these troubled days.”

“Indeed it is,” said Bart as he leaned back against a small greenwood tree. “How else would future generations learn of the valour of our times.”

Mirriam put her head on Bart’s shoulder and closed her eyes dreamily. “They could always read the scrawlings of the Krril upon their cave walls.”

Bart chuckled and closed his eyes also. “Indeed they could.”

As the sun poured its pleasant warmth on the coolness of the little pool and the breeze rustled the coloured leaves of autumn’s wonderland, they both fell into a well-deserved sleep. After all, the hall was being built to schedule. Bart was doing a fine job.

# *THE TELEMATRE*

Twilight lingered upon the frozen lands of the Palanglace, as the sun continued its path, below the endless horizon. The Mountain of Vision stood awe inspiring and alone in its place of reverence. Its peak reached upward to the sunlight, glistening white against an 'Azurion' sky. Above its summit shone the Star of Elebriouse, in all its splendour, the twilight could not douse its flame for it was the guiding star of the Helmsman, that which brought many a lost mariner home from the turbulent seas.

Deep within the darkened caverns of that great monolith and high upon a throne of ice, Elebriouse sat. He felt not the cold of his abode, nor did the darkness hinder his vision. To him the halls glistened in many splendoured colours and the ice sparkled coldly.

For three score years and ten he had dwelt alone within the immensity of those caverns, but to him the passing of years has no meaning.

Carantia now stood beside him, and before him were Manahlor and Antonion. They stood now in their full glory, relieved of their earthly bondage and restrictions but yet their faces were troubled.

'Is the reign of Loekan truly at an end?' thought Manahlor. 'Has he been vanquished from the world of mortals forever?'

'No more will he walk *on* the Earth,' replied Elebriouse. 'But the ideals he nurtured will live forever in the minds of Loch and man as it was decreed in the beginning, from him came not only the grievances of the land, but the driving force of change.'

'Unlike Zarrion who bore the gift of peace and tranquillity,' added Antonion. 'A counterweight he was, untiring in his efforts to curb the raw evil of Loekan, for all forces must be balanced lest the individual should plunge headlong to his own destruction or stagnate into nothingness.'

'Yes, indeed,' thought Elebriouse. 'The secret of happiness is to know when the balance is reached. Telemar realised this when he

cast aside the burdens of others upon the isle of Isor. He rejected the world of change, to find his own equilibrium upon Tukamar, though many misinterpreted the situation. Few realise the cause of man.'

'The prime source of man's misfortune is no more,' Carantia mused. 'When our task was set you must have had a greater goal in mind than simply removing Loekan. This you could have done without aid.'

'That is not so, Carantia. I could not destroy Loekan at the beginning of time without destroying my dream. I had to allow Loekan life at least until the sentient creatures of the Earth were brought into being, for he was a necessary part of life. In that age of the world, Zarrion dwelt here upon the Telematre; as you know, we became well acquainted. It was then that I realised I could never destroy Loekan. He and Zarrion must dwell upon the Earth together or both should be vanquished. I could not cast Zarrion from the world. There was so much he possessed that I did not. His values were different to mine. He served the all-encompassing power as I do but his mission upon the Earth was other than my own. I thought him not a part of my dominion. He had to find his own fate.'

The stage I did set for the last conflict – for not again would the time be ripe. Whether it would end in good or evil, I knew not for certain, though I deemed that Zarrion would not fail in his final decision.'

'The age of the Warloch has gone,' thought Manahlor, 'but I sense the role of man and Loch will be no less troubled.'

'Indeed, the men of the world shall wax and wane many times through the ages yet to come,' continued Elebriouse, 'but the Loch I fear shall not fare even this well. As man grows in power, they shall diminish. They shall be cast out into the wilderness and wastelands of the world, though this was not my original intent, for when I created them, I thought that they could live in harmony with men, but even I can misjudge. It seems to me now, that even without the corruption of Loekan, they were a doomed race. If they had lived in peace and not brought war to the lands of men, men would have eventually found their way to the land of the Loch, with dire consequence. It is the way of the world.'

Antonion turned to Elebriouse, 'Even we shall be eventually replaced. Man will make his own deities and we will be forgotten. Antonion is my name now but what shall it be in years not yet dreamed of – or shall it be at all? When man stands upon his high horse and reaches out for new horizons, shall we, the warriors borne out of time be no more than a myth, from the mists of creation?'

Elebriouse rose from his throne of ice and looked upon Antonion, 'They are but seedlings of the universe, their life span passes swiftly, like an arrow from the bow, we should not expect too much from them. We should be glad that they still treasure many of the higher graces, with which we endowed them. They are a noble race, who still see the virtues of mercy. Yet I fear for some, their mercy will be withheld.'

Antonion understood what Elebriouse had meant, he knew he thought of the Krril. They were not of his making and though they were a vile race, their destruction would not please him, even if he thought it necessary. 'What I see of the world is sad,' he thought.

'No,' replied Elebriouse. 'It is life.'

The High One walked solemnly from his great hall, his three companions following closely. Through many jewelled corridors they passed until at last, they stepped out into the light.

The sun appeared to rest upon the Earth from that high place, casting its rays upon them. Elebriouse held out his arms to the light, 'Behold the coming of a new day, my faithful friends, let us see what it shall bring.'

With far seeing eyes, the Monitors looked upon the lands of Carthelion. Firstly to the South they turned and they saw Barthen, guarding as he ever did, the northern approaches of Outer Carthelion, from the creatures who lurked in the deadly darkness of the Valley of Shadow. He was a gallant Lord and not until his people were free from danger would he rest.

To the north of the mountains they now peered and saw a people long since hidden, emerging from the darkness of the night, that had for so many years forced them into hiding, their salvation had materialised from a dream and they were joyous in their new found freedom.



Next, to the East they gazed and saw the people of Dianon. They were no longer called 'the hunted', for now there were none to hunt them.

Upon the Northern Flatlands they saw only emptiness save for the figure of one old Loch, who dwelt by the Marshlands. He had ordered his kind as best he could and dwelt now in solitude where his desire had led him.

For a brief moment their eyes fell upon Isor. There was a boat anchored off its coastline, and upon its shore, men stood in wonderment and awe, for where once had been only ash, there was greenery, raising its head above the destruction of the past.

And lastly, but not least, their vision fell upon the hall of Darrian. Here their senses dwelt a while, perceiving the dying embers of an age.

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The Kings of the Earth stood and faced each other, hands clasped in friendship. There was Ryan, King of Rhone, whose father had relinquished his throne after hearing of the deeds of his son. He had sent a strong troop of cavalry to ensure the new King's safe return, for he was a cautious man.

There was Darrian, King of Carthelion, he had been inaugurated in the hall of Carthelion and now wore the Crown of the Realm. Its gems shone even in the dimness of the early light of dawn.

Lastly, there was Delthinius, High King of Isor and Lord of Gresia, ruler of the most ancient of peoples, whose histories stretched across the centuries of time, even to the days of Tukamar, the sleeping giant whose peace may not be disturbed. He appeared happy yet saddened, for in his triumph he had lost many friends, never again would they be united upon the Earth.

They bid one another farewell and mounted their steeds. Delthinius joined Rem, who waited with those of Gresia who still remained upon the lands of Darrian. This would be his final journey home, never again would he set foot upon the soils of Carthelion.

Ryan rode to the head of a large, heavily armed force of

Rhonian cavalry, he would be glad to return to his kingdom. It seemed to him that he had been away far longer than the previous summer. He would head eastward, into the rising sun, to have words of friendship and alliance with the peoples of Dianon. It would be his last deed before returning to the daily life of Rhone. Barrin and Mirriam would accompany him. Barrin wished to return to the Outer Realm and Mirriam would go with him. Their travels would continue after Ryan had reached his homeland, but it would not be a long journey, for Rhone and Outer Carthelion shared the common border of the River Esule. Barrin assumed the border would be safe. He thought that the Krril would have more to occupy them than two wayfaring children.

Darrian cantered to the forefront of a large contingent of his own forces. They were to head south to the White Mountains. Their swords they would not sheath until the Carthelions were again united as one.

He paused at the head of the column and spoke with its commanders, who were Ramagil and Rowgar.

The conversation which Darrian held with his Captains was brief. Their plans had already been made and all that remained was to wish them good fortune. This he did before joining Bradur on the flank of the column. They would watch the departure together.

The banners of Carthelion were raised, that is all except one. This, Ramagil held in his possession, not before had it been unfurled, for it was the new Battle Standard of Carthelion.

Ramagil turned to Rowgar, his face young and stern. He spoke not, but thrust the banner into Rowgar's hand.

Rowgar then, without command or request, released its retainers and hoisted it high, to ripple in the early morning breeze. An Axe it bore, overlaying the hallowed Tree of Peace. They would not forget those who came unlooked for in their time of need.

Rowgar turned to Ramagil, a wiry grin came to his face.

Ramagil smiled not, but raised his hand and motioned the column forward.

As Darrian and Bradur watched their warriors pass into the realms of legend, Bart stood forlornly by the trail to the lands of Dianon.

He stood there, not to observe the passing of Ryan and his proud cavalry, but to wave a last goodbye to his closest friends.

They came as he expected, amidst the ranks of the Rhonian horsemen. Barrin turned towards Bart, and for a moment a look of mutual understanding passed between them. Barrin's face was tranquil and Bart's eyes were sad. Barrin then turned again to the direction in which he was travelling and bowed his head solemnly.

Miriam turned to face Bart, a tear she forced back from her eyes and her hand she raised in a last gesture of parting. "Fare you well, my dear friend," she whispered. "A father you have been to me and I shall remember you always, even until my day's end."

Bart watched the column, until it disappeared into the dawn and not until the starry sky had given way to the coming of daylight, did he turn from that distant horizon.

"Goodbye, my children," he said. "May Elebriouse guide you on your journey, for it seems destiny will forever lead you onward." He paused a moment in thought. "Now where have I heard that before?"

# *APPENDIX*

This appendix outlines the book design and speaks briefly of the languages, beliefs and philosophies of the peoples in the story.

The story of Carthelion was taken from a larger history, which was created to give the tale a foundation on which to build and a future to work towards. The index was included to provide a name reference for the story, not its mythology. It is slightly cryptic in nature to allow its use during the reading of the story – without interfering with the plot. Likewise the map in the first edition was inserted in the back of the book instead of the front, for those who prefer working their way through a ‘land’ storywise – without seeing a map.

Upon the lands of Ineham many languages were spoken. This story contains a few of their words. A limited quantity are used to flavour the writing – like ‘Shakespearean English’ or ‘big words’, an excess can become overbearing. The index contains the pronunciation of some ‘new’ names but in general the people of Carthelion would read, write and pronounce words as they saw fit. This should apply to everyone.

The way the Carthelions pronounced Carthelion was as in rebellion, not Cartheelion. Just as Halifax is not pronounced Hailifax.

The view that the peoples of these lands took of the ‘scheme of things’ has been made simple; they accepted the universe as they saw it. To them science was no more than a mechanical philosophy. The people of Gresia realised that compared with an infinitely large universe, they were all infinitely small, but even so they believed this fact made them no less important. They also believed all forces in the universe were balanced, including good and evil, and that the universe was constructed for each individual to observe from his or her own standpoint, wherever or whenever they experienced life. Reminds me of Arcazia. A second edition thought.

To move on to the Monitors of the Telematre; they were given the role of fantasy authors, they wove the reality of dreams. If a dream is fluent in time and responsive in feeling, then for all intents and purposes the dream becomes a reality for all those who are involved.

Although the servants of the Telematre had a part to play in this tale, they should be thought of as advisers – not rulers. Their overall philosophy was ‘To do unto others as you would have done unto yourself’. The story’s foundation endowed them with the knowledge that to teach anything more on these lines would lead to confusion and distortion, especially by individuals who wished to advance their own ideologies – alas even this simple advice was corrupted in the story by all concerned, it became ‘Do unto others as they do unto you’ – an eye for an eye.

The teachings of Loekan and Gerome were straight forward. Loekan taught evil and Gerome taught goodness. Before the advent of men into the world Gerome was known as ‘Riel’ and Loekan ‘Leir’, which meant wisdom and ignorance. In later days the Monitors called them by the same names as did men. The Druinand of which little is said, referred to Loekan as ‘Fer’, which meant angered or ‘the angered one’. They did not consider Gerome a mountain of wisdom nor Loekan a pit of ignorance as did the majority of Ineham. They had their own ideologies.

Finally, of the Axe, Staff and Orb. These items allowed their users to focus their individual powers – like a lens brings light to focus. They, like the Monitors were part of the twilight world which exists on an indivisible line between reality and thought. They could affect both and were not a definite part of either; however the Monitors were usually attributed to the world of thought by the peoples of Ineham because they were the dream weavers, the creators who could build and manoeuvre a ‘space-less’ world by pure imagination.

# ***NAME INDEX***

Below are listed the main characters of this story. For many of those listed their story ends here. For others it continues to the Day of the Druiand; when the four hooded mystics of that land first rode into Carthelion and to the days when Arikon ventured North to the Outer World of Cryon.

- BARRIN                      Adopted son of Hilda. Native of Outer Carthelion. A fair haired youngster with blue eyes. He was quite tall for his twelve years, being around seven and a half hand spans, which in modern terms would have made him around five foot or just over one hundred and fifty centimetres high. His build was moderate and his face inquisitive.
- BAROD                      A weathered middle aged man. Captain of the armed forces of Rhone. It should be noted that the 'title' of Captain was given to the leader of a company of men, regardless of the size of that company or whether they were mounted or on foot. This applied in Carthelion as well as in Rhone.
- BART                      Foot-soldier of Carthelion. A short plump man with brown hair. Renowned for his jovial manner.
- BARTHEN                      Lord of Outer Carthelion.
- BELGAR                      A staunch bushy haired man. A foot-soldier of Carthelion. He was said to be gifted with certain psychological powers.
- BRADUR                      Known as 'The Rock'. A tall, dark well

	built man. Leader of the forces of Carthelion.
CARRICH	A tall fair man from the northwest of Carthelion. He was the right hand man of the Prince of Carthelion. He bore the title of ‘Lieutenant’, which meant the leader of cavalry. He was responsible to Darrian and Bradur only.
DARACHLON	General of the legions of Taern-Loch, responsible only to Lochi. The name Loch was pronounced gutturally as it would be in Scotland, however the Gresians did tend to pronounce the word as Lock. Taern was added to their name as they came from the north of the River Taern. Darachlon himself was a powerful being standing over nine hands high. His teeth were tinged yellow and like all Loch he was dark skinned with an exceptional amount of body hair when compared with men, although the Loch were not completely hair covered. His face was not totally unhuman but his forehead was very pronounced and his lips thin. The overall impression of his face was one of ferocity.
DARRIAN	Prince of Carthelion, son of Doran, who was the twenty-fourth King of Carthelion. Darrian was moderately tall with long golden hair and white flecked blue eyes.
DELTHINIUS	Lord of Gresia and the fortieth King of Isor (pronounced Eye-sor). Father of Nennian. He was similar in appearance to Darrian except that his hair was much shorter and combed forward from the crown. He was thought to be of distant kin to Darrian.
FARRON	The head of Gresian (pronounced Greeshan) security. A wiry man, who

	continuously bore a suspicious look on his face. Father of Faorin.
GENDY	A short hunch-backed man, known as the 'Poisoned Dwarf'. Native of Northern Carthelion.
GEROME	Known as Zarrion, which means King of Zarrs in the tongue of Tukamar. A mystic born at the world's creation. The bringer of good. He was a medium sized 'man' who had very sparse white hair and a white beard. For as long as he had dwelt in Carthelion he had been blind. He was adviser to the Prince of Carthelion.
GORRAN	Homesteader of Outer Carthelion. A short stocky man.
HELLNER	Wife of Gorrان. A slim auburn haired woman. Native of Outer Carthelion. Mater of Arikon.
HILDA	Wife of Belgar.
JEDRO	Youth of Brannock.
JENGIS	An aged Loch whose lifespan was extended by the power of the Warloch. Unlike the rest of his race his teeth had turned white through age. He was the only mortal Loch who could speak the language of man.
KRRILION	A name given to the King of the Krril – it means King Krril. The name Krril was given to the mountain dwelling creatures of Carthelion by the men of Carthelion and Gresia, their true name was not pronounceable nor could it be adequately written. Krrilion himself was one of the larger creatures of his race, standing over eight hands high. The average Krril was around seven hands and most were of strong but spindly builds with a



	pronounced hunching of the back. Their faces were said to be set in a grotesque grin, but this, of course was not a statement made by the Krril themselves.
LITHIEN	Betrothed to Darrian. A 'slight' woman from the east of Carthelion. Her hair was a very light sandy colour and her face was serene, holding a calm beauty of its own.
LOCHI	Leader of the Loch, known as the Warloch in his day because of his bloody trail of destruction.
LOEKAN	An evil mystic born at the world's creation. His features were similar to those of Gerome, but his hair was thick and long and he did not wear a beard. Delthinius associated him with Lochi, although their appearances were totally different.
MATHIN	A burly middle aged man whose hair for the most part was grey. Senior group leader of the forces of Carthelion.
MELDIR	Elder statesman of Outer Carthelion. A wizened man of moderate build. He was the head of the inner council as the Prince was not yet of age.
MIRRIAM	Daughter of Belgar and Hilda. A rather slim thirteen year old with long brown hair. She lived with her mother and Barrin, two leagues (six miles) to the north of Brannock.
NAMARIUN	A leader of men who dwelt on the Plains of Dianon and the nearby mountains. He was above average height with unruly fair hair. Most of the people of Dianon did have fair hair as the founders of their lands came from over the sea, which almost certainly meant Isor.
NENNIAN	Daughter of Delthinius. A woman of fair

	complexion whose eyes bore the ancient sparkle of Isor.
RAMAGIL	Gridrider of Carthelion. A leader of horsemen, so named because of his ability to control his horse over the exacting trials course known as 'The Grid'. He was a tall fair man of thirty years. His name was pronounced in the cavalry as Ram-ay-hil, which was of Gresian origin, however Rowgar and other foot-soldiers used a more direct speech and simply pronounced the name Ramagil.
RAMNO	Lord Fatherer of the Carthelions. In his time he dwelt in Outer Carthelion.
REM	A healer from Gresia.
REOCH	Advisor to Delthinius.
ROWGAR	Captain of the forces of Carthelion. Distinguished by his hide jacket, which was leathery in texture and of a tan colour with tassled sleeves. The only one of its type.
RYAN	Prince of Rhone. A fiery red haired man, whose blood line was true in the respect that it was never mingled with those who came from outside the southern lands of Ineham. (Ineham being the continent in which our tale is set, although the word Ineham did actually mean 'world').
REYON	King of Rhone.
TARROL	A group leader of Carthelion. Strong and Tall. A true Warrior, quick to anger, yet gentle when the need arose. Some say possessed.
TACKUR	Tackurion Insinimus which meant Tackur, King of the East. He was the fourteenth King of Tukamar. It was he who lifted the Axe of Elebriouse from its resting place in

the Citadel of the Summa Matre, the Mountain of Peace. Father of Camir and Elori. His wife was Allanica. Tackur is named here because he is a very important part of this story's history.

THEOR

An unusually small and dark man for a Gresian. Captain of the archers of Gresia.

THRAWK

Known as the Watcher or the Skylord. Monitor of the Telematre. The last to dwell in Ineham in his true form save Cryon, the Majestic Warlord who never trod the lands south of his realm.

TURLY

Foot-soldier of Carthelion. Friend of Bart.

WARLOCH

A name attributed to the leader of all Loch. His build was like that of Darachlon. His face was stern and cruel and an aura of evil hung over him like a cloak; even wildlife could sense his presence.

## The Albums

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I would be more than happy to hear from anyone who has been involved over the years in 'Shades of Evil', 'Axe' or 'Time Warrior', the books, albums or games. I really would like to thank them for their efforts. Special thanks to my wife and brother without whose help my first novel 'Axe' would not have been published.

