

The Azure Ancient

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THE BEGINNING

Jabin sat within the poorly lit chamber watching the great hearth cast long shadows high upon the opposing wall. The flames haloed those present in its warming light, emphasizing their wizened faces, furrowed, sagacious and questioning.

Having answered all, he as yet understood little of what lay behind their scrutiny; typical of Azure, as unrevealing in their responses as the questions were mysterious.

His father's explanation concerning the Gift was largely lost on the child, one still young enough to both need and enjoy his dependence on others. Talk of being the first in a line of Kings, leading people and making decisions of influence served only to heighten his confusion; such things played little on the mind of this ten-year-old boy. Truth be told, he doubted any would regard him; past experience bearing this out. Only peers paid any mind to what the boy said, none at all to what he commanded.

Added to this, he was bored. Therefore, his only wish presently was that of his itching feet—to run. Preferably in the dirt, but anywhere would do. Anywhere where tedious questions and kingly decisions weren't required.

Fidgeting, Jabin thought of his cousin Josheb, a score of years older than he, admired and respected by everyone. With his love of swordplay and obsession with battles, Jabin thought him a lot likelier choice as king than himself. However, Josheb had only spent a short time with the Azure before being sent

from the citadel. Jabin wondered at that.

Not small for his age, Jabin was still slight. Known by all for his dexterity and competent coordination, he made up for in speed and agility what he lacked in mass and strength, often competing as an equal with boys much older in those events where swiftness out-classed brawn. He thought himself average in most ways, when he thought of himself at all, though his Aunt's did tell him girls would swoon when he was older; he was unsure of what that implied, imagining people fainting only at something gory or terrifying.

Typical of his people he had sandy brown hair and olive complexion, but what made Jabin unique were his eyes. Large they were, yet it was their colour that startled. A pale blue green, turquoise almost, having a misty, at times almost luminescent, quality.

Looking around the room with those startling eyes, Jabin recognised most of the Azure present, having spent the past weeks enduring many strange tests at the hands of these very Magi. Spotting one he knew well, he waved. Having been under his tutelage, he'd grown fond of the Azure, whom he called Quinn; struggling to mouth his proper name—Quirinicotilius.

Quinn was more jovial than most of the Ancients, with hair that existed only as wisps at the sides of his head behind large ears and a tanned rotund face that Jabin thought resembled a bloated leather wine skin. His multiple chins cascaded their way down the full length of his neck, which was attached to a body quite adequately matching the face in colour, rotundity, and stretched leathery texture.

Lifting a plump hand, Quinn waved back, a genuine smile of affection on his lips. Over the past half month he had come to

view Jabin as something akin to a grandchild. Being celibate and therefore childless, he poured all his fondness on the boy. Therefore of all present at the council, he was most delighted to see Jabin become Chosen; the recipient of the Gift. However, contending with this pleasure was the knowledge of the burden the young lad would take up as ruler of the Three Realms; leader, protector, and providential builder of a kingdom spanning the continent. A heavy task for even an Azure with ten lifetimes of experience, and none knew how long Jabin's life would be extended, if at all.

Quirinicotilius was forced to push the troubling thought aside as a bell sounded indicating the council assembly. Silence fell as all turned toward the moderator presiding over this crucial meeting of the Azure Magi; ancient priests to the people of Asasa.

The moderator, an unusually tall Magi that Jabin knew as Dored, had a sombre air about him, a severity that caused those around to be more conscientious of their behaviour. As he rose from his seat and scanned the auditorium with a foreboding glare, the assembly quickly came to order.

After fully inspecting those gathered and satisfied that all who should be present were, Dored nodded. Grim-faced he walked toward the centre of the room, whereupon he knelt, bowed his head and uttered the words of power.

When at work amongst the people, The Ancients employ their arts in tasks beyond the capacity of ordinary folk. Always it is the same. Whether bringing rain, moving giant boulders from fertile strips of land, or healing the fatally injured, whenever the Magi use their powers they first kneel and bow their heads as if in prayer.

Jabin had questioned Quinn concerning this practice, and was told that prayer was as close a definition as any. He went on to explain this in some detail, how the Magi were simply an order of priests established by the Creator to guide and protect the populace ...that only through approaching the Creator in a form of intricate prayer –a mixture of invocation and petition– had they any powers at all... He had said a lot more. However, like most children, Jabin had patience only for short answers, more elaborate replies quickly eclipsing his interest.

Yet whatever Dored had uttered to his God, it was obviously being answered, for the amphitheatre shaped hall began to alter.

It reminded Jabin of gazing across the smithy fires of home, the rising heat causing objects behind to blur and distort. So too the walls of the ancient chamber wavered, shimmering gradually to transparency. Yet unlike the heat illusion, where objects bleed ephemerally back and forth into focus, here the transition was fixed. Stepwise the room vanished from sight, leaving nothing visible but perfect blackness. The effect on the senses was confounding. Only when a comforting hand took hold of his own, did Jabin's panicked disorientation subside. Looking up, he saw the grandfatherly face of Quinn'.

‘What's happening?’ Jabin asked in a half-choked whisper.

Looking pensive, Quinn replied, ‘Necessity brings us to this place, Jabin. To achieve the purpose of this assembling requires we be free from all distraction, both corporeal and otherwise. That being the case, Dored has ...Dored has...’

Obvious to Jabin was the Magi's difficulty in explaining the situation in terms simple terms. Quinn liked big words.

‘...Do you understand the term ethereal by any chance?’ was

the Azure's next attempt. Noting the uncomprehending look on the lad's face, he sighed and tried again. 'Dored has taken us to a place that has no time or substance, well, not in the sense easily understood', he paused again, before rushing the next words, 'A place where nothing physical lives. This is the realm of the deceased. Well, in a sense it is ...Hmm, I doubt I'm making much sense?'

The look of frustration on Quinn's face earned Jabin's sympathy, he answered the Azure with a nod and a look of open-mouthed amazement. Although somewhat short of plain, Jabin had grasped enough to realise they were in a place he'd experienced only in his father's stories.

'Are their ghosts here?' He asked in a more hushed whisper.

Quinn looked at the boy and smiled, 'Yes, there are spirits in this domain. Though none you can see nor hear, nor any that could cause us any harm even if they wanted to.'

'What do they do here then?' Jabin asked, extremely interested.

Quinn's face went sad. He was about to answer when a hand came between them and rested itself on Jabin's shoulder.

'There will be time enough for questions later Jabin. For now we have more immediate things to heed, and your help will be most vital.'

The hand and voice belonged to Sosthene, recognised as the most powerful of the Ancients and one of the three founding fathers of the land of Triad. Holding Jabin gently but firmly by the shoulder, he led him to the centre of the gathered Magi.

Each step was one of faith, each a footfall into inky black darkness. Yet light came from somewhere, for Jabin could still see those around him.

Pushing aside his inquisitive mind, Jabin allowed himself to

be led.

Positioning himself in front of the boy, Sosthene squatted to his level and spoke calmly. ‘Jabin, you must listen carefully to what I now say, for my words will be few but critical to what we are about to do. In truth our success here may depend on how well you listen to my words. Do you understand?’

Jabin nodded, his youthful exuberance subdued by the sobriety in Sosthene's tone. Forcing all else from his mind, he gave full attention to the Magi.

Sosthene smiled upon the boy's efforts, and continued. ‘Shortly I will lay you down and ask that you close your eyes. My hand will remain on you for a moment but when I remove it you will have the sense of falling, as if through the air. However, you must not open your eyes or attempt to move at all. Do you understand?’

Jabin nodded again.

‘Good. After this you will hear the Magi utter the words of power, but not as you have heard it before. You will hear many things you will not understand Jabin, things that may cause you to fear. Still you must remain unmoving, your eyes tightly shut. Can I trust you in this?’

Nervous, Jabin swallowed and gave a slow nod. He had been taught from infancy to trust what the Ancients said. To have them now seek a confidence from him was unsettling.

Sosthene again placed his hand on the boys shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly, ‘Try not to fear. As long as you do what I have said, no harm can befall you.’ Sosthene paused before continuing, ‘There is one more thing, and maybe it is unnecessary I even bring this up,’ For a moment he looked as if he'd changed his mind and wasn't going to, but with a deciding nod he continued, ‘Remember only to keep your mind clear, to

not dwell on any one thing. As thoughts come to you, simply focus on pushing them aside. I know you cannot stop thinking, just do not become fixed on any one thought.’ Sosthene again looked as if he wanted to say more, but after a pause simply said, ‘Can you do this?’

‘I ...I think I can,’ Jabin stuttered, unsure how he felt. He wasn't really scared, rather nervous of the fact that he, a mere boy, had been chosen to receive something uniquely powerful—something that would make him different to everyone else.

Placing his hand behind the boy's head, Sosthene lowered him gently to the unseen floor. Though with eyes tightly shut, straight way it seemed thoughts came crushing into his head. Being ready, he began deliberately to push them from his mind.

Jabin felt the chill of the stone floor beneath him and the tingling caress of a breeze on his face. Though warned, he still tensed when the pressure of his body against the cold stone suddenly disappeared; though it felt to him more like falling than rising. An eerie fear sent a shudder through him, like vertigo. He battled the instinctive temptation to throw out his arms to save himself, the even greater temptation to open his eyes. He did neither.

The words of power started not at all as he thought they would; in whispered prayer. This time they incanted in song, one heard at first as if from a distance. Faint lyrics carried upon winds soft breath. Yet as he listened the words became clearer, the voices stronger, and, as the singers intoned their magic, something began to stir within him, something deep and immensely powerful.

It is known by the Azure that all men are gifted with magic's

power at birth, a latent link to the Creator. However, like the individual strands of a gossamer web blown loose to the wind, so too will the threads of their gift slowly, filament by filament, be lost, if not fixed in place from youth.

Jabin, ignorant of how it was happening, perceived changes occurring within his mind and body, as if some part of him as yet unknown had awakened from a long sleep. This portion of his being attempted to rise to the surface of his consciousness and tell him something. Concentrating on the voice, Jabin remembered Sosthene's instruction to keep his mind clear. Emptying it, he allowed his thoughts to come and go, dwelling on no one thing in particular. In doing this, he found the voice of this new awareness became clearer, amplifying as he quieted his thoughts.

Jabin could still distinguish between the world in which he lay and the one he witnessed in his head, but it was within his mind's eye a new knowledge rose.

He rushed toward a piercing light at the end of a grey and insubstantial tunnel. It was here that the voice seemed to call from.

Yet along with the beckoning voice and the singing of the Azure, Jabin heard a more disturbing sound. Distant and immaterial, it grew as the light of the tunnel rushed toward him, becoming defined and clear—an appallingly sound that chilled Jabin to the depths of his young soul. It was as if millions of people groaned in agony, voices that told only of ambivalent despair and anguish, moans that left images of all that was of terror to man and child.

Within moments the tormenting din overwhelmed him, collapsing him inward by some invisible weight of dread that

pressed from all sides. The weight evolved into a presence, alien and evil. A presence that sensed him and wanted him for itself. With the chillness of a glacier it pressed into Jabin, seeming to take hold of his very soul.

Frantic now, in the dread presence of this being, Jabin screamed. He knew such an entity had the power to rob him of himself, could master his own mind and body. In his fear the light before him began to fall away, replaced by a yawning gulf of hopelessness. Unprepared, his young mind surrendered to a battle it knew it must surely lose, for the power of this being was vast.

Again the scene changed. At the brim of a pit he stood, a cold howling wind piercing his ears as it entered the murk of the chasms depths. Fixated, he leaned forward, knowing he would fall but already enticed. Eyes glowed up at him from the base of the abyss, yellow like a wolf and full of power and evil and hate. They probed him, widening as if in shock before pulling on him again with renewed fervour. Jabin's knees began to fold even as he screamed rejection at what was happening. The cavernous black and hateful eyes enclosed their embrace.

An image...

The image cast itself across his abating mental command, the brief image of an Azure. No more than a whispered form, it was enough. The hold was shattered. With sudden clarity, Jabin remembered Sosthene's warning to dwell on no one thing, and with a mental-discipline found normally only in the highly trained, Jabin banished the notion of the creature from his mind, clearing his thoughts of those dreadful cries.

With jolted suddenness he reached the end of the tunnel.

All became bright spinning pinholes of light within his head. There was only disorientation, as sound and blurred images

bled apart from each other in lingering shifts. Then, with a snap, all came into focus.

Jabin found himself looking down from a very great height on a land he did not recognise. More disturbing was the fact that by rights he should be hurtling at velocity to the ground beneath. Instead he remained suspended, as it were, on nothing. Looking down to see what was supporting him, Jabin received a greater shock, he could not see nor sense his physical body at all.

A dread arose in him, his mind grappling with the messages it was receiving. It was the voice of an Azure that again rescued him from the uncomprehending terror of his situation.

‘Jabin! Jabin, do not be afraid.’ The voice belonged to Sosthene.

‘What is happening? Where are we? Where are you?’ Jabin frantically looked about in search of the Ancient.

‘Jabin, I am too drained of strength to speak long, so listen well. You cannot see me, just as I cannot see you. Our bodies are not with us in this place.’ Sosthene spoke quickly, though calmly, aware of the fragility of Jabin’s mental hold on the situation. ‘What you are experiencing is the awakening of your magical potential. A part of that awakening involves what the Ancients refer to as The Recalling.

‘The land you see before you is the Motherland, the ancient home of your forebears. All who experience the recalling see what you are about to witness from a unique perspective. You will witness our history as it was at the beginning of the gift of magic, what we believe to be the greatest of all God’s gifts to man. You do not have to fear, for the things you will see are long past, you will be nothing more than a spectator to a history that now also belongs to you.’ Sosthene’s voice began

to sound strained, as if he were in pain. ‘I must return to my own body now Jabin, watch well young king, and learn. Do not be afraid.’

The last words were just audible to Jabin, but the significance of the words “young king” remained loud in his ears.

Calmer after the reassuring words of the Magi, Jabin directed his awareness back to his surroundings and noted with surprise that he was no longer miles above the land but in a large forest glade. From the thick carpet of snow covering the ground, he guessed it to be winter, and deep into it, though he could feel neither the bite of the air nor the damp of the snowfall.

In the centre of the clearing, almost perfect in its circular shape, was a pond of the purest cerulean Jabin had ever seen. Looking up he saw the trees sway in the breeze. Yet, with detached curiosity, he noted the water of the pond remained glassy smooth, no hint of a ripple. At first he thought it had iced over, but on observing the trees of the forest clearly reflected on the ponds surface, he rejected that theory. It was only when he attempted to approach this seeming paradox that he discovered his immobility; stuck fast, it seemed, to his current position. Yet he had no time to dwell on this problem, for entering from the far end of the clearing came a large procession of men.

Their column approached the pond and formed a circle around it. All were young. All with a strange cast to their countenance, as if walking in their sleep.

Jabin could not help but think he recognised some of these men, though he discarded the thought; he knew all the young men of his home town and none of those were here.

Once circled around the basin of water, each man dropped to his knee and bowed his head. The immediate similarity of this

action became obvious to Jabin, but he pushed that aside also to see what happened next.

With a low rumbling the air began to pulsate, and from the pond there came the most beautiful sound Jabin ever heard. Not a sound he could later describe. It filled him with joy. Had his physical body been present, it would have brought tears of rapture to his eyes. This ecstasy grew in intensity until he thought he must surely burst, for without doubt no mortal mind could endure such bliss. Euphoria then altered to an engulfing awe, as each present witnessed a being clothed in white light rise serenely from the crystal waters. If Jabin could have moved, he would have followed the example of the young men and prostrated himself face down on the wet snow, for plainly this entity was a being to be worshipped.

Time froze.

For an indefinite period, Jabin alone was forced to behold a being whose presence simultaneously terrified and mesmerised him.

‘Rise, my favoured ones.’

Jabin saw the lips move but the voice it seemed came from all directions at once, so deep and rich that one would have thought the universe had taken voice and begun to speak. Jabin longed at least to bow before this great one.

At the word of the glowing immortal, the gathered men rose to stand and gaze with enthralled eyes upon the speaker.

‘Each of you knows me. You have been chosen and guided to this sacred place for the same purpose...’ As He spoke, the Holy One seemed to emanate an aura of absolute power, an ascendancy that made all standing excruciatingly aware of their inferiority in comparison, ‘...The purpose of guiding, protecting and teaching the rest of mankind on the world of Asasa. You

are to be my Priests.’

With the last word the Holy One raised his hands. From his body emanated luminous beams that speed toward each of the men, encasing them in an envelope of purest light. Time again froze. Nothing of earth or nature moved as the glowing One silently communicated his will with each man present. Then, one by one, the glow around them dimmed, leaving the men in a lesser but continuing nimbus.

The Holy One spoke aloud, ‘To you I give the gift of Dunamis, the ability to draw on the strength of your God through the channel and facets of the supernatural and its mysteries. From this day forward you shall be hailed as the Azure Magi, the priests of the Most High. As you learn of the facets of this gift, so you will learn of me. To each of you I have given a partial understanding, a foundation for you to build on together. But know this, none of you is above the other, united you must serve me, divided you will fall.’

‘To the whole, I give you this.’ A book of great volume and of shining silver appeared in his hand. ‘This tome will be to you both guide and law. Its words are final and its mysteries deep. Study it therefore dutifully, and live by it faithfully, for by it will things of the future be foreknown and the path for your feet to take be revealed. Be true my Priests.’

With that the holy one turned and, to Jabin's wonder, stared openly at him—smiling. As he began to slowly sink back beneath the sacred waters of the pond, he pointed almost casually and released a stream of light in Jabin's direction.

Wishing to flinch away, Jabin nonetheless felt nothing. Looking back to the pond, he was greeted with the bewildered faces of all the young men looking back at him. Glancing down he now saw the rest of his body, though not one of flesh.

Opalescence. A glowing skin of myriad coloured lights. In panic Jabin looked again to the pond, in time to see the smiling face of the holy one sink into the mirrored surface of the waters. Yet not before he heard uttered four more words, words that Jabin were convinced spoken to him.

‘You are the beginning.’ Then all was darkness.

DARK LORDS

The building itself was impressive, even to an immortal. Flawless upon inspection, the masonry work revealed only the finest hairlines as evidence the structure was indeed made from separate blocks, all capped with a vaulted roof of stone over one hundred and fifty feet in height. Once the possession of a kingdom of men, the fortress was now the residence to Tarnul—the Lord of darkness.

Evidence of his presence was apparent everywhere, from the noxious black mould that had taken hold on every surface, to the clogging mist that continually rose from the now dead earth. The dais that rose at one end of the massive chamber supported in its centre a throne from antiquity, its once silver brilliance now the dullness of bronze. The very air that circulated the chamber had become corrupt, dank, and poignant, like the odour of a festering sore.

It was just as Tarnul liked it.

Ornan halted his pondering of the building to cast his gaze around his gathered brothers. The summons had been urgent, clear in its charge that none be absent—and none, it seemed, had been foolish enough to ignore it.

A conclave meeting of all the dark brothers had not occurred since the time of the Ancient Wars, and Ornan noted the air of speculative confusion written on the faces of most present. He alone of the assembled Dark-ones knew the reason for this meeting—at least, had an understanding of the reason—and so shared his master's excitement.

The Hated-One had touched the barrier. The very fabric of their corporeal prison screamed of it. But he had also heard the words.

The words...

Ornan neither understood nor knew who they were directed to, and that troubled him. For whom on this forsaken planet populated only by the Dark Ones and their minions would the Hated One communicate with? And what did the words mean?

Ornan pushed the questions aside and bowed.

The master approached.

Robed completely in black with cowed head hidden deep within its folds, the dark High Lord stepped from the shadows. Alike to a shadow, he seemed to drift to the raised dais and mount his waiting throne. Concealed well within his hood, Tarnul's dull blood-red eyes perused those bowed before him. As he gazed, he ruminated on the past, one that held a lost glory. A time where he possessed almost unbounded power. A time when he and his horde were not entrapped upon a single pitiful planet, but were free. Free to roam the cosmos and its

endless systems. Free to enter the otherworldly realms of the incorporeal universe –the domain of the spirits– the place from which all that now is originated, the place from which all that will be is ultimately decided.

Above all he missed that place.

Titanic had been the struggle for power, immense in extent the forces unleashed. The hated Creator battling the dark host as only immortals can. To gain the pre-eminence, to attain the position of supreme controller over all that is; that at least was Tarnul's ambition, and, he assumed, the obvious goal of the Hated One—though his enemy always denied such a motive.

All that was a long time past as mortals measure, over two thousand years. Throughout which the great High Dark Lord had dwelt as a prisoner, defeated and cast down by the infernal Hated One, imprisoned and stripped of so much power.

Tarnul probed outward again as was his constant habit, and, as was the constant result, he struck the barrier; a scourge erected by the hated Creator. A cursed impenetrable force of energy that the Dark Lords had given up attempting to overcome. A shield that prevented any from departing the realm of Asasa, in any form.

But the High Dark Lord knew its limitations, and the deep disquiet it surely had caused the Hated One before, and after, putting it in place. For to raise an enclosure capable preventing the Dark Hordes release, would also prevent any from entering, so leaving the Creator and his creatures separated by his own hand. Tarnul again wondered why the Hated One had chosen to leave his creatures so trapped. However, it was because of this very thing that he had called for an assembling of the princes of night. Breaking from his contemplation, he addressed his waiting Dark Lords.

‘Brethren of the dark, the Hated One has touched the barrier.’

Tarnul watched his simple statement have its effect. Could feel it, as those gathered, with wild hope in their eyes, used their powers to reach out for the barrier. Escape was their most desperate dream.

He watched in silence as that hope dissolved, as each struck the obstacle they had thought removed. One by one all eyes turned again to their master, confidence turned to uncertainty on their faces.

Tarnul was silent. He relished being master, most powerful, feared and respected of the dark host; and by some the most hated. He relished that most of all.

He coveted the abilities and knowledge he possessed. Powers that possibly exceeded the rest of the Dark Ones combined. He delighted now in the confusion on their faces –his servants, all waiting for him –their master– to reveal his hidden knowledge.

‘The barrier has been touched, but as you have discovered it remains unbroken. However, the key to its undoing is now known to me, and that key is,’ he paused for effect, ‘an Elf.’ The last was delivered slowly, pronouncedly, the speaker fully aware of the response it would incur.

Listening, Ornan coveted what his master had, this power over others. He understood his masters relish of the moment, to be the source of a powerful truth hidden from the weak. Of which he, Ornan, was not. He too had heard the words.

‘How is that possible master, no Elf lives?’ This came from Chkurl, a lord Ornan considered a fool, but more importantly, a rival to Tarnul's favour.

No matter his feelings though, Chkurl's question was still

valid. What Elf was left for the Creator to communicate with? Had not the last died in the fighting pits centuries ago as entertainment for the Dark horde?

‘There are Elf’s that yet live Chkurl.’ Came Tarnul’s reply, ‘But they reside many leagues across the Boundless Sea.’

Tarnul’s words raised a stir among the gathering, but only one voice spoke up.

‘There is no land beyond the sea, master.’ This from the Lord Sabototh, ‘The land we abide on is the only soil on this planet, even the least of us are aware of the geography of the worlds, how is it that you speak of another land?’ Known for his arrogance, Sabototh’s tone still managed respect, though spoken through a sneer.

Tarnul’s eye’s flared his contempt of the presumptuous dark lord. ‘Your ignorance is equal only to the grandeur of your arrogance Sabototh, in doubting the veracity of my words.’ With a look of murderous menace, Tarnul continued. ‘You speak of knowing the geography of the worlds. Tell me, how far does the eastern point of the land extend from where we now stand? Surely your prodigious knowledge can recall such a trifle.’

Sabototh’s expression revealed his thoughts better than any words, fear clearly evident in his eyes. Yet pride still marked his stance, and there was no wavering of voice as he answered. ‘Almost two thousand leagues, my master.’

Tarnul’s angry mien changed to a grin, remarkably alike to that of a skull. ‘Subservience toward your betters has always managed to escape you Sabototh. A problem I may soon rectify if you fail to develop it yourself. However, along with your failing diffidence is your flawed knowledge of how the land lays.’ Tarnul paused just long enough for Sabototh to open his

mouth in reply. ‘You are incorrect in saying that from here to the eastern tip of the Motherland is two thousand leagues. Albeit you would have been correct if I had asked you that same question before we were cast down, but things have changed since then.

‘Ornan’, show our insolent brother that my more trusted lords are also my wiser.’

Ornan enjoyed a gloating look at Sabototh before responding, ‘Fewer than one thousand leagues master, the land is not as it was before we were cast down.’

Sabototh's expression, mirroring many of the other lords, showed surprise.

Tarnul continued, ‘One thousand leagues Sabototh. A thousand less then we remember it created as, and do you know where that land now is?’

Sabototh merely shook his head, too intimidated to speak.

‘It is over ten thousand leagues across the Boundless Sea, on the other side of this world. There, on a portion of land once part of this continent, live the last remnants of Elvin-kind. One of whom now holds the key of our imprisonment.’

The hubbub created by Tarnul's words reverberated as a wave across the chamber.

Ornan had listened throughout and had yet to hear anything he had not already reckoned upon, but the answer to one question eluded him, this he directed to his master. ‘High Lord, I have heard the words of the Hated One to the Elf, but I am at a loss as to what they mean and how He could have done such a thing without breaking the barrier. Have you an answer?’

Ornan was aware all eyes were on him. Of all his brother lords, only he and Tarnul had heard the Creator's message, and such a thing revealed much power. He allowed himself a

momentary satisfaction, for this would elevate him in the eyes of his peers. Yet not one to be carried away by outward signs of vanity, he tempered his expression, fully cognisant that Tarnul tolerated none who revelled in self glory. Such did not make faithful servants, and Ornan wanted nothing more than to be seen as a very faithful servant; rather, the power that such a servant might obtain.

Tarnul's aspect became frustrated. The shadow that hung about him deepened. 'To the second of those questions, Prince Ornan, I am at a loss myself to answer. And as to how it was done, I can only speculate. We know that the Hated One cannot touch the shield without at least weakening it, if not destroying it completely. Therefore, the answer to what was done does not rest in the how, but in the when.' To Tarnul's glee, perplexity manifested itself on the faces before him. He continued in the smugness that greater knowledge so often produces, speaking in a lecturing tone, as those who hold themselves in high regard do. 'When did our enemy give his message? There are but two possibilities: past or present. The present has been eliminated, for the shield could not still stand otherwise. This leaves us with only the past.

'Our hated enemy, if my conjecture is correct, has shown adroit cunning. At some time before the shield was erected, the Hated One sent a message to one of Elf-kind in this present age.'

On the faces of some, bewilderment had become blatant scepticism. It was once again Sabototh who voiced this doubt. 'But no mere Elf, even those of the Ancient Azure priesthood, has the power to travel through time. Even we were limited in that. What you suggest is implausible.' Again Sabototh's tone, all respect, was at variance with his expression, mocking doubt.

Ornan noted this, and so was surprised that anger did not mark the Dark High Lord's features. Yet though Tarnul's face reflected nothing, his words were cold as ice as he replied.

‘Your hand is at the door to my wrath. I advise you to leave us now before you open that door with your foolish tongue and discover what it means to enter it.’

Always quick to speak, Sabototh was not so quick of wit. In a stance that lacked all sagacity—in light of Tarnul's expression, he answered, ‘You have no right to speak to me this way. You are High Lord because we put you in your position. I demand the proper respect due a Dark Lord. Or are we of no more esteem in your eyes than the dispensable Kobolds?’

Ornan was sure Sabototh would have said more, but whatever words he had intended left him as a startled wheeze. With no time to think, let alone react, he found himself gripped in an invisible fist of power. Lifted from his feet it rammed him at great speed against a caryatid support of the arcaded roof section, forcibly enough to crack the carved figure across her waist and dislodge the masonry.

The impact, powerful as it was, was hardly felt by Sabototh, though fear was clearly etched on his face.

Ornan could sense the intensity with which Sabototh fought back, with the might of an immortal being harnessing powers that had once been enough to split mountains. Using every strand of dark energy that was his to command, Sabototh opposed the fist of power Tarnul had holding him.

To no avail.

No hint of strain marked Tarnul's voice, only icy hostility. ‘You were warned, fool, but you were heedless. And now you have opened the door to your own ending.’ The shadows about Tarnul grew darker still, ‘you have no longer any rights. You

are less in my eyes than the lowest of servants. As to my position as High Lord, I stand here because of my might, not your choosing.’ His words were bitten emphasis, ‘My strength, my knowledge, and my power have put me over you, and the price of your forgetting that fact is your soul.’

If the assembled Dark Lords had been quiet before, they were deathly so now. Sabototh's mien had altered from fear to terror. No shred of arrogance or pride remained in his eyes, only the horror of ultimate ending, something abominable to an immortal.

It is known that the vital essence of a being cannot die. However, for those powerful enough –and willing to take the risk– it is possible to lay hold of a weaker opponents soul, to subdue it to the point where it may be absorbed, and then to take it as one's own. However, the attempt to assimilate another's essence carries great risk, requiring complete confidence in ones pre-eminence over an opponent. For to fail in fully binding the soul of another, would end in your losing your soul to them.

Tarnul had such confidence.

From the fear in Sabototh's eyes, he believed also that Tarnul was able. Yet he did not plead mercy, even as he was drawn across the hall toward the High Lord. Such was the struggle between the two that a high pitched keening began to emit from all around, the focused energies causing the air to vibrate with power. With the increasing noise came heat, the air jumping hundreds of degrees within seconds. Sabototh's body armour began to melt, so much power poured into saving himself that he could not spare any to protect the armour nor

flesh of the Elfin form he had chosen to take. In reaching the High Lord the charred flesh of his body was beginning to fall as ash to the stony floor, itself now aglow and dull red.

Tarnul on the other hand was untouched by strain, the antithesis of Sabototh's condition. Bathed in a cool nimbus of blue, his calm was most evident in his smile as he spoke a few final words to his opponents burning image, 'I claim your essence as mine Sabototh. You will live eternally enslaved as an impotent entity within me. This day your existence will cease, yet live you will forever as mine. Welcome dark fool into my embrace.' The words were ominous and many shivered in the heat.

Ornan was not one of them. Mesmerised by his master's display, he wondered how he'd fair in such a contest. He watched as Tarnal began drawing Sabototh's vital essence to himself.

Such was the puissance of Tarnul's dominant power that the assembled Lords felt their own inner beings threatened, at risk if they did not protect themselves. A chill fear forced each to erect their own shields.

All watched in awe.

Among the Dark Lords such an end was dreadful to contemplate, to witness, horrifying. Yet they watched as Sabototh's soul departed its ruined flesh and as shadow approached the waiting High Lord. Having no body, Sabototh could no longer be heard to scream, but all could imagine the horror of it as the futilely struggling spirit came within reaching distance of Tarnul's baneful visage. Suddenly funnelling, it was sucked as a maelstrom into Tarnul's eyes. Within the space of a breath Sabototh was gone. The High Lords orbs turned from red to pitch black. With a staggered

step and a moan escaping his lips, he sunk to one knee.

Ornan watched his masters bowed head and trembling body. It was obvious a struggle was taking place; Sabototh's final vies for escape. To falter at this point, even for a moment, would see the much weaker Sabototh turn and take Tarnul's soul instead. Yet, as suddenly as he had gone to his knee, the Dark High Lord straightened, eyes again dull red and a smile on his lips declaring victory.

Turning to face Ornan and Chkurl, with an expression that denied any struggle had taken place, he spoke, 'Ornan and Chkurl, you I have chosen to find the Elf to whom the Hated One spoke, and once found to contain him. As for the rest of you,' He addressed the assembly, 'Once again we fight the Hated One's creation. This time, however, it will lead to our freedom. Each of you is to begin construction of ships for transporting our army, ships capable of carrying them to the other side of this world. I leave the logistics of such an undertaking in each of your hands.' He shifted his attention to two Dark Lords standing together at the foot of the dais. 'You, lords Brachk and Dryma, will come with me now. Those of you for whom I have further instructions will receive them in due course. This conclave meeting of the Lords of Night is at a close.'

Dissatisfaction at being dismissed without consideration to their own concerns was evident on many faces, yet none spoke in protest, subdued by Tarnul's display of power and the horror of seeing their dark brother's demise; many appeared even relieved, eager to be excused.

Soon the great hall was empty of all but Ornan, Tarnul, and the others he had summoned.

Chkurl, proud at being hand-picked, stood by the master. In

contrast to Ornan's well-groomed appearance, Chkurl had adopted the look of a barbarian warrior. A large six foot frame covered completely in furs. A hard face, dirty, rugged, with a full beard and shoulder length head of ruddy unwashed hair. Although of no need to an immortal Dark Lord, he still carried a broadsword at his hip. A buckler which now hung from a shoulder strap completed the look.

Though the aspect a Dark Lord chose reflected nothing of their abilities or power, it did disclose something of their character. Therefore Ornan's appraisal of Chkurl concluded that, as the barbarian he resembled, so too were his ambitions simple and unrefined. Contrary to Ornan, Chkurl had no desire for great power, only recognition of his prowess. In line with that barbaric nature he chose simple ways to achieve his goal, often challenging others of the horde to pointless duels. Ornan held him in low regard, considering him crude, inferior and foolish. However, this did not eliminate him as a threat to Ornan's ambitions, for Tarnul took pleasure in Chkurl's simple ways and slavish obeisance. For this, Ornan hated Chkurl, for none coveted the High Lord's favour more than he—and the power of that favour.

Ornan turned in disgust from his evaluation of Chkurl, to face the two other Dark Lords, Brachk and Dryma. Both stood at a distance from him and one another, facing the High Lord.

Brachk's head resembled that of a serpent, with torso and upper limbs of a lion and lower all feathers and claws. Dryma, of whom Ornan knew little, appeared like a shifting shadow, flitting between shapes so frequently that Chkurl eventually barked that he choose a form and stick with it. Dryma only shimmered more fervently.

Tarnal's voice drew the distracted attention of the Dark Lord's

to himself.

‘You four I have chosen to share something which the others will not be privilege to. Spare your questions until I have explained.’ Without awaiting their acquiesce, Tarnul went on. ‘Many centuries have passed since we last fought the Azure Priesthood, and I’m sure you well remember that if not for our vast army, we might have lost that war. We learnt quickly that individually the Priests were almost powerless against us, but together their strength increased far beyond proportion to their numbers.

‘Yet they were few, we were many, and they eventually fell. Though not before reducing us to a fraction of what we were.’ Tarnul paused reflectively for a moment before turning to Ornan. ‘Ornan, you and I alone heard the Hated-One speak. Was there anything you noted of the Elf he spoke with?’

Ornan examined his recollection of the time, but recalled nothing of significance. ‘No’, was his regretful reply.

‘Well I did,’ said Tarnul. ‘The stirring of the spirits alerted me that the Hated One was up to something, and I prepared myself to know what. Surprised I was to find that it was no Azure Magus the Creator conferred with, but a mere Elf child. A male I think. Of course, I attempted to obstruct the message and enter the child’s mind. However, an outside force prevented me—the Azure. They were protecting him. Far fewer than we have faced before, yet more than I could overcome alone. I had to be content with concealing my presence, and though it neared the limits of my abilities, I was able to witness what happened.’

Tarnul went silent again, his face taking on an unreadable expression. ‘Ornan and Chkurl, I send you not just to find a mere Elf child, but a threat greater than even the Azure. A

threat to our very existence. This child has the key to both our freedom or our desolation, for to this child has been given the complete power of the Azure. That power they call Dunamis, which before was distributed amongst them proportionately and only as need demanded, has now been given in its fullness to one individual. He we must have under our control, or dead.’ Tarnul raised a gloved fist to his face as he spoke the last. Then smoothly turning, his robe following him like some beleaguering ghost, he faced away from them. His voice lowered as he continued.

‘As you know, Dunamis is the force the Creator established to uphold the shield, the Azure draw from this power. Being given to this boy in its fullness now means it works through him to that purpose, though as yet he probably does not comprehend the magnitude of this. To destroy the child will remove the only channel through which Dunamis now operates, thus releasing it, and enabling us to harness it for ourselves. And once that power is in our control, so too the barrier.’

Ornan was so stunned that he stood for a moment, dumbfounded. He had encountered the Azure Priesthood before, five or six he could handle alone, with difficulty. But anything more was a force beyond him. To contemplate facing the combined might of Dunamis in one individual? Well, it could not be done.

He had witnessed with his own eyes a Dark Lord so weakened by the drain of Dunamis, that a simple warrior's sword had felled him, sending his soul to the realm of the dead. Such a thing had once been thought impossible. No longer. Trapped in the physical domain, the Dark Horde had seen the impossible become a threat and quickly learnt to fight only in

groups, and then against only few Azure.

It was with this knowledge and respect born of fear that Ornan responded. ‘How, my lord, are we expected to destroy this Elf? Child though he may be, what hope have two Dark Lords against even a child replete with the power of Dunamis?’

Tarnul replied without pause, gesturing casually, ‘Quite simple, my faithful Ornan. You will not go as Dark Lords.’ His reply contained no mirth, only the tone of one who had thought through a problem and reached all the answers.

Ornan decided to wait for Tarnul to expand on his bewildering statement. But Chkurl had neither patience nor the prudence for it. In a perplexed tone he asked, ‘What do you mean by, not Dark Lord's, master?’

Sombre and with a portentous tone, Tarnul replied, ‘You will not like what I am about to say, but in the face of desperation we have no other choice. As Dark Lord's you would be easily detected in the Elfin world, and being only two just as effortlessly dealt with by the Azure, or the child himself for that matter. Therefore the only way to remove your conspicuousness amongst them, is to remove ...’, Tarnul hesitated for a moment to stare intensely into the eyes of the Ornan, adding the weight of his authority to the loathsomeness of his words, ‘to remove your powers.’

Ornan and Chkurl jerked backwards a step. Although both had deduced were Tarnul's words were leading, their impact was no less staggering. Ornan was first to reply, his brow an etching of misgivings. ‘High Lord Tarnul, you know master that I am always your most faithful servant, but what you ask ...what you ask is so much. To strip us of our powers would make us susceptible to the mundane dangers of this world, forcing us to use physical means in defending ourselves or

killing another. With our full powers it would be difficult if not impossible to destroy this child, how then are we to destroy him with no means other than that afforded to the mortals of this world?' Ornan would have stopped there, but he decided it was time to lay it all out, with the hope that he could stall Tarnul's plans through sheer weight of questions; a vain effort he suspected, but in desperation he tried nonetheless. 'Also master, to whom, or what, will the safe keeping of our powers be entrusted? And how can we be guaranteed that another will not take them? For as you surely know lord, to release ourselves of our puissance frees another to take it themselves at ease.'

Chkurl carried on where Ornan left off, attempting the same futile strategy Ornan employed. 'If I may speak master, how if we are made devoid of our immortal abilities are we to travel to and from this land on the other side of the world?' Chkurl spoke with a tone of resignation that reflected Ornan's own fatalism. Both knew Tarnul would have planned this long in advance, the answers to all their protests waiting in queue. By the very presence of Brachk and Dryma, they'd surmised what the High Lord's answer would be. They were right.

'Your questions have been considered,' Tarnul responded., 'And I have answers for them all, but understand this, the child, as I have mentioned, is the key to our freedom. The Hated-One has transferred to him the power to uphold the shield. Before this time Dunamis was in the world, but only as the Azure required it. Now it is given completely to one. If we do not destroy him soon, while his powers are still new to him and largely unrealised, then he will grow in might beyond all hope of overwhelming.' Tarnul came forward to place a hand on each of their shoulders, 'But if destroyed, then the complete

potential of Dunamis will be freed for our taking, ours to use to lay waste the barrier. To leave this child to come to maturity would be to place the enemy's blade at our own necks. A blade, I do not need to remind you, ready at any time to destroy us.' Tarnul paused meaningfully before going on. 'Now you understand the importance of your task and why I ask you to lay aside your powers to achieve it. We cannot risk your being detected as Dark Lord's, for that would alert the Azure as to our knowledge of their whereabouts, and that must not happen. Not until we have the advantage in our hand.

'As to your questions. How to kill the child is something I have deliberated much upon. Being mortal he will, if caught unaware, be totally unprotected from physical attack. But to kill him and thus release Dunamis before the Dark Horde is present to harness it will only allow the Azure to take control of it again. Therefore, you must detain the child until we arrive by ship with the army.'

'But master, how do we confine such a one without our powers?' Chkurl voice reflected his angst.

Tarnul's answer was immediate, 'With this.' Raising his hands the High Lord revealed two thumb sized vials, both containing a milky white liquid.

Using their abilities to see beyond the obvious, the Dark Lords probed the conglomeration of substances the liquid was composed of. They noted the complex formulation of ingredients in precise amounts. With their complete knowledge of Elf biology, they were well aware of the potent effect of such a poison.

'The liquid will kill the child.' Ornan said bluntly.

'Yes, if taken in too large a dose. However, a few drops every couple of days will rob any mortal of their abilities to reason

coherently, four drops will prevent all voluntary muscular movement, and six or more will kill, the more the swifter.

‘Once in your hands, and the how of that is up to you, but once yours you must conceal the child until we arrive. Being sure that he is constantly secured and incoherent.’ Tarnul then opened his hands with palm exposed, revealing two rings of silvery grey metal, a small crescent shaped black stone embedded in their surface. ‘To aid you in remaining hidden from the Azure scrying, which they will surely use after the child is taken. These rings will prevent you from being detected by anything but mortal means.’

Ornan and Chkurl passively took a ring each and placed it on their finger.

‘Now’, continued Tarnul, ‘As to how you will travel, and the safe keeping of your powers.’ He turned abruptly from Ornan and Chkurl to summon Brachk and Dryma, one to either side of him. Both approached with immediacy born of fear. Together they knelt to the left and right of their master.

Although Ornan knew neither Dark Lords well, he knew that were of limited abilities in relation to the rest of the Horde; revealed in their hasty willingness to kneel in the High Lord's presence before summoned to do so. Having witnessed the demise of Sabototh, Ornan did not blame the two lords their timorous genuflection. Ornan waited to hear Tarnul's explanation. None came.

With planned suddenness, Tarnul placed a hand on each of the kneeling lord's heads and with a single word of power and a fluid downward thrust prostrated Brachk and Dryma before him. Immediately a nimbus of red light encased the now insensate Dark Lord's. With a pulsing energy that could be both heard and felt, the two rose ponderously to their feet. They

hung with heads slumped forward, suspended as if from invisible bonds three paces apart and a short distance above the stone floor. As Ornan watched, thin tendrils of power broke off from the nimbus surrounding each lord and began to intertwine, weaving together to form a quickly growing web in the open space between them. As the complex pattern became denser, so also did the void become darker, appearing now as a billowing black cloud amidst an ever-moving lattice of dull red light. Within the space of moments the light receded, to be smothered by a black emptiness bordered on either side by inert Dark Lords, themselves half swallowed by the void.

The completed Portal of Travel was nothing new to the Dark Lords; like every other means, it too had proven futile against the barrier and dismissed as a way of escape.

Although before their exile it had been an ability often employed, this was the first time Ornan had witnessed living beings utilised as portal stanchions. With mild curiosity, he continued to watch in silence, as did Chkurl.

Tarnal positioned himself squarely before the portal and again with a single word extended his arm with palm exposed this time revealing a spinning white Orb of Vision. With another brief command and controlling gesture, Tarnul sent the orb with blinding speed toward the portal which swallowed it up as if it had never existed. He turned to Ornan and Chkurl.

‘The Orb will return when it has found the land we seek. No doubt you are wondering why I have chosen two Dark Lords to act as Portal Stays?’ Again, he didn’t wait for their reply. ‘Lords Brachk and Dryma will act not only as sentinels of this portal, but guardians also of your powers. As you both know, only those who use the portal can command it. You therefore, having once conferred your powers upon them, will enter, and

once through you will command the portal to close on this side, thus preventing any other the use of it. Being the only Dark Lord's in that land, you will be the only ones capable of retrieving your rightful powers—after your task is accomplished of course.’ Tarnul said no more, but rather calmly turned and stood waiting for the orbs return.

Ornan looked over at Chkurl and saw that he too was surprised at the simplistic and flawless solutions Tarnul offered in response to their objections. With a less than reserved realisation, Ornan understood that the High Lord wasn't going to take no for an answer.

CHANGES

Quirinicotilius sat silently next to the pallet, gently holding the hand of the still form laying there. Both his own and the hand he held reflected the changes that had occurred to the owners of each. For the first time in his ancient life he felt the advance of old age upon his body; and a rapid advance it was. Seeing that the power behind the Azure's almost ageless existence was no longer theirs, it appeared to be making up for lost time, and Quinn knew that the days left to him in the flesh were swiftly drawing to an end. The thought saddened the Azure, for he was a lover of life. Known by all as the epitome of kindness and joviality, even in the numerous distressing eras

of the Azure history Quinn had maintained a cheerfully optimistic outlook that could not but infectiously rub off on those around. Now though, that life was coming to a close.

Quinn still found he had comfort and hope enough to share, the source being the same that had always enabled him to remain positive throughout his long existence—his God. As with all Azure, but perhaps more than most, Quinn was a man of faith, possessing a confidence in the power, presence, and foreknowledge of his God that suffused his every thought and lay behind his every action. Now, as then, it was in his creator that he placed his reliance; and the one whose hand he now held, the creators Chosen.

Focusing on the hand, Quinn ruminated on the boy it once belonged to. As many changes having occurred to this one as had to the Ancients. The once youthful lad of slight appearance now possessed the well-toned physique of a man in his early twenties, and, if he were any judge of such matters, Quinn thought the young face a handsome one. *Kingly*, he thought. With a strong jaw line and a face that revealed a good heart, even in repose. Quinn chuckled at his own bias, seeing how affection swayed perception. ‘A face revealing a good heart indeed,’ he mumbled to himself humorously, next I’ll believe that white hair signifies wisdom. None-the-less, he believed in the goodness of the young man's heart. He only wished the lad would awaken to prove it.

It had been five weeks since the Azure had gathered to bestow the power of Dunamis upon Jabin. Now only half that number of Ancients still lived, less each day, in spite of all their efforts to the contrary. That, and Jabin remained unconscious. The passing on of the Gift to the Ralisian line had been successful, but a success that had carried a heavy price. The

feeblest of the Azure had died during the ceremony of transference, their powers and lives violently torn from them. In the weeks following many more passed on, aging faster than their metabolisms could cope, or from injuries incurred when thrown by the explosive forces transferring Dunamis had produced. Only the strongest still lived, those that had managed to maintain some form of control and with the last of their draining powers to erect a barrier against the volatile energies involved. These remaining Azure were troubled in the knowledge they no longer possessed power to protect the people, but more-so that the one who now did, lay in some type of coma.

The door opening abruptly brought Quirinicotilius back from His contemplation. It was brother Dored who stood in the entrance. An aged Azure Dored, but one who still carried himself erect with an authoritative calm. ‘Brother Pul has passed on. Reman and Vral are on their deathbeds. Sosthene has called for council.’

To anyone not knowing Dored, he would have sounded almost callous speaking of the death of a friend and the mortal rest of two others, in a tone resembling that of indifference. But Dored was not only a brother in faith to Quirinicotilius, but a good friend also, and Quinn could see behind the mask his brother wore so well, could read the eyes and see the wretchedness that Dored felt within his soul; for the departed Pul was not only a spiritual brother to Dored, but one of flesh also.

Empathy clutched at Quinn's throat, preventing him from speech. Rising, he embraced his friend, knowing for all his stoic detachment that Dored still craved to be held, to share his grief. In Quinn's clasp, Dored's resolve crumbled. With a moan

he leaned into his brother's shoulder and together they wept. They remained locked together in the consoling comfort only to be found in another's touch. The stored anxieties and recent distresses halved in the sharing of tears, the bond of friendship doubled in the sharing of solace.

At last Dored pulled away. With lighter countenance he said, 'Sosthene has summoned council, those of us who remain must decide a course of action to take, and pray the Creator guide our steps.'

'Who's to watch over Jabin during the assembly?'

'We're to take him with us. Sosthene requires he be present.' replied Dored, his shrug revealing that he didn't know why.

Both paused and looked at the inert but healthy appearing young man on the pallet. Both then looked at the aged frame of the other.

'I don't know about you, good Dored, but if I attempt to lift that lad parts of me might quickly regret it. Maybe you should go and fetch some sturdier limbs from the young men working in the store yard.'

With a nod and exaggerated pretence of frailty, Dored smiled and theatrically limped off. Quinn chuckled at his friend's rare attempt at humour. Grabbing a blanket from the only shelf in the room, he draped it over Jabin. He then sat and waited.

He was awoken by a gentle shake of the shoulder. With embarrassment he noted Dored and the two middle aged men behind him.

'The assembly will be awaiting us sleepy-head, let's not keep them waiting.' Dored said, with another of his rare smiles.

Mumbling words of mock indignation, Quinn rose and directed the younger men to take an end of the pallet each and follow.

By the time Quinn and Dored arrived at the council of meeting, the remaining Azure had already been seated for some time.

‘Ah, there you are brothers, we were beginning to worry. Is all well?’

Quinn dismissed the two men before answering Sosthene; noting for the first time just how big the red bearded man was. ‘All is well brother, only the need for stronger limbs to carry the chosen kept us from arriving sooner. Council may begin.’ Both Azure took their designated seats, leaving Sosthene the floor.

Approaching Jabin's cot, Sosthene placed one hand placed upon the lad's chest. No word he spoke, but what happened next brought every Azure to his feet with disbelief. Sosthene appeared now twice his normal size, and both Jabin and the hand of the Azure glowed dimly in the lit chamber.

A few muttered astonished oaths, incredulous. Some shouted questions, echoing their bewilderment, but most just stood in silence; stilled faces that hid their owner's thoughts. Over the perplexed voices of the Azure rose that of Sosthene, silencing in its magically amplified rumbling all the others. ‘Brothers hear me.’

The dying echo of his augmented voice was all that could be heard in the chamber and with the full attention of all focused on his giant form, Sosthene continued. ‘As you see, I have access to Dunamis. After the transferring of Dunamis upon Jabin, I realised that the mental link I had formed with him during the ceremony remained intact, to the extent that I can feel his presence, if not his thoughts, even now.

‘This along with the fact, as you are possibly aware, that I alone have not aged, caused me to wonder as to what other

advantage was left to me. It was not until two nights back while serving as Jabin's guardian, that I discovered I still had passage to the powers of Dunamis, though only when in physical contact with him. When touching Jabin, I can summon the magic at will.'

Removing his hand from Jabin's chest, Sosthene returned to his normal size and walked to the bench of council before continuing in a more grieved tone. 'That, my brothers, is the good news. But as we have all learnt in each of our long lives, good news and bad often embrace as lovers, preventing the blessing without the curse and producing that which is treasured through that which is detested. So it is with the news I now have to speak.'

Sosthene's voice took on a keen edge, one full of emotion. Standing, he stretched his hands out as if to encompass them all and resumed his news. 'We chose a royal seed-line to have perpetual rule over the three realms. A king who would possess the power to lead, protect, and provide for the people. A power greater than any on the planet when in its fullness. A power that was once ours alone.

'Yet in the giving of that power we relinquished our own hold upon it, and in so doing unwittingly turned over the last page of our lives. And now we must wait for the book to be closed.

'But brothers, we did not decide this course through our own wisdom or foreknowledge. Rather it was the holy book and the prophecies contained within it that dictated our actions, indicating that the time for such to be done was now. Of our own volition we remained faithful to the oaths we all made to the Creator, heeding and obeying the prophetic words of the sacred book. Known we, that such action would lead to our deaths, still we would have obeyed, for we are his priests to use

as he sees fit.’ Sosthene paused briefly before continuing in a softer voice, his eyes revealing a hidden fear. ‘But yesterday, my friends, just as death races to meet us, so I witnessed death approaching this land.’

Throughout the chamber there was silence. The fervour with which Sosthene spoke robbed each present of the will to make a sound lest they hasten the foreboding words he was about to utter.

‘The Enemy sails toward us.’

The words were spoken chokingly, Sosthene collapsing into his seat as he voiced them, deep sadness in his eyes. Also evident was a bitterness that plainly was testing the Azure's resolve. Among the more intuitive Magi, Sosthene's speech of obedience, faith and dutiful sacrifice, were the oration of a desperate man, a man who struggled under the weight of his knowledge and responsibilities, but, worse, a man who was beginning to doubt. Doubt the beneficence of the one he so much wanted to believe was infallible and irreproachable. The fine words of his speech were designed more to convince the speaker than those listening that the decisions of a millennium had been wise.

The final words had struck more than just Sosthene to silence. For the second time in the meeting all present rose from their seats. However, it was not the rushed rising of surprise nor shock, but the deathly slow and hesitant one that fear and horror bring.

‘Are you sure brother Sosthene?’ Dored finally asked, breaking the dread silence.

‘Yes, I am sure brother. I sent a scrying across the Boundless Sea. Why, I'm not sure, intuitive sense maybe or just latent fears surfacing. As my travelling neared the shores of the

Motherland, I encountered thousands of ships lining the horizon, loaded with the Dark Horde and their demon spawn, carrying them toward us. This is why I have called this meeting, for again we face destruction at the hands of the ancient Enemy.’ Sosthene choked, ‘Yet this time all but I am powerless to defend against them, and the one on whom we have pinned all our hopes,’ he indicated Jabin, ‘lays helpless.’ With these words, Sosthene let out a ragged sigh and sagged even further into his chair, shoulders shrugged and crest-fallen. To all watching he looked defeated.

They understood his real battle, shared much of it. A man who for over a thousand years had devoted himself to a God he now questioned and a cause he now suspected as futile; a man who alone bore the burden of being sole able possessor of the only power capable of resisting the approaching enemy. His dejected image was mirrored in the visage of many of the assembled Azure, Sosthene's words robbing them of hope, leaving ambivalence in its place.

Some, though, were not so affected, and one in particular stoically refused entrance to the wasting demon that was despair. Rising to stand before them all, Quirinicotilius did what he did best; he gave words of encouragement and hope.

‘My Brothers’, his voice resonated with entreaty, and many despondent heads rose. ‘For years longer than I care to recount we have dwelt together as joint servants of our creator, fellow protectors and guides of the people. We have freely given of the powers we had been blessed with, gladly aiding those we lead. For over a millennium this has been our privilege and life work.

‘And now, once again, we face hardship and supposedly unassailable odds. But may I remind you of not only our past,

but of the fact that this time also has been foretold.’

‘Have we forgotten the words of the Sacred Book?’

‘When strength passes and night pervades, when all seems lost. Then will the enemy appear. Then seek the One who is taken, though think him not as lost. For among you a guide shall be chosen, another to protect, until light again replaces darkness. Be true my priests. Be watchful. For these things will be a sign to prepare for war.’

As the first rays of the sun can ever so gently awaken those who are deeply asleep, so too Quirinicotilius' words quietly stirred those who heard them. Discouragement and helpless fear drained from their faces, replaced by a new refocused clarity.

‘Our brother is right. We have been blinded by our own feelings of inadequacy. We have been faithless brothers as to forget the words of the Book. We must have faith, for even now when all seems hopeless we see the creator's hand preparing and using even this for his purpose.’ It was Sisera who spoke, who along with Sosthene and Vashti were founding fathers of the land of Triad. Well respected for his knowledge of the Sacred Book, and loved by the people for his time given in teaching the children, Sisera still had youthfulness about him. His eyes shone in reflection to the honesty of his character. In truth he was a man who drew great joy from simply observing the everyday things of life, drawing from them profound truths and insights on living life to its fullest. Like Quirinicotilius, Sisera was a jovial man, able to laugh loudly and have others laugh as loud. But the other side of his nature was reflected in the many arduous hours he spent in his small study, alone, carefully examining the holy texts; a book for which he had a

passion. Both for its piercing moral truths as much as its insight to future occurrences. So when Sisera spoke, others listened.

He walked up to Quirinicotilius, embraced him warmly then continued to address the Azure. ‘The Sacred Book speaks of what we face in several places, but it is only just now that I have made the association.’ Again he patted Quirinicotilius’ arm in credit, ‘The passages referring to this time, although obscure before are clear now in their fulfilment, as if the creator desired them to find definition only in consummation.’ Sisera laughed to himself, obviously amused at some revealed truth that as yet remained hidden from the rest.

‘Brother Sisera.’ Dored’s tone hinted at impatience, ‘Please share your new found wisdom with those of us less familiar with the prophecies you speak of.’

‘I apologise brothers. It’s just that this is like a sudden revelation. Quirinicotilius’ comments have caused me to recall passages that because of their ambiguity I’d ignored, yet now they are so clear. Let me explain before dear Dored melts me with one of his stares.’ He hesitated while the few chuckles subsided. ‘The passage that Quirinicotilius brought to our attention mentions our power passing and our night drawing near. It is obvious now what this means—the loss of Dunamis, and our own deaths.

‘The *One* refers to Jabin, and according to the prophecy he will in some way be taken, yet not be lost to us. This we have to assume is connected with his current state. Two Priests’ are also mentioned. One as guide, one as protector. It would seem to me that you, brother Sosthene, due to the fact you alone are still able to access the power, have been chosen as guardian. As yet I do not think we can be sure who is guide, though if I were to hazard a guess I would say broter Quirinicotilius. Jabin has

taken a shining to him from the very first, an affection I believe that is returned by our brother.’ Sisera paused to gather his breath. As he always did, he spoke at a pace unmatched by his lungs, a condition not helped by his aging body. After a moment he continued. ‘But there are two other passages which I clearly see now as finding their fulfilment in this time and the near future.’

Everyone was on the edge of their seats. Not a foot did stirred or hand shifted.

‘One is found shortly after the prophecy Quirinicotilius quoted, it reads: *When the One who appears is taken, know that north is the way, beyond the Northern wild to the further peaks, there to find the waters to quench our need. The rest with the people must seek refuge in the eastern heights, for there while in waiting will the war come.*

‘The other is from a much earlier entry, it reads: *Be true my priests, for testing will come while many of you abide with death. Power is lost, life does ebb, but this test remains for my priests to assail. To those who seek, help will be found. As a seed is but a seed until it dies, so too the chosen. Be true.*’

The room remained silent, the seated Azure portraying a diversity of expressions. Some nodded to themselves while others sat in quiet contemplation, having heard but still struggling to see any clarity in the prophecies. Still others looked as if a cloud had been lifted from their minds, allowing a moment of lucidity to refresh them. But the silence did not last long, for all had something to say.

‘Then the creator still has work for us to accomplish, we are to lead the people to safety.’

‘Yes, but we are again to train the people in the ways of war.’

‘Are the waters referred to literal or figurative?’

‘And what is alluded to by the chosen having to die as does a seed?’

The questions continued until Sosthene stood. Heaviness still marked his brow, deep rooted doubt that would take more than a rousing speech to undermine. Yet, Quirinicotilius and Sisera's words had lightened his load somewhat. Raising his hands in an appeal for order, he once again brought silence to the assembly. ‘Brothers, it is clear now that our future upon Asasa hinges on the decisions we now have to make. As council moderator, I advise that we adjourn this meeting and allow Sisera, who among us is the most knowledgeable in the Sacred Book, also brother Quirinicotilius, Dored and myself, time to study the prophecies more closely. During this time the rest must make plans to evacuate the people and-,’ he paused, ‘-For the first time in the history of Triad, we must make preparation for war.’

ARMADA

To each horizon ships filled the sea, their dark lines marring the play of the sun's rays on the cresting swell, their cheerlessness at odds with the brilliance of the day and the teeming life beneath them.

The eleven hundred galleons were divided into scores of

flotillas, looking from a distance like giant stepping-stones across some vast lake. The magically constructed craft sat low in the waves, weighted by their cargo; the brutal and unruly Dark Horde army. The majority of these remained below decks. The ungainly movements of the few who worked the rigging and kept deck clearly revealed that seamanship was anything but a familiar practice. By needs demand they had learnt quickly. Tarnul had forbidden all use of the Dark Lords powers in aiding the voyage, so the journey relied on the sinews of their minions. Beyond the need to protect the ships from magical detection—a belated afterthought—even Tarnul had refrained from further exercise of his power. *To ensure secrecy from any Azure with their eyes turned this way*, had been the reason given; and such may have indeed been the case. But the Boundless Sea was not only seemingly endless but highly turbulent. A place where nature was free to test the limits of its fury, where wind and wave struck blows with one another in an unending contest of wills. Here it was that Tarnul's fleet had found itself the anvil between the contenders, a trinket that the wind attempted to drive into the ocean and the waves essayed to throw at the sky. But Tarnul had remained resolute in his decision—No magic.

So the anvil had begun to chip.

‘Lord Tarnul, we lost twelve more ships in that last storm, another four are bordering on unseaworthy. We are going to have to use our powers my lord, if we hope to sail more than a handful of ships into our destination. We have only begun our journey and already an eighth of the fleet is lost, many of which were carrying essential supplies for the army. We...’

The droning appeal came from Dark Lord Foeomen; recently appointed by the High Lord as chief of logistics. Tarnul had

considered the appointment a necessity, the fact being he had come close to sinking a few of his own ships, if for no other reason but to release his frustration at the unceasing problems bedevilling their journey from the outset. His lowered head revealed only to the floor the annoyance written there as he deliberated the harm he would like to visit upon this insipid, annoying Dark Lord standing before him; he woefully regretted his decision to appoint such a monomaniac.

Oblivious, Foemen continued delivering his report, appealing several more times to his conviction that unless the power of the Dark Horde was brought to bare, the ferocity of the frequent storms would doom their mission. His monotonous dialogue then ended abruptly.

Tarnul looked up at the now silent lord; and look up it was, for Foemen literally filled the high vaulted cabin. Physically he appeared not far removed from a tree, with skin resembling the texture of bark, limbs that appeared more as the great branches of some oak gone wrong than that of a sentient being. Tarnul momentarily had visions of a large log fire. His words were brushed with irritation as he replied, 'Lord Foemen, if I have to tell you or any other of the Dark Horde one more time why we cannot use our powers before we reach our destination, that will be the last thing they ever hear. Is-That-Clear?'

The tree paled, swallowed, and nodded creakingly its comprehension.

'You may go now, but don't bother me again with anything short of the barrier falling.'

Foemen turned rapidly, the sound of a small forest being felled, and opened the door to leave. Standing ready to enter was another imposing figure, this one was of flesh; ebony flesh.

‘Ah, brother Damd, you received my summons. Foeomen was just leaving, please come in.’

Damd waited for the somewhat pale logistics adviser to clear the hallway before closing the door behind him.

‘He looked somewhat nervous, High Lord. Did you threaten to use him for kindling?’ There was no humour in Damd’s voice. After Tarnul, Damd was one of the next most powerful of the Dark Lords; a fact only he and the High Lord knew and wished to remain that way, a secret. For Damd was not only the military adviser to Tarnul, but his secret eyes and ears among the Dark Horde also.

Easily eight feet in height, Damd looked more a sculptured masterpiece of ebony than a living being. Every feature of his face appeared perfectly chiselled from a slab of black glass, every muscle clearly defined and in flawless symmetry with the rest. His skin was a polished pitch-blackness, reflecting his surroundings like some undulating mirror. His voice was such a deep bass as to be almost inaudible. Not knowing him, one might presume that his choice of appearance reflected an egotistical vanity, but Damd was far from vain; for that requires one actually care what others think of you. Damd cared for nobody and even less for what they thought. His only care was for himself and his desire to escape this world. Rather what motivated such a god-like appearance was a fanatical proclivity for perfection. Everything had to be without flaw; every word spoken precise; every plan made unerring.

Tarnul answered the ebony statue, ‘I was tempted Lord Damd, very tempted. He seems to think the loss of a few ships more important than arriving undetected.’

‘He has a point High Lord. We need the army if we are to defeat the Azure and their people. It will take all the power of

the Dark Horde to deal with the child who possesses Dunamis, we cannot afford the loss of too many ships.’ Inflection never entered Damd’s speech, often making it impossible to know the intended nature of his words.

‘Yes, yes, I know. But to save the ships we must use our power and to do that means risking detection by the Azure. We have no choice.’

‘Is there nothing that can be done then?’

‘Nothing. If we lose half the army, so be it. My hope is that we will not need them at all. If lord’s Ornan and Chkurl are successful in their mission, we shouldn’t have to.

‘But if they’re not?’

Tarnul did not reply, leaving unsaid what would happen if the mission failed. But Damd was well aware that failure would recourse to all out war. Knew it was an avenue they were unlikely to triumph in.

‘Then our hopes hinge on the capture of the boy. Is there no way to communicate with Ornan or Chkurl?’ Damd asked.

‘Yes and no. Yes, I could send them a message with my powers, which I am not prepared to do. But even done it would be impossible for them to reply, seeing that I have stripped them of the means. So, my friend, we must be patient and wait until our destination is reached.’

‘I can wait a while longer I think, High Lord.’ Damd’s voice inflected nothing in his reply, but his straight back and the set of his jaw told much of just how patient he truly felt. ‘I just hope you were right in your choice of Dark Lord’s master.’

Tarnul didn’t reply, but his thoughts were the same.

ENTRANCE

Ornan and Chkurl had been loading wagons every day that week, and the week before. Both hated the work, feeling such labour as being beneath them.

They had been in the main town of Land Point for a month, having learnt in that time much about the way of life on the land of Triad, but little of the Azure. The Priests had taken to themselves it seemed, though none of the town's inhabitants seemed to know why, beyond that it had something to do with boy named Jabin—who was soon to be made king. This information was about all anybody shared, most people presuming everyone was aware of the upcoming coronation. That two men were ignorant of such had earned a few wondering looks; suspicions Chkurl mitigated by claiming they had both been exploring the Northern wilderness for the past few years, only recently returning; a lie that seemed to satisfy the sceptical.

If the discomforts of mundane rigour and frustrating lack of information weren't taking enough of a toll, their increasing loathing of each other wasn't helping the situation. At the next break Ornan and Chkurl sat together apart from the other members of the loading crew.

'This idea of yours isn't working. We have achieved next to nothing in the past two weeks beyond calluses from loading several hundred wagons.' Chkurl's tone held no humour and

clearly echoed the disdain he had for his dark brother.

‘What do you suggest Chkurl? Maybe your strategy of breaking into the Azure stronghold, stealing the boy from under their noses and then escaping undetected. Maybe this seems to you a more feasible plan.’ Ornan's tone was thick with sarcasm. ‘I really can’t fathom why the High Lord chose you to accompany me. Mind you, I'm beginning to understand. I'd also jump at any excuse to get you out of my sight.’

Of the two, Ornan was the more skilled at oratory rebuff, enjoying the way he could cause the less eloquent—though equally vindictive—Chkurl, to grimace frustration at his own loss of words. Chkurl much preferred action. Yet though larger, he was no fool, recognising Ornan for what he was, a dangerous adversary. Being without his powers only underscored the risk of overt confrontation.

Chkurl cursed to himself again. Cursing not only Ornan, but the fact that with his temporary mortality had come fears and doubts. Such things he had never given thought to before. Now he felt a fool and a coward. Looking up he noted Ornan's smile of jeering contempt and could have kicked himself when he realised he was grimacing again; a clear sign of his chagrin. He was about to hurl a choice insult when both Dark Lords were distracted from their rhetoric by the opening of the main service doors to the Azure living quarters. In the doorway stood an aged but commanding figure and the Dark Lords immediately realised they were looking upon an Azure, the first they had seen since arriving in Triad.

Ornan caught himself reaching for powers that were no longer there; that this Azure could not know who they were did not relieve the edginess he felt.

The Azure gazed about the loading platforms before resting

his eyes on the two Dark Lord's. As chance would have it, they sat closest to the door.

‘Would you two young men be free to help me for a short while? I need a heavy load carried.’

The two Dark Lords looked at each other, the sudden turn of luck having robbed them momentarily of their tongues. Ornan was the first to recover. ‘You need our help to lift something?’

The surprised tone caused the Azure to raise an eyebrow. ‘Yes. Are you surprised that even an Azure can grow weary?’ He responded.

‘What of your powers?’ Chkurl's question seemed to agitate the Azure, causing him to straighten even further, his expression becoming sombre as he stood looking down at the two Dark Lord's. It was a long moment before he replied. ‘Shall we just say that things are changing and that even we of the Azure must accept the future that God presents us. But that was not my question, I asked if you two were free to aid me?’

Ornan had risen by this time and stepped in front of Chkurl, fearing he would utter another question completely lacking subtlety. He nodded to the Azure, indicating that he should lead the way, throwing a disdainful look at Chkurl as they both made to follow.

The Azure talked as they proceeded along the dim passages of the Azure keep. ‘I don't recall having met you two men in Land Point before, from what part of Triad have you come?’

Ornan replied, sticking to the same story Chkurl had already developed. ‘We have been exploring the northern realms, Magi, beyond the northern most outpost of Chanteef. Having just returned, we have taken work until we can get supplies enough to travel again’

‘Ah, you're adventurers. I myself have not ventured beyond

the Midland border town of Crasaw. Tell me, does the land change much as you travel north?’

The Azure was not looking at the Dark Lords as he asked the question and so failed to notice Chkurl give Ornan a warning look. Ornan answered cautiously, ‘Oh, there is no great change for much of the way, the forest becomes denser, giving way to mountainous country as one goes on. We would have travelled further, but were ill equipped for such harsh conditions. Being short of supplies, we were forced to return before crossing the great peaks.’

Chkurl held his breath, for he knew that Ornan had described a purely conjectured landscape based upon the little information they had overheard.

‘I have heard of these mountains.’ The Azure replied, ‘They are reported to be truly astounding in their size. But I doubt that the land will be settled that far north for many decades yet.’

Chkurl breathed again. The Azure had accepted their description without question.

The conversation stopped as they came to a plain timber door to one side of the passage. Without knocking the Azure entered, the Dark Lord's following. The room was simple, small, and largely taken up by a pallet on which lay a young man apparently sleeping. At the end of the pallet, also sleeping, was an aged man wearing the tell-tale robes of an Azure.

With a smile that reflected deep affection, the Magi that had led them gently shook the sleeping Azure until he awoke, and with mock scolding in his voice said, ‘The assembly will be waiting for us sleepy-head, let's not keep them waiting.’

Awakening with a start, the somewhat embarrassed Azure heeded his brother's words at the need for haste and promptly

instructed each of the Dark Lords to take an end of the pallet and follow. As they accompanied the two Azure, now deep in conversation, Ornan took the opportunity to examine the young man more closely. There was nothing remarkable about the youth. He was reasonably handsome with a lean muscularity that hinted at quick and powerful limbs, but beyond that there was nothing of special interest that Ornan could see. He was still contemplating what might be wrong with the man, when they came to two large timber doors heavily reinforced with large metal plates. The two Azure did not slow their pace as they approached, appearing not to see the obstacles. Yet at the last moment one of them simply reached out and, with but a touch, the seeming immovable doors swung inward, as if hinged on liquid. The chamber they entered was large and vaulted, designed with terraced seating that faced a recessed amphitheatre at its centre. Looking up, Ornan noted an upper balcony circling the room near its domed peak. The seats were almost filled with Azure, all of which appeared to the Dark Lords as weak and feeble, nothing at all as they remembered them. Chkurl again gave Ornan a questioning look that asked what had occurred to so emasculate the Azure. Ornan shrugged.

They carried the pallet to the centre of the arena where they were thanked and dismissed. The two great doors closed behind them as they left; appearing not works of magic but the result of deft engineering. Rather than leaving, they began to seek for some way to overhear what was being discussed within the council hall.

‘There is an upper tier that overlooks the chamber, we must find how to get there.’ Ornan said. They scanned the corridor for any possible access. A chained and bolted portcullis sealed

the only stairway. Together they managed to pry the chain from its fixings, allowing to lift the rusted and never used gate. Once through they lowered it again, allaying the chance of being discovered. Nimbly ascending the stairs, they crouched behind the balcony fronting some forty feet above the assembled Azure, straining to hear the things being discussed below.

Having missed much of the dialogue, what they heard now still brought smiles of sinister pleasure to their faces. Knowledge, in the High Dark Lord's hands, would lead to elf-kinds ultimate end and the Dark Horde's final freedom. Before the council had formally ended, the Dark Lord's had vacated their place of reconnoitre, left the Azure quarters altogether and were on their way to reclaim their dark powers.

ELDERS

Sosthene stood with his arms upraised, indicating that the gathered crowd should come to quiet. Before him, assembled at the Azure's command, were all the leading Elders of the city of landpoint and Nefa; a town three days by horseback to the northwest. Most also of the Elders from Midlan and Crasaw had arrived, but urgency had prevented waiting any longer for those still absent. Armies were not built in days, and the people of Triad had little time to prepare.

Prepare for what they don't yet know is coming, Sosthene lamented as he looked around at the many faces, most of whom he knew. He wished for the thousands time he didn't have to bring such terrifying news, but it was necessary. Normally the joint gathering of city Elders and Azure Magi was a Quinquennial event, occurring for the first week of every fifth spring. A time of celebration throughout the four cities, it was a period in which they remembered their ancestors first setting foot upon Triad, five centuries earlier. But it was also a time of planning, problem solving and the sharing of ideas for the future. However, it had been but two years since the last meeting and it was the middle of summer. Add to this the plain frailty of the Azure, and those gathered begun to think the worst. Some had arrived in hope the new child king would be presented to them, a notion quickly displaced upon seeing preparations for mass exodus.

So it was troubled men that faced Sosthene, and a troubled Sosthene who faced them back; wondering if they could comprehend the seriousness of what he was about to tell them. Those gathered before him had never seen, let alone fought, the Dark Horde. Sighing aloud his doubt, he spoke to the earnest faces.

‘Elders of Triad, thank you for making all haste at our summons. Due to the urgency of this matter, I will speak directly of it. I wish that it was with good news that I could welcome you all, but the news I have is of the gravest kind, such that even we of the Azure Magi are deeply troubled’. The summer air was humid and uncomfortable, the gathering made not a sound or a movement among them as all waited on Sosthene's next words; as if the words themselves were the thing to be dreaded.

‘Five centuries ago our ancestors departed the Motherland, ancient home to all Elfin-kind. Neither want nor whim had us flee our homeland, but dire need. For we once numbered in our millions, but only twenty thousand managed to escape destruction.’ He spread his arms wide, ‘This new home has been our refuge since, in which we have thrived and grown. Yet-’ Sosthene hesitated, fearing what he had to say next, the words momentarily refusing to leave his throat, ‘-Yet once again destruction faces our race, and as before, it is our ancient enemy—the Dark Horde.’

The gasped response hissed from the lips of the Elders. All had been taught of the Dark Horde, of their power, cruelty and hatred for the creator; and none doubted it. Magic had been a power continually witnessed in the Azure, therefore it was not so difficult to believe that other magical beings could wield power for evil other than good; the history books having nothing but evil to say of the abominable Dark Horde.

Sosthene signalled for silence again. ‘That is not the end of my grim news I’m afraid. As you know, a king was to be presented before you all. A king whom the Azure themselves chose, one upon whom we were to bestow our powers’. Sosthene paused meaningfully, ignoring the biting insects that buzzed about his face, wishing this were all a dream. ‘Elders, the king lives, yet he remains in a coma we are unable to restore him from.’

The Elders looked to one another in confusion, apprehensive, wondering what further evil tidings they would hear. Sosthene's next words confirmed their fears.

‘And now the hardest news I find to tell, but know it you must. In the giving of our powers to the King, the Azure have lost their control over it. They are powerless.’ Again, there was

a unified murmur. Shock.

‘However,’ Sosthene said in a louder voice, seeing the need for positive words to be spoken, a hope for the gathered Elders to cling to, ‘Not all is lost. I alone still have access to Dunamis. We have studied and seen that the Holy book has foretold this very time, therefore we must not forget that all is in His hands. We must trust.’ *I must trust*, he thought. ‘The Creator has left us with instruction in this dark hour, and we need follow it if we hope to survive.’ The words resounded hollow in his own ears, but he hoped the conviction in his voice masked his own uncertainty.

An aged Elder struggled to his feet, the formal sign that one wished to speak.

‘Elder Tanon wishes to speak.’ Sosthene acknowledged, seating himself so as to grant the Elder the centre of attention. Leaning on a stick that supported him under the arm, Tanon took a staggered breath before speaking.

‘As you all know, I am eldest of the Elders, my time in this vessel almost complete.’ The old man pinched at his aged and blotched skin, reinforcing what he had just said. ‘Ever since I was a child and first heard of the Dark Horde, I wondered as to what they were up to, if they would ever discover us. Deep down I have always realised that this day could come. But, like most, I have always trusted in the creator and the Priest's he chose to lead us.’ He presented an arthritic bow to Sosthene, before continuing. ‘A trust that has never proven miss-given. I would truly not have two of my sons if not for the healing power of the Azure, nor a wife, if they had not aided her through the birth of our daughter.’ With a sweep of his frail arm he encompassed them, ‘I know most of us gathered here have similar stories to tell. So I just want to make it known that,

powers or not, I still follow the Azure, wherever that may lead. For we need their wisdom and their guidance now more than ever.' He directed his next words at the seated Azure. 'My sympathy at your loss Azure. Its absence will be keenly felt I'm sure. Although I am too old to volunteer myself for any worth, I do extend to you the service of my family. Please, use them as you have need.' As he sat, Tanon's eye fixed squarely on those of Sosthene, and in that brief look the Azure realised that all that Tanon had said was aimed at keeping the people's confidence in him alive. With a lump in his throat, he returned his thanks with a nod. Rising he replied.

'Thank you Elder Tanon, for your compassion toward my brothers and for your vote of confidence. We must now face the fact that, with the exception of myself, the Azure are no longer a force capable of resisting any attack, let alone one from the Dark Horde. All we have left to offer you are wisdom and faith. We have studied the prophecies of the Sacred Book, and have decided as best we can how the creator desires us to act at this time. We ask that you would let us know, therefore, which of you are still willing to follow us. We offer you our continued leadership, to those who will accept us. However, any are free to choose their own path in this matter.'

The first to his feet was Tanon, rising with such unusual speed that it was obvious he had anticipated the question so as to show all the more enthusiastic support of the Azure. In rapid succession rose the other Elders of landpoint, followed quickly by the those of Nefa, Midlan and Crasaw. Within a few breaths all the Elders of Triad present stood facing Sosthene and the Azure seated behind him.

Sosthene smiled broadly towards the standing Elders, some of whose great grandparents he could still recall bouncing on

his knee. He turned away from the Elders to gaze at his seated brothers, his remaining fellow Azure, men whom he'd known for over twenty centuries and grown to love as his own flesh. He would be willing to suffer at any time a thousand deaths for these men, but felt helpless to aid them in their current decline.

‘Sosthene ...Sosthene’. The familiar voice distracted the Azure from his cheerless reverie. He looked up to see Quirinicotilius' kindly smile of understanding.

‘The Elders await our council, let's not reward their loyalty with a doubtful mien and unsettling silence’.

Sosthene nodded to the empathetic face of his brother. With a manner that disavowed the heaviness of his heart, he addressed the waiting Leaders of Triad. And so plans were begun that would lead to either Elfin-kinds victory or vanquishing.

GUILT

Quirinicotilius stood at the closed door, taking a moment to compose himself before entering. This was one meeting he had been loath to attend, but one all the Azure agreed he was the most competent to handle. ‘Heartfelt and compassionate rapport’, Sosthene had said, ‘Is a quality vividly witnessed in brother Quirinicotilius’ life and what is most required for this occasion.’ All the others had nodded heartily, adding their own

extolment of his many social mannered virtues. Quinn, though, had guessed the main reason for his selection—the others were just too nervous to offer themselves.

Nervous was exactly how he felt at that moment, pit-scared nervous. *Strange*, he thought, *how even after two millennium of life I am still struck sick with nerves over such encounters.* He adjusted his robes and realigned a few random wisps of white hair. Noticing his hands were damp with nervous sweat, he wiped them on his robe, which he then readjusted. *To think that I once stood face to face with the creator, engaged the Dark Horde in mortal combat, witnessed the total destruction of one kingdom of men and spent the past five hundred years establishing another and yet here I stand, dreading an encounter that most surely lives in the shadow of the others.* ‘Oh well’, he spoke out loud, ‘Procrastination is the mother of none and daughter of naught’, and with these quietly spoken words of colloquial wisdom, he knocked and entered.

The room was a waiting chamber, furnished accordingly with comfortable chairs. Two large windows offered an elevated view of the town's main boulevard on one side, and the forest beyond on the other. In the distance could be seen the impressive Mount Alptor, and further still the immense cloud enshrouded Lord-Kings Mountain; named as much for its vast size as for its throne-like shape. Standing silhouetted in the window was a large man with broad shoulders and sharp facial features. He was half turned toward the door as Quinn entered, and so the Azure didn't notice the petite woman held close on his far side until she stepped out from behind him.

Quinn closed the door, taking a steadying inhalation before turning to address Jabin's parents. ‘It is good to see you again Jonn, and you too my dear Tanya. I'm sorry you've had to wait

so long.’ Jabin’s parents both had smiles of greeting for Quinn, but he could see the anguish the smiles failed to hide. ‘As you’ve probably heard, trying times are upon us and we have been busy preparing, but I will not bore you with the details. You wish to know of your son. Please, have a seat.’ Quinn pointed to one of the couches and took the other for himself.

He seated himself carefully, making sure that the sun’s glare through the window did not hide him from them, nor were they mere faceless silhouettes framed between the architrave.

A pitcher of water was on the table between them and seeing that two of the mugs were half full, he poured a third for himself, gaining a few more moments to shape his next words.

‘Have you spoken to any of the other Azure concerning Jabin?’ he asked of Jonn.

‘No Magi. As soon as we arrived this morning we were taken to this room and asked to wait. I take it the news is bad then?’ The strain could be heard in his voice.

Quinn again felt a pang of guilt that these people should have been left waiting so long. Even though the plight of the Azure was serious, it was no excuse to be negligent. He suppressed his self-admonishment and answered Jabin’s father. ‘I’m afraid the news it not good Jonn. Things have happened that we did not foresee nor had any idea would occur. Before I take you to see Jabin, you must understand that he is both unconscious and—’, Quinn hesitated for the right words, his eye catching the flight of a quail through the window in the pause. A sudden stab of envy at its carefree life took him. Shaking his head, he spurned himself for foolish thoughts, ‘—and no longer appears as you remember him.’

‘But he is alive?’ Jabin’s mother asked, voicing her greatest worry, even though the Azure had already said that her son was

only unconscious.

‘Yes, Yes. And as far as we can tell he is physically healthy.’

Tanya visibly relaxed, having feared the worst, though worry still etched her forehead.

‘What did you mean Magi Quirinicotilius, when you said he no longer appears as we remember him?’ Jabin's father had a pleasant voice even when edged with anxiety. Quinn knew that for all his size and harsh appearance, Jonn was a gentleman who cared for his family and took his responsibility as head of house most seriously. Feeling another bout of guilt, as if the Azure had betrayed this good man's trust by taking his boy with the promise to make him a king, then returning a man they would neither recognise nor be able to speak with.

‘Jabin has ...’ Quinn paused again, ‘Jabin has aged ...He has changed ... but because he is unconscious we do not know anything of his mental state nor if anything more than his appearance has changed.’

‘Can we see him now?’ Tanya began to rise, seeming oblivious to what the Azure had just said. But Quinn knew that this woman, like any mother, could not just sit and talk about an ailing offspring, no matter how bad the news. She had to see him, to help him in some tangible way. He also saw she was scared to hear what he'd said, preferring to see for herself than leave it to the oft-times cruel imagination.

Jonn did not stop his wife from rising, though he remained seated. Rather he turned to the Azure, and with an imploring look simply asked, ‘Why?’

All the Azure's resolve evaporated, nothing he'd been meaning to say seemed enough. Not since the Great War could he remember failing people so. He no longer had the ability to change things as he would have once so easily done, and his

long life failed to even hint at a practical answer to the situation. In the end there was only one source to which the Azure could appeal in answer to Jonn's question, and being bankrupt of any other choices he was glad to do so. 'All I can say, Jonn, is that it appears Jabin has an important part in the creator's plans. He is even mentioned several times in the Sacred Book. Now I realise you may want more and that is quite understandable, but that is the only answer I can offer you. Even we Magi are confused as to what lays ahead.'

Jonn Ralisian said nothing, a man who never let words of little thought escape his lips, but this time it was not temperance that held his tongue, but bewilderment.

Quinn read the look and felt compelled to fill the gap of silence, 'Azure Sosthene has attempted to awaken Jabin, but for some reason he does not respond. I'm sorry Jonn, Tanya, but there doesn't seem to be anything that we can do but wait. Things have happened so differently from what we had expected, I—'

'We will see him now.' Jonn interrupted, his words firm. He had taken the step from confusion to anger; anger that ill had come upon his child in a place that he had condoned his child to be.

Tanya stood at his side. Quinn rose also, 'Of course. Follow me, it's not far.'

He was prepared for the emotions Jabin's parents would go through. He understood Elfin nature well and was not offended. All he had to do was be there to offer answers, where possible. However, he was also there to bear blame. For reproach could lie with no one but the Azure priesthood, and Quirinicotilius would welcome it; welcome it as just penalty to parley the guilt he felt over Jabin's circumstance. For now though, he led the

parents to their son.

FRUSTRATION

Brachk and Dryma hung in the air before the eager faces of Ornan and Chkurl. The latter had run almost the whole day to reach this small glade between the shadow of two hills five leagues Northwest of Land Point. Perspiration freely flowed from both of them, the excitement of regaining their coveted powers numbing any discomfort.

The portal had automatically materialised at their approach; Tarnul having added that affect to prevent it being stumbled upon by some wandering woodsman. Ornan and Chkurl simultaneously reached out with open arms and laid hands on the individual Dark Lords stanchion that held their powers.

Nothing happened.

Both lords pulled back, Chkurl with a shout. He bellowed a guttural roar of confusion, ‘What. Nothing. Our powers, where are our powers?’ He touched Dryma again, hoping this time to feel puissance re-enter his body. But there was nothing. Chkurl collapsed to his knees in dismay, ‘What in all the Hated-Ones creation is going on? Surely the High Lord hasn’t–’ He left the thought unspoken.

Ornan's face darkened as he stared at the black space between the suspended Dark Lords, ‘No, our mission was too important for him to double-cross us so blatantly. No, this is purely his guarantee of making sure we do what we came to do. Maybe, also the guarantee we don’t attempt to take Dunamis for ourselves. Remember what he said, that we would be able to

retrieve our rightful powers only after our task is accomplished. Being the one who created this portal he has enough command over it and our powers to keep them secure even from their rightful owners, being as they are incorporated in the stanchions.'

Ornan walked around the portal, 'But there still must be some sort of safeguard spell placed on the stanchions, one that allows Tarnul to detect us.' He came up to Brachk and examined him closely. After a moment he grunted and stepped back. 'See here, just below their temples.'

Chkurl approached and looked where Ornan indicated. It was a small symbol the shape of a Elfin eye and no larger than a thumb, 'The rune of disclosure. Rune magic. Why would Tarnul use rune magic?'

'Because it's not easily detected unless one's deliberately looking for It.' answered Ornan, 'He doesn't want the Azure to know we're here, remember.'

'But it's so crude, what good could it be?'

'It would be sufficient to show Tarnul whether we have the one we came for or not.' Ornan replied. He cursed loudly, picked up a pine cone and he threw it violently at the portal. On making contact the cone abruptly flared a brilliant white, such that the Dark Lords were forced to avert their eyes. When they turned back they saw only ashes floating to the ground.

'Well. That's made one thing clear, we don't use the portal.' Ornan's sarcasm held no humour.

'I don't believe this.' The now sitting Chkurl thundered, as he slapped the ground with one hand and ripped out a fist of grass with the other, 'All but one of the Azure completely powerless, the receiver of Dunamis in a coma, and we, the only ones of the Dark Horde that know a shadow of a ghost about it can't do

a thing or tell anyone because our Troll-brained High Lord has laid his wondrous little safeguards on his wondrous little stanchions.’ Chkurl leapt to his feet, anger showing a blood red in his cheeks. With impressive strength he grabbed a small low hanging branch and tore it from its trunk. Before Ornan could say anything, he’d swung it with all his might into the left leg of Dryma. The incoherent Dark Lord felt nothing. A creature of part shadow the blow was ineffectual causing no damage to anything but the branch and the fingers of its wielder.

‘What are you doing, you fool. Damage the stanchions and you destroy the portal. Anyway, as far as we know, Tarnul may not only be aware of our presence but our actions also. Are you eager to show him you’re as imbecilic as I know you to be?’

At the mention of Tarnul’s possible intangible presence, Chkurl dropped the branch and collapsed once again, too despondent for Ornan’s deriding words to raise any ire.

‘I want my powers back. If I have to go through another week as a mortal I’m going to start killing things.’

Disgusted with Chkurl’s pathetic handling of the situation, Ornan replied, ‘Well it looks as if we have no choice, doesn’t it. Who knows how far away the Horde is, maybe even months, and if the one they call Jabin awakens during that time, our job will become that much harder.’

‘In other words you’re saying we have to go back.’

Ornan nodded, not amused at the prospect himself, ‘What do you think Tarnul’s reaction will be if he arrives and we present him with just ourselves?’

Chkurl thought for a moment, and then resignedly stood up. ‘You’re right. Sabototh’s fate would seem a trivial thing compared to what Tarnul would do to us.’

‘That’s right, and unlike Sabototh, we wouldn’t have our

powers to even attempt resistance.’ He looked up and took a deep breath, ‘the question is, how do we get to this Jabin? He’s under constant guard by the Azure, safely locked away in their enclosure and surrounded by a city full of the Azure’s people.’

Both Dark Lords remained silent for a long while.

‘I have an idea.’ Chkurl said at last, ‘But it requires that we put ourselves at risk.’

‘Go on.’ Ornan prompted, doubting anything Chkurl suggested would be useful, but contained his ridicule until he had at least heard the idea.

‘Well, first of all we’re going to need a Elfin volunteer.’ the last was said with a malicious grin.

GRIEF

He suddenly turned from the pallet and rounded on the Azure, ‘Why weren’t we told of our son’s condition before now?’ Jonn’s tone was controlled anger, ‘Two months. Two months he has been in this state, and only now are we being informed of it. I have always credited the Azure as most honourable, but the Ancients have wronged us in this Azure Quirinicotilius, we had the right to know about our son.’ His face changed as he spoke his next words, from bitterness to mingled grief. ‘Ten years old. My boy was only ten when we last saw him. Now he has the

body of a man. You have robbed him of his youth Azure,' Jonn's voice dropped to a whisper, 'and us of seeing our son's growth to manhood.' To hide the pain on his face, Jonn turned back to the pallet on which Jabin lay. Tanya stood a few steps back on the opposite side. She had said nothing since they had entered, only standing and watching her altered son. Jonn placed his hand on Jabin's. Looking at his wife but directing his question at the Azure, he asked, 'Surely something can be done? Please tell us that something can be done.'

From rage, to grief, to appeal, and Quinn felt every stage of emotion like a hammer blow. Yet he had only passiveness to offer Jonn's rage, guilt in exchange for his grief, and nothing for his appeal. Yet he had to give something, to in some way offer hope to these people. So he turned to the only source of hope he knew. 'Jonn, do you have faith in the creator?'

Jonn and Tanya looked up, so surprised at the question that they momentarily forgot the situation. Jonn answered slowly, as if he thought it to be a trick question, 'Yes Magi, we have faith. Why?'

'Explain to me what faith means.'

From any but the Azure, such questions at such a time would have invited only scorn. But the Ancients had been the teachers of the people for over two thousand years, each generation raised at the feet of a Magi, learning early in life to heed the Ancients wisdom. Therefore Jonn was not offended, rather, eager for wiser counsel. He had flashbacks of his childhood as he answered, 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' Jonn then recited an Azure proverb, 'Faith gives birth to hope, hope to faith.' Jonn nodded at his own reply, grasping the purpose behind the question. Hope can only be lost when one misplaces their faith.

‘A wise answer Jonn, and one I must ask you to truly place your trust. The Azure have entered a period where the reins have not so much been surrendered but torn from our hands, and taken at the point of entering a dark tunnel. Therefore, as the blind trust those who take their elbow, so too must we trust the creator, only he can see enough to lead us. He is the only one who understands Jabin's fate, and he alone knows why these things have happened.’ Quirinicotilius’ eyes shone with the conviction of his words.

‘We must trust.’ Quirinicotilius continued, ‘and not lean on our limited understanding of what may be his reasons.’ Quinn’s mind flashed back to the recalling of centuries ago, wishing Jonn and Tanya could share the memory, that perspective changing experience. ‘You may blame us Jonn, and in truth I feel such sorrow and guilt at Jabin's plight that I invite your blame. But, as the placing of blame raises not the dead, so here also your anger. Though just, it must give way to actions that will benefit your son. Remember, hope exists while life exists, but hopes fruit is not always as we expect it.’

Jonn and Tanya were silent for a moment, the Azures words at odds with the hurt they felt. Yet, it had pierced their anger and reminded them of the greater picture they had been taught from childhood. ‘We are sorry Azure Quirinicotilius. We know the Ancients would never deliberately cause our son harm, nor put him at unnecessary risk.’

‘You do not need to apologise at all Jonn. Your anger and grief are understandable, and it is we who should apologise for failing to inform you soonert.’ Quinn looked past Jonn, to Tanya. ‘Tanya’, he said gently, ‘as Jabin's mother, I know this would hold hardest for you. Please, tell me how you feel, for my sake as much as your own.’

Tanya had sat down, shoulders sagged and hands clasped between her knees. She began to sob softly, but did not raise her head. Both men rushed to comfort her.

‘I was so proud of him.’ She said intermittently between sobs, further arousing their sympathy. ‘He was such a good boy’, she continued, ‘and when he was chosen to be a future ruler it was like a veiled dream being disclosed, as if I’d always known that it would happen, should happen, but I hadn’t been aware that I knew.’ She gave an embarrassed laugh that ended in a sob.

‘I know what you mean Tanya. I felt the same way. It was as if greatness was a birthright that belonged to him. I could not tell you why.’

Quinn released Tanya's hand, allowing Jonn to console his wife. He spoke to them both as he took a seat next to Jabin. ‘That is one of the main reasons we of the Azure chose Jabin. It is as if he carries an invisible mark upon him, something that sets him apart. None of us could put our finger on what it was, yet we all felt it. Your son is very special Jonn and Tanya, and I think we are yet to discover just how special.’

‘What can we do Magi Quirinicotilius? In what way can we help our son?’ asked Tanya.

Quinn smiled inwardly. Jabin had strong parents, he was glad they had chosen a beneficial path to take. ‘Well’, he replied, ‘There is in fact something you can do. The Azure are very busy at present. Too busy. What with planning an exodus and preparing an army. With our aging bodies, we struggle greatly. Therefore it would help us and most surely benefit Jabin, if you could take over his care and protection. Of course he will have to remain within the citadel. We dare not let him far from our observation and protection, at least not while he is in this state.’ Quinn gently touched Jabin's hand, and both parents could see

the genuine concern in his eyes.

‘We both thank you Magi.’

Quinn rose from his seat, ‘No need for thanks’, he said, ‘the benefit is mutual. I will organise for rooms to be prepared and arrange what you may need.’ He paused before opening the door, ‘Do make sure you tell us immediately of any change in Jabin's condition.’

‘Yes Magi, straight away.’

‘And Tanya’, Quinn added, noticing her downcast expression as she looked at her son. ‘Remember that things are in hands far larger and more capable than ours can ever be.’

She looked up, and after a moment offered him an unconvincing smile.

TAMILA

Tamila had turned eight only yesterday. As was custom, she was permitted a three day freedom from all chores and responsibilities. She had chosen to spend this time at her secret hideaway among the hills that overlooked what had come to be known as the Silverdawn Ocean.

Of course, she had not been allowed to travel the seven or so leagues by herself, but rather had come with her eldest brother Arman. At eighteen, he was already renowned throughout the area for his hunting and tracking skills, however, it was not to

hunt that had brought the young man to the coast on this occasion, but rather his other passion, fishing.

Tamila watched her brother fish from her promontory ledge high above the beach. It was a sheer drop from her perch to the rocks beneath, but Tamila was wise enough to keep from the edge. She was not an adventurous girl, nor had the need to be, for her imagination found such awe and possibilities in what it beheld, that she could spare no time for actually doing the things she dreamed of. Therefore, unlike other children who would have spent this time running about in a frenzy of investigation and play, Tamila was content to just sit and watch. Watch as the light played on the waves and the horizon glittered in its gentle curve, a serene backdrop to the swooping and diving sea birds as they preyed on unsuspecting fish and the young seals as they romped on the rocks below. Most of all Tamila gloried in the ambience she felt looking out over the seemingly infinite, majestic and powerful expanse of water before her. From her elevated position the sight filled her with the belief that anything was possible. That jumping from this ledge and floating on the salt scented breeze to become one with the birds, was not such an inconceivable thing.

Tamila jumped to her feet and let out an exalted whoop. Closing her eyes, she let the wind and the sound of the breaking waves combine with the awareness of how high up she was, and welcomed the resulting vertigo; she loved the dizzy feeling, that enticing pull towards the edge. Opening her eyes she took a deep breath. *Oh how I love this place*, she thought, made even sweeter with the knowledge she didn't have to go home that night, but would stay with her brother on the beach. Tamila broke from her daydreaming and looked down toward Arman. For some reason he was laying on his

belly with his face just inches above the water, one outstretched arm lolling about in the tide.

‘What’s he doing?’ Tamila thought aloud. Curiosity brought her nearer the cliff edge. She sat and watched as one of the larger waves covered the rock on which her brother lay. She let out a startled squeal as, on retreat, it dragged him with it. She waited to see him resurface, not believing anything grave could possibly have happened.

He did not reappear.

Tamila’s chest tightened as a cold flush traced its way through her body. For a moment her mind was too frozen by the possibilities it envisioned to command her body to any action. Recovering, she jumped to her feet, turned, and ran straight into an unyielding object—a person. The impact pitched her savagely backward, such that, casting her arms behind to save dashing her head, she struck the rock first with her elbows. Pain shot up her left arm, wracking her mind and bringing instant tears to her eyes. It hurt too much to scream, it being all she could do to draw breath in ragged gasps. Yet although the agony deafened her to all other senses, her mind still managed to pierce the distress with the need to investigate the cause of her hurt. Looking down she jolted at the seriousness of her injury. Her left arm had broken near the elbow, the jagged edge of bone having pierced the skin and carried on to protrude several inches upward, the shard having travelled enough to puncture her upper arm.

The scream finally found escape.

She continued to scream in anguish until the primal response had covered the pain to a more bearable level. It was then she remembered her brother. Tamila looked up at the figure she had run into, wondering as she did so why they had not come to her

aid. The figure was a very large man with red hair and a full red beard that framed a cruel grin. He stood with his arms folded across his chest exactly where she had run into him.

Between sobs Tamila gasped, 'My brother, I think he's drowned, down there on the rocks. Please help me find him.' Tamila attempted to stand, carefully cradling her useless arm, fear for her brother pushing her own immediate pain aside.

'He's dead.'

Tamila looked at the man. Was that a question or a statement? Looking into his eyes for the first time, the young girl shuddered.

'How do you know?' Was all she could ask.

'Because I killed him.'

This did not come from the bearded one. Another man had just pulled himself up onto the ledge from the pathway that led to it and approached the girl. 'I see you've already started Chkurl.' He said.

'She did that herself, stupid Elf ran straight into me.' The bearded one replied.

'Well it's not enough. She has to be badly damaged if we are to be sure of getting into the Azure stronghold.' Neither man made any attempt to help Tamila.

Fear for her brother coupled with the pain in her arm. The confusing words the men spoke caused her young mind to become muddled. 'Please take me back to my mother, I'm hurting a lot.'

The smaller man came up to her and she relaxed a little in the thought that adults were here to help.

His foot came down on her thigh with his whole weight behind it, causing her torso to jump as her thigh-bone was violently wrenched.

Her eyes went wide, the crippling pain causing her to wildly spasm. Instinctively she threw out her arms, forgetting in her distress her previous injury. Her whole body seemed to shudder and gasp. Unable to endure such pain, she sunk backward into a red haze. Eyes unfocused, darkness rushed at her.

DANEK

The entire courtyard was lined in organised rows, with hundreds of young men paired off and facing one another. Each held a wooden sword in one hand and a square wooden shield the diameter of a man's forearm in the other. As the men thrust and parried, feinted and dodged, the Azure, and few sword-masters walked amongst them, encouraging, correcting, and occasionally rebuking the less disciplined.

It was upon the latter that the Azure Dored now dispensed his reproach. 'This is the last warning I'll give you young Danek. Your behaviour is causing the other men to lose concentration and is disrupting the training. Try it again and I'll have you doing the Azure laundry by yourself for a week. Do-I-make-myself-quite-clear?'

'Yes, Magi Dored' replied the castigated Danek.

Danek was only just a man, but with a physique all men would envy. Yet neither his size nor Lion strength could

compensate an inept lack of coordination, one that made their current swordplay an exercise in purest frustration to the lad. For the second time in the morning training, and as a result of his inability with the stupid stick—as he reproachfully referred to the mock swords—he had thrown down sword and shield and dive tackled his opponent, wrestling him to the dirt. This, of course, had attracted an audience of other trainees, along with much laughter.

Now, however, the dejected Danek looked only guilty.

Dored, of almost equal height but looking like a reed to a log, regarded the young mountain standing before him. ‘You don’t find this easy do you?’ He asked in a more gentle tone; though his face still carried its usual austerity.

‘No Azure, if I have to rely on a sword to save my skin or the lives of others, well, let’s just say that I don’t think I’m going to be around for very long in this war.’

‘Mmm’, Dored murmured in agreement, ‘What are you good at Danek?’ The question was asked genuinely, no hint of sarcasm.

‘Well’, Danek responded, suddenly becoming self-conscious, ‘I’m a carpenter, and from what others tell me a good one.’ He added quickly, ‘And I also won the log toss at the last Spring-festival.’

‘Yeah, he doesn’t need an axe. If Danek wants lumber, he just uproots a tree.’ This came from the young man Danek had just grappled with. The others laughed, as did Danek and the Azure.

‘You definitely are the biggest boulder of a young man I have ever seen. You’re also quite right, the sword would only work against you in a fight. Have you tried archery?’

‘Yes Magi Dored, but I was more likely to shoot myself than hit those stupid targets.’ Shamed, Dored looked to the ground.

Danek's awkwardness was interrupted by Dored, who suddenly raised an eyebrow and, to the surprise of all the others, said, 'Danek, you've just given me an idea, follow me.' With that he headed off with determined strides towards the Azure citadel. Casting a bewildered look across at the other trainees, Danek shrugged and followed the Ancient.

The aging Azure still had a long gait, and Danek was forced to run to catch up. 'Where are we going Magi?'

'To see how far we can throw rocks my dear boy, to see how far we can throw rocks.'

Danek said nothing. He knew the Azure had lost their powers and were now aging, yet Dored's strange words gave Danek pause; he pondered the possibility of senility. He followed, worriedly watching the back of the Ancients grey head as he was led to the Azure citadel.

Sitting within the forum, before the large main doors and behind an equally large desk strewn with piles of paper, were fifteen Azure. Beside the desk a group of adolescent boys stood. Every now and again one would be handed a pile of papers, given a quick instruction, and sent off to deliver them. On the further side of the table a massive tri-fold blackboard had been erected. Before each portion stood an Ancient furiously writing, erasing, and re-writing figures and details being related to them by the seated Azure. Danek could only make out a few items on the boards; statistics relating to military forces and supplies; details of how other towns were responding; the progress of the reconnoitring expedition that was to choose the mountain stronghold for the people. Danek was glad he wasn't an Azure, all this planning would have given him a monumental headache.

Dored had disappeared into the citadel, leaving the young

man standing before the industrious desk. However, standing idle amongst such bustling activity soon brought him to the attention of the other Azure.

‘You there, young Danek isn’t it?’

‘Er, yes Magi.’

‘What are you doing lad, shouldn’t you be in training?’

‘Er, yes Magi. I mean, no Magi. I mean, yes I was, but Azure Dored thought I’d be better suited to, to rowing throcks. I mean throwing rocks.’ Danek’s lack of dexterity extended to his tongue.

The Azure just stared at the young man for a moment. ‘Throwing rocks? I won’t ask what you’re talking about lad as I’m sure brother Dored knows what he’s doing, but if you’re waiting for him, you might as well do something useful in your waiting. See that box of papers.’ He indicated a large wooden crate filled to the brim with paperwork, ‘Think you can carry it?’

‘Yes Magi.’

‘Good. Please take it to brother Sisera, he’s in the main chamber of the citadel.’

‘Yes Magi.’ Danek went to the box and with a clean motion picked it up and entered the citadel.

The Azure stared after Danek as he left, ‘I do declare that is the strongest person I have ever seen in my entire long life.’ Another witnessing Azure nodded confirmed, ‘If all our men were built like that, the Dark Horde would take one look at us and fight each other to get away.’ The other Ancients chuckled at the exaggeration, but stopped abruptly when from down the street there came a loud commotion.

A small group had gathered around two men. These, pushing through the crowd, ran toward the citadel. The larger of the two

carried a limp form in his arms, one that even from a distance was clearly a bloodied and battered child.

Turning to one of the boys beside the table, an Azure commanded, 'Go find Azure Sosthene, tell him his powers are needed urgently and immediately at the citadel, go.' Turning to another boy he instructed, 'Run to the infirmary, tell whichever Magi is in attendance to quickly send medicament for grievous injury.' With that the Azure and his fellows hurried to meet the approaching crowd. Grimness marked their features; each knew that without their powers there would be little they could do until Sosthene arrived.

Danek knew the citadel; at least, he knew where the main chamber was; as a child he had many times been requested by an Ancient to make an errand. It was the first building erected on Triad, and none of it though laborious Elf effort. Constructed instead solely by the power of the Azure. As he walked down the oval mural-covered corridors, Danek recalled being told how the long passageways were once whole massive trees magically felled and placed. Each colossal truck hollowed out and engraved along its internal length with images that told of the Azure's long history. Similarly, each of the rooms within the citadel were once no more than huge stones; boulders that the Azure had lifted by their powers, placed, and then sculpted to their purposes. The whole citadel centred on the main chamber, an ancient giant slab of granite. jutting stone monolith that sometime in the past had been forced to protrude like a primitive castle above the ground. From a distance, the magically construed structure resembled a small mountain.

Danek wondered at how long the citadel would last now that

the Azure no longer had the power to maintain it. *Except for Sosthene*, he thought, wondering if a lone Azure was enough for such a task. Already Danek could see the ancient wooden floor of the corridor beginning to wear. Sad, he thought with a carpenter's appreciation, that even such wondrous things as this must come to an end.

He reached the main chamber doors and entered.

The chamber was filled with Azure and village Elders. Everywhere Danek looked something was happening. The nearest group of Azure were discussing whether it was too late to form a cavalry regiment, whilst the group of Elders to Danek's left were loudly discussing with a few Azure why their sons would make ideal officers in the army. Most of the activity, though, didn't involve talk. Rather just the bustle of organising and preparing for the biggest exodus since the war of the Ancients; that and the enormous task of building a martial force from scratch.

Danek became bemused just watching the ordeal, again grateful for the fact he was just a simple carpenter free of such weighty concerns.

'Danek! There you are boy. I thought you were behind me, but never mind. Come lad, I have something to show you, and I need your advice.'

Danek just stood there and stared at the Azure Dored, eyebrows raised and a less than intelligent expression marring his features.

'What's wrong boy, you look as if you've just been hit by a mallet?'

Danek shook himself free of his stupor, 'It's, er, it's. You need my advice? Me?'

Dored's eyes gave a rare twinkle, 'Ha. Surprised are you. The

Azure needs the advice of Danek the carpenter. Well don't be so shocked lad, we're not omniscient you know, and it so happens that we don't often get time to try our hand at carpentry. Well, not the manual variety. Now we have no choice and you did say you were a good carpenter, didn't you?'

'Yes Magi.'

'Good. Then follow me.' Dored led the sizeable carpenter up to the very last row of tables around which were gathered a haggard appearing Azure Tulin, and the chief Elders from landpoint, Crasaw, and Midlan. Rather than piles of paper this table contained several large maps. One in particular caught Danek's eye. He recognised it immediately by its contours as the land of Triad. It was in colour, the oceans in blue, forestlands in dark green, and farms and towns in yellow or grey. Lines had been drawn every two finger-breadths across the length and width of the map, forming a grid pattern.

Behind the desk was a blackboard marked off in four separate columns: Comestibles, Building Materials, Transport, and Medical. Under each heading was a complicated listing of amount and distribution, with names of those in charge of each allotment.

The job of overseeing this whole logistics endeavour had befallen Azure Tulin; an Azure well respected by his peers for his commonsensible and orderly thoroughness. Unfortunately the stress of the job was clearly taking its toll on the frail Tulin. He was eager, therefore, to comply with Dored's request for a moment to talk.

"So what's all this about, building a machine to throw rocks, eh, Dored?"

POWER LOST

The girl was placed gently on a pallet positioned next to Jabin's.

Like Jabin, she did not stir. Her limbs were flaccid, their unnatural pliancy attesting to the seriousness of her injuries. The semblance of both patients ended there. Whereas Jabin could be mistaken for one in peaceful slumber, chest gently ascending and falling in regular rhythm. The girl's ragged gasps fore-echoed the rattle of death. Blood matted her hair which had congealed into a knotted mass to one side of her head. The left side of her jaw had been crushed causing that part of her face to appear deflated, what remained of her left cheek sagging into her mouth adding to the gurgling rasp of her breathing. Every limb of her body was twisted at grotesque angles and the hideous purple-green bruises and copious blood made the overall image seem almost feigned, as if a life-size doll had been thrown unceremoniously on the bed and painted an ugly green and purple before being finally doused in generous portions of red paint.

Jonn stood silhouetted in the window that framed Lord-Kings Mountain, hugging his wife. Tanya had her face buried in his shoulder, the sight of the stricken girl's injuries too brutal for her sensitive soul. Jonn also had paled, continuing to watch only from bewilderment, wondering at how a child so damaged

could yet live.

The room was filled with people, mostly Azure, who fretted around the girl's pallet. Some fumbled as gently as possible to cut away her clothing so as to better view her wounds. Others, equally delicately had begun to clean her exposed lesions. Muttered oaths of worry escaped their lips every time a wound revealed its gravity.

Two other men stood off to one side, these had carried the child in. They now stood waiting one each side of the door. Surprisingly neither looked at all troubled, alert but undisturbed by what was occurring in the middle of the room.

‘Where on Asasa is Sosthene?’ Azure Fanun shouted, ‘And where, by the power, are the bandages and salve I sent for?’

As if on cue the door burst open and in rushed a young man laden with several small boxes. Rushing to the Azure, he carefully deposited them on the waiting table. Turning to Azure Fanun he said, ‘Azure Sosthene is on his way, I saw him approaching from the main square when I entered the citadel, he should only be a moment.’ At that point the youth caught sight of the broken form that lay behind the Magi. Blood drained from his cheeks and he became pallid as his eyes glazed and legs buckled as if dislodged from their supports.

Two Azure rushed to his side and gently lifting, half dragged the ashen boy to a chair where they examined him.

‘Is he alright?’ asked Fanun.

‘Yes. Just weak stomached is all. Thankfully he put the medicament down before he saw the blood. He should be alright.’

As the Azure rose, Sosthene ran into the room followed by a puffing and sweating Quirinicotilius.

‘What's going on? Who's injured?’ the labouring Azure gasped. His reddened face highlighted the latest wrinkles rapid aging had bestowed.

Fanun briefly explained the girl's situation, pointing out to them her more serious injuries; which were most of them.

‘How did this happen?’ Quinn asked, his grimace and tone echoing the empathy he felt for the child's plight.

‘The two men by the door there, they saw her fall from a cliff edge on the eastern harbour inlet.’ Replied Fanun, indicating the two men that stood by the door.

Quinn looked over at the men, ‘I recognise you both.’ he said after a few moments.

‘Yes Magi, we were the ones who carried the boy's bed for you some weeks back.’ Answered the smaller of the two men.

‘Ah yes, I forgot. This girl was fortunate to have you around. How long ago did you find her?’

‘Maybe three hours ago Magi, definitely no more than four.’

‘That's not good.’ Quinn looked back at the girl for a moment. Although his expertise was not in medicine, he would have thought some of the injuries at least several days old. The bruising and aspect of some of the wounds witnessed more than just a few hours of healing. But the situation was too urgent to dally with mysteries, turning gravely to Sosthene he said, ‘With the time that's past and so much blood loss, her body systems must already be shutting down, I'm surprised she's still with us. You must work quickly brother.’

Removing his outer robe, Sosthene acknowledged Quinn by standing between the two reposed figures. He placed a hand on the chest of each. Immediately Jabin's body began to glow a warm yellow, incandescence travelled slowly up Sosthene's arm. Tendrils of light that caused his thin white under-robe to

gleam as if made from gold filigree. Passing across his shoulders the now amber-hued power concentrated about the Azure's head, its radiance becoming such that his features were rendered too bright to look upon.

By the door the two men who had brought the girl stood silently, unmistakable worry etched on both their faces; a worry illuminated by the brightness of Dunamis. But none in the room noticed.

The power gathered around Sosthene for only a moment, just long enough to translate his will into its progress, to give it the purpose he desired. Then with blinding swiftness it sped down the arm that touched the girl. With a silence that belied the intensity of colours the impact produced, Dunamis exploded around the girl's body.

Everyone staggered back a step, throwing their arms before their faces in fear that the noiseless and unfelt concussion would carry toward them more than just colour.

All in the room watched in awe as within the space of heartbeats the girl's broken body was made whole. Too fast for the eye to follow bone was realigned and knitted together, deep slashes exposing gaping flesh were restored. Before any had time to blink more than twice the young girl lay before them with skin as whole and flawless as an infant, every limb and feature perfectly rejuvenated.

The Azure in the room looked at each other in stunned amazement; never had any of them witnessed the power work so potently and with such speed—not even a word of invocation uttered.

Even Jonn and Tanya were aware that what they'd witnessed was awe-inspiringly unique. As for the two men by the door, they appeared several shades paler than one would have

thought normal.

As the last lambent threads of Dunamis receded from the girl, she descended back onto the pallet, the power in cocooning her in its light having physically lifted her to perform its healing. The golden glow finally seeped from Sosthene's arm also, leaving radiance only around the hand that touched Jabin; it too failing as the Azure removed his arm. As the residue of that last touch faded, so too did the Azure's strength. Sagging onto one of the pallets, knees trembling, Sosthene just managed to save himself from collapsing completely.

He felt a strong arm brace itself across his shoulders, and was dimly aware of being half carried to one of the cushioned seats in the room. Looking up, he saw one of the two men who had brought the girl offering him a decanter. The offer reminded the Azure of his thirst and he gratefully accepted the flask, gulping the contents. Leaning back with a sigh of exhaustion the spent Azure closed his eyes, glad for the solace darkness offers such fatigue.

Apart from Fanun, who attended to Sosthene, the Azure in the room surrounded the newly healed girl, discussing between themselves the possible reasons for Dunamis' potent demonstration of itself.

Jonn and Tanya stood by their son, though their eyes were still drawn to the other pallet. Neither had ever witnessed such horrendous injuries so speedily and completely healed. Both were in a mild state of shock and stunned by the knowledge that it was their son from whom the power for this miracle was attained. Yet for all his power, Jabin still remained motionless, unaware of the bustling Azure around him.

‘Something to refresh you, Magi?’

Quinn turned to the voice and with a smile he received the

decanter from the large red-bearded man, ‘Why thank you. I don’t know your name.’

‘It’s Chkain, Magi.’

‘Well thank you Chkain, I was dying of thirst.’

The man gave an odd smile before offering the tray to the other Azure, who also gladly accepted the refreshment, with the exception of Fanun, who still busily attended Sosthene.

After a few moments Fanun suddenly stood. Only Jonn, Tanya and the two men noticing his hurried movement. Following his gaze they all saw his reason. Sosthene’s body had become rigid, his form no longer following the contours of the couch he sat on but laying like a plank across it. His face was set in a mask of fear, eyes wide and darting as if through their constant motion he was attempting to stimulate some response from his locked limbs, which were as marble.

Fanun’s expression equated with the total bewilderment of the others, ‘What on Asasa!’ is all he could manage to utter.

Several of the other Azure turned at his cry and on seeing Sosthene made to rush to his side. However, it was as if the feet of the priests had adhered to the floor, their bodies moving in the direction they intended without the compliance of their legs, resulting in each Azure toppling like felled trees to the floor. So unexpected was this that many had not time to even soften the fall with their arms, instead collapsing painfully, some with the sound of breaking bones; aging bodies unable to endure the impact.

Fanun, jolted from confusion by his falling brothers turned just in time to see Quirinicotilius clumsily falling backwards, his features as stony as Sosthene’s. Looking up he saw Jonn. Yet although he registered the warning cry, it was too late to react. He felt a bursting pain to the side of his head, and then,

as if a moment had gone by without his awareness, he found himself staring at sandalled feet. A great rushing noise sounded in his right ear and warmth surrounded his left. Disjointed from his senses, Fanun dreamily wondered why he was laying down, but then the wind receded, the light faded and the dying Azure succumbed to his souls need to escape its broken vessel.

Jonn pushed his wife behind him, frantically looking for some form of weapon with which to defend them both. Being furthest from the door and behind both pallets and couch, Jonn had not only seen the Azure's strange collapse but also witnessed as the smaller of the two men from near the door, picked up the decanter and smashed it across Fanan's head with force enough that the heavy stoneware jug had ruptured into several jagged pieces; one of which remained lodged in the Azure's temple. The two men now approached Jonn from either side of the room.

If not for his wife, Jonn would have ran toward one in an attempt to break past for the door and help, but he dared not for fear of her safety. Instead he backed further into the corner, realising that he was in a desperate situation. Although he did not doubt his own strength, he was still only a farmer, no fighter. The two men before him revealed by their confidence that they were no strangers to battle, and the larger one would easily match Jonn in raw strength.

With his mind racing for any possible vantage, Jonn grasped at the only handy object. Grabbing the drapes, he pulled with all his might. The heavy material failed to tear, but instead Jonn's efforts rived the thick railing it hung on from its supports. The dislodged rail swung in a high arc from the end of the drape and more by luck than desire struck the smaller of

the men a glancing blow to the crown of his head. The man fell across the end of Jabin's pallet before sprawling to the floor. The continuing momentum of the heavy timber rod pulled Jonn off balance and away from his wife. Although only for a few seconds it was enough. Turning from his stagger, Jonn saw the large man with the screaming Tanya held above his head. Before he could register it, she was thrown toward him.

Jonn's instinct's contended with care for his wife's safety and ended with him stepping to one side while trying to catch her at the same time; a feat requiring greater strength than he possessed. The move had put him sideways to the larger man; a mistake that was taken full advantage of. No sooner had Tanya struck the wall then his assailant tackled him from the left. The air was compressed from his lungs with such force his respiratory muscles were shocked into torpor. His body, bent sideways, was hammered into the edge of the heavy timber framed couch. Ribs cracked, and Jonn felt as if his heart had ruptured from the blow. Bright red spots of pain speckled his vision.

The collision had caused the red-bearded one to lose his grip, allowing the stunned Jonn to regain his bearings and ponderously rise to his feet. In a half daze he stumbled toward his wife who lay in a crumpled heap behind the couch nearest the door. She was moaning softly, her leg broken beneath her. Worrying him more was the pool of blood he saw came from her left ear, or near it. He knew he would have to end this quickly. Turning, he noted the smaller man was no longer where he had fallen, but again the bearded man had launched himself. The man's strength was colossal, his arms forming a vice around Jonn's chest as his forward motion pushed them against the closed door. Once again it was Jonn who took the

full weight of the impact. Already broken ribs forced a groan of anguish as they were scraped across each other. Jonn's hand flailed across the floor in an attempt to find an advantageous position. He struck something cold and hard. Without conscious thought his fingers closed over it and swung it up in a blind and awkward arc, clipping his opponent across the temple. The man grunted and fell off.

Jonn again took the opportunity to rise, discovering as he did so that his right arm would only respond with bitter protest. Forgetting that and looking at his right hand, he saw the heavy iron doorstop it held.

The larger man had also risen, a stream of blood flowing where Jonn had struck him. He looked bemused, although his body still spoke of determined action. Jonn approached with caution, this time wanting to be the aggressor and not the prey. The bearded man stepped back, Jonn immediately seeing the way in which he had to support himself on the girl's pallet. The man was unsteady. Jonn lunged. Making sure that his attack would drive his opponent away from the bed and clear of the fallen Azure. The bodies in the room had already suffered from the battle, blood coming from the mouth of one priest where either Jonn or the one he faced had fallen upon him. But in such a crowded room it was practically impossible to completely avoid the fallen and Jonn had a quick thought of what a real battlefield must be like where men were forced to step on their downed comrades.

As his charge connected, Jonn attempted to hammer his enemy with the one weapon he held. His aim was off though, and he struck only air. The attack had also failed to drop the larger man, leaving Jonn to grapple with him. Immediately he realised this was not a wrestling match he could win. The

bearded one was already stronger, and this, along with Jonn's damaged left arm, meant it would be only moments before his fully able antagonist overpowered him. He had no sooner thought this than he was brought to his knees, the man having kneed him in the groin whilst simultaneously spinning him into a headlock.

Jonn could hardly gain a breath as his mind combated the pain from his groin. Combined with the awful pressure being applied around his neck, he quickly fell to unconsciousness.

Shakily, Chkurl let the still body fall to the floor. Never before had he come so close to defeat in battle—and against one mere man. Blood poured from the wound at his temple, another new experience. The pain of it caused a fogginess to slow his thinking, but for all his weariness and injury, Chkurl was far from spent. Although without his powers, his body was still a product of those powers, resilient, hardened and designed specifically for strength and speed, it had no flaw. Even as he sagged with fatigue, new strength began to seep into his muscles and clarity soon replaced the haze. Looking up he noted with some amusement, and much satisfaction, the body littered room. But something was wrong, and it took him only a moment to notice it—the boy's pallet was empty.

‘Ornan!’ Chkurl shouted.

There was no reply.

‘I don’t believe it.’ Chkurl muttered, infuriated. ‘That son of the pit has left with the boy and deserted me. I’ll kill him!’

But Chkurl did not let his rage at Ornan's apparent betrayal get the better of him. Not yet. There was still something to be done.

Removing the doorstep from Jonn's now loosely clenched fist, he stepped over and on the paralysed bodies that separated him from Azure Sosthene. Standing above the Azure, Chkurl could see that the priest was still fully aware, though completely unable to move anything but his eyes.

‘Well priest’, Chkurl spat, ‘It looks as if the last Azure of power has come to the end of his luck doesn’t it.’ He gave a blunt laugh that ended in a sneer. His next words whispered hate, ‘And when the rest of the Horde gets here, I will make it an obligation to insure that all your people die very painfully.’ Laughing, the Dark Lord raised his arm to inflict his deathblow. As it reached its highest point, his wrist was enclosed in a grip so crushing it caused Chkurl to drop what he held.

Looking up, Chkurl saw a massive fist encircling his arm. Following it up, he beheld a man beside whom even he was dwarfed. Then the giant's fist struck and all went black.

KIDNAPPED

Ornan ran down the passageway, the limp form draped over his shoulders bouncing languidly about. Of smaller stature than Chkurl, Ornan was of powerful physique, and the burden he carried more awkward than heavy. He knew he had to escape

the town soon, for not even the body of a Dark Lord was inexhaustible, and the longer he remained in Land Point the greater the likelihood of discovery.

If not for his previous experience within the citadel, Ornan would be hopelessly lost, the main corridors seeming to stretch on forever, branching into corridors at every turn. With unflinching recall, he navigated the maze of passageways.

The service doors through which they had entered the first time were situated at the rear of the Azure stronghold; an entrance that as luck would have it was rarely used and well concealed from the town's streets.

Blood still trickled from the Dark Lord's head, though it had slowed somewhat, and his normally finely groomed hair was matted around the wound. In his first moments after coming to, he'd been disorientated; unconsciousness an experience as new to him as the need to eat and sleep had been. With the passing discomposure had arrived a strong sense of fear, being reminded yet again of his lost powers and frail mortality. It was fear that prompted him to leave Chkurl to the fighting while he exited with the boy. As fate would have it, it was well he did, for from the end of the passageway he had seen the large man that had entered the room. Even if he had remained, he wondered whether they could have toppled that one.

Approaching the large service entrance, Ornan lowered Jabin to the floor. Opening one of the doors a fraction, he surveyed the outside loading dock and surrounding courtyard. No one was about. Better still, a half loaded wagon stood still hitched to oxen. Ornan retrieved the comatose youth and manhandled him onto the wagon, moving the load of barrels so as to better conceal him. He then jumped onto the driver's bench and within minutes was on his way to the waiting portal.

HATE REKINDLED

Quinn knew where he was the moment he regained consciousness. The infirmary. Voices speaking softly to his left he recognised as Dored and Sisera's, though he was unable to turn his head and see them. In fact he could move no part of his body at all other than his eyes, themselves tunnelled in their movement to a narrow cone of vision before him. He could not even feel the pallet on which he lay, and when attempting to speak, it was as if his tongue were missing, not just numb but gone; his efforts like that of a man attempting to walk after his legs have been amputated. In truth the only evidence he had of being within his body was that he could still see the end of his nose, and blink. Quinn's mind raced over what he remembered. Jonn fighting with the one called Chkain. He worked back from that recollection. *I collapsed. Why did I collapse? Sosthene was injured. No. He was in trouble. Fanun gave an anxious shout. But why did I collapse? Chkain offered me a drink. That was after the girl was healed, so astonishingly healed. Wait. Chkain? The drink? Have I been poisoned?*

The Azure struggled with all his mental effort to somehow sense his limbs, but in vain. He was suddenly struck with the fear that this may be a permanent condition. New fears

crammed in on the first; *How would I remain sane? My mind robbed of its body. I would be impotent, helpless to fulfil my smallest desire.* The Azure's mind flashed to one of the many walks he had taken with other of the priesthood within the forest. There they would debate—one of his favourite activities—the weightier mysteries of life. The memory closed with the thought of *Never again.* The terror of that perception spurred the aging Ancient to focus as never before. At the point he felt he must surely faint with the effort, a droning noise as of muffled groaning sounded in his ears. With an exhalation of breath that came so suddenly all in the room turned, he gave an ejected shout, dispossessing with the outcry both the rictus of his limbs and the fearful image of lost independence. The paralysis that only a moment before had seemed so lasting began to fade, seeping from his limbs like the diminishing effects of a long sleep that lingers after rising. The sensation was an ecstatic one for the Azure.

‘Ah brother, you do not know how relieved I am to see you moving. We had begun to give up hope. Please, don’t attempt to rise, you are not yet up to that.’ Dored placed a restraining hand on his brother's shoulder and did not remove it until Quinn relaxed. He then methodically begun to inspect a bandage that Quinn hadn’t realised bound his head.

Awash with fatigue and curiosity as to his plight, Quinn's thoughts were still not for himself. ‘What on Asasa has happened? Is Sosthene alright? What of Jabin, is he harmed? The last thing I remember was seeing Jonn Ralisian and that Chkain fellow battling, and then something hit me.’

Frowning deeply, Dored replied, ‘It is not a good thing brother, not good at all. You have been unconscious for six days. Most of us had despaired that you would recover.’

Noticing Quinn's unbelieving expression, Dored handed his friend a small mirror from the bedside, 'You lost much blood from your head wound and it took all of brother Fanyifn's skill to put your broken skull back together.'

Quinn's expression turned from disbelief to shock. The face he saw in the mirror was almost unrecognisable even to him. The once olive rounded face was now sallow and gaunt. The eyes peering back seeming to have buried themselves in his face, making deep caverns of once podgy flesh. What hair he once possessed on his left side had now been shaved clean. But it wasn't what was missing as much as what could now be seen, that appalled him most. A Ragged and angry lesion ran from the top of his skull to just above his left ear, a raw wound that was made even more horrific by the deep purple and green bruising that swelled around it. Quinn had a sudden attack of self-pity. The face he looked at appeared more an apparition from Sheol's domain than the jovial face that he had come to love. Now I am not just an old man but an exceedingly ugly old man. But if there was one thing he'd learnt in his long life, it was that the quickest way to increase ones worries was to worry ones worries. So, with a self-discipline born of much life, the Ancient put down the mirror turned to his brother, 'From the beginning, tell me what happened.'

Dored, seeing Quirinicotilius was well enough to at least listen, pulled up a chair. He sat in thought for a moment before speaking. 'The two men who brought the injured young girl to us were Dark Lords.'

Bluntly put, the impact of Dored's words were crushing, but Quinn beckoned Dored to continue.

'They had injured the girl so as to get into the citadel, with the goal that they would kill Sosthene and kidnap Jabin.'

Quinn's hands had clenched into fists, but he still remained silent.

‘From what we have gathered it appears that the two were sent ahead of the Horde in an attempt to thwart whatever plans the creator has for the Chosen. Ironically, to do this they had to forfeit their powers so-as to remain undetectable to us, would you believe it. Of course this was before they discovered that all but Sosthene is powerless. I'm thankful to report that, apart from the two already here, none of the Dark Lords know of our predicament, and the longer that remains the case the better. At least now we know why the Horde has chosen to travel by ship. It seems our lost powers still serve us brother.’

Quinn grunted and motioned for Dored to continue.

‘After gaining entrance, even to Jabin's own room, the Dark Lord's managed to drug all, save Fanan,’ Dored looked up at this point, and Quinn knew before he spoke that Fanan was dead.

‘We are forced to mourn so many of our number in so short a time.’ Is all he could say.

Dored nodded. After a moment's pause he continued. ‘Jonn was then left to face them himself. He managed to strike one down but was overcome by the one calling himself Chkain. It was during their struggle that you cracked your skull.’

‘What of Jonn and Sosthene?’ Quinn asked, gingerly caressing his bandaged head.

‘Jonn is recovering from some broken bones, and Sosthene has been up and about for three days. Fortunately the young Danek, the lad who threw that log so far at the last Springfest,’ Quinn nodded remembrance, ‘Well on hearing a commotion, he entered the room and saved our brother Sosthene from the Dark Lords death blow. Still though, it took our brother over

two days to come out from under the drugs influence.’

Quinn nodded slowly, stroking the six day growth on his chin, ‘And what of the others, our brothers, Tanya and the girl, Jabin?’ The last mentioned with much concern.

‘Our brethren are well. The drug seems to have had no permanent effect. I think that the potency was amplified in your case due to the extent of your injuries. Tanya also is recovering, her leg was broken and she has a nasty head wound but she should be alright. As to Jabin and the girl, the girl is well though still unconscious. However, Jabin ...Jabin has been taken Quinn’.

At this news Quinn did sit up, an angry glow coming to his cheeks. ‘We must get him back Dored. If the Dark Horde get hold of him it will be the end of both Jabin and all that we know.’ He stopped and looked up as if a realisation had only just come to him. ‘We have one of the Dark Lords?’

‘Yes.’ replied Dored, ‘A very talkative one, especially once Sosthene recovered enough to interrogate him. It seems that his newly acquired mortality has left him fearful for his own skin, we only had to threaten harm and he opened up like a dam breaking. I think he told us everything.’

‘I very much doubt that brother.’ Quinn retorted, ‘Even without their powers the Dark Lords must be feared. They are inimical opposites of everything that is good, every virtue in which we hold value. Selflessness and compassion are concepts foreign and unknown to them.’ He lay down, a trembling in his limbs witness to just how weak he was, ‘I must rest now. But I want to see this Chkain when I awaken. There are some questions I wish to ask him myself.’

Dored could see the anger on his brother's face, hear it in his bitten words. He understood, had seen the love his brother had

for the Ralisian family, especially Jabin, whose protection he had taken upon his own shoulders. Dored also had the insight of a millennium of friendship to see the rising hate within his friend, for if there was one thing that could rage within Quirinicotilius' heart with a fervour equal to his love for the creator, it was his hate for the Dark Horde. Dored had fought alongside Quirinicotilius during the War of the Ancients, had witnessed the cold fury with which he battled their enemy. During that time his friend had become a man fuelled by only one desire—to save his people—and he had taken that responsibility fully upon himself.

Dored wondered once again at the enigma of his brother. On the one hand a man of such love as to warm the coolest heart, on the other one whose hate was a frightening thing to behold.

I wish we all had your zeal Quinn, but do not take it all upon yourself brother, share the burden. But out loud, he simply said, 'Rest now, I will be back soon.'

HOPE REKNEWED

The girl lay on the pallet before them. Her covering was pulled back to reveal the changes that had occurred to her within the week since her healing. The body the Azure saw was no longer that of a child but rather of a rapidly developing woman. Signs of puberty were obvious, along with the general

growth of body and limb that normally would have taken a half-score years to form.

‘What do you make of this Sisera?’ Sosthene asked as he pulled her blanket up again.

‘I’m not sure. It would appear the healing she received did more than just heal.’ Sisera raised a finger to his lips in thought, ‘When you were connected to them, did you have any sense at all that this would occur?’

‘No. As Jabin’s power reached the girl it was if my part was reduced to unwitting intermediary. I had no control over anything that followed beyond the connection I provided and, even there, I’m not sure I could have withdrawn my hands if I wanted to. This result-,’ He indicated the girl, ‘-is either the work of Jabin, or the creator himself. I was merely the tool.’ He smiled suddenly, ‘Now I know how an axe handle must feel.’

Sisera nodded. ‘But the question remains. Why is she aging?’

‘Maybe that is something only the creator himself can answer. Whatever the reason, like Jabin, she cannot be wakened, and we can only wait.’

‘Doesn’t that strike you odd?’ said Sisera.

‘That she can’t be awakened?’

‘No, the whole similarity of the thing. Jabin receives Dunamis but doesn’t awaken; the girl receives healing by Dunamis but doesn’t awaken. Jabin develops ten years in as many days, the girl likewise. There must be some connection here that we’re not seeing.’

Sosthene looked contemplative for a moment and then gently placed his hand between her newly forming breasts.

Sisera said nothing, only observing as Sosthene closed his eyes and furrowed his brow. He watched for long minutes when suddenly Sosthene’s hand began to glow with a very faint

bluish hue. A moment later his eyes popped open. With an abrupt and beaming smile the Azure removed his hand and turned to the perplexed Sisera.

‘The mystery does deepen brother. The girl is linked with Jabin. Through her, I can sense his presence.’

Sisera's excitement reflected Sostehne's, but he let his brother continue.

‘More remarkable still, it appears this girl is a conduit to Dunamis. Through her, I can link to his powers, weakly, but still effectively enough to be of use.’

‘Then we are not powerless?’ Asked the now lively Sisera, hopping from foot to foot.

‘No brother, we are as yet not powerless.’ replied Sosthene, who had always found Sisera's outward expressions of joy quite amusing; though at this time he also felt like jumping; except his back hurt. ‘The power is lessened through the linking, and the concentration required is greater than when directly connected with Jabin.’ Sosthene frowned, ‘I think that Jabin's abductor must still have some power, for although I can sense Jabin, his position is hidden from me by something that further weakens my use of Dunamis.’ He frowned a moment longer, then, clicking his tongue, he smiled, ‘At least we don't just have to sit and wait for the Horde to arrive now, we are no longer ignorant and helpless.’

The now composed Sisera nodded his agreement. ‘This news could not have come at better time, we have had too much go wrong. The people need some encouraging news, something to lift their hopes again.’

‘Come.’ Replied Sosthene, ‘the meeting is to begin shortly, and we have some very important things to contribute I think.’

Turning to leave, the Azure did not see the shudder the girl

gave, nor the look of anguish that briefly crossed her face. Her eyes opened and she heard the voice of the one who had touched her mind.

‘By the way, Tamila is her name. We must make effort to find her parents, they will be extremely anxious.’ Sosthene spoke as they left the room, ‘It seems, from the thoughts that I could decipher, that her life is now very much caught up with young Jabin's. But to what extent only the creator knows.’

As their voices drifted away, darkness once again swept over her. But she took comfort in the fact she was not alone. Jabin was there; his thoughts a part of her very own.

CHKURL

For the hundredth time Chkurl strained at the ropes that bound him to the wall, the friction burns his struggling inflicted exacting their penalty, only adding to his discomfort. He sat naked upon a stone block with two steel rings protruding from it just above the floor. To these rings his ankles had been fixed with rope, his arms fastened to similar fixtures at waist height. The arrangement prevented him from standing or being able to bring his arms together, and was designed to promote vulnerability within the prisoner; a purpose achieving its intent.

The room containing him had no windows and only one

narrow entrance, this sealed by a solid oak door a good hand span thick. It was a circular room a short ten paces in diameter and shaped somewhat like a cone; the walls angling in as they ascended, creating a circumference at the top narrower than the base. This, Chkurl surmised, was to effectively stop any man or beast from scaling them. There was no ceiling immediately above the room, instead the wall ended in a parapet that acted as the balustrade for some sort of viewing platform. The whole arrangement reminded Chkurl, rather chillingly, of the fighting pits the Dark Lord's had built back in the years following the war of Ancients; pits used to view their Elf captives battle to the death against blood hungry opponents in gladiatorial type combat. The resemblance unnerved the Dark Lord, his mind reversing the scenario and placing him as the victim. Had he known that this was simply a storage silo—turned holding cell—he might not have been so apprehensive. However, he had nothing but his own kinds motives from which to make comparison, and his kind knew only cruelty.

Chkurl once again swallowed bile, his newly awakened fear of death rising from the pit of his stomach to take hold of his heart. Mortality had become an abomination to the Dark Lord, an anathema that he could scarcely endure. The past week had brought home just how helpless he had become, the gamut of fears each moment offered threatening to send him mad with dread. His body had suffered also. Maddening fears had completely subdued his appetite. Gaunt cheeks framed trembling lips chapped from dehydration. Though still powerful, his body seemed to have deflated in its confinement; this due more to the Dark Lord's defeated posture than to any real physical decline. Yet decline had occurred, the robust physique having no choice but to follow the lead of the flailing

mind. Self preservation had become a driving compulsion within the prisoner, a desperate desire to escape and find somewhere safe, a place where he did not have to be concerned for his life, where peace dominated fear, where he was again the threat not the threatened. One other desire also vied for attention within him, one that dominated all the host of Dark Lord's actions—Hatred. Chkurl lovingly nurtured it in the depths of his soul. Hatred of many things, Tarnul for putting him in this situation, the Azure for causing him such terrible fear, the Hated-One for robbing him of his former freedom. But mostly Ornan, for he had betrayed him. Although Chkurl now knew mortal fear, he nonetheless vowed that if ever their paths again crossed, he would make Ornan pay terribly. The Dark Lord was shaken from his vengeful thoughts by the sound of the chamber door being unbolted. Fear once again dominated his thoughts; he could not endure another interrogation.

In reality Chkurl had suffered little at the hands of his examiners. They had quickly realised their captive's fears through his cringing pleas for mercy, and played that fear to their advantage; which pleased the Azure in more ways than one, for torture was a means they had no predilection for, even toward those as detestable as the Dark Horde. However, the Azure that now stood before Chkurl lacked scruples in regard to the Dark Horde. Scruples that, toward any other animal, he would hold in high regard. He was determined that before he left, this creature was going to give him the answers he sought—or die in its defiance.

Chkurl pushed himself up against the wall, bringing his elbows in as close as possible to his torso. The mien of the Azure facing him appeared as one big bruise, adding a sinister dimension to his appearance.

‘Please don’t destroy me.’ he pleaded to the Azure.

The Ancient was taken aback, not expecting such behaviour from a Dark-one. He looked up with a perplexity.

Chkurl followed his gaze and saw two other Azure watching from the parapet. *This is it, they’ve come to kill me. The others will watch as he kills me.* An agony of dread swept through him, terrifying him to such an extent that he was convulsed by a fit of trembling. Death had never been part of the equation of a Dark Lords life. To face it now, then, so suddenly, caused distress enough to induce physical pain.

Blood to began drip from Chkurl's forehead.

Quinn's eyes returned from their questioning glance at Dored and Sosthene, regarding again the shaking figure before him. He noted the creature had fouled itself in its fear. *I haven't even started,* he thought, *Best to take advantage of the situation, before fear gives way to apathy. Or hate,* He amended, considering it was a Dark Lord he dealt with.

‘Where has the one called Ornan taken Jabin?’ the pitch of his voice was low and menacing.

Trembling shook the Dark Lord such that he could not reply coherently, but when Quinn grabbed him by the hair, roughly pulling his face forward, he managed to vocalise a scratchy reply, ‘I don’t know.’

The Azure released his hold and stepped back. He knew the Dark-one was lying. For all his fear of meeting the Creator, he still had defiance enough to lie. From within his robes Quinn produced a small knife, no longer than a man's hand. Under the light of the oil braziers set high around the walls, the razor honed fineness of the blade could be easily seen. The Dark Lord's trembling stopped almost instantly; stillness berthed in foreboding.

‘What are you going to do? Please don’t hurt me, I’ll tell you what you want.’

‘I know you will, because you know what will happen if you don’t.’ Quinn pushed the knife up to the Dark Lord's throat and applied just enough pressure to break the skin. ‘I want the boy back. If you don’t tell me where he has been taken, I'm going to make you bleed, and I won’t stop the bleeding until you talk truth, do you understand?’

Chkurl nodded, eyes bulging from their sockets.

‘Good. Now it's obvious you did not swim across the Boundless Sea. We know there is none of your kind here with their powers still intact. So I want to know how you intended to get Jabin away from us. Where-has-Ornan-taken-him?’ The last was spoken in an protracted ominous whisper.

A battle raged within Chkurl, fears versus hate. He hated the Azure, part of him willing to defy them no matter what. But dread cowered in fear at that option. His countenance reflected the conflict within. Hate and fear echoed and reverberated within his eyes. *The Azure has done nothing yet, maybe I can bluff them*, hate thought. *And risk death*, fear countered.

Quinn stared back at the face before him. He saw the Dark Lord was on the brink, could choose either way. He realised, then, he would have to resort to violence; an abrupt act to force Chkurl onto the path of cooperation. He steeled himself.

Taking the knife, he pressed the point up against the inside of the Dark Lord's right leg, just above the knee joint. He looked up at the Dark Lord, but Chkurl did not return his gaze, instead being mesmerised by the blade, as if unsure of its purpose.

‘You give me no choice Dark One. You will talk or you will bleed to death.’ Making a quick thrust in and up, he effectively severed the artery. Blood spouted from the wound immediately,

striking the wall at waist height in rhythmic bursts before settling in a growing pool at his feet. Quinn knew he had taken a gamble. At the rate Chkurl was losing blood, minutes at the most remained before the Dark Lord's brain was starved of oxygen and unconsciousness took him. He could have cut a smaller vessel, but that would lack the dramatic effect he was relying on to loosen the prisoners tongue. He stepped back and allowed the sight to take its effect, hoping it was the desired one.

Chkurl's face paled considerably, more from shear shock than the immediate loss of blood. He was aware of his life ebbing away with every pump of his heart. The visual impact of it leaving his body so rapidly, raised a dread within him more heinous than any other torture could have. A plight made worse by the fact he was unable to move his arms, the denial of this simple need to comfort a wounded limb only heightening his anxiety. A weakness flushed coldly up his back and down the front of his face. Saliva began to pour into a mouth that felt suddenly very dry, a leaden burden seemed to pull on his arms and head. His terror grew. Looking at the Azure he began to beg. '...Please, I beg of you, do not let me die. Please stop the bleeding, you cannot let me die. Please.'

'I can do whatever I like, Dark One, and your death would bother me not at all. But I will strike a bargain with you: tell me where Ornan has taken Jabin, and then I will stop the bleeding, but be quick, you run out of time.'

Chkurl's mind was beyond any thought other than survival now, his dread growing with every new wave of weakness. With all barriers down the words flowed freely.

Quinn listened as Chkurl gave the details to the portal and its location. Only when he was completely satisfied Chkurl had

told all, did he allow Azure Fanyifn to attend the Dark One, by then Chkurl was only seconds from unconsciousness.

On the viewing balcony overlooking the holding cell, Dored and Sosthene watched Quirinicotilius interrogate the prisoner, recording as they watched all that the Dark Lord spoke. ‘Brother Quinn never ceases to amaze me, Dored.’ Sosthene whispered as both observed him cut the Dark Lord. ‘If you had asked me to describe him, I would have mentioned every desirable trait to grace a man's character. But today I see a side to our brother I have not witnessed before. It surprises me.’

Dored nodded. ‘I have been closer to Quinn than any in life, and only once before have I seen him so coldly determined, during the time of the war of Ancients. I honestly don't know how to deal with it. It frightens me.’

‘We must watch him.’ Sosthene said, ‘Hatred, even of such as despicable as the Dark Horde, can easily mar the man who is fuelled by it.’

They both continued to watch as the Dark Lord's fear unstuck his tongue. Dored turned to Sosthene, ‘We have the creator to thank that the Dark Horde know nothing of our plight, but if this one called Ornan manages to get back through that portal of travel and reveal our secret.’ He left the thought unsaid, but Sosthene finished it off.

‘We would be as good as dead.’

‘He has had a week head start. According to what we've heard the portal is only five leagues from where we stand. Only a day's journey. Surely we are already too late.’

‘Well, I don't intend to give up until we're sure.’ replied Sosthene, pressing the tips of his fingers together, as he did when thinking. Turning to the door he said, ‘You grab

Quirinicotilius. I will gather some young men. We leave from the stable yards within the hour.' He opened the door to leave but turned back to say, 'Oh yes, be sure to bring the girl, we may need her.'

THWARTED

Ornan could not believe how his luck had turned for the worse. Apart from actually escaping with Jabin, every other aspect of Chkurl's plan seemed cursed with failure. He hoped to himself the fool was being tortured. *As long as he doesn't talk*, he amended.

It was only two hours before sunset and Ornan crouched behind a stand of heather on the valley's west bank. Overlooking the clearing, he watched as twenty-five men unloaded their horses and readied to make camp. Unbeknown to them, they had chosen the very clearing that held the portal of travel. As fate would have it, they had pitched their camp with the portal dividing the men from their horses.

Ornan cursed and spat on the ground; a habit developed while loading wagons. Venting his frustration, he kicked the still form of his captive in the leg. Jabin did not stir. Ornan spat again.

Of all the pit-cursed places to choose, he thought, knowing it was only a matter of time before one of the men walked into the invisible portal and was incinerated. Then all hope of using

it would be lost, for the men would surely send for the Azure.

Ornan despised the loss of his powers, in hindsight regretting he hadn't given stronger argument against being sent on this mission. Yet, unlike Chkurl, the loss had not tormented him, nor his current mortality filled him with dread. Ornan's goals had always been further sighted than Chkurl's. As far as Ornan was concerned, to limit ones goals only to that which offered immediate gratification was a blind and foolish notion. Therefore, though anguished by the loss, he could counter it with his vision, which allowed for paths unfamiliar and unkind. However, he was still unused to having his will thwarted, and once again wished that fate would personify itself—so he could strangle it.

Deciding there was nothing he could do for now, he waited for the concealment of darkness. Yet as time past, the more nervous he became. He doubted that Chkurl would have revealed the whereabouts of the portal, but...

Finally, bettered by the growing anguish, he got up and walked toward the camp, leaving Jabin in hiding.

The men did not rise from their eating on seeing the stranger, but continued to eat and chat as he approached. Had they known this area of woodlands was five leagues from the nearest settlement, maybe they'd have been surprised to see this man walking toward them, dressed as he was only lightly, carrying no supplies and without a horse. But these were not locals to Land Point, rather travellers from the town of Midlan, two hundred leagues to the north, on their way to escort their town Elders home.

Ornan approached with a smile and a wave. 'Hello travellers. May I share your fire?'

'I think we have heat to spare friend, make yourself

comfortable, my name is Raban.' The wiry fellow stood up and shook the Dark Lord's hand. 'I did not realise we were so close to civilisation, is Land Point near?'

Ornan hesitated before answering, 'You are strangers then?'

'From Midlan, yes, Elite Guard escort to the Midlan Elders at your service, Sir.' Raban spoke with a smile and an exaggerated bow while his men laughed at his lavish description of them.

'I see.' Ornan replied with a grin, 'Well, yes, Land Point is only another league in that direction.' He lied, pointing west. 'But why did you not take the main road?'

'Er, well, that's a bit of an awkward story.' Raban said, looking embarrassed and somewhat uncomfortable.

At this, all of the others burst out laughing.

'But a funny one.' said the man Raban had been sitting next to as he stood up to shake Ornan's hand, with a grin that said he was about to embarrass Raban even further.

'Raban here decided that we had to make detour around a certain farm on the way, a farm that had a certain unmarried girl living on it. A girl who had taken a certain large fancy for our elite leader here, but sadly,' he imitated a regretful frown, 'she found it hard to take no for an answer. So hard in fact, that our glorious chief would rather add another two leagues to our journey than run the risk of hurting her feelings.'

'Or her hurting his face,' another called out with laughter.

'Aye, that be true, whatever came first, the hurt of heart or face, a stinging blow it would have been to either.'

Some of the men were now unable to keep eating, their amusement barely contained laughter. Raban squirmed with embarrassment.

His teasing friend continued. 'Unfortunately, our illustrious

leader has as much skill in bush craft as he does in saying no to large farmer's daughters. So before you could say, well, before you could say No to a large farmers daughter, Old Raban here had got us all lost.' Now every man was roaring with laughter, some with tears in his eyes. The jester slapped Raban on the back and re-took his seat.

'Now that's not entirely fair Bihl. It wasn't exactly my fault we ended up on the wrong side of the defile, was it. I mean, we couldn't have crossed the river anywhere else due to the high ran fall of late, and I didn't know that the defile carried on so far. Anyway,' his voiced weakened in light of the others mirth, 'I always knew where the road was, we just couldn't get to it was all.' With that, his hurt frown began to break into a smile at the corners of his mouth. 'At least we didn't meet up with Dorhis, that woman gives me the fidgets more than a leech in the under-breaches.' He laughed aloud himself at this. Turning back to Ornan, he asked 'What's your name friend?'

'Orlan.' Ornan replied.

'Well Orlan, take no notice of my men, their just jealous. Come sit by the fire and share our meal.'

'Why, thank you.' said Ornan, as he was handed a mug and plate by another of the men.

'Help yourself.' Raban said indicating the fire, 'The stews still hot, and the pots on the boil for sefy (a coffee-like beverage) if you'd like.'

Ornan nodded and walked to the fire. Kneeling in front of it, he grabbed the ladle and casually looked around while giving the pretence of stirring the stew. Seeing that the men had returned to eating and talking, and that no one took any notice of him, he slipped his hand into his tunic and withdrew one of the small vials of poison given him by Tarnul. Unstopping it,

he emptied a good third of the contents into the simmering water, before filling his plate with food and returning to where Raban sat. He took a seat beside him.

‘So, Orlan, tell me, what of the coming invasion, have the Azure found out anything new?’ The one called Bihl asked.

‘I’m afraid I’m as in the dark as you are on that one, friend.’ Ornan replied, ‘The Azure have been too busy planning the exodus and preparing the army for answering many questions, and most of the people have been made too busy to ask. Land Point is a hectic place at present.’

‘As is Midlan.’ said Bihl, ‘these are definitely strange times, that’s for sure. Personally I’m caught between my uneasiness of the unknown and the excitement of an approaching adventure.’ Many of the others nodded at this.

He continued, ‘What I don’t understand, is why our Elders require an escort, I thought the enemy was yet months from our shores.’ He shrugged away the question. ‘But wherever they are, they better hope they don’t wander across our path, we’ll show them what real soldiers can do.’ The last said with a cockiness reflecting the young man’s age.

‘Maybe the Dark Horde is closer than you think.’ Replied Ornan, ‘And with all but Azure Sosthene bereft of their powers, I personally wonder how any army is going to resist them. If I remember my history lessons correctly, man’s ancestors numbered in the millions, yet were unable to defeat the Horde, and that was when the Azure counted five times their current number, all with their powers. I don’t think much for man’s chances.’ Ornan hoped his words achieved there demoralising intent. Few things angered him more than worthless Elfs speaking of the Dark Lord’s as if equals. Again he longed for his powers, then he could show this trash a few things about

what it meant to face The Enemy.

Ornan's words caused silence for a few moments before Raban spoke up. 'There is still the king.' He said quietly, 'We have heard that the power he possesses is immense. With the Azure's guidance he can save us.'

'He is still unconscious.' Countered Ornan, with a bit more acid than he intended.

'Well, I trust the Azure.' A very young looking man piped in, 'They have never failed us. They will find a way.' Several of the others nodded agreement and Ornan was tempted again to remind them of the Azure's failure to win the last war. But he thought better of it. Everyone sat quietly.

'I'm thirsty.' Raban finally said, 'And I can hear the sefy calling my name, anyone else?'

Before long, most of the young men were contentedly sipping on their drinks, long yawns indicating their readiness for sleep, while troubling thoughts of war and large farmer's daughters were pushed aside for tomorrow.

Ornan had also poured himself a cup, but only feigned drinking it. By putting the poison in boiling water the potency of the drug had weakened, but Ornan had compensated by adding more than necessary. Still, the effects would take longer to show themselves than normal. So he waited.

His luck remained unforgiving.

There was a blinding flash. Ornan knew what had happened before even turning around.

Every man had come to his feet in an instant, some drawing their swords, others simply standing there, doltish expressions on their faces.

Most realised straight away that what they all stared at was some sort of magical creation, for nothing about it was

ordinary. Yet, what grabbed their attention most was the half-consumed body that lay at the foot of the thing. The whole front of the upper torso and head had been completely burned away, the reek of burnt flesh wafted strongly in the air. At the sight of the defaced body, several men abruptly lost their evening meal.

Raban was the first to do something. With drawn sword he approached the corpse and knelt to examine it. 'It's Grance.' He said at last, rather loudly, 'I recognise his clothing.'

The other men looked around, seeing if Grance was among them. He wasn't.

'What on Asasa is this thing,' Muttered Raban, careful not to touch it, 'where did it come from?' Others joined Raban now, just as cautiously.

'Do you think it might be the Azure's work?' asked one of the men.

'Do they look like Azure to you?' Bihl replied, pointing to the figures of Brachk and Dryma.

'Dark Lords?' Raban said suddenly, 'What's a bet they're Dark Lords.'

Bihl prodded Brachk with the tip of his sword; it was like prodding a rock. 'We've stumbled across something pretty big here Raban. I'm worried. This thing looks an awful lot like some sort of gateway. What do you think we should do?'

Raban rubbed his fingers through his short black hair, 'We have to tell the Azure, tonight.' He pointed to one of his men and said, 'Tav, take two others and ride to Landpoint', he indicated the erroneous direction that Ornan had given him, 'It's a league in that direction. Tell the Azure that we've found something we believe relates to the Dark Horde. Make sure you leave markers as you go, so you can easily lead them back

here. Now go.’ Tav tapped the two nearest him on the shoulder and all three ran toward the horses, within moments they were galloping in the wrong direction.

When the horses had departed the clearing, the other men gathered to investigate the mystery that Grance had been unluckily enough to discover. Several of them covered his body and carried it to one side, each thanking the creator it had not been them, but wishing it hadn’t been Grance either; he had been a good companion.

It was while they were all gathered before the oddity, that, without even a sound, the man nearest Raban abruptly collapsed. Then the man next to Ornan. Within the seconds that followed, fifteen men had collapsed. The seven that remained standing were frantically looking about in fear, not knowing which way to look, swords held defensively before them.

‘What on Asasa is going on here?’ Shouted Raban. He and Bihl stood shoulder to shoulder, watching as their men toppled around them. Bending down, he examined the man who had fallen nearest, noting the stony features and gaze-fixed eyes. The man still breathed freely. ‘They seem to be paralysed.’ He spoke to no one in particular.

‘This is some sort of spell-craft.’ Bihl replied, ‘It must be this thing doing it.’ He indicated the portal.

Raban turned and with all his might swung his sword into the rib cage of Dryma. With a yell, he dropped his now shattered sword, placing his damaged hand under his armpit.

Bihl at the same time tried to run Brachk through, but also only managed to bruise his sword arm.

Raban called his men to him, noticing as he did so that Ornan stood by himself to one side, seemingly unperturbed. Raban was a shrewd man, chosen as leader by the Elders for his astute

and decisive thinking. As he watched Ornan, a suspicion crept into his mind, one he planned to investigate. Quickly giving his orders, three of the men went to the portal and took guarded positions beside it. The other three followed Raban as he approached the lone stranger.

Ornan watched as the four approached. With his powers, he could have killed them all with nothing more than a gesture, but without them his choices were limited, talk or run. With a weapon it was possible he could have defeated three maybe four, but not even he was fast enough to overcome seven armed men; and he was fairly certain that any talk would soon betray him. He decided to run.

The four men were at first taken aback by Ornan's sudden dash toward them, and brought their swords up defensively. But he had done this only to put them on the back step, and with a sudden change in direction he sprinted past them, disappearing into the forest before they could recover. A moment later the four were in hot pursuit.

It did not take the Dark Lord long to lose them in the dark, few Elfs a match for his speed. He made sure they had been led a fair way into the forest before doubling back. Approaching the clearing, he saw the two remaining men guarding the portal; each with sword drawn and worried looks. Under the cover of growing darkness he crept behind the horses, the noise of the crackling fire further muting his actions. Untying two mounts, he quietly re-entered the woods. Shortly after, he had Jabin tied to one mount while he rode the other. The portal, he decided, was lost to him, and it was far too risky waiting anywhere near it. Therefore his plan now was to find a place of concealment and wait out the Dark Horde's arrival. Knowing that Northwest was the least populated of the nearby land, he

headed in that direction.

PURSUIT

It was while they were preparing to leave that the rider came in. Unwell and almost delirious from exhaustion, he still insisted on being taken straight way to Sosthene.

Dored and Quirinicotilius stood one to each side of the man as he told his story, urging him to sip water as he spoke. He related to them that he was one of a band of men sent from Midlan to escort their Elders home (the lateness of which had begun to cause concern among the elders). His company had uncovered what they thought some form of magical gateway, and he and two others had been sent to alert the Azure at Land Point. However, only a few minutes into their journey all three had mysteriously become paralysed and fallen from their mounts, his two friends breaking their necks. He did not know how long he'd lain there. On recovering, he'd started walking south intending to find the coastline. Miraculously he re-found his mount and on reaching the coast was blessed again by fortune in the timely meeting of some local fishermen. These had fed him and pointed the way to Land Point. All this the man estimated as taking three days, maybe four, depending

how long he had been prone with paralysis.

Quinn was the first to question the man, whose name was Tav; already sure what the answers would be. ‘Was there anyone else at the portal?’ he asked.

The man gave him a questioning look, ‘Portal, Magi?’

‘Yes. The object you found was a Portal of Travel, a magical device used to travel large distances. Was there anyone else at the portal?’ The Azure asked patiently.

‘Well, not when we arrived, but shortly after a man joined us. He turned up and asked to share our fire.’ Tav squinted his eyes in thought for a moment, ‘Oran. No, Orlan. Yes, Orlan was his name.’

‘Ornan.’ The three Azure uttered simultaneously.

‘Ornan?’ The confused Tav responded.

‘My friend, you unknowingly shared your fire with a Dark Lord. How many men did you say were in your company?’

‘Twenty-five, Magi’ Tav replied, mouth gaping.

‘You were all armed?’

‘Yes Magi, and Raban, our commander, drilled us daily.’

Quinn turned to Sosthene, ‘It all fits. Ornan must have drugged them during the meal, just prior to the poor Grance fellow stepping into the portal. The only question is whether the other men all collapse as well. If they did, then we’re already too late.’

Sosthene turned to Tav, ‘This map,’ he showed him a piece of parchment with a sketched map drawn on it, ‘Does it look an accurate guide to where your camp is?’

Tav took the map and examined it, ‘Yes, that will get you close alright. But if you take this you’ll find it easier.’ From around his neck he removed a finger length whistle that had been attached to a fine cord. ‘Raban had each of us whittle one

of these before we came on the trip, they make a very eye pitched note that travels quite some distance. When you near where you think the clearing is, blow hard upon it. If any of my company is nearby, they will give a return signal.’

‘Thank you Tav, your leader has a good head on him.’ said Sosthene. Turning away, he instructed another young man to escort Tav to the citadel and get him properly tended to. Then, mounting his horse, he turned it to face the gathered group. In a loud voice he said, ‘I will take ten men with me. The rest of you will travel with the wagon to guard the girl. Speed is now the most important factor, but caution is paramount. I have chosen you men because your instructors commended you as the best they had trained. Understand, that the one we go to encounter is a Dark Lord. Even without his powers, he is a being powerful enough to defeat any three of you, therefore I want no heroics. You will act only on my command. Is that clear?’

‘Yes Magi.’ The men replied loudly.

‘Good, don’t forget it. Now we ride.’ Turning his mount, he kicked the horse into motion and was soon racing beyond the town perimeter into the forest beyond.

The two remaining Azure watched as Sosthene sped away, each battling envy at his retained vitality. They had the job of following their brother in the much slower wagon. They weren’t about to let him get too far ahead.

‘Let’s be off then.’ Quinn said, jumping up on to the driver’s bench and immediately regretting it. ‘Ohh. The old knees aren’t what they used to be.’ he complained rubbing his strained and worn joints.

‘Mmm.’ Dored replied in a sardonic tone as with a far more dignified approach, he mounted the passenger bench. Looking

over his shoulder, he noted that Tamila was safe, secured to a quilt covered bed of straw. 'Let's go get Jabin.' He said

Led by two pointers the wagon set off, twenty eager horseman following behind.

The whistle proved a blessing. The land they were riding into had become a sea of wooded hills and smaller knolls all indistinguishable from one another and impossible to navigate. At first there was only a long silence following Sosthene's high-pitched call, before a return signal sounded closely behind them and to their left. The sound itself was a relief to the Azure, whose sense of foreboding had grown as they travelled. Fear of what the future held if the Dark Lord managed to get through the portal caused him deep anguish. Now, upon hearing the return whistle, came renewed hope that Ornan had been captured and Jabin recovered. Sosthene rode toward the sound with a more optimistic expectation.

As the party of horseman entered the glade, the returning whistler shouted greeting, as did his companions. Sosthene grimaced. Tav had spoken of twenty-five in his company; Sosthene counted ten in the clearing. Three graves were evident at the far end of the camp.

Sosthene rode up and dismounted as a tall and wiry man approached them, a tired smile on his lips.

'At last.' He said, 'My name is Raban, Magi. I hope it's our messengers that have brought you and not just some strange luck.' The leader of the men looked haggard, his eyes dark ringed and shoulders hanging in weariness.

'Your man Tav, brought us news of your discovery early this morning. We have ridden as hard as we can.' Sosthene looked at Raban's men and then at the three graves, 'What has

happened here since Tav left?

Raban rubbed his hand through his dark hair, 'What hasn't happened is more the question Magi. But I'm pleased to hear about Tav, two of those graves belong to those that went with him. When one of their horses returned we realised that the same thing must have happened to them as occurred us.'

'Your men collapsed with paralysis?'

'Yes, all but seven of us, poisoned I think. They all came out of it, though some quicker than others. Spookiest thing I'd ever seen, staring straight ahead like that, body all rigid, could've sworn they were dead.'

'I take it the third grave belongs to the one called Grance?' Sosthene asked.

'Yes Magi, what was left of him.' Sadness flickered in the Raban's eyes.

Sosthene breathed a mental sigh of relief, having feared the grave to be Jabin's. 'I am sorry at your loss Raban. Was he a close friend?' Raban nodded. Sosthene paused in respect for the man's grief before continuing. 'Tav mentioned a man named Orlan, is he still here?' The answer to this question was critical to the Azure, and Sosthene held his breath in anticipation. *Please don't say he went through the portal*, he thought.

'Him!' Anger reddened Raban's cheeks, 'Pretty sure it was he who poisoned us, and may death claim him. No he's not here. He stole two of our horses and headed north. I sent three of my men to follow him but they haven't returned. That was three days ago, I'm worried for them.'

'He was a Dark Lord.'

Raban's jaw dropped. He turned around and looked at the portal, real concern on his face, 'Did he come through that?'

‘Yes. It's a gateway. Don't worry, it poses no further threat. We believe it can only be worked from this side.’

Raban looked relieved, but then another fear came over his face, ‘Then I've sent my men to their deaths, haven't I.’

‘I'm afraid I don't know. You've done very well Raban. You made wise decisions in a difficult situation, one in which you didn't have all the facts. You are to be commended, not blamed for any deaths that have or might occur.’ Raban nodded, but worry for his men remained engraved on his face.

‘What happened to the rest of your men? Tav said you had a company of twenty-five, less the three dead, plus Tav and the three you sent north, you should have eighteen. I count only ten.’

‘That's because I sent another two parties out to contact the Azure at Land point. Two days after Tav departed, and the other only this morning, you must have past each other halfway.’

‘Did you send them the same way you sent Tav?’

‘Well, I figured that Orlan,’ he paused, ‘I mean the Dark Lord. I figured he would have given us wrong directions, but I couldn't be sure, so the first group I sent the same way as Tav went but the second I sent east.’

Sosthene looked past Raban to the portal. Raban's men no longer gave the magical device a glance, its constant presence over the past three days diminishing its novelty; they kept their distance though. Raban followed his gaze, ‘It roasts anything that enters it and I wouldn't go putting my fingers between the two standing figures if I was you. I take it they're Dark Lord's as well?’

‘Yes, I believe they are.’ Replied the Azure quietly.

Sosthene commanded his men to dismount and start

preparing the midday meal. They had been in the saddle for nine hours without rest. Sosthene was pleased that none had complained. Turning to the senior soldier in his company he said, ‘The wagon will be arriving within the next few hours. Place six men on look out so they don’t pass us altogether. Also prepare the two best trackers among you, send them with a small party to find the three men Raban sent north. If they don’t come across them within a day’s riding they are to head back here, is that clear?’

‘Yes Magi, What should they do if they come up against the Dark Lord?’

‘Unlikely, but they shall keep their distance, only fighting if attacked. Other than that they are to return as quickly as possible, marking their trail well as they do. That’s all.’ The soldier nodded and ran off. After dismissing Raban, Sosthene approached the Portal with curiosity.

Sisera was respected for his knowledge of the Sacred Book, Quirinicotilius his love of the people, but it was Sosthene who was renowned for his adeptness and understanding of magic. Spell-craft fascinated the Ancient in all its forms, and the magic of the Dark Horde had always been somewhat of a mystery to him, a paradox he could not explain, a seeming contradiction to his faith that waged war with his Elfish logic.

Sosthene believed in the Sacred Book; he had seen the glory of the One who gave it. Yet the Sacred Book taught that there was no magic that did not have its source with the creator, that he alone was the author and controller of all realms of supernatural power. But if this was the case—and as an Azure, he had to believe it was—then why the Dark Horde? Why did they continue to exist? What stopped the creator from withholding his power from them? And why did he give it to

them in the first place?

Questions he had battled with for a millennium, and was yet to find a satisfactory answer. This vexed him, knowing within his heart that the unanswered questions had marred his faith with doubt. Doubt he both abhorred on the one hand but could not help but attend to on the other. Therefore he approached the portal with the lingering hope that it might unravel a long unanswered question.

He begun by looking for the rune symbol; the one Chkurl had spoken of in his first interrogation. He found it where the Dark Lord had said it would be; a neatly drawn symbol in the shape of an eye. From what Chkurl had said, it was the Dark High Lord's only connection with his two minions. Sosthene thanked the creator for this. If not for Tarnul's fear of the Azure's powers then Ornan and Chkurl's first attempt to return would have succeeded and the defeat of mankind already accomplished. He returned his attention to the symbol.

Rune magic was the crudest of the so-called arcane powers, finding its origins in the time before even the Ancients. A time when elves populated only a small part of the world, but when magic was everywhere. Elves lived long back then, as did everything within nature, legend saying it was a time all things reflected more accurately the harmony originally intended in creation; maybe because it was so much closer to the act. Yet rune's were a raw magic, as were most things back then. Simple, limited, and temporary. It was not until much later that magic became an art to be studied, and not until the Azure's appearance that magic was truly understood for what it was; one Azure describing it as, *An overflow of all that the creator is.*

The Holy Book was the key to man's understanding of spell

craft. From personal study of the sacred text on this topic, Sosthene had written his own treatise, utilising his systematic mind to break down and sub-divide the facets of such power until he had formed a branching tree of magic. At its foundation, of course, was the Creator. From there branching into its three main realms distinguishable by their relationship to the three aspects of the Creator, omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence; the all encompassing power, knowledge, and proximity of God. Each of these branches could then further be partitioned into what had come to be called the nine facets or realms of magic. The facet of Power enabled the user to create, destroy and change, the facet of Knowledge the ability to foreknow, understand and divine, and the facet of Presence to see, to hear and to traverse.

Yet for all his study, Sosthene was no nearer understanding the Dark Horde's power. In truth they could do all that the Azure had been capable of, and individually were even more powerful than any of the Ancients. He took one last look at the rune symbol before walking off toward the camp fire. There was little he could do until the wagon arrived with Tamila. Then he would see what secrets this portal could reveal.

PLANS

Sosthene closed his eyes in concentration. He could sense Jabin, yet his proximity remained hidden, elusive, fringing his perceptions. Untroubled, Sosthene let go of all thoughts, focusing only on what he sought—Jabin's familiar aura. Slowly his presence became apparent, muted and delicate as if muffled by some preternatural fog.

Gently reaching out, Sosthene touched the boy's mind.

As before the connection was almost immediate, so sudden the Azure was momentarily disoriented. Sosthene felt that odd duality, aware of another's thoughts, their emotions resounding in his own head. Yet the thoughts were random and incomplete, concealed from the Azure by the same mysterious barrier that hid Jabin's whereabouts. Nevertheless, one facet clearly shone through—Dunamis. Dimmer than what he remembered it, the creator's power was still evident enough to draw upon. Opening his eyes, Sosthene focused on his connection through the girl and opened himself to the power. The feeling was always an ecstatic one, as much from the puissance felt as the actual wonder and intimate presence of the creator's energy. Sosthene looked up and noted Quirinicotilius and Dored. Pain for their loss oppugned his joy. He wondered again why providence had selected him, rejecting them. The responsibility and privilege weighed heavy on him.

A faint hue surrounded his hand, which he brought up to the rune symbol. With a light touch Sosthene traced his finger over the mark, undoing its magic. Stepping back he took a breath. This is the hard bit, he thought, If only I could be sure of what's going to happen. Out loud he simply said, 'Keep your distance everyone, and be ready to run if anything should go wrong.'

Drawing into himself all the power accessible to him, Sosthene braced himself before thrusting his hand into the

portal. An agony burned itself within his arm as the two opposing magic's rivalled for dominance. The ground trembled beneath the Azure's feet, and the portal void flashed alternately from red to blue, sparks of incandescence erupting in contained bursts from its opening. Sosthene fell to his knees but stoically refused to remove his hand, itself seeming alive with flame. Tormented drops of sweat poured down his trembling face into eyes now tightly closed in concentration.

On a low pallet behind him was Tamila, a serene image amidst the tempest. Sosthene's held her left hand tightly in his own, that connection being the Azure's only link to Dunamis, and one he wasn't about to release. Quirinotilius and Dored stood five paces off, each holding the other across the shoulder, reminding themselves and one another that Sosthene would benefit nothing from their approach; would possibly be distracted if they did so.

The soldiers stood in a spread out line behind the two Azure, swords drawn and ready in hands that had not considered the uselessness of such a gesture. No words were said, each mind preparing itself for fight or flight, hoping for courage to prevail.

The portal was a static blue now and Sosthene seemed no longer in pain, having risen to a crouched position with his eyes open and alert. With a suddenness that caused all viewing to jump, the portal flashed from existence. With mutual screams the two Dark Lord's on either side fell to the ground, quivering slightly before slumping into unconsciousness. No one moved, none sure as to what might happen next.

Sosthene, crouched and unwilling to release his hold on Dunamis in such close vicinity with the Creator's enemy, probed outward. With a thread of the power he examined the

inert figures, confirming his thoughts. Both were unconscious and, more importantly, powerless. He regretfully released his hold on Tamila's hand and felt Dunamis drain from his grasp. Turning to his brothers with a smile, he said 'Their powers have been taken and they'll be no great trouble to us.' Looking then to his senior officer he said, 'Bind them and set over them a permanent six man guard. Fetch us when they come to, and by no means talk to them until we arrive.' The soldier nodded and with several others begun to tie up the fallen Dark lords. By this time Quirinicotilius stood by Sosthene, busy examining his burnt hand. 'Well, well. It looks as if Dunamis did a bit of a healing trick on you too brother, look.' Both Dored and Sosthene saw what Quirinicotilius meant. Sosthene's hand, though burnt during the struggle, was now as whole and pink as the proverbial infant's bottom.

'That's strange. I didn't will Dunamis to do that.' Sosthene said.

'Well someone did, it's only a force you know, it doesn't work independently.' Dored replied rather condescendingly, and then realising his tone, apologised. 'Maybe you did it without realising?'

'No.' Quinn interjected, 'Let's not forget it is Jabin through whom this power is now attained. Possibly, then, it is he who is responsible for your healing brother. For Tamila's condition as well.'

Sosthene nodded slowly, 'And if that is the case, then Jabin is aware of what is going on, at the least aware of my actions when linked to Dunamis. We'll have to talk more about this, it may be to our advantage. For now, though, our quarry gets further from us by the minute. We must make plans to move.' Each headed off to different parts of the camp, all questions

forgotten in preparation to travel north.

DISCOVERY

Haron stood upon the knoll, hands on hips and staring in awe. before him a mountain so immense he wondered how the land upheld such a load instead of rupturing from the weight.

For three weeks they had travelled now, Lamed, Reln, Cansh, and himself. Most of that had been through woodlands, hidden from the sky and unaware of anything but the trail they blazed and the goal they sought. So when at last they had broken free of the Stoneheart forest to gain their first glimpse of the giant edifice before them, it had been all the more impressive. The dark canopy woods gave way to a sky piercing lord of the earth.

Lord King Mountain.

Few had ever travelled this far Northeast, and fewer still returned; losing one's way a high risk with passage gained through the most densely forested wood's on offer. And such was why these men were sent, between them the best team of explorers in Triad; to their credit the mapping of the entire Northwest coastline. However, this mission had proven the most trying of their adventures. Not physically, rather in scope of undertaking. Their task was not only to find a way through

to the Eastern Peaks, but to find a path large enough to accommodate an entire population. This they had done. Yet the most daunting task lay ahead. Having reached the massive mount, they now had to find a place to house the people of Asasa—a prophesied place. A place within the peaked ranges of Lord King Mountain itself.

Haron shook his head as he thought about it. Gazing at the stone monolith that filled his vision, he wondered where to start. ‘It’s all very good saying that this is the creator’s will and prophesied within the Holy Book—’ he complained aloud, ‘—but where on Asasa am I supposed to begin looking for it. Fyron and Tayal (Asasa’s moons) could hide in there and neither would know of the other.’ He murmured for a while longer, the delayed echo of his demur giving him the sense, if only a false one, that an empathetic ear was listening. He accented his grievance by spitting on the ground. With a final sigh he turned his back on the mountain and headed toward camp, arriving just as the others were rising. Lamed had already begun a fire and was boiling water for the ritual morning cup of sefy. Cansh sat on his bedroll, the same bewildered expression on his face he had every morning, as if waking from sleep was a novel experience. Reln, as usual, sat before his maps.

‘Wondering where you’d gone Haro’, Lamed said through a yawn, stretching until his bones cracked. ‘Please tell me that in your morning walk you’ve inadvertently stumbled across a mountain stronghold large enough to house everyone in the country.’

Haron returned Lamed’s smile, replying, ‘That’s not all Lamed, would you believe that the river flowing through it runs with milk and honey.’

‘Oh good, I do so much like a spot of milk with my sefy.’

Both men were jolted by a sudden thunderous yawn from Cansh, the bemused expression having left his face now, replaced by one that epitomised misery.

‘Ash’s, Cansh. Do you have to do that every morning? You sound like a mad bear.’ Lamed complained, nursing a finger he’d just burnt on the sefy pot.

‘Ummph.’ Is all Cansh could reply before walking off to find some place quiet where he might relieve himself.

‘He never changes does he?’ Haron said, ‘And after breakfast he’ll have more energy than the rest of us put together. He’s a man of extremes I’ve always said, definitely a man of extremes.’ Haron watched Cansh wander off into the undergrowth before plunking himself on his bed-roll to wait for breakfast. He was just lowering himself down for a quick shut eye when the fourth member of their party piped up.

‘Forget that Haron, remember we’ve got a mountain city to discover, and I think I just might know where to look for it.’

From anyone else, Haron might have simply said, ‘Sure, sure’, and then gone to sleep. However this wasn’t anyone else, this was Reln, and Reln was one of the sharpest men Haron had ever known. Abandoning his comfy position, he rose to investigate the man’s claims.

Reln, an eccentric middle-aged man with a face twenty years younger, ignored Haron as he approached, too engrossed in his maps. And worth looking at they were. More works of art than maps really. Precisely detailed and immaculately painted, their elaborate legends and definitive topography captured the eye. Many had been the time Reln’s maps had saved them, financially as well as practically; for a good map was worth a solid sum, and Reln’s were the best.

‘So what have you found for us today Reln. Or was it during

the night you found it?’ Haron asked, knowing that Reln quite often rejected sleep in favour of his hobby.

‘Just now in fact.’ Reln replied, ‘But it looks as if breakfast’s ready, so I’ll tell you after.’

Haron bit back what he felt like saying.

After breakfast, □that is, after Cansh finished his third helping,□ Reln gathered the men around the map. It began from the forest boundary approximately twelve leagues north east of the city of Crasaw, and ended at the foot of the mountain they now faced, displaying their long journey up to the present day. Reln had drawn in every detail their hurried pace had allowed, marking distances and contours to the best of his trained eyes ability. Yet still there was much missing, a fact that annoyed the perfectionist map maker no-end. Nevertheless, the details were enough for Reln to hazard a likely spot at which to begin their hunt for a defensible refuge. Haron was eager for that to be accomplished. *Preferably before the Dark Horde arrive*, he thought.

Reln pointed to an area on the map approximately a league Northwest of their camp and stated, ‘Here’s about where we should start looking.’

They all waited for more. None was forthcoming.

‘Why, Reln?’ Haron asked at last, with exaggerated curiosity, knowing full well this is what Reln waited for.

‘Ahh, a good question, let me explain.’

Cansh groaned and made to leave, but Haron grabbed him by the belt and pulled him back. All of them had been through one of Reln’s explanations before, agreeing it was one of the most boring experiences they’d ever mutually endured. Yet, though Reln may be a mite tedious in his elucidations, Haron knew this was as nothing compared to his stubborn uncooperative

nature when refused an audience. He recalled a time when they were once forced to stay camped for three days because Reln, who had been offended by their falling asleep while he spoke, refused to budge. Normally this would have meant he got left behind, but since the others were quite lost themselves, Reln had them at his mercy. Having come this far, Haron wasn't going to be waylaid again by the mapper's idiosyncratic ways. Anyway, as Haron saw it, they'd all just had breakfast, it was a beautiful day, so what was an hour—or two.

Still holding onto Cansh's belt, he constrained him to take a seat. With all seated such, he indicated that Reln should continue. *And please be merciful*, he thought.

‘...and since the terminal moraine can be clearly seen from where we stand, it will simply be a matter of following one of the lateral moraines, probably the eastern one, since that is of nearer proximity, which should lead us straight to what I believe is the most likely spot for massive settlement. So there you are. Any questions?’

Although only a half-hour later, Haron could have sworn the plant life had grown a good hand-span. He had understood little of what Reln had said, and in truth had begun daydreaming only a short five minutes into the lecture (an intriguing dream about the problems resulting if people were born as adults and became younger as they aged). Turning to Lamed, Haron noted the familiar signs of another mind detached from the present; eyes fixated upon some invisible spot two paces in front of the face, a slight nibbling of the bottom lip and an expression as blank as a dead sheep's. Cansh, on the other hand, had been a ball of frustrated energy. With all his fidgeting, Haron was surprised the rock hadn't worn

smooth. They had endured. Albeit an endurance leaving them as ignorant at the end as they'd been at the beginning. Yet it mattered little if nobody understood Reln, as long as Reln understood Reln; which Haron secretly thought might not always be the case. But as long as Reln did, then all the others had to know was how to follow his directions.

‘Right, then, thanks for that Reln. Let's break camp now and then head in ...what direction did you say it was?’

‘That way!’ Reln said in a disgusted tone, pointing toward where the sun had risen. ‘And you don't have to pretend Haron, I know you weren't really listening.’

‘What? I ...Well. I mean ... I was, but...’

Reln cut him off, ‘No you weren't. Neither was Cansh, But I'm used to that. No, only Lamed was listening, he stared at me the whole time. Thank you for your courtesy Lamed.’ They all looked at Lamed, who was still staring at his spot and nibbling. Haron kicked the log he sat on, ‘Oi, Reln said thank you.’

‘Hmmm.’

‘Reln said thank you for listening to his explanation.’ Haron emphasised, nodding his head indicatively.

‘Oh. He's finished.’ Lamed said, then noted Haron's eyes rolling back, ‘I mean, uh, that is.’ He paused abruptly, a hiatus on his reply while his mind caught up. That done, with a smooth transformation of voice and expression, he replied, ‘That's quite alright Reln, I just hope I can remember it all.’

Eyebrow raised, Reln asked. ‘What part have you forgotten?’

‘Let's break camp.’ Haron suddenly enthused, ‘Lamed, we're getting short on victuals. Might pay if you go ahead, now, and see what you can trap. We'll follow on shortly.’

‘Right, see you all later then.’ With that Lamed dashed off,

stopping only to pick up his bow and quiver.

Turning to Reln, Haron said in rather a rush, 'You figure out the best way to get where we're going Reln, Cansh and I'll break camp, O.K.' and he too hurried off before Reln could reply.

GHOSTS

They had made good time on the return journey, Reln's maps and their familiarity with the landscape having lent them speed. Approximately halfway they had bumped into another band of men, these sent by the Azure to find them, or failing that to complete their mission. From these men they learnt of the exodus' progress. That the populations of Land point and Nefa were now all at Midlan, ready to journey North upon Haron's return.

All four explorers now sat before a combined council of Azure and Elder. Behind a bench before them sat the chief Elders of each town, and with them the Azure Sisera, Tulin, and Fanyifn. It was Sisera who stood to address the men.

'Haron, Lamed, Reln, Cansh.' He began, facing each in turn, 'We admit to having given up on you as lost or perished, but can truly say we're delighted to have you alive and well before us.' His smile turned serious, 'I apologise at requesting we

meet so soon after your arrival, before you've had chance to rest, but time is an essence in we have little of, and yet within which much to do,' he shook his head with the overwhelming truth of that, 'Now would not be a good time for the Dark Horde to arrive at our doorstep, not while the whole population is crammed into this one small indefensible town.' In truth this had been Sisera's driving motivation for weeks now, each day etching further worries into his careworn face.

'So then,' He continued, 'We just need to know a few details concerning the mountain stronghold, then you will be free to relax for the few days it will take us to prepare. You will then be enlisted as guides to lead us back there. I'm sure you understand.' The last was spoken with one of Sisera's famous smiles, aimed at allaying any refusal. All four men nodded acceptance of the task, anticipating that this would be the case. Haron then rose to speak.

'Magi and Elders, although leader of this group, I think it best if Reln, our cartographer, and the one to whom chief credit must be given for fulfilling our task, be also the one who answers your questions. In truth, anything I could tell, Reln can explain the more ably.'

Reln seemed to swell in his seat at this.

Lamed whispered to Haron as he retook his seat, 'You got a grudge against the Azure or something.'

'No', he whispered back, 'Just giving credit where credit's due.' Inwardly, though, he was hoping this action would restore something of Reln's goodwill toward him; a commodity he'd noticed lagging of late.

Several hours later, all four explorers sat together in the eating hall of one of the few lodging houses in Midlan,

situated in the centre of town next door to Resolution House, meeting chamber of the Midlan Elders.

Cansh sat looking at his plate, which already lay empty. Due to the exodus, rationing had been enforced and the portion Cansh had eaten was less than satisfying for the gourmand tracker.

‘Don’t look so down Cansh.’ Lamed said, noticing the disgruntled expression on the large man, ‘It’s only till we get to the mountain. To be perfectly honest I think the forced diet will do you good. I don’t like to be the one to say it friend, but your three servings a meal are beginning to show somewhat.’

Cansh patted his distended stomach, totally unconcerned by the criticism, ‘Reserves.’ he replied sedately, ‘Never know when you might have to go hungry.’

The other three laughed, amused at such a comment from one who’d rarely known a hungry day in his life. All sat quietly enjoying the simple comforts of a home made meal, one they could eat from a table and chair.

‘What do you make of the questions they asked, Reln?’ Haron finally asked, as he removed a knife from his belt and began whittling a piece of hardwood he’d picked up on their return journey; what he would carve was yet to be decided, but he began nonetheless.

‘Well’ replied Reln, ‘I’m not sure, but I’d say the Azure think there’s something up that mountain, or in the forest around it, something out of the ordinary.’

Haron raised his eyebrows and then frowned, ‘I’m not an idiot you know Reln.’ He said, feeling patronised, ‘I managed to figure that much out for myself. I meant, what exactly were they hoping to be up there?’

‘Something dead.’ Lamed interjected.

Both Haron and Reln stared at him. Cansh looked at Lamed's plate, which was still half full. If he were a dog, he would have been drooling.

‘Why do you say that?’ Reln asked

‘Because afterwards, when Azure Tulin was speaking with you, I overheard others mention something about the dead brothers that guard the people, and prophecies about the mountain stronghold being too ambiguous when it came to important matters.’

‘Dead brothers?’ Haron responded.

‘They must’ve been referring to dead Azure.’ Reln said, puffing out his cheeks as he always did when in thought, ‘They are the only ones they call brothers.’

‘Ghosts?’ Haron asked, ‘Or Azure rising from the dead?’

‘Not necessarily, a spirit can live separate from the flesh. The creator himself is said to be a spirit you know.’ Reln replied in a matter of fact tone, as if that bit of information answered everything. ‘The bigger question, though, is what good can disembodied spirits be against a very real enemy like the Dark Horde?’

‘Maybe they still have their powers.’ said Lamed, pushing his plate in Cansh's direction; the other man's slaving eyes finally winning his sympathy.

‘I think not, else they undoubtedly would have done something already. Anyway, maybe they’re not there at all. I mean, we were up there for weeks, during which at any time they could have made contact with us.’

‘I'm glad they didn't.’ Lamed replied with a shiver, ‘The thought of someone floating around without a body gives me the fidgets.’

The men talked more on the subject, achieving nothing

more than deepening the mystery in their own minds. Plans were then made for the morrow, after which each made their way to a waiting feathered bed; the first in eight weeks.

TOO SLOW

If not for the urgency of their journey, the weeks of travel might have passed pleasantly. However, of necessity they'd kept a hurried pace, with little time spared to enjoy the startling scenery; a contrasting landscape to the continents southern wilds.

Of all, Quinn had found it hardest. Though no stranger to a saddle, it remained a pastime he avoided unless required. A man of girth, the protest of his rump had eventually required Sosthene to utilise Dunamis purely to enable the plump Azure the ability to remount; a predicament of great humour to the ever ribbing Bihl.

None but Tamon and Tahl, grandsons of Elder Tanon, had ever made the journey to Chanteef before. They, with Raban, Bihl, Tav and Jonn, had now blazed a trail many score leagues from where they'd left the portal, a trail wide enough to accommodate the wagon sheltering the unconscious Tamila.

Now four days into the third week, their advance north became decidedly cooler; the northern autumn having begun.

The small comforts that the outpost of Chanteef offered were now two days journey behind. Quinn and Dored were badly missing the large open fire they'd so enjoyed. With the changing seasons, the rueful sufferings of age had become their acute experience.

For the past half-day they had been riding through a region of country that starkly contrasted anything prior. A Flat land, completely dominated by barbed tussock grass; a serrated leafed weed with foliage keen enough to require sheathing the horses' legs to prevent lacerations. An occasional knoll was the only other highlight to the otherwise bleak vista. In the nearer distance could be seen another serrated line, this one the dark and seemingly continual crest of the Northern peaks.

A harsh land to be in at any time of the year, it was dispiritedly depressing now, with the sparse and unfriendly plant-life punctuating an overall message of ostracism. All agreed it was uninhabitable.

It was at the top of a particularly barren knoll that Sosthene elected to set camp for the night. The weary travellers did not argue. Travelling this destitute land was a cheerless thing that had sapped them, inducing an energy-robbing drabness. Only Quinn approached his brother to question the halt—it was only midday—Dored following behind.

‘What goes, brother, why stop so soon?’ Quinn asked, a yawn escaping his lips even as he spoke.

‘We need to talk.’ Sosthene responded, of all seeming the only one alert, ‘I have been thinking. To this point we have kept pace with Ornan’, he glanced at the wagon, ‘yet the wagon slows us, and time is going by too fast for the speed we make. The land before us does not have a pre-blazed trail, and since none of our party knows of the terrain this far north, it

will not be long before we lose any ground we might have gained.'

'I did suggest we enlist a tracker at Chanteef.' Dored said.

'Yes, I know brother, and I wish we had now.' Sosthene replied, clasping his hands behind his head while stretching his back, 'Things move way too fast, and with every passing day I feel a dread growing within me.' With a loud sigh the Azure sat down, looking a moment older than either of his companions.

Quinn, worried at his brother's words, followed his example and sat. The others of the party could manage the preparations by themselves tonight. Lowering himself, he sighed, 'Oh, my aching buttocks rejoice in the motionless comfort of mother Asasa.' he exhaled contentment. 'So, brother. What do you have in mind?'

Sosthene smiled at Quinn's aged antics despite himself. 'Remember several weeks ago, after I had divested the power from the Portal of travel and was healed of my burnt hand?'

'Yes.' The two nodded.

'And you, Quinn, commented on how Jabin may be aware of what is occurring when Dunamis is used. How he may even be the cause of Tamila's condition.'

'Yes. Yes I do, and I think I know what you're thinking. You want to try and contact Jabin through Dunamis, possibly get him to release Tamila?'

Dored grunted loudly, 'Why didn't we think of that sooner, what a simple but brilliant idea.'

'We don't know if it's going to work yet.' said Sosthene, 'But you're right, that's what I've been thinking. If we can awaken the girl, our speed will triple.'

'One question.' Dored said, 'What if awakening the girl breaks the connection she has with Jabin. How would you use

Dunamis then? How would we find him? Or can you detect him without her now?’

‘His presence yes, direction no’, Sosthene replied, ‘but that is what we need to discuss. I believe the only reason Ornan is still running is that he can somehow detect us, knows that we’re following him. Possibly it is my connection with Jabin every evening that is alerting him to our presence. We still have Tahl and Tamon to guide us, and they have guaranteed that Ornan is leaving a trail easily followed. So, even if Tamila's link is broken, we still have the means to catch him, and the more quickly, but if it does remain intact then all the better.’

‘What if we lose the connection and the trackers lose the trail?’ Quinn asked, uncharacteristic pessimism asserting itself in fear of losing Jabin.

‘A risk’, Sosthene said with a placating palming of the air. ‘But remember, time is on Ornan's side, not ours. As long as he knows we’re following him, he can lead us around in circles, and before we know it the Dark Horde will have arrived. Then any action will be too late.’

Quinn furrowed his brow in thought. He didn’t like the possibility of not knowing Jabin's well-being, something that Sosthene's nightly connections had provided. However, Sosthene was right. The wagon was slow. Surprise was the best way to catch a prey. Yet the risk still weighed heavy on the Azure. He looked to Dored. ‘What are your thoughts my friend, can you think of another way?’

Dored, holding his chin, didn’t immediately answer. ‘It would seem to me,’ he said at last, ‘that we are being rather hasty. As yet we do not know if communicating with Jabin is possible, but, if it is, then why would we not also be able to simply explain our situation to him and let him decide. If Jabin is the

one behind Tamila's condition then I'm sure he has a good reason for it, and if he is not, then telling him will not change the situation at all.'

Quinn raised his eyebrows in mock ridicule, 'Why are you always the logical one?' and then seriously, 'But right as usual. There can be no harm in trying to contact Jabin. As you say, if Jabin is behind the girl's condition, then he is the one best qualified to discern a solution. Having said that, how do you intend to convey all this to Jabin?' this last spoken to Sosthene.

Sosthene was a step ahead and quickly answered, 'I've been thinking on that. Jabin's thoughts and whereabouts are muffled to me. However, if after I have linked with Dunamis, I then shape a message which I pass back to him, then if he is able to utilise his gift at all, he should be able to respond in kind to me.'

The others nodded slowly, seeing no flaw with their brothers theorising. One thought troubled Quinn though, this he voiced, 'What if communicating through Dunamis, which I might point out we haven't tried before, should reveal itself to the Dark Lord Ornan? He might kill Jabin to prevent it.'

Sosthene nodded this time but offered no reply. None were needed. All three knew that their choices were limited, that each carried risks.

Quinn bowed his head. How he longed for his powers once again. He knew that in many ways his powers had taken the place of the need to trust. It was a self-revelatory thought, how faith and trust—supposed equivalents—could be isolated from each other. He sighed wearily at the thought. Looking up, he saw his brothers waited his decision—for by divine rule the Azure were forbidden to act on any decisions not unanimously reached. Resolution of this matter would rest with the last to

will it so, not the first. Therefore they waited patiently on their brothers' judgement.

'Let us do it.' Quinn said eventually, verbally masking the conviction his heart lacked. Inwardly he prayed it was the right decision.

Only Tanya was permitted to accompany the Azure in their attempt to waken Tamila. It was thought wise having another woman present, a mother figure to calm her in the initial waking moments.

Tanya had agreed to come because her heart went out to Tamila, a child robbed of childhood. She had always wanted another daughter, having lost her own in infancy, arising one morning to find her cold and lifeless in her crib. The experience had changed her deeply, made her vulnerable. Azure counsel had helped through that time of her life, taught her that pain was always balanced by the panacea of hope. Yet neither the Azure nor time could completely erase the scars. Vulnerability remained, its roots feeding on the knowledge that permanence was myth, that life, relationships and love could only be measured in moments, each one of which could be an ending; and it was endings she feared.

She sat on Tamila's left, facing Sosthene. The Azure had agreed not to tell Jabin's parents the danger of what they were about to do, it was too late to debate the matter and the emotive arguments of worried parents had to be fairly weighed against the need of the people; a need the Azure deemed louder in this case than any parental guardianship could annul.

Tamila was clearly a woman now, and one of extraordinary beauty. Her night black hair sparkled in the lamps light as if full of stars, outlining a face so lovely it captivated. Her body

also comprised all that might be considered perfect in a woman's form, smooth and gently curved with a tautness of limb offset by feminine softness. She was quite the most beautiful woman they had ever beheld, all taken by the angelic perfection of her appearance. Even Tanya had been mesmerised by the girl, often on their journey to be found gently stroking Tamila's exquisite face.

Sosthene removed the girl's blanket. She wore the linen shift Tanya had provided. Placing one of his hands on her forehead the Azure held her hand with his other and closed his eyes. Once again he entered the world of another's thoughts. A vast sea of images abruptly encompassed him, as changing as the waves. At one moment they swelled proud of each another, melding the next, as meaningless and obscure to him as the currents of the ocean. Sosthene was reminded of the Azure proverb: none know the thoughts of man but the spirit of man that is in him.

Concentrating on rising above those cryptic thoughts, on resisting the submerging sensation of another's mental images suffocating his own, he rose as if a bird, hovering above the surge of emotions and experiences beneath. He searched, looking about. The sea was as vast as the horizons are distant, yet he knew this was but an allusion. The oceans of the mind, like those of the world, flow back into themselves, the streams of information alike to that of the varied depth currents of the sea, all heralding from the same source, each point having opportunity to interact with all others. Sosthene concentrated on those currents, striving to see within them the image peculiar to what he sought. It did not take long. In fact it was becoming easier with each attempt; he wondered whether this was due to his growing adeptness or the girls growing

attachment to Jabin.

A single thread of gold traced its way throughout the currents, its direction distinct from the chaos about it. Sosthene followed the trail, the sea becoming tranquil as he drew nearer its source. At last he came to a dead calm, where no thoughts rippled. Here that the threads combined and dived deep below the surface.

Sosthene could see the glowing power of Dunamis. A lambent light that flickered softly, its glory concealed by the depths. Gently, reverently, Sosthene allowed his mind to touch the surface.

...Peace. A sense of fullness, oneness, unity with God...

Sosthene allowed himself a moment's pause, relishing the sensation; one never experienced before his linking with Jabin. It was a quick moment, though, his sense of duty asserting itself. He submerged himself completely and allowed the power to enter him. It was weak, weaker than before. Ornan must be making good speed, he thought. 'Please let this work', he whispered in prayer.

With the power came the greater awareness of Jabin, Dunamis bridging the gap that separated them. However the awareness was muted, like conversing in a dream, the words perceived rather than heard.

Now if we are right, and may the creator make it so, then Jabin should be aware of what I'm doing, Sosthene thought, beginning to fashion the message he wanted Jabin to answer, sending it along the thread.

IMMORTALLY ILL

Ornan lay back in never before experienced exhaustion. Wracking pains belied even the thought of moving. He guessed he must be ill, knew it from the ache and wheezing of his chest. His breath condensed in the cold air, warming for the briefest moment the end of his blocked nose. The Dark Lord coughed violently, spitting thick phlegm into the underbrush. Delirium mocked him as a fool. *To be killed by disease*, the thought ended with another wracking cough.

For three days he had attempted to widen the gap from his pursuers. *But still they follow, curse them*. Three days travelling without sleep or adequate sustenance. Ill equipped to travel from the start—with only the cloths he wore and a fur-lined cloak stolen from a farmstead along the way—forced now by weakness to rest □ or die. Again, in his haste, he'd forgotten the limits of his mortality.

He glanced over at the still form of Jabin. The elf lay serenely, unperturbed by the cold, lack of food, or abuses of his captor. Ornan had forced meagre food down the boy's throat only irregularly, the only routine contribution being an indiscriminate kick, the comatose youth the silent bearer of the Dark Lord's growing frustration.

It had been Ornan's intent to travel only a short way north at the beginning, there to wait for the Horde. Yet he had known the Azure would not just sit and do nothing. To the contrary,

Jabin was their only hope, therefore they would pour all into rescuing him. It was on the second night fleeing that Orman reassessed his options. He had no way of communicating with Tarnul. Therefore no knowledge of the Hordes distance. He had no powers. Then again, neither did the Azure, except one; he'd cursed Chkurl for failing to kill that one. He'd considered killing the boy, waiting for the Dark Horde to arrive. However he had no idea as to what might happen to Dunamis if the boy should die; it being a foreign power to him and abominably unpredictable. For all he knew it might return to the Azure as before, or worse, the Azure Sosthene could assimilate it in its entirety, and then all would be lost.

The thought had struck when he'd picked up a stick, to scratch his options on the ground. *Rune Magic*. Crude, pathetically weak, but not useless. Enough, at least, to hint at what was going on around him.

It had not taken him long to draw the charmed symbols, and shortly after he was fleeing North, alerted to the connection Jabin had with another, and with it their approach and the imminent possibility of capture. Since then it had become a daily ritual, the drawing of the runes. Though he despised their limits, he was forced by circumstance to rely on them. The arcane symbols were like scroll work now, tracing along the forearms of both Jabin and himself, symbols he hoped would detect any links the boy might have with others, in turn alerting him. What he would do in such an event...? He did not know. But at least he'd be aware of the connection. He guessed he was at least two days ahead of his pursuers, a good two days. That being the case he decided to rest for a time, just a day. An idea applauded by his ailing body. *Tomorrow I'll make up for the lost time*, he thought. Fogginess fringed his thinking. Shivering,

he pulled the stolen robe about him. Looking once more to Jabin, he thought he saw the boy alternately expanding and contracting. He was too tired for the vision to trouble him, having the vague realisation that he was probably delirious. Taking a long pull on the skin of water, which felt oddly heavy, the Dark Lord closed his eyes and immediately was asleep.

Moments later the symbols upon their arms began to glow. Continuing to glimmer, they drew the attention of none but two passing birds.

AWOKEN

Sosthene opened his eyes.

Tanya sat opposite watching him, Quinn and Dored behind her.

‘Did it work?’ Quinn asked, rubbing his hands together in an effort to relieve the continual dull ache; the cold, damp nights were taking their toll.

‘I don’t know. The message went through. Whether Jabin understood or can respond...’ He shrugged, ‘I don’t know’.

‘We must wait then.’ Dored said, ever the pragmatist.

Sosthene nodded and all four turned their attention to Tamila.

Only moments passed before, fluttering twice, her eyes opened, eliciting twin gasps from Quinn and Tanya.

‘Well, well.’ said Dored, while Sosthene simply nodded.

The girl's eyes, once deep brown, had changed colour. They were now the perfect match of Jabin's, a misty turquoise with a lucent quality that seemed to illuminate her delicate face.

All four stared, lost in hope and admiration.

Tamila stared back. She recognised one of the Azure, Quiwrus, she thought his name ...No, Quinn. But how she knew this she couldn't remember. She felt different, heavier, and with such strange dreams. She was taken by panic for an instant, *Jabin! Where was Jabin?* But then remembered. He'd sent her back. *You will be with me again soon*, he'd promised.

She felt a pang at the thought of being separated from him. Underlying that was a keener emotion, one new to her, stronger than any she recognised. Like a compressed yearning, a strangely pleasant restriction of the emotions, as if her heart were being held in thrall, preparing for its sweetest desire being met. It was a wonderful yet mysteriously frustrating feeling. She didn't want it to end. It excited her, for she knew it found its roots with Jabin.

'How do you feel Tamila, are you well?'

It was the Azure Quinn that spoke to her. She smiled at him, Jabin liked him a lot. 'Yes, I'm fi-'

What's wrong with my voice? She tried to clear her throat, but there was nothing to clear. She tried answering again, 'I'm fine, thank you.' *That's not my voice!* In curiosity she raised her hand to her mouth. The hand that approached her face was not her own. It was larger, a grown-ups. She made to sit up. The Azure helped her, a strange look on his face, as if waiting for something.

'Tamila.'

It was the woman that spoke. She was a pretty woman,

Tamila thought, familiar. Jabin's mother.

‘Your Jabin's mother.’ She said loudly in affirmation of the awareness.

The woman sat back slightly at this, surprised. ‘How Did-’ but she didn’t finish, only smiling, nodding, a tear forming in her eye.

It was a beautiful smile, thought Tamila, filling her with images not her own, but remembered as if they were. Jabin's memories. She smiled back, an act that further enhanced her great beauty.

‘Where am I?’ She asked, bringing a hand up to brush the hair from her face. Again the grown-ups hand appeared. She flinched and the hand did also. Following the hand down she saw where it ended. She quickly brought out both her arms and traced them with her eyes down to her body. A wide-eyed expression spread across her face. She looked at the others. They sat still, looking on with clear concern. Slowly she stood up, and then again looked down. She held that pose for several seconds before speaking. ‘I'm a woman.’ She looked again to Jabin's mother, who nodded back, this time with a tense smile, unsure.

Tamila thought for a moment, vaguely recalling knowing this, a dreamlike knowing. Jabin had said something, as did one other. She couldn’t recall who that was. With awe she gently stroked the linen shift she wore, feeling through it the contours of her new and alien self. She was too enraptured by the newness of it all to feel self-conscious of others watching, her mind bearing the innocence of an eight-year-old in many respects, though not all.

Her body fascinated her, a child's fascination. The impatient wishes of an eight year old girl suddenly come true. Her

height—an arm's length above what she remembered—also thrilled her, even being a little frightening. *Like standing on the table at home*, she thought. She did not feel fear, finding comfort in some mystical inner knowledge, her subconscious furnishing insights enough to alleviate the worst of her anxiety.

It was as Tamila was about to remove her shift, so as to get a better look at herself, that Quinn called to her.

‘Tamila, could you come and sit by us please.’

She looked at the Azure, immediately abashed, embarrassed at what she had been about to do. The Azure seemed to understand and softly said, ‘Don’t worry child, I would probably have done the same were I only a boy, and woke up to find I had become a man.’ He smiled a warm smile and beckoned her to take a seat next to him.

For the first time she noticed she was in a wagon, the heavy canvas roof a dome overhead, the light dancing in rippling rhythm on windblown surface. In the middle of the wagon was a thick pile of sheepskins, and on these a large winter quilt. To either side of the cosy pallet rose the wheel housings, on which sat the three Azure. Jabin's mother had moved to the back, busy retrieving something from a low table there.

Tamila took the proffered place beside Quinn. The Azure took her hand in his and said gently, ‘How do you feel really child? You do not seem surprised at what has happened to you. Maybe you already knew what was going to happen?’ The last asked with a quizzical look, anticipatory of the answer.

‘Yes.’ She replied, ‘But I don’t know how I know. It has something to do with Jabin, doesn’t it?’ Frowning in perplexity, she added, ‘I don’t actually know who he is. Well, I mean, I know who he is, but just not what he looks like. I don’t think I’ve ever met him. Doesn’t that sound odd?’ She tapped her

head, 'I know him in here, but I can't remember what he looks like.'

'It's alright child,' said Quinn, 'there is much that we have to explain to you, very much indeed. To be honest, we thought that you'd be more anxious, finding yourself a woman. But that's a small surprised compared to the ones we've had.'

'And I'm sure there are many yet to come', added Dored.

Both Azure paused as Tanya returned carrying a small tray, upon it a bowl of something steaming, 'Are you hungry child?'

Tamila was surprised to find she was, very hungry in fact. Taking the bowl, which contained some type of vegetable stew, she attacked it eagerly, feeling as if she hadn't eaten for days.

'Slow down girl, you'll give yourself a belly-ache', this from Tanya, in a motherly tone.

Tamila apologised, making a conscious effort to pause between mouthfuls. She felt a strange bond to this woman, as if having known her all her life, yet knowing she'd never seen her before. *Why do I feel so close to people I've never met*, she thought. It was then she remembered her own mother. 'Is my mother here, does she know what has happened?' She noticed Quinn's slight pursing of his lips at the question, and frowned.

'I'm afraid not child. She knows you are with us, but it may be a while before you get to see her again.' Quinn wanted to say more, feeling a stab of guilt. They'd been unable to seek the parent's permission before departing with Tamila. He wished it otherwise, and hoped they were not too anxious.

Tamila accepted his answer without alarm, which surprised her as much as the Azure. She could remember a time, not that long ago she was sure, when separation from her mother would have distressed her. In fact she felt very different in the way she considered many things. Calmer, with a more independent view

of life. She thought about this change in her as she kept eating.

Sosthene interrupted her thoughts, ‘Maybe the best way to start this is from the beginning.’

Dored nodded, ‘Always found it so myself,’ he said, ‘But which beginning?’

‘Well,’ Sosthene replied, ‘Since Jabin is the reason behind why Tamila is here, and something of an enigma to her, let’s start with him.’

It had been four hours since the Azure entered the wagon. The twilight sky had become overcast with clouds shot through with pinks and oranges.

Weary from travel and anxious to know what was occurring in the wagon, the others of the party waited expectantly outside. Talk had been sporadic, most passing the time alone or dozing fitfully about the camp fire, cloaks wrapped tightly about them. A chill breeze swept across the knoll, robbing the small blaze of its warmth. Unable to harvest firewood in the barren environment, fires were limited solely for cooking.

Only Bihl seemed unruffled by the cold, having fallen asleep soon after pitching camp, his muffled snore an odd sound in the wind. Tamon, eldest grandson of Elder Tanon, sat with Jonn and Raban nearest the struggling fire. A tall man with broad shoulders, he was yet thin, with hands and feet seeming too large for his bony limbs. He had proven a competent tracker over the past weeks, little escaping his notice upon the trail. He, Jonn and Raban now talked quietly together, the serious talk of men wondering what they might face as they approached the mountainous peaks.

Nearer the wagon, huddled under a canvas lean-to, sat Tamon’s younger brother, Tahl. Shorter than his brother but

with a weight more proportioned to his body, the blond headed youth sat with chin resting on knees hugged to his chest for warmth. He stared at the door of the wagon, lost in adolescent thought.

Had they been less preoccupied with their own discussion, the older men of the group might have noticed the out-of-character behaviour of their youngest companion; taking such interest in the Azure's current activities? Though, in truth, it wasn't the Azure that Tahl had an interest, as with the girl he had seen within.

He felt guilty that he had seen her. The Azure had made the wagon out of bounds. 'For Tanya, and the girl she tends only', they had said. But he had seen her—sneaked a look when they had camped two nights back—and she wasn't a girl, but a beautiful woman. That glimpse had plagued his thoughts ever since, and he just had to see her again. Therefore, when the Azure had all entered the wagon, Tahl saw his opportunity, and now sat, eyes fixed to the door in hope of just one more glimpse of the vision within.

At last the door to the wagon flap pushed back and the three Azure descended the half dozen steps to the ground. Tahl sprang to his feet as Tanya then exited, and holding onto Tanya's hand, the girl. As she reached the bottom step, the young woman looked up and straight at Tahl.

Tahl's heart tightened. If eyelids could open wider, his eyes would have fallen out of his head. He realised too late that his mouth was hanging open. Snapping it shut, he bit his tongue. A pathetic yelp escaped his lips in pain before he had chance to stop it. After a moment in which thoughts of self-disgust and burning embarrassment wrestled each other, he looked back up, only to find that she was still watching him—smiling.

STRONGHOLD

The day was brilliant, a bright, crisp dawn defining and contrasting the shapes, colours and sounds of the panorama before them. The horizon, blushing crimson, tinted rose the few sparse clouds that drifted as if heralds of the blazing yellow glory to follow.

Sisera stood atop a large rock and breathed deeply as he gazed at the mountain and the beauty of its surrounding countryside. With the sun's first rays illuminating his blue robes and white hair, he looked more a being from the creators' realm than an aging man with frail limbs. He stretched out his arms and took one long breathe. 'We finally made it, brother', he said in a remarkably youthful voice.

'That we did Sisera, that we did, and worth every hard earned step it was. I can't recollect seeing anything as impressive as this since the Choosing.' Tulin said this from the smaller rock upon which he sat, looking far closer his age than his spry companion. 'How far did Haron say the stronghold was?'

'A league in that direction I think.' Sisera replied, indicating east. 'Following the path of an ancient glacier, going by what

ReIn said. Clever man that ReIn, when all this is done I'd like to sit down with the fellow and simply chat. His knowledge of the geography of this land seems unequalled even among us.' The Azure descended his podium, mindful. Standing by his brother he said, 'There is still much we do not know about this place, and that bothers me.'

Tulin laughed, 'Never were one to let a mystery sit undisturbed were you.'

Sisera smiled back broadly, 'Dored says it's what annoys him most about me, "to inquisitive", he always says.' At mentioning Dored, his face went suddenly serious, 'I hope they're alright.'

Tulin knew he referred to the party that chased Ornan and Jabin. He nodded agreement, 'Sosthene still has power, and Dored would not permit them to do anything foolish, I'm sure they're fine. They probably have Jabin, and are on their way back right now.'

This time Sisera laughed and slapped his brother across the shoulders, 'If I'm to be branded the inquisitor, then you're ever the optimist.'

Both Azure stopped for a moment to listen to a skylark, one hidden somewhere in the woods nearby. The first songbird of the new day, its tune was enchantingly soothing, a melody accented by the perfect stillness of the mountain landscape. The sound made each man reflective.

It was Sisera who finally broke the silence, 'Why do you think the creator was so distinct in indicating we should come here, yet cryptic as to why?'

Tulin shrugged and picked up a stone at his feet 'Suits me just to wait and find out. I'm sure that the Holy Book's references to the Mater of Peaks to the East, and forests where the sleeping dead brothers walk to guard, will find their

definition in due time brother. For now, though, we have enough to occupy ourselves with just settling this mountain paradise. I'm quite happy to let the mystery sit in the hands of the one who gave it.'

'I know.' Sisera answered equivocally, himself picking up a stone and toying with it in hand, 'I should probably do the same. Yet I can't help feel that I've missed something. After all, you'd think that dedicating so many centuries to the scriptures would give me some insight to this most crucial period of our history. Yet what I find seems riddled with gaps, information you'd think should be there, but isn't. I know the creator is in control, but why the conundrum? Why couldn't he have revealed more to us? After all, aren't we his priests? Aren't we supposed to lead the people?'

Tulin listened to his brother, but had no advice to give. Unlike Sisera, whose mind relished discovery, digging ever deeper into mystery, Tulin contented himself with the plain simple truths of life and faith. For this reason he'd been placed in charge of the exodus, making sure the people's needs were being met. Numbers, quantities and requirements, these he understood. He could not empathise therefore with his brothers troubles, and wasn't one to pretend he did.

After a while in which neither said anything, Tulin stood up, flinging his stone into the scrub, 'Things will work out brother, let's just make do with what we have and leave the rest to God.'

Sisera nodded slowly, 'You're right as usual.' And he also flung his stone, but with an agitated sharpness that countered the smile he wore. 'Let's be going back, the people must be near ready to move by now.'

The two walked off, Sisera with his arm across Tulin's shoulders. Both speaking again of their plans once the

stronghold was reached.

Standing atop a high cliff, twin to the one facing them, they could see both down the defile from which they'd come and inward toward the vast massif. The gorge entry had allowed only three abreast, yet spilled into a immense spread of fertile flat-land. On the southern side of the cliffs, facing the only entrance to the stronghold, was an abrupt drop, at its base a small mountain of scree and rubble unassailable to any but goats. Leading to this, easily five hundred paces in length, wound a narrow ravine, with enough twists and turns to make those same goats dizzy.

It had taken the best part of three days to pass the population through the defile, and still the stragglers were coming. Now, with a sense of wonder, they stood in another world altogether.

Standing with a clear view of both sides, Danek was amazed at the contrast. On the one, a terrain of rocky grey shale, rubble strewn from years of weather beaten corrosion and landslip, devoid of any but the hardiest alpine life. On the other side a lush, wide, green expanse, more appealing in its wooded idyllic beauty than any he could remember seeing.

To either side of this oasis there bordered cliffs. On his left the mountain, rising like a wall to the sky, enshrouded in mist with its kingly peak embedded in the heavens. To his right the northern bluff, ascending hundreds of feet before plateauing level with the ridge on which he stood. The face of the bluff fell away—unnaturally so, Danek thought—in gently sloping terraces. But of greatest marvel to the giant carpenter, were the caves—hundreds of them and of all shapes and sizes. They pockmarked the terraces like some termite invested tree, too

numerous to count. Danek wondered what sort of natural phenomenon could cause such honeycombing of solid rock. Being prophesied, he realised it mightn't be natural at all, but supernaturally created. That thought amazed him most of all.

Looking down at the foot of the bluff, he could see the first of the populace ascending the slope, having been designated their caves. The Azure, based upon the details provided by ReIn, had planned in advance. The caves were to be for the families with younger children, the elderly and the infirm. The fertile plain at the bluff's base was to be for the army, and the space in between for the leadership and other administrative elements. All others were to camp on the eastern side of the plain.

The sun was behind him as he gazed at the stronghold, its descent casting his shadow long on the valley floor. Turning his attention to the far end of the valley, Danek noted the mountain stream that flowed across the canyon midway, dividing the plain in half by its meandering course. At the southern end of the valley a black chasm gaped, swallowing the gushing waters with an almost eerie silence, only to reappear under the bluffs opposite face. From there erupting in a cascade to the forested ground far below. Haron had said the waters then travelled to form a lake at the base of Mount Alptor. According to Haron, this valley sloped gently upward and ended as abruptly as it began at a precipice, the defile at the base of which led eventually to the eastern edge of this Lake; Lake Alptor.

Danek turned to the two men accompanying him. Haron stood sharing the panorama while Lamed sat basking in the late afternoon sun. Since first meeting the pair, Danek had been taken by the tales of their adventurous lives, having always longed for such himself. So in the long journey north, the three had become good friends. The bantering humour of the two

questers appealed to the young carpenter, as did their rougher than usual ways, and Danek found he was able to relax in their company more readily than most others he knew.

‘So what do you think young Danek. What do you think of Haron's Homestead?’

Before Danek could respond, the reclining Lamed piped up.

‘What do you mean, ‘Haron's homestead?’ If I'm not mistaken, and I never am, I do believe that it was I who first spotted the place, therefore I think the name should be Lamed's Loft.’

‘Loft.’ Haron repeated in amusement.

‘Yes, it being part way up a lofty mountain, so Lamed's Loft fits quite well I think.’ Lamed said this from his reclined position, his wide brimmed hat still pulled down over his face.

‘That's a ridiculous name.’

‘No more so than Haron's Homestead, that sounds like a chicken farm’, Lamed replied from beneath the hat.

Haron turned to Danek, ‘Alright Danek, what do you think, what's the better name for the place.’

The large man grinned broadly before replying, pleased to be included in the repartee, ‘Danek's Domain.’ He said with all his teeth showing.

The hat laughed, as did Haron. ‘Some mediator you are.’ he said jokingly, ‘I suppose you also want to rename the mountain Danek's Peak. Remind me not to bring you into the argument next time.’

‘Time to be going, I think.’ Lamed said, rising from his spot with a yawn and a stretch, ‘Twilight's soon here, and I haven't so much as set up my bed roll.’

‘Let's be going then,’ Haron said, shouldering his backpack, ‘Azure Sisera wanted to see me about checking the far end of

this valley.’

‘And Tulin, I, about the stone throwers.’ said Danek.

‘Yes, I look forward to seeing those.’ smiled Haron, as they began to retrace their steps to the plains below. ‘Personally I think it sounds a good recipe for dropping a rock on your head, but even that’ll be fun enough to watch.’

FAITH

Tamila sat astride her mount, adjacent to Tanya's at the rear of the company. The sorrel mare trotted along slowly, willing to follow the freshly blazed trail while allowing Tamila only light hold of the reins. She had picked up riding instinctively, as naturally quick to the saddle as she had been to womanhood, the mount taking to her commands as if to the most competent horseman. Yet although she rode close to Tanya, her mind was distant.

Jabin's mother knew the target of the girl's thoughts, □ her son. It had not taken long for Tanya to realise Tamila's feelings for Jabin were far deeper than mere acquaintance, the past week revealing much of the depth of their bond. Yet for all the girl's longing, Tanya knew Tamila didn't understand that the tenderness she felt was love. How could she, transformed overnight from eight to eighteen. The incrementally

blossoming emotions of the heart, had in her case come to full bloom, with neither of time or motherly wisdom to smooth the transition.

Tanya hadn't tried to explain this to Tamila, she didn't know how, and the Azure had said it was probably best to await the questions, before assuming to answer any. In fact, the Azure were as surprised as any, as to the maturity of the girl's mind; as equal to that of her accelerated physical growth. Surprised and relieved, for they had anticipated a difficult time on awakening Tamila, prepared to soothe the child within the adult. Instead they found a woman within and without.

'What are you thinking this morning Tam.' Tanya asked, admiring the girl's beauty yet again, framed to perfection by the autumn sun's filtered light.

'Oh, you know ...him.' She smiled impishly, 'I can't seem to get him out of my thoughts.' She sighed, 'Do you miss Jabin much, I mean, do you think of him a lot?'

Tanya nodded, a mixed expression on her face, both amused at the girl's lovesick condition and amazed at her honesty, revealing as she so often did her most heartfelt thoughts. 'Yes.' She replied, 'Often. He was a good boy. My pride and the envy of all the other mothers.' Tanya smiled to herself, recalling the many times Jabin had received praise from those whose own children weren't quite so ready to make parenting a pleasure. She was just about to relate such an incident when she noticed Azure Quirinicotilius riding toward them from ahead.

'And how are the Ladies coping this morning?' The jovial Azure called with a smile and a wave of greeting. 'I must say, seeing you has made the highlight of my day.'

The past six weeks had transformed the Azure. The rigours of the trail trimming his plump form down to a comfortable size.

unfortunately, the rapid weight loss had left the skin of his face too large, and his robes a tent upon his frame. Quinn, however, was still Quinn, and his lightened weight had done wonders to improve his enjoyment of the journey—and that of his mounts.

Even the weather had improved, the chill's confining themselves to late evening and early morn but dissipating quickly with the coming sun; a joyous delight to Dored, who, more than any, had thought his bones perpetually frozen.

The two women greeted the gracious Azure with warm smiles, 'Morning to you Azure Quinn.' Tanya replied, using his shortened name as all the party had come to do, 'I take it Azure Sosthene is ready for us.' Although she said 'us', it was only Tamila that was really required, but the two woman had become so close that where one went the other was sure to follow. This of course was of immense pleasure to Tanya, who saw Tamila as somewhat of a grown daughter; and secretly, a possible future daughter-in-law.

'Ah, the intuition of women, if only we Ancients had been gifted with that talent.' Quinn said with feigned longing, 'It must be nice knowing another's thoughts ahead of them.'

'Only when they're the thoughts of someone as sweet as you Azure Quinn, but I think you'll find that most woman would give their entire presentiment and more for just a small portion of the power the Azure ...Oh.' She suddenly realised what she'd said, 'I am sorry Magi, with Azure Sosthene still able to ...but you not ...I'm sorry, I easily forget that it is lost to the rest of you, forgive me, I was thoughtless.'

Returning a smile that showed no offence was taken, he replied, 'Don't fret Tanya. In fact I still forget myself at times. Find myself reaching for what's no longer there, mumbling words of power only to find that now they're just that—words.'

He looked melancholy for an instant, but only an instant, ‘Shall we,’ he said, turning his horse in Sosthene's direction. The women pulled in alongside, all talk forgotten for the moment.

‘Why are there no woman Azure?’ Tamila asked as they neared the others.

‘That's a good question child,’ Quinn responded, ‘one I’ve often thought of myself. To be quite frank the sacred book speaks nothing at all of the reason men alone were chosen. If I were to speak personally, and there is every chance I may be wrong here, but I think the probable rationale, has less to do with ability or aptitude than it has to do with simply the nature of things. Why is it that the stallion leads the herd, or the lioness hunts while the lion rests? I don’t believe these sorts of questions have definitive answers to them, other than the simple fact that the creator has deemed it so.’

Tamila did not reply, beyond nodding, yet her closed expression made it plain she thought the concept rather unfair.

As was his way in such discussions, Quinn posed a question of his own. ‘Think on this’, he said as they came to a halt, ‘do you think it was only chance that has brought you to where you now are, or design, and if design, what is the purpose you are to fill?’

He did not give the girl the chance to answer, but instead dismounted, helping Tanya from her saddle before walking off toward the front of the party, ‘Come,’ he summoned, ‘Sosthene appreciates punctuality.’

Tamila dismounted last, a thoughtful expression on her face.

At a small natural clearing bordering a stream, the rest of the company sat; except Tahl, who had chosen to walk behind Quinn and the women. Jonn, Raban, and Bihl waved at the woman as they approached, perspiration showing on their

foreheads from the effort of blazing a path through the undergrowth. Off to one side, under a large oak, was Dored, using the scheduled break as an opportunity to catnap.

Tanya went to her husband and kissed the top of his head, ‘Where’s Tamon?’ She asked.

‘He’s following this stream. Thinks its rapid pace indicates a river nearby. Traversing the mountains on the other side of this forest will be easier if we can find the river that flows from them.’ he lowered his voice, ‘He also said that there are bears this far north, that it’s best if the company stays close together from here on.’

‘Oh, it’s alright,’ Tamila said, having overheard, ‘we had Tahl looking out for us, didn’t we Tahl.’ She gave the young man one of her dazzling smiles.

Tahl returned a self-conscious smile, his cheeks brightening considerably.

‘All the same,’ said Jonn, ‘we should all remain within easy sight of each other from now on.’ The others nodded assent.

‘Are you ready Tamila?’ Quinn asked, ‘Sosthene is waiting.’

The Azure stood at the far end of the glade, his left arm crossed under the other, his right fingers drumming his chin in thought. He didn’t notice the girl approach.

‘Do all Azure think as deeply as you?’ asked Tamila, breaking the Ancients reverie.

‘No, not all’, he replied with a laugh, ‘But if you think I’m bad, wait till you meet Sisera, now there’s a man who could contemplate while his house burnt down.’ Both shared a laugh.

‘Are you ready?’ he asked.

‘As always.’ She replied cheerfully, ‘Over there looks a comfortable spot.’ She indicated a secluded alcove between the roots of a large tree strewn with a thick layer of leaves. There

they sat, facing each other.

For the past three weeks this had been their daily rite. Sosthene would access Dunamis, using Tamila as a conduit, and so discern Jabin's well-being. In truth it was Tamila who did the discerning, Sosthene having discovered her sensitivity far more acute than his own. However, he was still required to harness the power for her perceptions to utilise.

Tamila closed her eyes as the Azure took her hands in his. He took the moment to scrutinise the girl. From the time she had first awoken, everyone had learnt to admire this woman—and not just for her beauty. That, only a month prior, she was a dependent, weak, ignorant child, seemed a surreal thing. The enigma of the change baffled him. The astounding physical change as nothing in comparison to the maturity of mind and spirit within her. Sosthene battled between the concepts of all things being possible with the creator, and the biggest question of all—why?

Closing his eyes, he once again entered the girl's mind, a act that, more than any other, highlighted the wonders of the woman-child before him.

‘So what's the verdict, how close are we, brother?’ Quinn asked.

‘Well, Tamila believes only over these mountains.’ Sosthene replied, looking toward the snowy peaks visible above the treeline.

‘And he has stopped, you are sure of that?’ asked Dored.

‘She saw the Dark Lord at some sort of lake, apparently unconscious.’

‘How did she know he was unconscious?’ Dored asked, stifling a yawn, still dozy from being awoken.

‘She just knows.’ Sosthene replied.

The worried expression that had been absent from Quinn's face for many days, returned, ‘We must hurry then. We are still days from crossing those mountains. He could well die of exposure or dehydration before we reach him.’

‘I agree, but Tamila says that he is safe.’ said Sosthene.

‘And how does she know that?’ Dored asked.

Sosthene shrugged, ‘Again, she doesn’t know how, just that he is.’

Quinn squinted frustration, for the thousandth time wishing for his lost powers. ‘What do you think Soth?’ Is she right? Is he safe?’

Sosthene shrugged again, an expression of weary ignorance tightening his lips, ‘I don’t know. I am barely able to detect the boy, let alone decipher the situation. Whatever it is that's blocking me, it's still in effect despite Ornan's condition. Why Tamila's is unobstructed...’ He shrugged incomprehension. ‘Possibly her more personal link with Jabin. Whatever the reason, I cannot verify what she says, we simply either trust her or not.’

‘No, we trust’, Quinn said. ‘It may well be the creator sent her for this purpose. However, there's no reason why we can’t take some other precautions. I say we send Tamon and one other ahead of us. They could the more quickly reach Jabin, maybe as soon as late tomorrow, and then tend to him until the rest of us arrive.’

Jonn who was chosen to accompany Tamon. They left an hour after the decision, Tamila explaining as best she could Jabin's position. Shortly after, the rest of the group set off in pursuit.

LANDING

The dismal weather well matched Tarnul's mood. His fleet had been forced to wait a full day before attempting any possible harbour along the coast. When at last the weather improved, reefs veining below the choppy surface had compelled them to yaw east for yet another day. This produced a spate of cursing from Tarnul, furiously aware of the clear silhouette his armada made against the horizon, dashing any hopes of a surprise landing—Yet still he refrained from using his powers, just in case.

Originally he had planned a night approach, remaining far enough out at sea that none but the keenest observer ashore would have spied them. And this he would have done if not for the weather. The strong winds and rough seas had made broaching too dangerous, considering the poor state of the ships, so they had been constrained to as straight course as possible. With the storms end had also come the morning, and to Tarnul's displeasure the coast was still leagues distant; though close enough that any ashore had a picturesque view of seven hundred fully-rigged war ships. He glanced back at the flotilla that followed his command vessel, or what remained of

them. In the four and a half months at sea the fleet had been halved in number, the Horde dwindling from a host of a quarter million to fewer than one hundred and thirty thousand. The vessels had suffered more storms on this journey than Tarnul cared to recount, each tempest claiming something; men, supplies. Not to mention over six hundred ships. And with but one exception, never did Tarnul allow the Dark Horde to use their powers. That exception being to put the army into a state of hibernation, an act deemed necessary due to the loss of so many supplies—and the fact Trolls were beginning to eat Kobolds. Only those deemed sufficient to sail the ships were exempt.

Now they navigated their way up a narrow fiord that barely allowed a vessel abreast. The cliffs dwarfed the ships, darkening the galleons in their shade, their creaking passage echoing off the walls, deafening in the otherwise silence.

The fiord opened into a circular bay, at the head of which a large town spread. Tarnul raised his eyebrows. So many things had gone against them on their journey, that to have chosen the very fiord that led to one of Azure's cities, seemed odd. He made a sound that could have been a laugh, and was about to issue orders when he was struck by something. Staring at the nearer piers and smaller jetty's, the large warehouses behind them, then streets and the closer knit buildings just visible beyond. Cursing vehemently, he struck the taffrail, splintering the hardwood with the force of the blow. 'They've gone.'

Standing with Tarnul, Damd had also noted the deserted appearance of the town, 'Maybe they saw our approach and evacuated.' He offered.

'No.' Tarnul said, 'They would've had two days notice at most, enough to martial a force to greet us, but hardly time to

evacuate a town of this size. Besides, what else don't you see?'

Damd looked back to the docks and nodded, 'No ships, they took all their ships.'

Tarnul spoke through clenched teeth, 'Yes, and we saw no sign of sails along the coast. This means they could have departed days, weeks or even months ago.' Tarnul was about to strike the railing a second time when he stopped, without warning he mumbled words of power. Before Damd could even think to ask, Tarnul had levitated and was travelling at speed toward the docks. Damd, as usual, registered no surprise at this sudden use of previously forbidden power, instead merely conveying a mental command to the other fleet captains. They were to dock as many ships as possible at the piers, and beach the rest. That done, he too uttered the words and followed his master.

'Nothing. Everything gone,' Tarnul's voice was simmering rage, 'This was no quick evacuation, it would have taken months of preparation, they must have known of our approach.'

'How? The ships were masked, how would they know?' asked Foemen, standing with a dozen other Dark Lords around their leader.

Tarnul spat his reply at the Dark Lord, looking for any excuse to release his irritation, 'Because we failed to shield the ships immediately, you fool.'

Foemen knew better than to question Tarnul's use of the generic 'we' in a matter that was the High Lord's fault alone. Yet he resented being called a fool and felt compelled to reply, 'But it was only a few days into the journey master, the odds of them detecting us before then are-'

Tarnul cut him off, 'By the foul luck that's cursed us from the

beginning, it wouldn't surprise me to learn the Azure had descried our approach at its outset.' His cloak shadowed the scowl he wore, the red ember of his eye's the only evidence of his growing ire, an anger he knew best kept concealed, hidden from those who would see it as evidence of his oversight in this matter. 'Well there's no choice now. We must use our powers to locate them and then confront them where they will. Complete surprise is lost, but perhaps we may still catch them unprepared.'

'What of Ornan and Chkurl?' Damd said without inflection.

'What of them.' Tarnul snapped.

'Should we not first seek to locate them before planning futher? After all, they may have the Elf and be waiting for us.'

Tarnul's orb's flashed. Was their hidden disdain in Damd's words? To assume he would forgot such a vital matter.

'Now is as good a time as any', is all he said, lowering his cowl from his head and closing his eyes. A strange shimmer distorted his visage, alike to the sheen of heat on a humid day, a moment later his eyes opened. A look best described as worry flickered across his skulled features, he turned to Damd, 'The portal is gone, Brachk and Dryma I cannot detect. Nor Ornan. Chkurl is to the Northeast, I think, the ring he wears distorts his exact location.'

'I don't understand.' said Damd, leaning forward slightly as he spoke, the barest hint of challenge in his stance, 'I was under the impression you had secured the portal and kept wards upon it. How can it be gone?'

Though noting the posturing disrespect, Tarnul decided to ignore it, the problem of the moment outweighing the affront. 'Then you were under the wrong impression, weren't you.' He said. 'The very presence of the portal was a risk in itself, a

beacon to any with power looking in its direction, which is why I placed it in an unpopulated area. Securing it to my powers and warding it would have only further highlighted its presence, raising the probability of discovery by the Azure. No, the fact is, the only contact I maintained with the portal was a simple rune of earth magic, one that would alert me to Ornan or Chkurl's approach with the Elf.'

'Earth magic. That's all?' Damd whispered.

'That's all.' Tarnul said back, his eyes flaring red, contesting any comment that may have been on Damd's lips. The ebony giant remained silent.

'Only once did Ornan and Chkurl return,' Tarnul continued, 'but they didn't have the boy, and I had fashioned the portal to allow their return only if he was with them. Since then I have received no further signal from the rune, and therefore had no need to think of it.'

'A portal of travel does not simply vanish, master.' Damd said. 'Unless the one forming it failed to adequately stabilise the stanchions.' Before Tarnul could respond, he continued, 'But since you are the one who created it, I think that unlikely. However, that leaves us only one other alternate,' he looked Tarnul in the eye, 'The Azure have found and destroyed the portal. Therefore it is the portal that has given us away, leaving us now facing an empty city.'

Tarnul knew Damd was right. The portal had been the weakest link in his plan, but in his confidence he had failed to determine just how weak. His confidence, and his fear. The fear of a lone Elf-being given the complete possession of Dunamis, a power Tarnul knew all too well could destroy him. All of them. With a cursory look, he noticed the accusing stares on the faces of the other lords. None, however, dared voice

anything. ‘Are you then placing the blame for this on me?’ Tarnul asked Damd in a dangerous tone.

Damd stood impassive, ‘Just stating fact.’

‘Well understand this fact, all of you, I have allowed for such as this.’ Tarnul lied, ‘It matters little whether we meet them here or there.’ he pointed north, ‘The Azure are few in this land, we still many. We will simply crush them.’ With the last word, Tarnul slowly clenched his fist and from the docks a thunderous sound erupted. Looking, they all saw one of the moored galleons collapsing into itself. Tree sized splintered shards of mast and yard snapped away to fly through the air, the hull seeming to fold inward as if paper, timber crushed together by some unseen, unrelenting force. The thick Hawser tautened for a moment, then, with startling suddenness, sheered the iron docking pin from its mount, sending it careening across what remained of the vessels bow to crash against the strake of the neighbouring ship. This was followed shortly after by the pinging snap of rigging tackle and cleats torn from their fixings. Still fully manned, the sound of the ships destruction was matched in mocking harmony by the screams of those on board, all engulfed in the constricting mass of timber, steel and canvas. When the unrecognisable hulk at last had compressed to an impossible size, there was silence, the death of ship and crew complete. Tarnul casually opened his palm and the wreck sunk beneath the water.

‘So too the Azure.’ He said.

Nobody answered.

IT BEGINS

The rider came from the direction of the fire. Danek recognised him as Dylan, one of the young men chosen as advance guard. Their job had been to patrol the perimeter of the forest, alert for the approach of the Dark Horde. Danek's heart felt like stone as the rider neared, conscious of what his arrival foreshadowed. During the previous night, strange lights to the south evidenced something was amiss. Those flames now formed a line of fire that raged at the Stonehearts border.

Danek, straining to see in the glaring morning light, noted the limp manner in which Dylan's left arm hung. Not until the young soldier neared, did they see why. Everyone gasped, and Azure Tulin promptly sent two men to his aid. Protruding from Dylan's left shoulder was an arrow, its feathered end jolting in motion with the horse. Danek grimaced in empathised pain.

Dylan's mount pulled short as others ran up along-side, only to catch him as he slid semi-conscious from the saddle; face drained of all colour and lips moving as if to speak but unable. He was taken immediately to the Azure quarters.

They had no choice. Time had run out. After passing through his shoulder blade, the arrow had punctured the man's lung. He was now drowning him in his own blood. For an hour, Fanyifn had tried to remove the shaft, yet it remained lodged. Pushing

the quarrel through had proved impossible, for it was too near his heart.

With a shake of his head the Azure looked toward Sisera, who nodded solemnly. With a sigh the Azure healer took hold of the shaft and snapped it off as near to where it had entered Dylan's body as possible. He then gently rolled the man on his back, carefully raising him to a sitting position. Wiping the man's brow, he turned to Sisera, 'With the arrow still in him, he'll only live a short while longer. The ride has taken too much out of him, only serving to worsen his wound.'

Sisera put his hand on his brother's shoulder, 'You've done what you can, but we need the lad awake. We absolutely must know what has happened.'

'Yes, I know.' Fanyifn sighed, 'I can give him certain herbs. They will ultimately hasten his death, but will revitalise him for a time.' Fanyifn looked back at the dying man, 'The strain placed on his metabolism will overwhelm him quickly. Choose your questions well.'

'How long?' Sisera asked.

Fanyifn shrugged, 'That depends on lads strength. The herb induces a feeling of physical Euphoria, therefore he will not feel ill until moments before death. I wouldn't mention his condition to him, it will only make questioning more difficult.'

Sisera nodded and sat on the pallet next to Dylan. Fanyifn took a pestle and mortar and began to grinding ingredients together.

Shortly after the Azure presented a vial of dark honey coloured liquid. 'You must hold his mouth open and make him swallow.' Fanyifn said.

Sisera gently eased Dylan's slack jaws open allowing the blend of herbs to be administered, while methodically stroking

his throat in a downward motion to induce the swallow reflex.

‘How long?’ He asked.

‘Soon, these are potent herbs.’ Fanyifn answered.

A few minutes later the youth's eyes opened. There was a glaze to them, yet an alertness that attested to the drugs strength. He coughed and blood splattered across his chest, reddening his lips, but he didn't seem to notice. ‘Azure Sisera, Oh it's good to see you Magi, I thought I was dead for sure.’ He flexed his shoulders, no sign of pain on his face. He looked about the room, smiling the smile of one happy to still be alive. Sisera placed a restraining hand upon him as he made to sit up.

‘It's best if you relax for a while longer.’ He said, forcing a calmed demeanour to his face, ‘We need to know what you saw Dylan, what happened on your patrol?’

The man looked confused, ‘You don't know yet?’

‘No. You were the only one to return.’

Dylan looked stung, ‘So you don't know their coming.’ He looked anxious.

‘If you mean the Dark Horde, yes, we guessed that, but we need to know how many, are they mounted.’ He would have said more but the dying man cut him off, his face pale, the unnaturally dry and pasty texture of death. With a laboured voice he said, ‘The ghost's, there were ghosts. We were camped where the river leaves the forest. There was a great light that blinded us. when we could see again there was an army of thousands on the other side of the river.’ Dylan's breathing had a shallow gurgling sound to it. He coughed repeatedly, blood escaping his mouth each time. With a hand placed over his chest and twinges of pain on his face he said, ‘It was only the river that saved us. Arrows were being loosed upon us, so many arrows we had to abandon the camp and ride for our

lives.’ Dylan paused, his head lolling briefly in dizziness before he shook it clear. ‘I was nearest the horses when the command came to mount and flee. I heard screaming behind me but I didn’t look back.’ He squinted, ‘I remember getting hit,’ he flexed his wounded should, confused, but continuing said, ‘but one thing I do remember is the ghost’s, hundreds of them. They seemed to appear out of nowhere and walked toward the Dark Horde as I rode through them.’ Dylan’s voice was wonderment, ‘When I reached the first ridge, I chanced a stop to look back. I saw what I guessed to Dark Lord’s battling with the ghosts, though it wasn’t really a battle. They threw fire, and what seemed lightning, and sought to pass them, but were unable. The ghost’s formed a wall that they could not breach. I watched until the Dark Lord’s gave up their efforts and sent their army into the forest.’ Another cough, this one wracking his body. Exhausted, he lay panting for breath. When at last he continued, it was in a weaker voice. ‘Their army contains fierce creatures ...reminded me of wild pigs, giant ones that walk upright, with hands instead of trotters ...whatever they were, the ghost’s couldn’t stop them, didn’t even try it seemed.’

Colour had now left the boys face, and perspiration beaded his forehead. His speech began to come in a gurgled slur, ‘Though neither could the creatures harm the ghosts, swords seeming to pass right through them. That’s when I rode again. They’d spotted me and begun to give chase ...For pig-men, they were very fast.’ He smiled, but then took a staggered breath and looked at Sisera, ‘I think they were Azure.’ he said, before groaning in sudden pain. Blood erupting from his mouth in a choking hack. ‘What’s wrong with me?’ He spluttered through a mouth wide in an effort to exhale, a look of mixed fear and weariness.

Fanyifn came to his side and gently held a cloth up to Dylan's face, covering his mouth and nostrils gently with it. Within a few seconds his eyes closed in induced sleep. The two Azure watched on as the young man wheezed his last breaths. Neither spoke for long minutes, reminded of another time, another war with scenes similar—except, in that war, they could have saved this man.

‘I’m afraid he is but the first.’ Fanyifn said at last.

Sisera dragged his hands slowly down his aging face with a deep sigh, as if drawing out of himself the weight of so much remembered loss. He then stood with a resoluteness that opposed such thoughts. ‘If it is the creator's will for man to live on or be destroyed, who can thwart his will? But, while there is life there is hope, and we will dishonour the dead their sacrifice if we fail to take the advantage their offering provides.’

Of the two, he looked the least comforted by his own words. ‘From what Dylan has said it is as we thought. I don’t know how, but the spectres of our dead brothers have arisen to guard against the Dark Lord's power. We need confirmation of this. If true, it may mean we have only their army to face.’

‘*Only.*’ Fanyifn challenged, ‘They are not so insignificant brother, and I need not remind you that they don’t stay dead unless you burn them.’

‘I know,’ Sisera returned flatly, ‘but at least we mightn’t have to face their masters. This war would be over before it begun.’

Fanyifn nodded solemnly. ‘Let's pray for Sosthene's quick return, then.’

DREAM

All had awoken in an instant, their sleeping thoughts shattered by the piercing scream. Each stood in a guarded fashion around the trembling Tamila, watching Tanya and Quinn attempting to calm her.

‘What is it child, are you in pain?’ The Azure asked.

Tamila shook her head. ‘No’, she whispered as she leant against Tanya, her raven hair damp and matted to her face.

‘She’s had a dream is all.’ said Tanya.

Tamila whimpered.

‘A dream’, Quinn repeated, ‘I thought you’d been bitten by a snake or something.’ He took the girls hand, ‘Yet dreams can seem as real, and more terrifying, than any waking experience.’ He patted her hand in a grandfatherly fashion, ‘From the looks of you it was a bad one, can you tell me what it was about child.’

Tamila took a shaking breath, ‘I was being attacked by some animal, large and fierce. You were all around me, but you couldn’t stop him, he was just about to bite me when I awoke.’ She released another shuddering breath and, looking up, noticed all the others, ‘I’m so sorry. I did not mean to awaken you all. I feel so silly. It was only a dream.’

‘Maybe’, said Quinn, ‘But I’ve seen too many dreams become reality to simply ignore them, especially the dreams of those touched by Dunamis.’

‘You are linked in a special way to the sole possessor of the creator's power Tamila, if nothing else, that alone would indicate we take extreme interest in any dreams you might have. Who is to say they are not messages from Jabin, or the creator himself for that matter.’

Tamila looked scared, ‘You mean my dream might come true.’

Quinn, patting her hand again, replied, ‘I didn’t mean to frighten you. No, premonitory dreams are rarely literal, at least not in my experience. They’re simply figurative interpretations of what might happen.’

‘Well what does my dream mean then?’ Tamila asked nervously.

‘Hmm, that's easier asked than answered.’ Quinn said, tapping his top lip with his forefinger, ‘Unfortunately premonitory dreams are not only rarely literal, they are also rarely understood. Until of course there fulfilment, then hindsight makes very clear what the dream was foretelling.’

‘There doesn’t seem to be much point in them then, does there.’ Bihl interjected, ‘I mean, what purpose does a message serve that nobody can understand? Surely if the information was important then the creator, or Jabin, or whoever it was, would just make it plain.’

It was Sosthene who answered the remark, moving to take a position beside Tamila. ‘It would serve no purpose at all if information was the goal, but facts and figures are not the totality of all communication, and dreams have use in more than simply relaying knowledge. Warning, encouragement, concepts, and even feelings are all possible objectives in the sending of a dream.’ Taking Tamila’s hands, he turned her to face him. ‘Yet there are other reasons behind the ambiguity of

dreams. Dreams can be overheard, by those with the power to do so, no matter how faintly whispered—’

‘The Dark Lord’s?’ Tahl interrupted.

Sosthene nodded, ‘If, indeed, this is such a dream.’ his manner hinted nothing of his own suspicions, ‘If augural, the sender may wish none who overhear it to apprehend it.’ He directed his next words at Tamila.

‘As Quinn has said, you are linked in a special way to the sole possessor of the creator’s power. Therefore it would be wise to investigate this dream further. May I?’

‘What are you going to do.’ she asked

‘To try and find out what your dream means.’ He replied.

‘But Azure Quinn said that was impossible.’

‘Not impossible, just rare. Are you feeling brave.’

‘Why?’ She asked tentatively.

‘Because to understand your dream I have to first experience it, and to do that means you have to dream it again.’

Tamila looked to Tanya, who squeezed her across the shoulders reassuringly. She then turned to Quinn, who nodded and winked at her.

‘It’s only a dream, I suppose.’ she said at last, ‘The worst that can happen is I’ll wake up screaming again.’

‘Least we’ll have warning this time. My heart is still in my mouth from the first time.’ Bihl said jokingly.

Sosthene smiled, ‘Close your eyes and just think of sleep.’ When she complied, he also shut his own and opened himself to Dunamis. Connected, he gently concentrated a portion of its power toward the girl, sending her into a deep sleep. Then began his search, turning back the images within her mind, searching for that which held her dream. It jumped out at him, almost staggering in its vividness, different than her other

memories in that it was whole and precise in all its detail.

Sosthene allowed the initial deluge of recall to wash over him, then, taking hold of it, he viewed the dream again. Tamila went rigid as he did so, her hand moistening in his own, her faint moans of anguish sounding an ominous backdrop to the unfolding nightmare.

As Tamila had said, the dream began with the group gathered around something or someone that he couldn't see, or, more precisely, Tamila couldn't see; since it was through her mind's eye that he viewed the dream. Sosthene smiled at the oddity of seeing himself within the vision, walking from the campfire toward the group, which parted for him. Watching himself kneel and take Tamila's hand...

A sudden familiarity flared as Sosthene's watched his dreamt self close his eyes. Without doubt, he suddenly knew this dream was real. From behind his other-self, he saw a shadow rise and approach, but it was already too late. In the time it would take for him to safely leave the girl's mind, the creature would be upon them. He felt a sharp pain across his back and to the side of his head. Before he lost consciousness, he heard Tamila's scream of terror.

Sosthene awoke in pain, his head aching with tear-wringing intensity. He was on his stomach, which surprised him, and bright daylight surrounded him. *Why did I sleep so late?* He wondered groggily, *why has no one woken me?* He attempted to rise, almost rendering himself unconscious; a blazing agony burning from shoulder to shoulder across his back. Hissing pain through clenched teeth, head resonating both its own suffering and that of his back, he suddenly recalled the dream.

He became still, afraid that the creature was still present.

A figure approached, opposite to the side he faced. Too light footed to be the beast. With a gentle touch something cool was applied to his burning shoulders.

‘The animal is gone then?’ Sosthene asked hesitantly, and the figure jumped at his voice.

‘Oh, you’re awake, Magi,’ It was Tanya. ‘That is good. We were worried. Yes, the beast is gone, or I should say it has been killed.’

‘And the rest of the group?’ Sosthene questioned, but Tanya had already run off. He could hear her already informing others about him. A moment later Quirinicotilius was at his side.

‘Where are we?’ Sosthene asked, before his brother had chance to speak. He lay in a lush clearing of grass, amidst forested hills that gently sloped to a cloudless bright blue sky.

‘Well,’ begun Quinn, ‘you’re not going to believe this brother, but we’re at the Pool of Recalling,’ his voice carried the wonder of his words. ‘You’ve been in and out of unconscious for over a day. We were forced to carry you in our haste to get to Jabin.’

But Sosthene had heard Quinn’s first words, ‘The Pool? ...How is that possible? ...Are you sure?’

Quinn nodded. ‘Nothing doubting. It’s the pool, and it hasn’t changed from the day I first remember seeing it.’

Sosthene almost forgot his pain at Quinn’s words. How he longed to investigate this mystery, and was tempted to do so, but more pressing matters required answer. These he voiced, starting with the most vital, ‘What happened?’

‘You’re asking me?’ Quinn said, ‘We were hoping you’d answer that. No sooner had you started to re-live Tamila’s dream, then you both screamed out. At almost the same

moment a bear attacked us. None of us saw it coming because we were all concentrating on you, but by all appearances it seemed to have its intents set on Tamila.’

‘How do you mean?’ Sosthene asked.

‘Well, it pushed everyone out of the way to reach her. Fortunately for her you were right in its path. Though unfortunate for you, of course.’ Quinn rubbed his head in empathy, ‘You’ve got a rather nasty set of bear claw engravings across your back and head. Any deeper and I’d be talking to a corpse right now. The only good news was that you stalled it long enough for us to react.’

Sosthene nodded—and immediately wished he hadn’t. Closing his eyes to the wash of pain, he asked, ‘What of the others, Tamila, is anyone hurt?’

‘Tav was wounded and the others have bumps and bruises galore, but the bear didn’t get to Tamila. While you delayed it young Tahl jumped on the creatures back.’ Sosthene raised his eyebrows at this.

‘Not for long, mind you, but the distraction was enough for the others to draw their weapons and kill it.’ Quinn shook his head, ‘I don’t think I’ve seen an animal so intent on violence, it seemed crazed.’

‘What of Tahl?’ Sosthene asked, his own fear at merely witnessing the bear only accented the young man’s courage.

‘Oh, I wouldn’t worry about him. He wrenched both arms when he was thrown off. Sprained an ankle when he landed, but I have a feeling the boys optimistic about his injuries’. He looked toward where Tamila sat next to Tahl. ‘She’s decided to act personal nurse to the hero. If I’m not mistaken, I think the boys been smitten.’

Sosthene barked a laugh, and grimaced immediately. ‘Are

you sure it was only a bear, not a tree that fell on my head.’

Quinn winced sympathy, ‘I’m not surprised, any harder and that bear would have had your head off your shoulders. If you’re not up to using Dunamis, I’ve still got a poultice ready, the herbs in it should have an analgesic effect. When you’re feeling up to it, you can heal yourself and the others, we’re a bit of a sorry bunch at the moment.’

With a nod the suffering Azure lay back and closed his eyes.

An hour later Sosthene was sitting tentatively against the trunk of the lone poplar within the glade, his back and head bandaged around an assuaging poultice. From where he sat he could see Tahl leaning upon a rock while the gentle Tamila spoon-fed him. He smiled to himself, recalling a time very long ago, when he had once loved a woman. Then had come the Choosing, the end of any further such feelings. Sosthene didn’t resent the loss, having received so much more in return, and in truth you don’t grieve what you don’t miss; the desire for such relationships taken from each of the Azure at their ordination. Yet, he was still thankful for the memory of such longing.

Returning his attentions again to Tahl, he frowned, suspecting the young man mistook Tamila’s attentions. Sosthene knew her feelings for Jabin. He hoped Tahl would accept them once revealed.

Loud snoring distracted Sosthene from his musings. Nearby, under the shade of a hastily erected shelter, lay Tav, his bandaged leg raised upon a blanket. Sosthene decided, then, that healing the man could wait; a decision encouraged by his aching body. He turned his attention back to his surroundings.

The clearing was as Quinn said, the place of the Recalling. Sosthene, too, found it just as remembered; a place thought lost

to them when fleeing the Motherland. There was magic here, most evidenced by the weather. Around him spring reigned, in a mountainous region entering winter. Out of season flowers scented the air, insects that would normally now be dormant, buzzing among them. Sosthene sneezed and silently cursed the resulting pain and unseasonable amounts of pollen in the air. Yet apart from the weather everything else remained the same; the size of the clearing; the size and shape of the trees; the level of the pond and the perfect stillness of its waters. It was as if time had failed to leave its mark on the place, as if this pocket of nature perpetuated separate from the rest, isolated in the laws that governed it. Sosthene wondered what part in the creators plan it played.

Furthest from the convalescing Azure, sat Bihl, Tamon and Raban; a sleeping Dored beside them. Snatches of their conversation drifted over from time to time so that Sosthene knew at least the general topic of discussion—Ornan.

They had bound the Dark Lord hand and foot, but apart from that he remained unchanged from when had first discovered him; unconscious and stretched out on the ground. No one knew why, but his gaunt and sallow appearance indicated that illness was the likely reason. Sosthene pondered the irony of that—a sick immortal.

Ornan's determination brought the Azure close to admiration. To have persevered for so long, with no powers and in an alien land, experiencing mortality for the first time in a life that remembered no beginning. He wondered what had motivated the Dark Lord to continue; Fear? Hate? Promised reward? He realised how little he understood of his enemy, how different their concepts were, of everything. Randomly he pondered what it was like to live in the spirit realm, what it was that had

so divided the Dark Horde and the Creator. However, that train of thought ended quickly. Unlike Sisera, Sosthene saw little point dwelling on such unanswerable questions for long; unanswerable in this life at least. Instead he turned from the Dark Lord, toward where the rest of the party gathered at the edge of the pool.

Quinn mumbled to himself as he scrutinised Jabin's insensate body, taking special care to check for broken bones and other internal injuries.

With his head resting in his mother's lap, Jabin looked more the battered victim of a robbery than the monarch of a nation. On finding him, he'd been carried to the pool where his soiled and foetid garments had been removed so as to better tend his injuries. The unlikely looking future king was a dishevelled mess, his hair and lightly bearded face a shaggy tangle about his head; any number of parasites living both on, and in, his clothing. He had not fared well at the hands of his kidnapper, though better than Quinn had expected; the creators power no doubt protecting its steward to some degree. Still, sores had developed from weeks being tied to a saddle; these wept profusely, some as large as the palm of a man's hand. Bruises also covered him, and not a few of his ribs had been broken, some several times.

Though delighted to find Jabin alive, Tanya yet struggled with his changed appearance. Maternal instincts battled her pragmatic mind, leaving her muddled and apprehensive as to how to react. In truth, she was glad of his unconsciousness, and felt guilt at the gladness; based in a fear that more than his body had changed. She reached out and stroked the young man's cheek. Jonn had just finished shaving it. *So much like my*

father, she thought, her sons face unveiling fond memories; one in particular of her father sleeping, appearing much as Jabin did now. A tear formed in her eye, ‘Life is too short’, she said aloud to no one in particular.

Quinn looked up from his examination of Jabin without reply. Brevity was a facet of existence he had not shared, yet, strangely, could relate to. His life, too, seemed to have rushed by, the memories of several thousand years seeming distant and surreal, small comfort to the realities of the moment—even less to the possible finality of the morrow.

Shaking his head to clear it of morbid thoughts, Quinn said, ‘Well, I can’t find anything seriously wrong with him, nothing that would demand the immediate use of Dunamis anyhow. So if you’ll just sit him up Jonn, we’ll put this tunic on and then see about getting him some clean clothes.’ After a pause, he added, ‘Actually if you two could see to that yourselves, I think I’ll check on Sosthene, he may be feeling up to healing the injured among us, which as it stands is about half our number. I’m not overly worried about anyone in particular, but I’d feel a more at ease if everyone were fit for whatever may come.’

‘Understandable,’ said Jonn, ‘then the sooner we can decide what to do next.’

Quinn murmured agreement as he walked off, thinking, *I wish I had the remotest idea.*

Sosthene had fallen asleep watching the others, the sedative qualities within the poultice taking their desired effect. He awoke at the approach of Quinn, feeling rested. The pain across his shoulders was still persistent, but bearable. ‘Time, is it?’ he asked his brother.

‘If you’re up to it, but I’ve got a few things to share with you

first.’ Quinn opened his hand to reveal a ring of silvery grey metal. A crescentic black stone was embedded in its surface, ‘Found it on Jabin, what do you make of it.’

Sosthene took the ring and examined it, ‘Obsidian.’ he said at last, ‘The one stone that disrupts the flow of the Power. Now we know why I couldn’t detect him easily. They’ve lent heavily on earth magic haven’t they.’

‘So it would seem.’ Quinn said, ‘I also found runes on the forearms of both Jabin and the Dark One. Ornan would’ve been aware of every time you connected with the power.’

‘Probably what kept him running’, Sosthene added.

Quinn nodded. ‘Tamon also described to me a set of symbols he found marked in the ground on his way here, and I think they explain why the bear attacked us. Ornan used the earth magic to link with the bear, and directed it to attack Tamila.’

‘That’s possible,’ Sosthene said, ‘though to attempt such through runes carries risks.’

Glancing over at the recumbent Dark Lord, Quinn said, ‘I’d say he encountered and succumbed to them. It appears he is in a very weakened condition. His body shows clear signs of malnutrition and physical exhaustion. This may sound ironic, but he may not live unless you use Dunamis to heal him.’

Sosthene choked back a laugh at that, ‘That would confuse the creature wouldn’t it. Mercy to the merciless.’

‘Mercy has nothing to do with it, we need him alive to answer our questions.’ Quinn’s comment had a shade of anger behind it. Sosthene realised that weeks on the trail had done nothing to dull his brother’s hatred for the Dark Horde.

‘Mercy is not a gem to be given only to the worthy brother.’ Sosthene said.

Discomforted, Quinn answered shortly, ‘They are not of us,

different rules apply.’

Sosthene looked at his brother through a frown, surprised at such words from a man whose example could teach all a thing or two about love of others. ‘Alright Quinn.’ he said softly, ‘just don’t allow your loathing of them to shape you into their likeness.’

Both men fell silent, each troubled at the others words. It was Sosthene who eventually broke the reverie, a quizzical look on his face, ‘Something just struck me. Tamila told us she saw Ornan unconscious here two days ago and yet the bear only attacked us yesterday.’

Quinn nodded, glad for the change of subject, ‘I know. But if you remember from what you’ve told me of her dream, it was both literal and oracular. As rare as it is, I’m beginning to think she may have the gift of prophetic vision. From the two examples we’ve seen so far, it seems her visions are factual.’

‘So she truly sees the future?’ Sosthene mumbled, trying to remember the last known recipient of that ability. ‘If this is true, we can train her in its use. It would be a gift indeed.’

‘The creator gives, he takes away ...and he gives again.’ Quinn said, adding to an often-quoted text from the Sacred Book.

‘Well, let’s hope he doesn’t decide to take it away again.’ joked Sosthene, as he took the proffered hand of his brother and slowly came to his feet, the effort causing his heart to pound between his ears. ‘Did you say that bear hit me with its paw or an iron mallet.’

Quinn laughed, ‘It was a big bear, be thankful it only caught the back of your head.’

‘Oh, I am.’ Sosthene replied dryly, ‘So very thankful.’

Supporting Sosthene, they both walked slowly toward

Tamila. She had finished attending Tahl, and now sat watching Jabin's parents care for their son. She sat alone, her chin resting on her knees, chewing her bottom lip. She looked up as the Azure approached, her troubled expression replaced by a dazzling smile. 'Good afternoon Azure. I'm glad to see you up and walking. I feel partly to blame for your injury.'

'How's that?' asked Sosthene, gingerly lowering himself beside the girl, 'The bear would have attacked us either way, it wasn't your fault.'

'I know, but I still feel guilty. Maybe if I'd been less hysterical then you wouldn't have had to-'

'Nonsense child,' Quinn cut in, 'I haven't told you yet, but we believe you have a rather unique gift. If we're right, then what happened with the bear would have happened anyway, regardless of what you or anyone did.'

'You mean what I dream comes true.' Tamila asked.

Sosthene said, 'More precisely, what you dream is true. There's a difference, and we do need to talk about it, but now is not the time.' He took Tamila's hand, 'Before the pain returns, I want to see about healing us all. The Dark Horde still approaches our land-, *if they are not already here*, he thought, '-and the people await their king to save them.' He indicated Jabin.

Tamila looked at Jabin, and the pensive expression returned.

Quinn said, 'What's wrong child, you look troubled.'

She nodded, 'I'm just worried about meeting him in person. It feels so odd, seeing him there, knowing him but having never meet before. I feel scared. What if I'm not what he expects?' She ended the thought with a sigh.

Both Azure nodded, having heard this all before, the girl-turned-woman having voiced her discomfort of this moment

many times. They said nothing, knowing that only in experiencing the moment would she truly understand her fears unfounded. Sosthene squeezed her hand, 'Shall we', he said, and with a nod she took his hands and they both closed their eyes.

It was late in the evening when Sosthene and Tamila finally opened their eyes. They had said nothing to each other, instead both rising to slowly walk in different directions. Tamila toward Jabin, near the centre of the camp, Sosthene to the ponds edge. There he now stood, gazing out over its depths, the moon's light reflecting off its surface and outlining his ghostly silhouette against the night.

Most of the others slept, watched over by Raban, who had taken first watch; a practice begun after the bear attack. Dored and Quinn remained up also, though neither approached either Sosthene or Tamila, realising something unusual had occurred.

Tamila sat by Jabin, staring at his face while she gently stroked his hair, the first sign of physical affection she'd shown him.

Sosthene at last broke from his contemplation and came to where his brothers waited. Raban, seeing his approach, gave his greeting to the Azure, then courteously left them to talk.

Dored and Quinn waited patiently for Sosthene to speak.

'He spoke to me.' He said at last, his voice low and subdued.

Quinn and Dored looked at each other. 'Who?' Dored asked, 'Jabin?'

'No. The creator.' Sosthene said.

'The Creator spoke to you!' Quinn's voice suddenly filled with awe, 'that has not happened to any since the Choosing'

All three were momentarily lost to the immensity of

Sosthene's words.

‘What did he say brother?’ Dored asked at last

‘He said much.’ Sosthene replied looking up at his companions, a troubled look as his gaze brushed past Dored's. ‘He had a message for each of you also. With you Quinn, he wants you to know that he is well pleased, that you above all have shown the purest faith. But he also sends warning concerning your feelings against the Dark Horde, that you guard your heart against bitterness.’

Quinn's face took on an unreadable look, the divine message of praise and rebuke inscrutable in its impact. He nodded to his brother, ‘Thank you.’ he simply said.

Sosthene turned to Dored, again with the pained look. ‘To you brother, he wishes you also to know his pleasure. You have served him well. He instructed me to give you a special message, one even hidden from myself.’ With that, Sosthene placed both his hands on Dored's temples. There was an instant flashing aura of yellow about his hands, followed immediately by a hiss of dread shock from Dored. Sosthene moved his hands away, the message delivered.

Dored had sunk to his knees, tears forming in his eyes, and his typical erectness becoming a slumped defeat.

Returning a hand to Dored's shoulder, Sosthene whispered, ‘Brother, all I was told of this message is that it will be your hardest test, but one that must be.’ Dored began to weep.

Sosthene longed to know what message could so break the invulnerable Azure. Only with great effort did he respect the secrecy of the mystic missive, ‘He told me to tell you that when the time arrives, not to hesitate, it is his will it be done.’

Dored, obviously much shaken, said nothing, taking the message without comment. Nodding his head, his eyes

unfocused, he slowly rose and went to be alone with whatever burden had been given to him.

Quinn went to follow, but Sosthene restrained him. ‘No brother, I feel what he bears no words will assuage. Leave him be for now, I think it best.’

While realising the truth of Sosthene's words, Quinn struggled with his need to comfort his friend. He knew, however, that Dored would speak when he was ready. Turning, he asked, ‘What else did the creator say brother?’

Sosthene shook himself from staring at the back of Dored's dejected figure; now sitting at the pond edge, as still as the waters themselves. He focused on Quinn's question, ‘Most was said for my benefit, words I needed to hear, though loath to do so.’ Sosthene silenced into reverie. Exhaling suddenly he added, ‘I may share it with you some day, after I’ve had time to think on it. However, he spoke of other things I’m happy to share with you.’ He indicated the clearing, ‘This place remains unchanged from how we remember it, because it is, in fact, only a short time since we were last here.’ Quinn looked bewildered at the statement. Sosthene explained, ‘This valley, containing the pool of recalling and the hills about it, has existed within a different time line than that of the surrounding land. The trees within this glade have aged but seasons, while the world about it aged two thousand years.’

Quinn looked, amazed at such a wonder. ‘Why?’ He asked.

‘Because if it remained within our time-line, the Dark Horde would have detected it. A place of power such as this, would have been a lodestone to the Dark Horde's senses, standing out against the lesser powers of this world. In discovering it they would have found the means to escape the barrier that keeps them here.’

‘But how would that have been possible?’ Quinn asked, mesmerised; that all around him, the grass and trees, were the very same he knelt beside millennia ago.

Sosthene had asked the same question, and he answered Quinn with the very answer he’d received. ‘Of all locations upon Asasa, this alone is unsealed by the barrier. As such, it is the only place the Creator can freely communicate without destroying that which constrains the Dark Lords.’

Comprehension dawned, and Quinn clapped his hands together at the revelation, ‘That’s why it was so important we reached this place. Why the prophecies concerning it were so puzzling. If the Dark Horde were to learn of its existence then they would have escaped long ago, destroying this world as they left.’ Quinn stood with one hand clasped within the other, understanding in his eyes as he said, ‘And that’s why Jabin remains unconscious, isn’t it?’

Sosthene nodded, ‘The creator could only communicate with him in this place, else risk the barrier. When Jabin participated in the Recalling, his soul was somehow bound to this time, while his body remained in ours, connected by the power of Dunamis.

‘It was then up to us to follow an instruction given two thousand years earlier, that when the moment arrived we were to bring the body to this place.’ He spoke the last softly, looking around him with a growing appreciation of where he stood.

The implications staggered both Azure. Not least of which, that the Creator should place the fruition of his plans in the hands of those gathered in this valley; in the comprehension of mystic prophecy; in the soul of a twelve year old boy.

‘It would seem the Dark Horde act less independently than

they think.’ Quinn said.

‘Hmm’, Sosthene played with his bottom lip in thought, rather dubiously adding ‘It appears the means to the Dark Hordes undoing has been left in our hands.’ *I just wish the details of how were more clear*, he thought. This had been his daily battle, he knew, to accept that his own ignorance was not Gods. That God was less interested in allaying his fears than building his faith.’

‘What do we do now then?’ Quinn asked.

It was Tamila who answered, having approached unnoticed.

‘We have to place Jabin's body under the water.’

The others turned toward her.

‘What's that you say Tamila?’ ask Quinn

‘The Creator has spoken with me,’ Tamila replied, with a composure not missed by the two Ancients. ‘As has Jabin,’ she continued. ‘I was instructed to tell you that the Dark Horde arrived at Landpoint several days ago. By their arts they have located our people, traversed the land and at this very moment prepare to battle.’

Each Azure reflected the others worry at the sooner than expected arrival of the Dark Horde. Neither doubted Tamila's words, but her next words baffled them.

‘Jabin said your brothers can resist the Dark Lord's powers for a time, but in the end the people must fight. He also said his presence is needed for any hope of victory.’

‘How can our brothers resist the Dark Horde?’ Quinn asked, voicing Sosthene's thoughts, ‘They are without their powers— Or have they been returned?’ There was spark of hope in his voice.

‘That's what I didn't understand,’ Tamila replied, ‘He spoke of your departed brothers.’

‘Departed brothers?’ Both Ancients said at once.

‘What did he mean by that?’ Sosthene asked.

She shrugged, her calm slipping to awkwardness at understanding so little of what she shared.

‘We can discuss this later,’ Quinn said, ‘the urgency of our return is now paramount, these other riddles must wait for a more convenient time.’ He turned to Tamila, ‘What did you mean by putting Jabin under the water?’

‘I wasn’t told. Only that it need be done.’ She answered.

‘Well what are we waiting for then, our people may be dying as we speak.’ Quinn said, already walking toward where Jabin lay.

ARISEN

Jonn had many moments of pause, as he and Bihl carried his son into the ponds still waters. He trusted the word of the Azure, that Jabin would be safe, but his faith in their words contended with a practical mind that said he was about to drown his son.

‘Are you right, Jonn?’ Bihl asked, holding Jabin's legs above the ponds surface.

‘Yeah. I'm fine. Not the most natural thing to be doing though, is it, putting your unconscious son under water. I feel a bit at odds about it.’

‘He’ll be right. I'd be more concerned at what you’re going to

say to him when he wakes up.’ Bihl said.

Jonn gave a *tell-me-about-it* grunt, ‘Tanya and I have lost more sleep over that prospect than I care to remember.’

Bihl gave him a sympathetic smile, ‘I’m sure he still remembers his Ma and Pa, Jonn. Your children are still your children no matter what their age, or how they’ve changed. It’ll work out.’

Jonn nodded, ‘Hope so. Well, I’m ready.’

Both men lowered Jabin into the water. Bihl released Jabin's legs first. After a moment, Jonn let go of his son's shoulders. Almost immediately Jabin sank below the surface, seeming to descend beyond the actual depth of the water, disappearing completely. So suddenly had this occurred that the two men had no time to react, hardly enough to even register what happened.

Jonn was half turned about, anxiously conveying to the Azure what had happened, when an eruption at the centre of the pond swung him back. He was greeted by two figures rising from the waters.

One was his son.

Jabin was erect, though visibly unconscious; his head slumped and shoulders limp. The entity beside him was harder to view, outlined by a flickering dazzle of colours that confused the eye. The colours jump from the figure in short bursts, like the popping sparks of a well-dried log on the hearth, in colours defying any natural hues. Jonn heard gasps behind him, and turned to see the Azure staring with awe at the imbued being. They mouthed something, but he couldn’t hear what. Turning back, Jonn saw the two figures drift toward each other, a sound like that of many tiny bells increasing as they did so. A moment later they met, and with a final flare of colour and a graceful

staccato of notes that sent a shiver down Jonn's back, the two images became one.

Jonn blinked.

Standing on the water, eyes looking about him, stood Jabin. He was naked, but bathed in light. Jonn watched his son, his boy become man standing before him. As their eyes met, so also did all of Jonn's fears dissolve, worries discarded as father and son walked eagerly toward each other. Although Jonn knew it, his impatience to be close to his son overwhelmed the fact that he was walking on water—as was Jabin. All things were forgotten save each other, as they embraced, tears coming freely to both.

On shore, Tanya and Tamila hugged joyfully. Quinn wept, tears at odds with the beaming smile showing all his teeth. Sosthene stood to one side muttering to himself, a mixed kettle of confusion and happiness brewing on his face. The others of the party shared Jonn and Tanya's joy in their own way, clapping each other on the back and shouting words of gladness and mirth.

Only Dored remained cheerless.

Having separated himself from the others, Dored witnessed Jabin's miraculous return, then bowing his head, he wept silent tears. A burden rested upon his soul that evoked emotions he rarely felt and never showed. A command he knew not how to keep, but had to obey. One that made no sense, and threatened to overthrow his faith. Looking through the glazed eyes of sorrow, Dored watched Jabin's welcomed return by those that loved him. Fists balled in his robe, he whispered an agonised plea, 'Forgive me, I have no choice.'

At last father and son parted. Jonn providing his son some

modesty with his own tunic.

Taking interest for the first time in the solidity of the water beneath him, Jonn reached down and tapped the surface. There was a ringing sound, as of crystal glass when gently rubbed. Standing again, he laughed at the wonder of it and stamped his foot, causing the whole glade to fill with a high pitched vibration. Arms across each others shoulders, Jonn and Jabin walked to shore.

As they neared, Bihl shouted out, ‘Well, if it's solid enough to hold you two heavyweights, it should hold me.’ With a bold leap, he jumped onto the pond, landing only yards from where Jabin and Jonn approached. None but they saw his startled expression, as he disappeared beneath the surface. Spluttering in surprise, Bihl found himself up to his neck in frigid water. Onshore there was a short silence, before each fell to a fit of laughter. Suppressed tension from weeks of pursuit found its release, and Bihl found himself the catalyst.

Jonn attempted to aid his friend, but due to some unknown mystery the surface remained solid for only Jabin and his father. Eventually, in disgust at the whole spectacle, Bihl let go of Jonn's hands and clambered to shore by himself. By then Jabin and Jonn had reached the bank and were greeted with hugs and handshakes by the whole group. After Jabin had been given the chance to properly dress, all sat together in a welcome celebration, Quinn even breaking out a bottle of ambrosia he'd brought for this very moment.

It was not long before the party had formed into smaller groups of discussion, leaving Jabin time to be with those closest to him; his parents, Quinn—and Tamila.

Jabin sat upon one of the few smooth rocks surrounding the pool, his eyes a penetrating blue gleam. He wore his father's

clothes and, though not quite of equal size, he filled them well. At his right sat Tanya, whose hand he held within both his own, while her eyes glistened with tears of joy. For all the changes in her son, it had not taken long to realise that his love and honour for them remained undiminished. Their sadness at his missing years were allayed somewhat by the man they saw before them. A man who seemed to inspire those about him, exuding confidence, compassion, and a steel resolve. Yet there was something more, an unseen aura about Jabin that was felt, a power that commanded respect from his friends, and fear from those who would be his enemies, a transcendent quality about him that set him above other Elfin-kind.

Tamila sat adjacent Jabin. She said little, content to look at the man she had grown to love, though before this time had never meet. Everything about him reinforced her feelings, even his appearance being one that seemed profoundly right for her. Their eyes meet often—win in colour and intensity—at each contact a magnetic attraction pulled at her soul. A desire to reach out and touch him, hold his hand, rest her head on his lap, anything to feel closer than she was. In those connections, Jabin's eyes spoke to her beyond words, feelings for her and of his need for her presence. They also spoke patience, that time to be alone would come, that matters of more urgent importance pressed him, duties he must fulfil. It was in that duty she saw sadness and fear. She longed to ask what was wrong, but his eyes spoke—Wait.

Quinn sat just outside the family circle, wishing to give them time to re-acquaint on the new grounds of Jabin's transformation. It also gave the Azure time to simply watch his favourite Ralisian. It was already clear to the Ancient that Jabin's arrival had immediately altered the order of authority.

Simply by his presence, Jabin had become leader. Even the three Azure felt an inexplicable need to submit to this man. Quinn thought back to the concerns he once had for Jabin, of the duty of Kingship being overwhelming. Now he laughed at such thoughts, scolding his own lack of faith in the Creators purposes. Jabin truly was a king of kings, a demonstrable leader, benefactor, and hope inspirer of his people. Quinn smiled at this last quality, finding himself considering the war as good as won, purely because Jabin was back with them. It was while Quinn ruminated, that Jabin stood up to address everyone.

‘My family and friends, there is much I long to share with you, but I have been chosen to meet a present need that requires immediate attention. In what sense I am to meet that need, I have not been permitted to reveal. But know this. Many leagues from here our friends, relatives, and people fight the Dark Lord's army. It is a fight they cannot win while I remain here.’ Jabin walked among them while he spoke, laying a reassuring hand on each as he passed.

‘You all know that to me and my progeny has been given the power of Dunamis. It is sufficient for what we face, I do not question this. We are in the Creators care,-’ his gaze went out to where the lone figure of Dored sat, his words carrying clearly across the springlike glade, ‘-we must, therefore, quell our doubting hearts at a time where faith and hope are most required.’ Jabin looked about him at the faces, lingering long on Tamila's. ‘You must gather what you wish to take now and assemble yourselves about me within the hour. Now go and make yourselves ready.’

With that everyone went about breaking camp, gathering together those possessions they could carry. Each one's

thoughts were on loved ones, hoping they were still alive, wondering what they might be facing. Within the hour all stood in a tight semi-circle before Jabin.

With a word he brought them to silence before speaking, ‘I will transport us as close to the stronghold as possible. You will be disorientated upon arrival, but it will pass quickly.’ He made a count of everyone, nodding, he added, ‘Now, we go.’ Before any had time to think, there was a sudden blurring into grey and the sound of a thunderclap.

The few horses left behind jumped at the sudden noise. Upon seeing the now empty glade, they, with typical lack of interest, returned to their grazing.

WAR

‘Release.’ shouted Danek, and was answered with the thrumming reverberation of four tensional ropes being loosed, simultaneously followed by the whistling travel of four sizable boulders flying toward their targets. Flying true, they disappeared amongst the mass of bodies pressing up the defile below. From this distance he was unable to see the carnage each missile created, but he grimaced at the possibilities.

‘Reload.’ he shouted again, turning to examine the war machine nearest him. This one resembled a giant crossbow, half again the height of a man. Like the crossbow it was

fashioned after, it consisted of a tightly wound cord of animal sinew attached to a notched holder. This was fixed to a pivoted tripod platform enabling it to be angled both up and down, as well as from side to side it. Once drawn back mechanically by windlass and ratchet, it could be loaded with a rock or flaming pitch and launched by the simple release of a lever. With a furthest range of three hundred yards, it had power enough to fell a small tree. Ten had been built of this type and seven of a second design Dored had proposed. Larger than the giant crossbows, these catapults threw their load by the use of a swinging arm. Slower to load, these weapons had the advantage of being able to launch multiple missiles simultaneously. Though of shorter range and less precise, their destructive power was well evident to those in its path below.

Danek looked at his creations with pride. The weapons had taken a small forest to build and equal manpower. There had been only one day to test them before the Horde had arrived, but now they had proven the balance of the battle, decimating the enemies ranks. Over time the constant barrage also obstructed the defile, the spent boulders—and their victims—further hindering the enemies approach.

Danek walked to the edge of the north bluff on which the four catapults under his command sat. From there he had clear view of the defile. *Still they come*, he pondered, amazed that any creature, no matter what their origin, could continue to fight through such bloody slaughter.

They had attacked at twilight the previous night, battling unremittingly through the dark hours. The narrowness of the sheer sided defile had hindered their approach to four abreast—in places only single file—giving the defenders a crushing advantage. Granting them to fire down upon their foe with

spear, arrow and rock, while receiving little in retaliation.

Little, but some. Trolls made up the bulk of the enemies first assault, creatures the equal to any five men in strength. Projectiles thrown by them travelled far, and with force enough to pierce the heaviest of shields and armour. Some of the strongest even managed to hurl back the heavy catapult rocks that landed near them, though none to the height of the weapons themselves.

It was upon this scene that day dawned bright, clear, and indifferent to the death it canopied. Looking with the advantage of light, Danek was struck by the symbolism of what he saw. The people's army stood free on high ground, their sweating armoured bodies and steel weaponry blazing in the glancing morning sun, conveying an empyrean aspect. While below, like demons of the pit, the Horde languished shadowed in gloom. Screamed pain and anger echoed from their imprisonment like the distressed moans of the accursed. Danek guessed that thousands had fallen. Whereas only a scant handful of the people had even been injured. Again he marvelled at their persistence. Glancing across the defile, Danek saw that the yellow banner was still flying, indicating that he was to continue firing.

The Azure had devised a simple method of communication between the separated units of the army; a series of coloured banners each signifying a different command. Yellow was an order to maintain artillery attack, red to cease; green the command for the soldiers to attack, blue to retreat; white to be flown when under attack and black with a white slash diagonally through the centre the sign of general retreat back to the valley—to be used only in the instance of the gorge being overrun.

‘Release.’

Ten? Twenty? How many fell each time? He had no idea, but he hoped more. He wanted this fight to end quickly, the threat to elf-kind destroyed and life again returned to normal. Though he knew that would never be, not unless the Azure received their powers back. It was strange to him, seeing the Azure so changed. Old men with old bodies, no power left to them but the wisdom of their words—a wisdom proven vital in the last few months. Having to rely on the mundane power of young men and woman in tasks they had once accomplished with little more than a thought.

‘Reload.’

Danek wondered what the world would be like without them, what would take their place when all were dead and gone. He thought of Jabin. How can one man take the place of hundreds, he thought, or will his power and wisdom equal theirs? The questions weighed down the uncomplicated carpenter, and he returned his attention to the battle.

For all their loses, and the immensity of the obstacles they faced, still the Horde had pressed forward; now only fifty yards from the gorge entrance. The bodies, now piled up to the height of a man, were making it impossible for those behind to advance further, those attempting to ascend the mound being added to it by the archers above.

‘Slaughter. They might as well cut their own throats.’ Danek said aloud to no one in particular. We can’t lose.

No sooner had the thought been voiced, than there was a woman's scream from behind the catapults. At first Danek didn’t register. One more scream from a different direction, not seeming out of place in this battle. However, by the second scream, Danek was running. The heavy spear—his preferred

weapon-flexed slightly as he bounded toward the now consistent shouts of alarm. The thought ran through his head that maybe he should raise the white flag, but he wasn't sure whether he was being attacked or not, so decided against it. As he drew nearer, the sound of fighting became clearer; men howling their battle cries as others shrieked their deaths. He cleared the line of catapults at a sprint, but was prevented from seeing what attacked them by those of his own command. Each had swords drawn, standing in a tight line blocking any passage. Those at the rear, nearest Danek, looked about them, unsure.

What to do? Push forward or wait? Danek was trying to decide. At a glance, he could see that his men were bunched too closely, risking injury to one another with their own swords. In a booming voice, which had earned him the nickname Thunderclap, he shouted, 'Spread out, you're too close, give yourselves room to fight.' Those closest heard him clearly, in obedience stepping back and apart from one another to blade length, shouting the command to those in front. The resulting loosening of the ranks allowed Danek to get glimpses of what they faced, and his blood ran cold.

His command consisted of three men for each of the seven catapults on his side of the bluff, plus another ten as reserve; thirty-one in all. Before him stood at least fifty of the Horde, and more could be seen ascending from the mountain the bluff abutted. Somehow the Horde had found a pathway leading from the defile to the bluff. Danek guessed they had approached through the night, realising then why the Horde had continued to battle so relentlessly and futilely in the defile—They were a diversion. Like a sudden revelation, Danek grasped the depth of the situation. If this bluff was lost,

then the catapults could be used against those upon the facing cliff. That action would take the pressure from those in the defile, allowing them entrance to the gorge. *If that happens...*, Danek jumped to the result, *If that happened, this will become a real war on an open battlefield, with casualties as heavy for the people as it had been so far for the Horde.*

Sweat poured down Danek's face. His mind became a bubbling confusion of thoughts. He'd not wanted a command position, knowing that he was not a quick nor deep thinker, strategy being a word he understood but could never utilise. He had been selected to command the catapults on the northern bluff for several reasons, not least of which because he had supervised their construction, but also because the bluff's were considered unassailable, therefore requiring little more than overseeing the deployment of the weapons.

How wrong could they have been.

Turning, Danek looked across the gorge to the opposing bluff. He could just see the figures of Tulin and Sisera. Now he wished had raised the white banner. They still faced the defile, the catastrophe taking place on his side hidden from them by the catapults, the noise of this battle no doubt seeming but an echo to the one below. *They couldn't do anything anyway*, Danek admitted to himself, now hating the fact of their lost powers; though still wishing he had an Azure by his side. They would have known what to do even if they couldn't help in doing it.

But he was alone, and his men were dying before him at the hands of creatures that looked part lizard, part pig and part just plain monster. He took a steadying breath. It was up to him. With a cry like a man gone berserk, Danek lifted his spear above his head and charged. What followed was a blur. His

first time in battle, he was not prepared for the seeming separation of mind from action, feeling more the spectator than the performer. Now he understood why the Ancients had been so insistent on gruelling training, for it was those conditioned responses learnt from continuous repetition that now kept him alive. Trained automatic riposte to the enemies onslaught, attacks he would otherwise have been unable to avoid. Yet it was futile. By the time he had joined the melee, half his men already lay on the ground. The surprise of the attack, the inexperience of the soldiers, were proving a fatal combination.

Danek had just killed a creature with a vicious blow to its head using the iron-capped butt of his spear, when he felt a searing pain across his left shoulder. On spinning around, his spear fortuitously parried a second blow, this one aimed at his head by a creature a good arms length taller than himself, and twice as broad. Danek's arm rung in pain from the impact. Troll, he thought, he'd been warned of them by the Azure. Although slower than the Goblin or Kobold, they were fearless and extremely strong, with thick hide as natural armour. They had two weaknesses: feeble peripheral vision, and legs lacking armoured below the knee. Danek jumped to the side and begun circling in that direction. The creature followed, its forward facing black eyes—which seemed far too small for its size—tracking his movements, its body rushing to catch up. Danek suddenly jumped again, putting him side on to the creature. Before it had time to react, he thrust his spear into the Troll's calf. Being as thick as Danek's waist, it was an easy target. Dropping its large axe, the beast bellowed a deep and strangely hollow sound, yanking its injured leg to one side. The deeply lodged spear was torn from Danek's hand, leaving him defenceless before an angry creature easily thrice his weight.

With speed contrary to what he had been told, the Troll's arms darted out and wrapped themselves around Danek's chest. He was lifted from the ground in a grasp that prevented breath and swiftly cracked several of his ribs. With another bellow, the Troll lifted the helpless man above his head preparing to dash him against the rocks. In his anger however, the creature had forgotten the six-foot heavy-shafted spear that protruded from his leg. Tripping on it, he fell, releasing Danek in the process, sending him flying through the air.

Danek's awareness lasted only for the flight. Striking something hard before sliding down a cold surface, the sensation was lost as unconsciousness took him.

Sisera's voice was urgent as he pulled Tulin around and pointed, 'Brother, what do you see?'

Tulin gazed in the direction his peer indicated, his eyes squinting at the effort. Even though the catapults and the smoke of boiling pitch obscured the distance, Tulin knew what he saw. 'How?' is all he could say, a horror developing on his face as it caught up with the eyes and the chaotic picture his mind was painting of a battle turning to the enemies favour.

Sisera rounded upon several young officers nearest him. 'As quickly as you can,' he said to one, 'get men on top of that bluff.' To the other, 'Have half the catapults aimed at the other side and prepare to fire.' As both soldiers rushed off at a sprint, Sisera brushed his hand down his haggard face, one that had seen little sleep for several days. 'The attack must have been sudden if they had no time to even raise the white banner.' He mumbled something under his breath, hitting his thigh with a clenched fist. 'Disaster, this could end in disaster ...if they manage to take that bluff.' His voice was equally as haggard as

his face.

‘How could it happen? We sent men to investigate any possible access to the bluff; they assured us there was no way.’ Tulin said, anxiety tingeing his words.

‘No way for Elf’s, that is. We were foolish not to have checked it ourselves, the Horde contains creatures with limbs far stronger than a man’s, with the ability to perform feats men would find impossible. Of course they said there was no way, they were thinking of what they could achieve with no idea what the Horde could do. None but we Azure have ever seen their ability. It’s our fault, we should have made sure.’

As one, both Azure turned again to the far bluff, their grimmest fears coming to fruition even as they did so. The fighting had finished and it was obvious that not a man was left standing. The larger creatures among the invaders had already begun re-positioning the catapults, aiming them toward where the two Azure stood.

Both Ancients knew that the Goblin’s—the most barbarous element of the Horde army—would even now be tearing apart the bodies of the fallen, feasting upon them as was their way. Both also knew the Horde could not be blamed for their actions, as mere puppets, fashioned and guided completely by their makers, they reflected only their masters natures in the unmindful cruelty of their deeds. It sickened them nonetheless.

‘Danek was a good boy’ Tulin said softly, ‘He showed promise as a leader of men, regardless of his self-doubt’, the Azure swallowed hard in an effort to restrain strong emotions.

Sisera placed a gentle hand upon his brothers shoulder, ‘We have been allowed to live too long brother. For all my faith in the creator’s plans, I cannot help but think he has misjudged me in this, in deeming me up to this task’. He looked across the

gorge that separated the bluffs as he spoke, could see the weapons they'd built preparing to rain death upon their own people. He wondered at the irony of that. 'At times I feel a powerlessness that threatens to overwhelm me. The faith I uphold to oppose it seems such a hollow wishful thing, a last option when all else is exhausted.' He sighed before continuing, 'Yet, as the book says, who has known His mind? Or who His plans faulted? So brother, we go on not because we know why, but because He does. Death is not such a final thing, as I'm sure those men,' he indicated the opposite bluff, 'have just discovered. While there is life there is hope, as our dear brother Quinn so often reminded us.'

'I wonder how they're doing, we need them now.' Tulin said with a frown. The thought ended as an officer ran up to tell of the catapults readiness.

'Destroy those catapults,' Sisera commanded, 'before they learn how to use them effectively.'

'Then concentrate on their army.' Tulin added.

'Yes Magi.' and the soldier sped off to obey.

Looking across the gap, the two Ancients could see that the creatures were still attempting to operate the war-machines. For the advantage to be regained the machines would need to be destroyed, and soon.

There was the resonant thud of thirteen catapults firing in concert. Sisera thanked the Creator the bulk of the machines had been placed on this side. Several seconds later, he watched the barrage fall upon the enemy. One missile struck a catapults windlass mechanism, mangling the bronze components and rendering the unit inoperable. Others missed, while some glanced from more robust parts of the machine. Screams indicated that many of the projectiles were not completely

ineffective.

‘Reload.’ Came the command as the second officer returned to the Ancients.

‘Two hundred men are ascending the bluff now Magi,’ he glanced at the catapults, ‘when they reach the top, we will have to stop firing.’

‘Yes, give the order, but make sure the weapons are loaded and ready, in case this fails.’

The officer looked at Tulin, and the worry in the Azure's eyes made the man uneasy.

Tulin saw it, ‘Don’t worry lad, I’ve seen far worse and seen it overcome. We’ll get through this and then you’ll have some real stories to tell your grandchildren. Now go and do what you’ve been told.’

‘Yes Magi.’

‘Not much worse though.’ he mumbled to Sisera.

DISSENSION

They had tried everything and failed.

In a rage that would not be abated, the High Dark Lord released a violent stream of pulsing red energy toward the dimly glowing figures at the forest edge. With enough power to incinerate an acre of grown oaks, the blast fell upon the figures

and was dispersed and defused as if no more than a stream of cool water. Tarnul had not felt such frustration in a long time. An ancient hatred rekindled to its fullest within him, a malice born of pride and resolute rejection of anyone or anything that opposed his will. A pride that blinded him to all but his own rage and his need to satisfy it, to seek retribution. However, all avenues had been exhausted, every power at their disposal unleashed and sent with the combined will of the Dark Horde, and all achieving the same result—Nothing.

Tarnal's eyes glowed, malevolent and yellow, as he gazed at the ghostly Azure spectre's before him. They stood in a loose line between the trees, facing the Dark Lords. Not a sound they made, their expressions ever calm, serene—sleepily so—yet they barred the Dark Lords efforts as easily as a man turning aside a young child's puny attempts to pass.

For days now the Dark Lord's had been held up here, forced to send their army ahead to do battle with Elf's in their mountain fortress. Even the Dark Lord's ability to resurrect any of the Horde had been thwarted by the incorporeal Azure. A fallen warrior required being carried clear of the forest before any Dark Lord could raise it. The fires, also, had died, put out by the arrival of an unseasonable rainstorm. The Azure shades prevented the Dark Lords from magically setting even a blade of grass alight within the forest.

‘This is useless High Lord,’ Damd said to his master with his usual lack of expression, ‘we waste our time. We must concentrate on helping the army instead of trying to break through these.’ He indicated the Azure shades.

Tarnul spat his reply, ‘Do not presume to instruct me Damd, you will do what I command until I decide otherwise.’

Damd didn't reply. Neither did he look afraid. Rather he

turned back to the forest in silence, nodding his head as if having just becoming aware of some new knowledge.

Tarnul looked at his second in unspent anger. Yet he might as well have been angry at a mountain for all the attention it got him. He closed his eyes and focused inward, willing his emotions to subside so he could think better. It was then that he was thrown to the ground.

In an instant he was on his feet, every part of his mind and body alert, power ready to be unleashed at a thought in his defence. But there was nothing. No danger either physical or otherwise could be seen, even the ghostly Azure having vanished. Tarnul saw others of the Dark Lord host rise to their feet, the weaker ones the more stunned. Tarnul knew this was not an attack, the wave of magical energy that struck them had lacked focused direction, was rather the widening concentric ripple of a power released from a distance, having its roots at some fixed point far off. He closed his eyes and reached out.

What he found sent trepidation through his body, a sensation not experienced for eons. His fear, now as then, stemmed from the thought of lost freedom, incarceration upon a being that had never before known boundaries. Something had changed in the world, Tarnul sensed it. A presence of power absent before but now keenly apparent. A power Tarnul recognised and, were he honest with himself, envied.

‘The Azure shades have gone, master. The way stands open.’ This from Damd.

Tarnul didn’t reply, but looked toward the mountain. There was a sudden clap, as of thunder, and a blue-green light that flecked for an instant at the mount's base.

‘Master?’ questioned Damd, but was unanswered, his High Lord lost in thought.

Damd's powers did not extend to Tarnul's perceptive abilities. He could not know what they were soon to confront; but he could guess. 'So we face Dunamis, then.'

Tarnul's head snapped up at the mention of the abhorred power of the Hated-One, his detachment shattered by hearing his fear voiced. Still he did not look at Damd, keeping his eyes on the place the light had emitted from, the people's stronghold.

'Yes', he said in a sough voice almost as deep as Damd's, and as emotionless. 'It would appear our choices have come to but one. We must face this boy.'

Damd nodded, but of the other Dark Horde gathered round few took it as calmly. Foeomen in particular looked troubled. Glancing about at his brother-lords, he saw the thoughts he had written on his own. The large Dark Lord battled between a fear of confronting his master and his dread of facing Dunamis, both of which, he knew, could end in his doom. His fingers, like gnarled branches in the wind, rubbed against each other in nervous reflex, while his face twitched in anticipation of his protest. After an anxious moment of indecision the greater fear won out.

'We cannot win against the full power of the Hated One, High Lord, not here, not as we are. Best to leave and plan a new strategy. Fight when we are ready.'

Tarnul's mien showed his fury and although Foeomen was not its source, he became its target. 'And when would that be, you fool. In what way can we be more or less ready than what we are now? Time does not increase our powers, but with every passing day the possessor of the Azure's magic grows in his understanding of his abilities. We have run out of options, we face this child now or we face certain defeat later.' His tone took on a deeper malignity. 'I have endured you Foeomen. You

are like a whining beast, a howling wind that achieves nothing but noise. You will speak no more, but will do what I command, else you will receive Sabototh's fate. Am I understood?'

Foemen stared at his master, before lowering his eyes from Tarnul's in nodded acquiesce. The oak-like lord then stepped back.

Tarnul watched him move to stand with the other lords, his yellow eyes simmering violence as if disappointed at Foemen's compliance. Turning away sharply, he gave the command to move on the stronghold.

None noticed Foemen hang back, nor saw him flex his hands in barely contained anger before turning around and walking in the opposite direction.

DUTY

Danek saw the pinhole of light and willed himself toward it, regaining consciousness with a flash of painful awareness that rendered him almost senseless again. At first he forgot where he was or how he might have got there, but the pain in his ribs and stinging hurt of a slashed forehead soon reminded him. He was laying face down on an incline, his head seeming unsupported. His one good eye—the other swollen and caked in

blood—remained blurry. Shaking his head gently, he blinked hard against the blur—and almost shouted alarm when focus returned revealing a sheer drop to rocks fifty feet below. In panic, Danek pushed himself back from the lip of the bluff he'd come so close to unwittingly plummeting over. His heart drummed a tattoo of pain in his head at the sudden movement.

Several minutes passed in which the robust carpenter took stock. He examined himself for serious injury, simultaneously taking in the sounds from above. Sounds of battle.

Looking up at the blue sky, he noted it was yet early morning. He'd not been unconscious for long. As he made himself ready to ascend back to the plateau, he glanced something to his right. Squinting against the sun's rays, Danek became alarmed in recognising what he saw. Somehow the Horde had managed to construct a platform that rose at a steady angle from the defile to the bluff. On the still shadowed southern cliffs it was hard to see, being built with minimal material. Iron pins hammered into crevices within the bare rock, upon which were lain thick planks that formed a path, this providing access to the tableland above. Yet even more alarming was the steady line of creatures that scrambled across it.

Danek realised the Horde must have erected it during the night, the noise of the battle acting as decoy for its construction. Ignoring his pain, he rose, with clenched teeth hauling himself up the short distance to the bluff. On reaching the top, he cautiously peered over the edge.

A battle raged. Several hundred Assasian soldiers had formed a wedge between two separated elements of the Horde. Casualties were heaviest about side containing the catapults. These had been repositioned. Danek guessed the creatures had attempted to use them, and so been separated from the main

body with the arrival of the soldiers. Trolls and Goblins lay scattered amid the war machines, though a handful remained. These fought ferociously for their lives against the newly arrived troops, who used their spears to good advantage, holding the creatures back while archers picked them off from the behind.

Danek recognised many of the soldiers, knew that this company were of the recently formed Azure Guard. They were the best, hand-picked by the Magi to act as rearguard in case of retreat, and for deployment in any such situations requiring decisive action. The men were quick, precise and disciplined, chosen for cool heads and their ability to make every motion of the blade count. They were brave, hard, and determined men— But they were not enough.

For every beast killed, two more took its place. Though the Horde's losses exceeded the Azure Guard's, their numbers swelled, while the Guard's slowly dwindled. Danek alone knew why. It was then he understood what needed to be done. *I have to destroy the gantry ...somehow.*

The battle had moved from where Danek hid, allowing him to see behind the Horde regiment to where the suspended platform abutted the plateau. It hadn't been completely bridged. Between the butte and the mountain existed a crevasse separating the two by a good five feet. The creatures were forced to jump this distance to join the fight; a feat not all succeeded in. As Danek watched a Kobold misjudge the gap and fell, those behind it seemingly unperturbed.

A hasty plan began to form in the young carpenter's mind, one he'd be questioning his sanity concerning if time permitted such, but there wasn't time to think, only to act. With every passing minute dozens more of the Horde were cramming onto

the plateau. It was only because the tableland had become so crowded that the procession on the gantry had come to a standstill.

Easing his way up onto the gently sloping edge of the plateau, Danek crawled as low as possible toward the rear of the enemy position, at times hanging over the side of the cliff face in his determination to avoid being seen. Though the mountain cast its shadow on his approach, it was the distraction of battle that concealed him best, the Horde too busy defending their foothold to notice an unlikely enemy approach from their one unassailable position.

What seemed an hour later, but was really only minutes, Danek came to where any further advance would have him clearly outlined against the brightening sky. To his right, the plateau narrowed to a rocky protrusion, a jut upon which the creatures leapt from their gantry. The crevasse separating the two was a good man's length in width. The gantry itself was supported by pins as thick as a man's wrist. Danek wondered at the strength of those managing to hammer such into a sheer rock face. The pins were spaced with heavy timber planks spanning between. The creatures lined no more than two to a plank, the heaviest of them standing alone.

Danek's heart began to beat wildly, the reality of what he was about to attempt finally breaking through his disconnected thoughts. Part of him screamed foolishness at the impetuous act of daring-do he was about to commit. He ignored it. Looking over his shoulder, the carpenter saw down the line of battle. As he watched a man was cut down by a Troll's giant broad-bladed axe. As the Troll moved forward, three Goblins swarmed over the fallen soldier. At first Danek couldn't tell what they were doing, but as the head of one Goblin came up, its mouth

dripping gore, Danek's blood chilled. Horror raised the hair on his neck. Sickened, he turned away just in time to avoid a foot aimed at his head.

The Kobold, whose crested brow came up to Danek's chest, spat a growling sound, one Danek assumed was a curse, and went to draw the short sword it had at its belt. It was quick, far quicker than the Troll he had already faced. But as fate would have it, the sword did not come freely from its sheath, its poorly kept and rusting steel clinging to the leather scabbard.

Before the creature had it out, Danek, with both hands tightly fisted struck the Kobold mightily on either shoulder at the base of the neck. Its sword fell to the ground as the Kobold collapsed in agony. As it fell, Danek brought his knee hard up into the creature's sternum. With a harsh, choked cry the creature fell down and was silent. Danek didn't know if it was dead, and didn't wait to be certain, for upon the gantry a commotion had started. The creatures there had seen him. Unable to do anything because of their precarious position, they were shouting to those on the plateau. As yet they'd failed to get above the roar of the fighting, but Danek knew that wouldn't last. Thoughts of being eaten alive sent another wave of fear through the giant man, but he crushed the thought with an even greater fear—the Horde destroying all those he held dear, feasting upon them. Danek found himself running like an enraged bull toward the crevasse. He had no planned conscious thought of exactly what he would do when he got there, only that it was up to him to destroy the gantry, to give the men a fighting chance, to give his people a chance of life.

As before, everything slowed down, his mind taking in gradual motions what in reality was a rushed sequence of events. Danek reached the edge of the tableland at a sprint,

with every ounce of his strength he jumped, throwing his formidable bulk across the chasm, which at this point was a good seven feet. He hoped the makeshift platform was up to the impact.

The two Goblins saw his rapid approach, and already had their swords drawn. If they had kept their wits about them they could have skewered the man in mid-flight, but they had hesitated on seeing the massive Elf flying toward their narrow perch, and panicked. Forgetting their weapons, they made a hurried bid to find some form of escape. By then it was too late.

With the momentum of one of his catapult missiles, Danek smashed into the Goblin's, who in their haste to avoid the collision had both run into each other. One of the creatures was immediately rendered senseless, its head acting as buffer between Danek's barrel of a chest and the unyielding granite of the mountain. It fell silently into the narrow canyon. The other Goblin, hit hard in the mouth by Danek's arm, had maintained its balance by the fact of a handhold fortuitously found at the moment of impact; fortuitously for both, for as Danek rebounded from the force of the collision, he reached for the only nearby object—the Goblin.

Almost twice the girth of the Goblin, Danek's weight, and the impetus with which he fell, would've torn muscle from bone in the arm of any elf. Yet the Goblin was not a man. Danek, holding onto the Goblin through its belt, came to an abrupt halt in his fall. The Goblin gave only a strained grunt as indication the man was indeed a heavy weight. A second went by, then two. The others of the horde had not yet reacted, still stunned by the unexpectedness of the attack. The Goblin was unable to move. Having dropped its sword, it now used both hands to

cling tenaciously to the hold it had found, knowing that any attempt to move would result in a rapid descent to the valley floor; though creatures who thought little about death, the survival instinct was as strong in them as any animal, and they understood fear.

Danek knew he had to think quickly, before the others overcame their initial shock and killed him where he hung, his mission incomplete. That thought spurred him. He noticed that the first Goblin had dropped its sword before it fell, and it lay a few feet to his left, hilt facing toward him over the edge of the plank. Danek did the only thing left to him. Using his strength to advantage, he began climbing up the Goblin. Reaching the creature's shoulders, he swung toward the sword, managing to grab the hilt. He continued the movement by pulling up on the arm holding the Goblin while at the same time swinging his left leg over the edge of the plank. Using the sword as a counter weight, he skilfully spun himself around into a sitting position.

The Goblin, feeling the sudden release of weight, attempted to remount the plank, but Danek had anticipated this. Grabbing again the Goblin's belt, he yanked his arm forward. The creature found itself falling backwards and down at speed. It had no time to reach out for anything, but rather fell without a sound. Free of one enemy Danek turned to face the others.

From his seated position, he looked left up the gantry. Now he knew why he hadn't been attacked from that side. The force of his assault upon the scaffold had dislodged the plank one up from that which he sat on, effectively preventing access to the gantry from above. *Mission accomplished*, Danek thought to himself, amazed. Looking to his right, he was confronted by a Troll even bigger than that encountered earlier. It was still

coming toward him, slowly, not as sure footed as the quick Goblin, or nimble Kobold. In a moment Danek was on his feet, in two quick steps he reached the edge of the plank the Troll stood upon. Without thought he reached down and took a firm grip. Bracing his back, Danek let out a roar. With what would have taken the strength of any other three, Danek tilted the timber plank. The Trolls pig-like face showed an instant of shock, before it plummeted to its death. Danek threw the plank in after it. Exhausted, he leaned back against the rock face, awash with fatigue and dizziness, feeling oddly light headed.

Putting his hand to his head, he pulled it away sticky wet. Looking down he noted his blood stained jerkin and leggings. Fresh blood. His blood. Gingerly feeling the side of his head, Danek was appalled when his fingers found a deep gash just above and behind his left ear, into which his fingers disappeared. He tried to remember how it happened. Obviously when he jumped, but he could not remember hitting his head. Losing blood, the throbbing pain of his injury now engulfed. His chest hurt too, stabbing him every time he inhaled, exacerbating his dizziness. Ignoring the angry commotion on either side of him, Danek lowered himself to sit with legs dangling over the edge of the timber plank. With closed eyes he pushed his shoulders against the cool rock, its damp chill easing the pounding within his head. He was jarred to wakefulness by a loud *thwack* near his head.

Opening his eyes slowly, sensing that something bad was about to happen, he was faced with a line of Goblins along the plateau. All faced him with arrows notched and drawn in their strange short bows. Danek stared at them, unsurprised, with barely energy enough to care. He couldn't get up, his boots heavy on the ends of his stout legs. Death weary, he closed his

eyes again. *Maybe if I pretend I'm dead, they'll go away*, he thought dreamily. The Goblin's seemed to be laughing at him, pointing and chattering in their guttural tongue.

There was a sudden burning in his right leg. He knew what it was without opening his eyes, and that part of his mind most aware braced itself. Pain erupted in his left thigh, then his right shoulder. Danek shut his eyes tighter. He knew he was going to die, and hoped it would be soon, the agony was becoming unbearable. Another piercing fire of pain, this one in his hip. It burned a howl of anguish from his lips, and with the racking torment a cloak of darkest night enveloped him; black, cool and comforting. Danek invited death's embrace, hoping what he'd accomplished was enough.

BATTLE

Josheb, his golden blond hair matted by sweat and gore, stood between his two closest friends, their bodies doused in blood.

He had already seen his cousin fall. Though within his head it was little more than that. Something seen, a witnessed event he could not yet connect with any emotion, his mind so fixed on surviving that all other thoughts and sensations were overwhelmed.

Sword master and captain of the Azure Guard, Josheb was considered by all a wonder with the sword; quick enough to best any two of the other Guard's simultaneously, on one occasion three. Son to the wealthiest man in Landpoint, he had grown up with much time on his hands, and spent it in sword play. Now what had once been considered—by his elders—a waste of time, was now proving of greatest worth to those who stood with him.

His love since childhood had been the stories the Azure told to children gathered at their feet, of the ancient times; the Motherland; the War of the Ancients; noble men in battle and conquests fought. From his earliest years he had dreamt of being a soldier, though no army was even established in the land. He had even managed to persuade one of the Magi to teach him swordplay and the arts of war. Now, a young man of twenty-three, he stood more prepared for battle than any of his companions. As such, he had become their leader.

Striking down the Goblin before him with a sudden thrust through its abdomen, he quickly withdrew his sword and dispatched the Troll his friend faced, a slash to the base of its spine. Jumping back he scanned up and down the line of battle.

They had lost ground in the past few minutes of fighting, his men being forced back toward the narrow trail that lead to the valley below. The Horde had proven a fearful enemy, but their advantage was their superior strength, not their skill. Though fast, the creatures lacked discipline in their method, advancing through means of hacking ferocity than any battle skill. A fearful tactic, considering their strength, but one the Azure Guard easily counter; the sword being an instrument requiring less strength than technique to be of deadliest effect.

However, there was something Josheb did not understand.

They had arrived with just over two hundred men, to oppose less than one hundred of the Horde. Yet that many of the enemy now lay dead, but still they appeared so thickly packed that the tableland could barely contain them all.

They must be getting up here somehow, Josheb thought in frustration, the beginnings of fear beginning to creep through his adrenaline fuelled battle haze.

Of the two hundred men, fifty had fallen, another dozen been grievously injured and dragged clear. His ranks were now only three deep, each man covering three feet either side over a ragged line that stretched across the bluff. They could retreat no further without surrendering their flanks. Josheb made his decision quickly. Bringing the whistle to his lips, he blew a sharp series of signals. With well trained practice the Azure Guard suddenly divided into three separate detachments.

Josheb, with forty men, held the entrance to the trail, another forty separated from his left flank and another from his right, each fighting in a new direction away from Josheb's band. The move was a desperate one, dividing his forces. For those in the detached columns it prevented any retreat whatsoever. Against the Horde that meant no quarter, but at least it would divide the Horde's force as well, hopefully buying time enough for reinforcements to arrive.

With a fury and blur of movement, Josheb leapt back into the fray, arms feeling ponderously heavy, his sword like some log he carried. He knew the ache that strained at his shoulders would soon slow him enough for an enemy's blade to pass, but what choice had he, they were too few to rest. He pushed himself on.

On seeing the parting enemy line, and the diminished number of elves guarding the exit from the bluff, the Horde redoubled

their efforts. Like a freak wave they broke against the line of men. Josheb saw Elan, his friend from youth, stumble, and was only just in time to parry the blow that would have ended his life. In so doing he had opened himself up, and the Kobold facing him slashed forward with a vicious overhead blow. With lightning speed, Josheb spun his torso and flicked his sword arm around. Half-successful, he managed to deflect the full force of the stroke, yet was unable to completely turn the enemy's blade. The Kobold's weapon glanced off Josheb's sword, missed the man's head and struck his shoulder at the joint. Josheb screamed in agony and fell to the ground, sure that his arm had been severed. He was quickly dragged clear as another soldier jumped to take his place, running through the off balance Kobold. With gritted teeth, Josheb looked down at his shoulder, expecting to see a stump. He couldn't describe the joy felt at seeing a full length of arm. Sliced to the bone it had miraculously missed the artery, and was bleeding surprisingly little. Flexing his fingers, he found they still worked, though the pain when he did so brought a loud groan.

'You're out of the fight, captain. We'll get you down the mountain.'

'No, Wynn.' Josheb said through clenched teeth, 'It would take two men to carry me down, and all are needed here. We must hold as long as possible. Just bandage my arm before I bleed to death then help me to that rock.' He indicated a large boulder beside the trail that overlooked the battlefield, 'I need to see what's happening.'

The man quickly bandaged the stiffening arm, Josheb feeling nauseous from the burning pain and blood loss. That done, and with the steadying support of Wynn, Josheb clambered up the boulder. He knew he was exposed to bowmen, standing so high

above his troops, but Josheb doubted any enemy archer had room to draw nor skill to hit him if it could. Looking right and left, he saw that his redeployment was working. The Horde had split its forces and the drive forward had been displaced, reduced enough that the Guard could now hold their position. However it was still only a balance, an equilibrium Josheb knew would soon be tipped if more troops didn't soon arrive.

He couldn't see beyond the enemies rear line to determine where the creatures were arriving from, but he knew they were, for he could see new heads appearing at the rear even as those at the front were felled.

He'd just turned to make a quick count of his men, when Wynn shouted wildly in warning. Before he could react, Wynn had dived into him, throwing them both from the lookout. Josheb felt something sharp pierce his chest. He landed heavily, striking his head on the strewn rocks. A sound like landslide filled his ears. Flat on his back looking up, he only semi-consciously noted a Goblin move to stand over him. He realised then that the bluff was lost. The enemy had broken through.

Before the creature struck its deathblow, Josheb lost consciousness.

VICTORY?

The catapults, half of which faced the opposing bluff, sat idle, loaded, ready, but waiting. The men that worked them had lined themselves across the edge of the tableland, viewing the battle that raged only a hundred paces from where they stood.

Slightly higher than the opposing plateau, the men felt as spectators, audience to some elaborate performance being played out on the stage below. However, the scenes of this drama were real, and each knew they were spectators to a contest that would ultimately decide their own fate. Therefore they witnessed in silence, each tense, aware of what hung in the balance, frustrated that all they could do was stare.

Sisera and Tulin stood with them, frustration being a gross understatement to what they felt. Helplessness clutched at Sisera's throat like shame. He felt soiled that so many of his people were dying while he did nothing—could do nothing—struggling between defending his ineffectiveness and cursing it. Another question kept raising its head, however, one the Azure suppressed but kept coming back to — Why?

Why did the creator allow such things to happen when he had the power to stop it? *Or did he?* Sisera cursed himself for that thought, but it had struck a discontented chord within him. His subconscious mind began to run with it, pitting doubt and reason against faith.

Tulin, too, wondered at why. However his faith was not in question, only what he saw as his limited understanding. He loathed what was happening, longed only for power to stop it.

Both Ancients had lived so long with the power, that dispossessed of it they felt maimed, fathers incapable of

providing for their families, forced to entrust their care to another.

Their height advantage allowed them to see how the Horde were being reinforced. They could do nothing but pray, even as they watched Josheb's ordered manoeuvre, knowing he was trying to buy time, but at what risk. It was evident to all that the conflict could only end one way. No company of men, divided as they now were, could long survive such overwhelming odds; not even the Azure Guard.

‘How long till reinforcements arrive?’ Sisera asked the young officer next to him, his tone unusually cool.

‘They should be there soon Magi. We dared not take men from the defile, and the next nearest unit was within the valley preparing forward defences. It would have taken them a short time to muster, and the trail up is not an easy one. I would estimate their arrival shortly.’

‘Look.’ One of the men abruptly shouted at the Magi.

Sisera quickly turned back to the battle, but didn’t see anything new. ‘What-’, he voiced in an annoyance born of impotence, ‘-What am I supposed to see.’

‘The Horde, Magi. They pull back, see.’ The man said excitedly.

Sisera and Tulin looked to the enemy's ranks, and indeed they did pull back. There seemed to be some commotion to the rear of their position, but he couldn’t see what. ‘This may well gain the time we need.’ Tulin said.

Though desperately few, the remaining division of Azure Guard pushed at the unexpected retreat of the enemy, while the flanking units added a lateral squeeze. They constricted the Hordes ranks, such that the enemy creatures were jostling for room to swing. Yet little of great advantage was gained; not

with the Guards numbers so dwindled and battle weary.

The extra minutes were enough. Suddenly from the opposite bluff came a loud cheer, followed quickly by the sound of men shouting their battle cries and running into the melee—the reinforcements had arrived.

Sisera and Tulin almost fell off the plateau in their elation, as hundreds of fresh soldiers poured onto the lower tableland and tipped the balance to their favour. The front lines of the Horde, on seeing the situation, turned to run and were neatly cut down by their pursuers. A mad panic soon set in. Among the Dark Lord's army, the closed ranks made fighting impossible. Unknown to those at the front, who madly pushed back those behind, there was no way of escape, the gantry now inaccessible. In ignorance and fear, the fleeing Horde managed only to drive their own forces over the cliffs edge. In fact the newly arrived soldiers found their work cut out, the Horde doing their job for them. It was not until but a few lines of their ranks remained that they realised what was happening. Then, like the cornered beast's they had become, they turned savagely against the soldiers, throwing themselves in frenzy for escape against the steel and spear of their enemy. Within moments it was over.

It was while the soldiers sought to discover how the Horde had gained access to the bluff, that Danek was found. He was barely alive, an unbeliever number of arrows protruding from his limbs. It was obvious his tormentors had been aiming for a slow kill, yet miraculously no shafts had severed an artery nor punctured a vital organ. His face was ashen, contrasted by the now black blood caked to his scalp. Conscious, he made no sign of it, eyes closed, mouth half open, all effort centred on remaining as still as possible, easing the pain until death did

came.

He'd thought it had come, only to have it elude him, to teasingly caress before cruelly withdrawing. It was the silence that alerted him to the changed, the sounds of battle dulling to silence. Voices called—his name he thought—then he was being moved. He felt such hatred toward them, the pain they caused being beyond what he could articulate, even if he could make a sound. Thoughts of being eaten alive returned, but he didn't care, as long as it ended the pain. Then something wet was held to his lips. He couldn't taste it past the blood in his mouth, but moments later there was a falling away from all sensation, into a coolness that beckoned only to him.

DISASTER

Josheb lay back against the rock, the broken shaft of an arrow protruding from his ribs. Each breath felt like a rasp pushing through the hole in his chest, a giant weight every time he inhaled, but he was still living, and so were many of his men. Looking around the busy tableland, listening to the sounds of exhausted men rejoicing in life, Josheb felt exhilaration. Life was sweet indeed, realised the more fiercely for having it so threatened. However above the hubbub of men's happy shouts,

a different sound came, one Josheb knew too well, the sound of steel on steel coupled with the enraged cries of battle.

‘Wynn, do you hear fighting?’ He asked the young soldier who had tried to save him from the arrow.

Wynn raised his head from tending another of the wounded. After a moment, he nodded, ‘Yes, probably from the defile.’

Josheb shook his head, ‘To clear, it sounds nearer than that.’ Wynn saw his captain's face suddenly drop. Josheb made to rise, but could not. With urgency, he told Wynn to climb the outcrop and see what was occurring on the opposite bluff. Wynn scampered up the rocks, apprehension on his face, understanding what Josheb feared.

His fear was confirmed.

‘What do you see Wynn? What is it?’ Josheb's voice was shaded with trepidation.

Wynn was lost in what he saw, mesmerised by the horror of it. ‘Elan.’ Josheb shouted, after futilely trying to get Wynn's attention. Already guessing what the younger soldier saw, he had to hear it spoken. ‘Elan.’

His childhood friend rushed to his side, clearly anxious that Josheb was suffering in some way. ‘What is it Josh?’

Josheb nodded his head in Wynn's direction, ‘I fear we may have been too quick with our celebrations.’

Elan looked bewildered, but rose to join Wynn. Once atop the rock, his reaction was starkly different from the younger man. Jumping down he ran to Josheb, alarm showing in all his movements. ‘The Horde has taken the southern bluff, they fill it, hundreds of them.’ He glanced around him as if expecting to find creatures of dark spawn surrounding him. His eyes abruptly came back to Josheb's, ‘What do we do?’

‘Quickly, help me to the rock’. Once there, Josheb took the

whistle and gave it to Elan, 'Blow as hard as you can on this.'

Elan took the whistle and blew a powerful shrill note that soon had all the troops quiet and looking in his direction. He looked down at Josheb with a, 'what now', expression.

'I don't have the puff in me to shout, so you will have to be my voice.' Elan nodded. 'Tell the men that the Horde has taken the opposite bluff. That they are to immediately reassemble into their units and make haste to the valley floor. Only those required to tend and move the wounded are to remain. Another small contingent should remain to make sure the enemy doesn't attempt the gantry again.'

Elan repeated this in as loud a voice he could. At first there was only confused looks, the truth seeping in slowly, confirmed by a few who'd run to the rock to see for themselves. There became a bedlam of activity. Men raced to retrieve weapons, officers shouted commands for troops to regroup, while soldiers hastily regrouped in their units. In relatively short time men stood in ordered ranks ready to move off.

Then disaster struck.

They came with little warning, loud thuds follow by the swoosh of air rapidly pushed aside. The first volley was dead on target, falling square in the middle of the formations.

Order became chaos.

'The catapults. I forgot about them.' Josheb said, now on his feet, pain and shortness of breath momentarily forgotten.

'We're all dead if we stay up here much longer.' This said as a second volley came crashing into the still tightly grouped formations. Turning to the group of runners he'd arranged for message bearing, Josheb told each to run to their units and tell each officer to get their men off this face at the double.

'Emphasise that I want it orderly, the trail is small as it is, we

don't want to hold things up even more by units jostling each other.' As the messengers ran off, Josheb turned to an older man and said, 'How many of your men are left to work the catapults on this side?'

'Enough.' The beefy elf replied.

'Then take a half dozen of my men to help you arm them, and start returning fire.'

'It won't be easy sir, they're above us, and so we won't be able to see what we're aiming at.'

'Do your best, we need some time to get everyone off. If you place someone on the rock outcropping there', he pointed, 'they can see well enough to shout adjustments to the crew.'

The man nodded and ran off. Another volley descended but with everyone having vacated the area previously fired upon most of them missed; thankfully, the creatures operating the machines had failed to re-target the weapons.

'Thank the Creator they haven't had time to practice.' Elan said to no one in particular.

Josheb nodded, but then shook his head. 'This is a disaster. We've been doubly had. First the defile decoy to take our attention from the attack on this bluff, and now this. We were too confident, we should have anticipated that if they could take one of the bluffs they were capable of taking both.'

'Not even the Azure foresaw this, Josh.' Elan replied.

'I know, and that scares me. They are old men now Elan, old, frail, and unable to cope with what they once easily coordinated. I'm not sure whether it's wise for us to follow their lead in this war.'

Elan looked at his friend in surprise. His reply was admonishing tone, 'Those are the Azure you speak of Josheb, leaders of the people for over a thousand years. They may not

have their powers, and old and frail as you say, I still would follow their lead, their wisdom in matters of warring against the Horde is all we have to our advantage.’

‘I hope they’re still up to the task is all.’ Josheb replied, looking unconvinced.

The Azure felt shame and self-recrimination burn dual paths within him, searing their accusations across his heart and leaving him too sickened to think beyond his failure. *How could I have been so foolish not to see this*, had been the thought that first struck him, when he'd turned to see Horde creatures charging toward them from the far end of the bluff. How they'd got up he had no concept. That they could have was something the Azure should have foreseen. Now half of the soldiers were dead, the remainder fighting a retreat down from the bluff, the Horde hot at their heels. Each time the creatures neared, a handful of soldiers would turn and face them, granting a few more minutes for those in front at the expense of their lives.

Added to the reproach he took upon himself was the necessity for he and Tulin to be carried down the trail. a fact slowing their descent only further. The men had ignored the command to leave them behind, shaking their heads in shock at such a thought.

They neared the base of the bluff and could see the peoples encampment. It stretched across the valley before the caved and terraced southern embankment. One hundred yards away a unit of several hundred soldiers made their way at a sprint to the northern bluff, still unaware of the greater disaster that had occurred to the southern face.

‘Blow the whistle.’ Sisera suddenly commanded the young

officer supporting him under one arm.

While still running, the man pulled out the whistle and gave a piercing call. The noise quickly attracted the attention of the unit, which after a moment's hesitation turned to run in their direction.

The men surrounding the Azure were down to a handful now, yet they did not desert the Magi, offering themselves to enable their safe escape. Humbled at such sacrifice, the Azure wept, never before feeling as helpless as they did now.

At seeing the rapidly approaching unit, the small band surrounding Sisera and Tulin gained a renewed burst of energy. Hope of deliverance urged them on. It was just as they ran free of the widening trail that the troops arrived, surging past the Azure to charge into the pursuing enemy. Safe for the moment, the delivered men collapsed in exhaustion. Weary to trembling, they yet new they were far from safe.

The Azure understood this better than most, and shortly had the men running again. The fastest ran ahead with messages to the other Magi, informing them that the southern bluff was lost, to prepare for battle within the plain. With the plateau lost, the defile would shortly follow. The men ran off, leaving the Azure with only three guards. These turned to face the engagement being fought ferociously behind them.

RETREAT

Though the yellow flag on the northern bluff still flew, they knew it had been attacked by the horde and should be flying the white. As for the banner upon the southern bluff, it had disappeared altogether.

Standing with his brothers, Fanyifn wished for answers. News of the attack on the northern escarpment had already reached them, and troops been dispatched. No word had come since, and now communication had been lost with the southern force. With not much to go on, the Azure within the main encampment had assembled their forces. Before them on the plain stood the bulk of the people's army, fully armed and ready to march toward the defile.

‘If the northern bluff has fallen, we can still control the situation, for that face is isolated from the valley, but—’ Fanyifn's lips pursed in anxiety, ‘—if the southern bluff is lost, it runs the full length of this valley. We would have the Horde pouring down upon us from a hundred positions.’

‘The southern face is impregnable Fanyifn.’

‘So we thought of the northern, brother. We have not had enough time to be sure of anything. We have forgotten how resourceful the enemy is?’

The other Ancients acknowledged his words by their silence. Time had been against them, robbing their defences of the thoroughness due them. The Horde were remarkably capable as Fanyifn said. All now began to ponder the worst.

‘If they have taken the southern face, then by moving the army to the defile we open the path for them to overrun the valley.’ A frail Ancient said from where he sat at the door to the

command marquee.

‘But if we don’t move them, and the northern bluff has been taken, then the horde will have almost unhindered access through the defile.’ Said another.

‘We could divide our forces.’

‘And be split down the middle. No, we aren’t strong enough.’ Fanyifn said. ‘The area we are forced to cover is too large. We must know, and soon, where the enemy is. Already they are too many moves ahead.’

‘Magi.’ This from a soldier approaching anxiously from the tent entrance.

‘Yes son, what is it?’

‘Men from the bluff Magi, they’ve just run in. It’s been overrun.’

‘Which bluff lad, which bluff?’

‘The south, Magi.’

‘Pit curse it.’ Fanyifn spat, causing the soldier to take a step back, thinking he had said something wrong. Ignoring him, Fanyifn turned to his fellow Azure, ‘We are faced with possible disaster brothers, the bluff is lost and to regain it would cost us dearly in men.’ Fanyifn paced as he spoke, clearly distraught. ‘From their position they control the defile and can fire down upon the opposite plateau, so we must see that also as lost. When their forces are large enough they will no doubt descend upon us in number. Therefore—’ he didn’t like what he was about to suggest, ‘—I think our only recourse is retreat. The stronghold is lost, we must withdraw and find another place to make a stand, for here we are too vulnerable.’

The other Ancients looked at each other, not liking what they heard but suspecting it to be truth. Not a few felt anger that the so-called stronghold had so quickly been lost. Fanyifn

continued, ‘We must gather all the people, raise the banner for general retreat and pull back to the stream. We must do it before the Horde is within the valley, else they will cut us down as we run.’ The others all nodded, and the plan was set in motion.

Death had slowed its rain upon the soldiers, all thanks to the catapult crew. Taking Josheb's suggestion, they had placed a man upon the outcrop of rock and used him to sight their weapons. Loading, firing and reloading in such rapid succession, the unit made every shot count, quickly disabling the opposing war machines and allowing time for the men to clear the tableland and descend the trail.

Josheb and his unit were last to leave.

‘Look.’ Elan shouted out, ‘The banner they fly.’

Josheb, growing weaker from his chest wound, looked to where Elan indicated. In the main encampment, he saw the army spread out in formation. Behind these, at the caves, a bustle of activity was taking place. From what he observed, he guessed it for what it was, the people were being evacuated. This was confirmed when he noted the large black flag with a diagonal white line being flown in the middle of the camp—General retreat.

‘Things must be worse than we thought, for the Azure to abandon the stronghold.’ Elan said.

‘And we better get a move on if we don’t want to be left with several thousand of the Horde between us and them.’ Josheb replied, noting the defile and seeing troops slowly leaving their position in answer to the signalled command. ‘It won’t take those creatures long to realise what’s happening. They’ll make a mad charge forward then, and I, for one, don’t want to be on

this mountain when they do.’

Elan nodded, ‘We’ll have to carry you.’ he said.

‘Are there any other wounded?’ Josheb asked.

‘A few, but they won’t see out the hour and would die if we tried to move them.’

Josheb nodded regretfully, but didn’t waste any time dwelling on it. He still had fifty living men to keep alive. ‘Call the Catapult crews, tell them we’re leaving now.’

DEFEAT?

It was a desperate flight, and one doomed to fail from the outset. The evacuating masses had only covered half the distance when a shout of dismay went up. Descending in a dense line from the plateau ahead, were Goblins. The soldiers that led the retreat saw the futility in running straight away, the enemy positioned to intercept them well before they could reach the stream. Forming a hasty battle line, they quickly informed the Azure.

Goblins. Fanyifn looked plainly shaken by the news. Able to outpace a galloping horse over short distances, the Azure had forgotten to take into account the speed of the creatures. Not for the first time, Fanyifn questioned his capacity to lead. Nevertheless, he took resolute charge of the situation. ‘Get the

bulk of the army to form a wall along our southern flank and to the rear.’ He said, ‘Send a detachment of one hundred men to lead the rest of the people into the wooded slopes along the foot of the mountain, get them to follow it east until they come the end of the valley, there they are to wait. The army will fight a delaying action before also retreating to join them,’ *and may the creator help us*, he added to himself alone, *because if he doesn’t, we’re finished.*

Children too young to know they should be scared, fled alongside those older and all too aware, toward the forested Mountain boundary; young ones, whose confusion at the situation was all that kept them from tears of terror; mothers clutching their babies in anguish, while those too old to fight did what they could to calm those too young.

The Horde had reached the valley, and now rapidly closed the distance between the two forces. Their animal cries were shrill and predatory, frightening the soldiers that had yet to see battle, terrifying those that had. The Azure kept them moving at a steady pace, toward the stream that marked the halfway point of the vale. However, their shouts of encouragement were soon drowned out by the din.

At the head of the column, Fanyifn saw the approaching enemy as an inevitable end. Like falling from a ledge and seeing the ground racing to receive you, knowing escape is futile. So Fanifyn abandoned hope to the only outcome that seemed possible. The good he had done over a thousand years suddenly seemed trivial in the light of his feebleness now.

Is it truly to end like this? He thought pitifully.

There was a time he’d thought he’d never die. That had changed only recently, an image, surrounded by his brothers while he lay on a soft bed. A peaceful death, an easing into

afterlife. To have it so savagely presented now ...scared him. To those around, these thoughts were veiled, hidden by a mask of resolute tenacity. A mask that gave the men hope while at the same time hiding the owner's lack of it.

Things were deteriorating too rapidly. Josheb's unit, and the three others that descended the bluff, had failed to clear the trail before the Horde burst through the defile. That the trail lay hidden behind the defiles facing edge, was their only salvation. Streaming past, the Horde run on into the open plain of the valley without giving thought to what might be around the corner.

Josheb knew they couldn't wait around for that to last. Looking up, he saw that the sun had reached its zenith, the sun high and shadows few. One hundred and fifty men crammed the space behind him, and each looked to him to get them out of this. He kept from them that he was close to fainting; with shortness of breath from his chest wound and probable internal bleeding. *Why rob them of the little hope they have*, he reasoned.

Josheb supported his forehead in his palm for a few seconds, taking in a long breath before slowly exhaling. Dizziness was robbing him of what he needed most at the moment, an alert mind. Glancing up toward the mountain, he saw a stand of trees surrounded by a copse of low shrubs.

Elan followed his eyes, 'Might be the only chance we have. It'll only take one curious Kobold to walk around this corner and we're a memory.'

Josheb nodded, almost fainting as he did so. 'I'm not going to be standing for much longer Elan, but you're right, we need to get hidden among those trees. It's open ground for most of the

way, but if we send the men a dozen at a time keeping low amongst the rocks, we can probably make it.’

‘It’ll be a short lived mistake if we don’t.’ Elan said with little humour. Both men took a last look at the invading Horde, which now swarmed down onto the plane in their thousands, before turning back to instruct their men.

The first onslaught had been raging for what seemed only moments when a soldier ran up to report that the bulk of the Horde had broken through the defile and were quickly approaching. They had only minutes before they would be fighting an all out battle on two fronts in the middle of an open plain, their backs to a valley that ended in an eighty-foot precipice.

Though the armies numbered almost equalled, the Azure knew the reality of the odds stacked against them. Gathered to the rear of the army, most stood mutely in the rapidly unfurling chaos, knowing there was nothing more they could do.

Fanyifn turned to Sisera, who himself had only just returned from the northern bluff, fleeing before the greater force that followed. ‘What do you suggest brother.’

Sisera looked toward the still distant Horde swarming through the defile, and then toward the southern flank of men already dying. His answer was whispered, ‘We have no choice. We have no-where to run to. If we fight a controlled retreat to the valley end and there make a stand, we can buy time enough for the children and womenfolk to escape.’

‘And then?’ Tulin asked from beside Fanyifn.

‘And then we fight for all we’re worth, and die knowing we did our best.’

‘And may the creator bless the effort.’ Tulin said, uttering the

oft repeated blessing with surprising conviction.

The other two nodded without conviction, the same thought occurring to both—Why should he start now?

HOPELESS

The five remaining men readied themselves to make the risky dash to the trees. Josheb was barely conscious now, and Elan worried for him, anxious of what moving him would do, knowing there was little choice.

There had been several close calls, and the dead goblin at Elan's feet gave testament to the latest. However, the real risk was what they were about to attempt. It would take four men to carry Josheb, and little to conceal them as they moved. Speed would be their only care. The four, each chosen for their size and swiftness, grabbed a limb each and awaited Elan's signal.

'Now', the tall elf whispered, and the men bolted forward, fear adding a fleetness to their feet which pounded the ground in pace with their heartbeats. Josheb bounced between them, delirium making it impossible to distinguish the reality of his position from the imagined one his pain riddled mind presented.

About halfway, Elan chanced a look back, unable to resist the fearful expectations his more fatalistic self kept affirming. He turned just in time to see a large group of creatures enter the blind valley behind them.

'We've been seen.' He screamed, his cry adding further speed to the bearers, though where they ran to offered no escape. As they entered the stand of thick trees, the thudding sound of pursuit sounded after them.

Perhaps because they only saw five men enter the grove, the creatures charged heedlessly in after them. Only to find more than they expected. Half their number died quickly, a reception

of swords coming at them from every direction. But Horde spawn don't remain surprised for long. Knowing they were grossly outnumbered, the survivors withdrew. It was obvious they had the men trapped so they summoned and awaited reinforcements. Within minutes, the few had become hundreds.

Elan watched from within the thicket of alpine trees. He felt nothing, dread having long since exceeded the point it can be experienced. *At least I die amongst friends*, he consoled himself. He looked down at the now unconscious Josheb. *At least you were spared this*. Spurred by a sudden pang, Elan quickly covered Josheb in a layer of the pine needles that lay thick on the ground. *Now maybe you'll be the one who lives through this*. His attention was taken by the whistling of arrow fire, followed immediately by the screams of those to slow to take cover. Looking up, Elan saw that the Horde were readying a fire, no doubt preparing to set the trees alight and flush them out. Glancing down at the mound concealing Josheb, Elan knew he couldn't let this happen. With a courage founded in the love of his friend, Elan shouted his last command.

'Elves to me—Attack'.

Breaking free from the thick copse of trees, sword waving, Elan sprinted directly toward the line of creatures. At the first he ran alone, his rallying cry taking time to bolster his men. Seeing him, however—his courage and disregard for death—soon evoked within them similar passion. Like seasoned kindling, their hearts ignited in a blaze that melted their fear, inspiring each to spite death as if a little thing, that though it take them it would do so at dear cost to the Horde.

Elan's sword found its first offering, and he was engulfed, weapon slicing through the air in a flurry of mad movement. The forest erupted with men. They charged as one, their cries

echoing off the gorge to create the illusion of thousands instead of the scant one hundred and fifty.

If the Horde were mere men, maybe the unexpected charge of an enemy bent on fighting to the death would have been enough to cause panic. However, the sudden assault, though unexpected, did not faze them. Their archers wasted no time in panic, letting fly their shafts mere moments after the oncoming soldiers broke free of the trees. Not as proficient with the bow as their Elfin counterparts, the creatures were practised enough, and the densely packed wall of men made an easy target. Twenty fell within the first few yards. A second volley felled a further dozen before the soldiers bridged the distance to engage their enemy.

DARK POWER

From atop the bluff, they delighted in the arena below. Lovers of violence, they had restrained from using their powers so as to savour the bloody savagery beneath them. Standing upon the southern bluff, they witnessed the panorama of destruction being meted out by their forces. To their left, in a dead-end gorge capped by a copse of trees, several hundred of the Horde faced half that many Assassians. The onlookers watched as the

soldiers broke from their hide-out to attack with ferocity. It was futile, with no chance of the soldiers breaking past the Horde, thousands more pouring through the defile.

To the north a far larger battle took place, the noise of it carrying clearly to the heights from which they observed. It was a battle fought on two fronts, south and west, with the extremes of each side struggling to prevent the opposing army from outflanking it. In the Assasian's case this was paramount to their survival. Being on the defensive, they were in a poor position, caught in the middle of a plain with no sheltering landlines and nowhere to withdraw to but a mountain face or a cliff edge. Apparently they'd decided the mountain to be their better chance, now fighting a desperate retreat to the small forest that bordered Lord-Kings sheer base.

It was one of the hardest manoeuvres to maintain, a concerted action dependent on the highest discipline. Fear need only overcome one soldier, for the rest to rout. Fear of being left behind, tempted them to turn before the signal, or failing to reform into a defensive lines. The Assasians, however, did it well, their discipline reminding the Dark Lords of who trained and led these men.

As the forward lines stood to fight the Horde, those behind would retreat several yards and take position. At a signal, the forward ranks would suddenly retreat, to dash beyond the newly formed file, themselves reforming several yards behind the line in their turn. And so it went, fight, retreat, reform, and fight again. Archers offered those retreating covering volley fire, but it did little more than harass the Horde. Men were hacked down as they turned, choosing the wrong moment to lower their swords and run, or prevented from turning by the intensity of battle. Their only advantage was that the ground

they retreated through was unobstructed, the Horde, however, forced to fight over and through a carnage of corpses and gore that turned the dirt to mud and grass to oily slickness. Yet such advantage meant little.

To any but the Dark Lords, the spectacle would've appeared internecine, a battlefield of unrestrained slaughter, the Horde berserk in their murderous compulsion. Yet such massacre brought only pleasure to the lords of night, a perverted joy in the suffering of those they deemed less than worthless, fit only for fulfilling their own amoral whims.

Tarnul turned from his pleasure at the sight, obsessed by a more pressing concern. Ignoring all others, he scanned the area for another's presence.

Beside him, also unheeding of the din, stood Damd. Watching Tarnal's, he waited in total stillness, understanding that their fates hung not in the battle below, but in the actions of a single Elfin boy.

'He's not here.' Tarnul said at last, feeling both frustration and relief in the discovery.

'Strange.' Damd replied, 'Maybe the bearer of Dunamis is not as confident in his powers as you thought. I say we destroy this rabble and then search out this Hated One's chosen at our convenience.'

Tarnal nodded, an uncertain expression on his face, he did not like this mystery. Looking back to the battle, Tarnul gave the command, 'We will descend and destroy our enemy's creation. All but the Azure. Them I want kept as bait.' With that he rose into the air and descended to the valley below, the other Dark Lord's following in the wake of his billowing grey robes.

‘Look Magi.’

The Azure remained huddled at the armies rear, doing their utmost to maintain discipline while keeping each division in concert with the rest. It was a task that kept the runners busy, and the Azure painfully aware of the knife-edge they balanced on.

‘Look Magi.’ With each cry of alarm, more activity ceased, as one-by-one the Azure became aware of what was descending upon them. Groans could be heard from the lips of many Ancients, knowing that against this they had no defence. Some collapsed, their strength leaving them much as a condemned man at the moment of execution.

Like a black cloud to which the brightness of day only deepens the odiousness of, they approached, shadowing those below in portent to the death they brought. The air cooled in their shade. To those gazing upward, it was as if nightmares had taken flesh.

Fighting now only raged in the foremost ranks, the attention of both sides taken by the spectres that flew above. In malevolent contrast were their eyes, glowing yellow-red in an aura that spoke of sudden death. Many Azure had now sunk to their knees, some prayed. Soldiers who weren’t fixated, recoiled in terror, the beaten carriage of the Ancients robbing them of any courage they still possessed. A few followed the priest’s example, offering last words to the creator, else pleading his intervention.

The Dark Lords spread out to form a crescent above their victims, a hunger on their faces in anticipation of the violence they were soon to inflict. As one, they drew forth their powers, focusing that formidable might into one clear purpose

—Destruction.

Feeding that purpose with their hate for all living things, they channelled their desire toward their High Lord, who, floating before them all, became the augmented vessel of their combined power. With a scream of pure abomination, Tarnul arched his body, extended his fingers and released a sheet of death down upon the Hated One's created.

From below the noise of the High Lord's shriek sounded like the ground being ripped in two, rocks torn apart in an explosive surge of gross might.

Then came their death.

The last thing the Assasian's saw before collapsing was a thundering, blinding peal of red and blue. Then all were knocked to the ground.

THWARTED

What was occurring did not at first register. The High Lords ardent pleasure at being the focus of the Hordes power imbibed his senses, bathing him in a dreamlike world of absolute command. To experience this was to taste power beyond imagining. To taste it was to lust for it, and to lust for it was to hate all others possessing it. Yet as the sensation waned and the mundane senses of reality took hold, Tarnul understood that something had gone wrong.

Below him lay the armies of both sides, prostrate and unmoving. What he should be seeing were only the cinders of their remains, having been dealt energy enough to melt rock instantly, to evaporate a lake to steaming mist. Yet the grass remained green, and not a hair on a soldier's head as much as smouldered.

Tarnul knew, then, that the time had come.

Looking up he saw his enemy.

Jabin breathed deeply. From his time in communion with the creator, he had come to know of his power, yet this was the first he'd drawn deeply from it. He felt a wave of purest delight at the efficacy of it. A giddy joy tempered only by the knowledge that such power was not his own, but belonged to one of such imminent grandeur as to leave him thoroughly humbled; yet happy in that humility. He hovered only a hundred yards from where the Dark Lord's levitated, glad to see that he'd managed to protect the people; some of which begun even now to rise to their feet.

He was disturbed how close he'd come to being too late, arriving only moments before the Dark Lord's attack. Still fresh to his power, and unfamiliar with battle, Jabin had been forced to think hurriedly. Yet, he'd been quick enough, only the barest of the Dark Lord's fierce hate managing to get through, enough to bring the armies to the ground, but little more.

Below and behind him stood Quinn, Sosthene and Dored, behind them the party that had travelled north. They were dazed by the mode of travel that had transported; not even the Azure had travelled in such a way before. Their bodies felt as if undone, disassembled to its most basic parts before being projected faster than the mind can fathom and then

reassembled, and all within a moments moment. Now they stood, shakily, and watched as the Chosen battled for all their lives.

If the fact that the bearer of Dunamis was not the boy-child he had expected startled Tarnul, he did not reveal it. Tarnul's voice carried to where Jabin hung in the air, his voice hummed with the power of the Horde as he spoke, 'I give you a choice, Chosen. Surrender to me now, immediately, and this people will live. Oppose me, and they will die in agony, and you shortly after.'

Jabin said nothing, blue lines of puissance lacing his body giving him a faceted appearance. His silence seemed to incense the High Lord as if a shouted rebuke.

'You think you can oppose me, fool. Do you not understand who I am? Even your Creator,' hate dripped at the word, 'fears me. He knows he cannot defeat me face to face, the barrier witnesses to that truth, and in his cowardice he sends against us servants.' His arms gave a mocking emphasis to his speech, as he indicated first the prostrated forms below and then Jabin himself, contemptuously adding, 'Servants endowed with a power they think so great, but cannot save them.' Tarnul paused. When he spoke again his tone was placating.

'But I am not without mercy. If your Creator has left the fate of his world in your hands, then I offer you lenience, a chance. Raise one finger against me, and when the barrier is broken I will reduce this planet to dust, but bow down to me now and I promise no harm to any on this world. Your choice. What will it be, life? Or death to everything?' The last word was spoken with an impossibly thunderous shout. This threw those who had risen back to the ground and triggered multiple landslides, each echoing within the valley as highlight to Tarnul's words.

Sweat flowed freely from Jabin's forehead, his brow diverting the steady stream to each side of his face where it glistened in the afternoon heat. Tracings of blue flashed in his eyes, granting him a god-like countenance. Inside however, he felt as unsure as the ten-year-old boy he'd been only months before.

The creator had shared much with him, but of this moment there had been little said, only a diverting of his questions, telling him he would know what to do when the time came.

But what do I do? Jabin thought, and a doubt crept in.

Before him was a power that could destroy this world, an army of evil that had already proven a greater match than the combined Azure. Had once come within a step of removing life completely from the face of Asasa.

Why does the creator not confront them himself? The thought shook him. *Was he here because the creator was too fearful? What other explanation was there?* And the doubts echoed upon one another. Without knowing it, Jabin had descended to stand on the ground, fear robbing him of the focus required to remain aloft. The Horde, watching him, did not move, possibly mistaking this as precursor to his surrender.

Jabin was unsure if it wasn't.

'Jabin.' It was Quinn, 'Don't listen to him. They fear the Creator, and the one whom he has chosen. They play a bluffing game. They are not as sure as they make you believe, of this I am certain. Liars they are, from the beginning. Both to themselves and to those of us they would dominate. Do not heed them.'

Jabin nodded without turning, but the doubts lingered.

It was Tamila who drove them off, 'Jabin, My love. Think of the Creator, on what you have come to know of him. Compare him to those you face. The Magi speaks truth, they lie to cover

their own fears, and seek to pervert your trust. Trust in what you know of God.’

It was good advice, and all that Jabin had at this moment, so he dwelt on what he knew.

He began with the most obvious. The Creator was a being that radiated might, whose presence did not so much invite but demand awe and reverent fear. Yet, in his presence there was indescribable peace, a knowledge that here was the source of every good and perfect thing.

Jabin recalled the seemingly timeless period he spent in the divine presence, most of which were the efforts of a heavenly mind patient answers to that of a mortal. A being whose attentions were seen in the infinitesimal detail of the universe's workings, from birth to death to rebirth, an unending cycle of renewal. An attentiveness seen most intimately in his care for affairs of elfin-kind; never far from those who would call on him.

Jabin was prompted by the reflection to mouth a word best describing what he knew—Good. The Creator was good.

Without his awareness, Jabin noted he had re-ascended once again on level with the Tarnul. Then the ludicrousness of his doubts became apparent. Before him was the epitome of evil. Nothing they did was of any use, nothing said of any worth. In their way dwelt only misery, and before them he felt only fear and loathing. They were creatures without grain of beauty or spark of value, only corruptness and emptiness and lies. Jabin wondered at how easily he had lost sight, been willing to accept the promise of one who fathered lies as surely as the creator fathered truth. Of the little he understood, one thing was clear, better to die than accept the Dark Ones word.

In that new confidence, he spoke his defiance. ‘You speak of

choices Dark One. Yet though you have done all in your power to will it otherwise, this moment has come to pass. If you, then, offer me a choice to fulfil the creators will or your own, then know that I speak for all when I say, we will sooner die than bow to you. So either back up your words with action, or kneel to me as divinely elected King of Asasa.'

In perfect emphasis to his words, Jabin pointed to the Horde army below. All now bowed toward Jabin, forced to their knees by the unseen power of Dunamis.

'You dare!' Tarnul's cowl was flung back to reveal a fiendish skull, skin blackened and sunken into the hollow contours. Two flaming red eyes beckoned death from deep under a heavy brow, while blister blackened lips pulled back in a rictal grimace. No more words he spoke, rather, he swelled in rage. With a gesture he sent a wave of flame that descended upon his bowing army like a scourge. Jabin protected his own troops with a wall of energies that quenched any flame that touched it, throwing in its path an icy cold pool of air that subdued the killing heat.

The Horde were protected by no one. As the surge of flame crossed their ranks, each flared like a torch. Line by line the bowing soldiers erupted, writhing in unimaginable agony as the arcane fire burnt them alive. Their screams of anguish rose with the stink of burning flesh and roar of rising heat.

So quick was the devastation that two thirds of the Horde had been consumed before Jabin could extend his shield and mercifully enclose what remained. By then however, Tarnul had redirected his assault. Such was the ferocity of the High Lord's attack that Jabin could feel the atmosphere bubbling with mystic energies. They seemed to pressurise the very air. Barely in time, Jabin thwarted a white hot bolt of light from

striking the small party behind him, instantly followed by one aimed at himself. It was then he noticed, though only peripherally, the band of men that approached from behind the Dark Lord; a ragged group of no more than forty. They warily came nearer; some clearly injured, carried by the others, but most with bows drawn and preparing to shoot at the hovering Dark Lords. It was a doomed attempt, the Dark Lords easily detected their approach and struck at them before any had chance to pull their bowstrings. Jabin threw his powers toward them in a desperate effort to save. A blinding sheet of white emanated from him, but whether because he was new to his powers or too hasty, the shield was poorly delivered, half its strength slicing into the Horde.

When the colliding flash of energies subsided, Jabin saw all the men sprawled on the ground. Some were burnt beyond recognition, others bore no mark but lay as still as the death he knew must have claimed them. He shifted his eyes back to the Dark Lord, an anger beginning to burn hot within him. Gathering himself, Jabin prepared to unleash his rage upon their evil, to rid the world of them forever. With a shout, he opened himself wide to the mystic cord binding him umbilically to the storehouse of Dunamis. It was as though he stood atop Lord-Kings Mountain in a blizzard, the wind howling past him in a whipping frenzy, tearing at his frame. Yet Jabin became more than just the object of the winds fury, he became the funnelled vortex of its fervour, the sinkhole of its storming abandon. With blazed intensity, Jabin's form flared the brightest blue, hurting the eyes. Looking up through the glory of Dunamis' endued outpouring, Jabin was aware that the sky itself rippled, power beyond imagining issuing into the vessel of Jabin's flesh. He understood then, that he was

connected with the barrier. The immensity of the power he felt was surely omnipotent. With a certainty, Jabin knew he could do all; and still it mounted. Through the glory of his shining aura, Jabin witnessed the Dark Horde and could see the fear on their faces. Most cringed from him, but remained unable to break away from their connection with their High Lord; a connection Jabin could now see; thick cords of red joining them to Tarnul. As for the High Dark Lord, his skeletal mask was blank of all expression but unbelief, only his eyes retaining the hate of his race.

Jabin spoke and his words were like the thundering falls of Mount Alptors Greater Lake, 'You will kneel Dark Lords, you have no choice.' At his words the Princes of night were forced to the ground below, unwilling legs were bent and unyielding heads were bowed by a might they could not resist.

'And now, Evil Ones, you die.'

Screams of never before experienced terror erupted from the kneeling Dark Lords as they saw the impossible come upon them—their deaths. Jabin's might was beyond any they could recall, a power that defied their understanding and overwhelmed their comparative feebleness as would the oceans a puddle. As one they attempted to flee, but were held in check by two forces; Jabin's absolute command, and Tarnul's unvanquished hold of their mystic essence. In inescapable horror they awaited the Chosen's killing strike, the undoing of their souls.

It never came. Instead they found themselves released.

AN ENDING

Looking up, the Dark Lords were confounded. Jabin's light had faded, and he no longer stood alone. Behind him a tall figure leaned close, an aged man who wept ragged sobs into the ear of the Chosen.

Shock and pain emitted from Jabin's face and body. His power, only moments before vaunted enough to crush the mountain on which they stood to dust, now drained from body. A funnel of rippling light streamed out of him to gather like a cloud of quartz above his head.

Mesmerised by what they saw, and unbelieving of their escape from annihilation, the Dark Lords remained uncomprehending as the light of life flickered from the Chosen's eyes, and he slid to the ground in death.

Dored stood in voiceless horror of what he had done, unaware of anything but the blood soaked blade in his hand and the young man at his feet, whose blood now stained the dirt a muddy crimson. Only one thought circled his mind in defence of his actions, though as unfathomable to him in its design as the act itself.

It was Creator's will... It was the Creators will...

Silence enveloped the valley, a palpable foreboding shared by the thousands of beings that surrounded the scene. No one moved.

Sosthene, fists clenched in his robes, felt the change, like a presence leaving him—his link to Dunamis. The realisation made him grip the arm of his brother, for it spoke louder than

what his eyes beheld as to Jabin's fate.

Quinn, unheeding of the pain in his arm from Sosthene's fingers, stood with arms dangling in stunned incomprehension, shaking his head ever so slightly in anticipation for the dream to stop.

Jonn and Tanya likewise were statues. Beyond mystified, doubting what they saw, refusing to believe senses that declared a terrible reality.

Others of the return party only gaped.

All except Tamila.

Shakily, she began taking steps toward her nightmare. As with Sosthene, she knew that Jabin was indeed dead. With his fall had come the severing of the bond between them, like the tearing away of her heart. But not before one clear message had been perceived, as lucid in its intensity as was the physical pain of the sender

'I will always love you. Always.'

She stepped closer, the echo of those heard—yet unheard—words making Jabin's death all the more incredulous. She reached where he lay, his eyes closed in a face that still held the confusion of its last moments. Confusion that mirrored her own, the utter uncertainty of the moment being all that kept her from falling prey to her grief. Yet the veneer was thin, reality rapidly bridging the gap and forming an abyss in its wake.

Tamila realised with growing terror, that she had no idea how to survive. Jabin was more to her than her hearts love, he was the linchpin that had held the wheels of her new life in place, the coordinating element within the drastic change of course her destiny had taken. She had come to know Jabin as if part of him, and he her. Now to have that bond brutally torn away, was beyond her fortitude. All courage left her, and she collapsed to

her knees, a low cry of torturous grief escaping her lips.

So it was that those closest to the fallen king failed to see Tarnul's hesitant approach. He neared his enemy, unsure of what had occurred, but perceiving his triumph in it.

The chosen is dead, there was no doubting it now, and a wicked smile divided his skull in two. Victory flared in his ruby eyes.

‘Fool Azure.’ He spat at Dored, ‘Whatever madness took you to perform this act, know that by it you are undone.’

With that Tarnul, swelling in size, reached out and placed his hands into the thick Cerulean cloud that yet remained above the lifeless Jabin,

‘It is done.’ He said. ‘Mine, all mine. After so, so long.’ Above him the blue funnelled into the heavens, the rippling sheen of its presence distorting the skies clearness. At his touch it flinched as if a living thing, recoiling at the contact of its opposite in shuddering rejection, but for only a moment. Returning to stillness, it deepened in colour, becoming many shades darker than the sky it funnelled toward, as if a sapphire support of the heavens.

Tarnul's back arched in an indistinguishable locus of pain and pleasure, as the power of the Dark Horde and that of Dunamis melded. Only the High Lord's dark will sufficed to maintain it, a union between such inimical opposites that time and space sought to bend in agonising contortion about it. Tarnul became an amber glowing form, an inflammation that pulsed and grew as it robbed wellness from the world.

With a sluggishness that could be counted in seeming hours, Tarnul removed his hands to hold them as fists before his chest. Surrounding them was a red nimbus of light, itself connected to

the place his hands had left. A coiling thread that changed by degrees from red to the deep azure blue of Dunamis. It writhed and whipped against itself in a serpentine frenzy, diametrical powers seething in their earnestness to separate, but Tarnul held them as one.

Dored stood alone, nearest of all to the Dark High Lord. Behind him Tamila wept, her arms cradling Jabin's head gently in her lap; it was a sight Dored found unendurable.

With hope lost, he had turned to face the lord of Darkness. Numbness was all he felt, a dull ache of thought from a burden of duty too awful to understand but obeyed nonetheless.

It was the Creators will...

Up to the last he had believed his God would annul the command, stay his blade or strike him down before it was committed, or rebuke the act from heaven itself before it was done.

It was the Creators will...

Even as the bladed steel sunk through flesh to find the heart, he had not believed that death would be the outcome, having faith that nature's laws would be suspended, that supernatural will would impose its sovereignty over the mundane.

It was the Creators will...

And now his mind whirled. *Did I hear the message right? Was I supposed to wait? Yet the message had been clear, the time clearer still. It was the creators will...*

A lingering hope had whispered, *He can raise even the dead.* But that hope died as Dored witnessed Tarnul reach out to wield the power of the creator. Only the stubbornness of his nature kept him from sinking further, a part of his mind that refused to yield even to what the rest of him sensed as truth. It

was not in his nature to quit. It was that nature that now threw an idea.

You can reclaim Dunamis.

The creators power was within reach of his outstretched arms, what prevented him from doing as Tarnul had, and drawing the power into himself.

Dored stepped forward, seeing this chance as more than just salvation for the people but as a means of redemption for himself. However, before he had taken two steps, he was struck down. A searing vermilion light engulfed him in an aurora of ruby gilded pain, such that his bones seemed to boil within. The agony was crippling, contorting his muscles as it held him rigidly upright. With the last of his flagging will, Dored turned to face Quinn and Sosthense. Through the torment, he mouthed to their stricken faces, ‘It was the creators will, forgive me.’ Then he fell, his life leaving him with a rush, like a broken wall, body collapsing as the spirit burst free.

Sosthene and Quinn watched as their brother died, continuing to watch as Tarnul, alive with the combined might of the two powers, consumed Dored's body until nothing remained but the imprint of where he'd fallen. A moan escape their lips, echoed like a dirge by all within the valley. None moved, watching with horror filled eyes, their silence undisturbed but for the strangled weep of a young woman as she cradled the head of her love, the last hope of Asasa.

Tarnul, High Lord of Darkness and now master of all, looked upon those about him. No shred of pity was in his eyes, no clemency in victory or grant of benevolence as conqueror. Only raging hate. Behind him, like a dark cloak fanned out to either side, stood his lords of night. They too were silent, the end of

their captivity upon this world so close that each could taste it, but dare not move lest it take flight. The coiling power of the Horde and Dunamis reflected in their eyes, its undulations a hypnotic drug that held them mesmerised.

‘Now you all die.’ The booming words, spoken so suddenly in the silence, brought many to their knees, legs turned to water at the sound of pure malice.

Tarnul spread his glowing arms wide, and said simply, ‘Die.’

From the heavens there erupted a wave of liquid rock, a shroud of death, a wall of blood. The sky appeared to fall all at once. Screams now came from many. Men whose courage sufficed to face any natural danger now shook with terror, throaty screams of dread ascending to meet the unknown horror. Animal-like squeals came from the Dark Horde army, most having fallen on their backs. Some attempted to dig holes in the damp earth, clawed and hooved feet scrapping in desperation. None however, man or beast, thought to run. There was nowhere to run. Their death spread from horizon to horizon, the speed of its descent compressing the air below in its advanced, and the agony of its arrival already felt. Their terror mounted.

Tarnul appeared to grow in their fear, feeding on it, its flow like fresh blood to the predator. With exultation he screamed upward, ‘You lose, Hated One. I have beaten you.’ The words had only just left his mouth, when a thunderous reply came from above,

‘Wrong, Dark One, He has beaten you.’

As the thunder of the voice reverberated throughout the valley, the sky shattered. A shower of bright crystalline pieces, dissolving as they fell, until nothing remained but a memory of red death. Above, the sky stretched as before, but now

something else domed within it. There, but not there, it flickered—waiting.

Tarnul, visibly shaken, scanned the heavens. He then turned to gaze intently at the body of the Chosen, as if deducing something. Decided, he glanced again upwards.

‘You!’ He said in a whisper, ‘You. You’re dead. What is this?’ The reply came as from all directions at once, a voice booming with a ground shaking depth.

‘As a seed is but a seed till it dies, so too the chosen. Have you forgotten, High Lord?’ The last said mockingly. ‘You were wrong to want me dead. I am more than just a channel for the creator’s power. I am now one with it. In destroying my flesh you have only removed the vessel that kept me from joining it. Now I am as much a part of what keeps you bound, as the creator Himself.’

Tarnul was quiet, his only movement the surging coil of blue-power battling between him and sky.

‘You are undone Dark One,’ the voice continued, ‘Only I can touch the barrier without breaking it, for I am from below, not above.’

Raising both hands, Tarnul bellowed in guttural defiance, ‘You forget fool, I also have become one with the Hated Creators power. Think not you are match for me, joined though you are. You are but a pitiful Elf. I’ll subdue you as the wind does a speck of dust. Today we shall be free.’ Planting both feet, he raised crimson imbued arms and sent a stream of incandescent energy upward. At an indiscernible point, the blast struck the domed presence, igniting it into whiteness. It appeared as a lattice work of ivory lace that etched the sky, illuminating the never before seen barrier between this world and the next. Such a sight should have wrought wonder, a

beauty incomparable in declaring the praise of its maker. However, the magnificence of the sight was lost in the drama unfolding beneath it.

In silence all watched as the force of Tarnul's attack intensified, the filigree white barrier turning from white to orange, then red. Breaths were held. The whole vault of heaven appeared as on fire, Tarnul's vaunted will ascending to fuel the destruction of the boundary, clashing with an enemy who alone stood as guardian to life. From dull red to glimmering scarlet, the shield became too bright to look upon.

Yet still it held.

In a yellow blaze the High Lords cloak burst to flames and fell as ash to the ground. He stood revealed, an emblem of death in sinewy skeletal form, skin like thin tanned leather following every contour of his drawn features. With a hissing intake of breath his body clenched. Simultaneously, red tendrils of power spawned from his torso. With viper quick speed they lashed out, attaching themselves to the gathered Dark Lords behind Tarnul. At their touch the Dark Ones screamed, a few even dropping limp to the ground as if the tendrils sucked their life and strength away. Some attempted to run, but were brought to their knees by the clamping vice of Tarnul's need. All but one. Damd alone managed to escape.

Tarnul's power again seemed to grow, emitting from him a screeching raw energy that caused the onlookers skin to crawl, their hair to stand on end. Dark Lords then began to fall, from weakest through strongest, drained of their essence, the depleted soul absorbed. The tendrils flickered out with each passing.

Tarnul sagged. His haughty pride faltered. His knees began to bend, exhausted arms to lower. From above a voice sounded,

neither raging nor mocking, but grieved.

‘Do you even now not see, are you still so blind?’

There was a consuming silence—the silence that precedes doom—and Tarnul's fury was engulfed by it. Then the voice spoke again, resolute and firm.

‘Your time has come Dark One, the Creators patience has come to its close. You have failed to heed truth. Be gone to what awaits you, accursed one.’

In that moment the heavens transformed, blinking from red latticed flame to the azure of natural sky. Simultaneously, in screaming torment, Tarnul collapsed, curling up as a ball, fear rippling his frame like windblown water. The tendrils attaching him to the few remaining Dark Lords had become shadowy black wisps carrying the fear of the master to the slave. They too lay foetal upon the ground, groaning in dreadful clamour. Then, as suddenly as the sun dispels shadow, the cringing forms dissolved and were gone. Nothing remained to even note where they'd been, their vanishing as surreal as to make their presence moments before seem imagined.

DAMD

Damd, having broken free of the tendril that drained him, and exhausted to the point of collapse, struggled to regain his

composure. He had not escaped unscathed, and felt within the difference. Much power had left him—been stripped from him—leaving in its place a babe compared to the master he had been.

Looking down he saw the once mirror black of his flesh turned now a mottled grey. Standing alone, trembling, his eight feet of height stooped in fear, he felt broken. An avalanche of thoughts crushed in a wave that staggered him, none bearing hope. Shock mingled with disbelief, crumbling to despairing fear; a new and agonising sensation. It was long minutes before Damd regained control over the flooding emotions within.

In the end it was the guiding trait of his kind that drowned out the inner turmoil—Hate. A hate that centred on no one thing, regarding all and everything with equal malice. Nonetheless it was a self-possessed malignity, guided by an ancient being of intelligence. Damd realised that all eyes within the valley would soon be on him, and their timidity would turn to boldness.

Though not without power, Damd knew he was no longer a being capable of routing armies at a gesture—indeed, barely strong enough to turn aside a score men—and the loss was enough to puncture his hate with a pang of grief. Escape became his chief concern.

With his back to a mountain and surrounded by a sea of enemies, the only way out was up. Turning, Damd sprinted at a speed proving he was physically undiminished. Once at the mountain face, he bounded the height of three men, catching with his fingers an outcrop of rock over which he vaulted. Within moments he was lost from view in the ascending abyss of Lord-Kings many paths, and was not seen again for many, many years to come.

THE CREATOR

Josheb lay on his back facing the sky, a numbness permeating every limb. Nothing hurt, not even the wounds he had received in battle, everything just felt distant. Without feeling his neck muscles work, he turned his head to better see what had happened to those previously carrying him. To his right lay several bodies, or what remained of them, their flesh now burnt away to leave indistinguishable smouldering corpses. Bile burnt the back of Josheb's throat, and a weak trembling shook his muscles in revulsion. Turning his head away to the left, he saw Elan close by. A conscious Elan, but prostrate and with a look of grim concern on his face.

‘Elan’, Josheb said to get his friends attention, ‘Are you all right?’ He flexed his own fingers as he asked, feeling the beginnings of sensation to his extremities.

Elan jerked slightly, turning his head with a start toward Josheb. With recognition of who had spoken also came a look of relief followed by a marked exhalation of breath. ‘Yeah.’ he nodded, ‘I’m okay. I thought I’d died. Until I heard your voice, I wasn’t sure exactly what I was seeing’, he glanced at the sky and laughed meekly, ‘it was the sky, I was scared of the sky.’

‘What happened, Elan?’ Josheb asked, too surprised at his

own situation to feel any humour at Elan's. 'The last I remember was being carried to a stand of trees and thinking I was going to die from the pain. The next thing I know I'm on my back amongst a pile of burnt soldiers and feeling nothing at all.' As he spoke Josheb tentatively raised himself to a sitting position, looking down, his confusion became more acute.

'Wasn't I injured?' he asked.

'Yeah, in your chest...' The last word slurred to a halt as Elan's jaw froze on his face in amazement. His friend no longer had an arrow protruding from his ribs. And his shoulder, so wounded, was now whole, even absent of the bandage Elan had applied.

'How?...' But that also was lost to awe, as both men became aware of what was in front of them.

After having charged from the copse of trees to what he surely thought was his death, Elan had fought with a ferocity bordering madness, so crazed with the desire to kill these creatures that even after the horde turned to run, he continued to swing in frenzied slashes that parted only air. At first he thought they'd managed against all odds to rout their enemy, but only for the moment it took to notice the dark mass of creatures flying as one toward the centre of the valley; Elan now they could be nothing other than the Dark Lords.

Elan had no idea what was occurring on the plain, but knew he should be there. A fatalistic thought had whispered vaguely that if this was to be man's last day, then he would face it surrounded by those he loved. With the handful of men remaining alive of his unit, he led them after the Dark One's. Between them they carried Josheb.

All Elan could recall was commanding his men to fire upon the hovering Dark Lords. The next he'd known was a crushing heat that he thought would surely kill him. He remembered the blanket of cold on the brink of death, an assuaging cool light that broke the Dark Lords attack as suddenly as it had begun, leaving only sedate absence of feeling in its place.

Now, however, all trace of the Dark Lords had vanished, and in their place a miracle. The people of Asasa stood side by side with those of the Horde, and at their feet a pool had appeared. Its surface was like polished steel, mirroring perfectly the azure sky.

Elan looked at Josheb, who shook his head. Neither had any idea how the pool got there or what it portended. Yet more amazing than the pool itself, was the two figures at its centre, one a woman, the other a man who lay prone in her lap. Josheb could see the woman had been crying, her extremely beautiful face heavily streaked by tears. Josheb recognised neither.

An unnatural stillness settled the valley. An impossible hush hung over everything. Time passed as an indefinable period before Josheb realised he was hearing music, played at a distance but gradually drawing nearer. Looking up with everyone else, he was stunned to see a multitude in the sky, shining beings whose features were hidden by their brightness. Their vastness quickly filled the heavens—though they themselves did not descend—and the sun's afternoon glow became shadowed by their presence. Josheb saw then, that it was indeed music he heard—instruments—each played by the heavenly beings. In tones that pierced his soul as if a language, communicating to a part of him no mortal melody could touch, a part of him that resonated with the divine.

The millions strong orchestra, at one moment intoning their music to touch the heart, suddenly became a symphony of praise. In a deafening shout of exaltation the shining host burst into song, one so full of glory that Josheb knew without doubt what was about to happen, and fell to his knees, unsure if it was a voluntary action or not. As the hymn reached a note that set the very air humming, a flash of white burst across the whole world, so intense it diminished the sun. With it a heavenly figure ascended from the ponds waters.

Josheb felt insubstantial, as if only half there in comparison to the utter fullness of the being before him. Even the mountain lacked solidity, the Creators light seeming to pass through its granite walls, a depth of presence dwarfing anything merely physical. Josheb gave a hurried glance to those around him, surprised to see their flesh appear translucent, revealing within an inner essence normally conceal. Those of the Horde were the exceptions, their cloudy flesh hid nothing within, reminding Josheb that these creatures were spawned by a force as dark as the creator was light. Spiritless beings.

As abruptly as it had begun, the singing ended.

Although he had not seen how, Josheb realised that the battlefield, seeming moments earlier littered with the dead and dying, was now empty of all but the living. Looking to where burnt corpses had seconds before, he now saw those same men alive and whole, without so much as a scar.

HEALING & CURSING

Danek had thought he'd died, his vision being filled with flying beings of light stirring him in song, and because his torturous pain was gone. It was a release so sudden as to make him gasp from the relief. It was the subsequent gasps he heard around him, from men stretched out or in the process of rising, all with stunned expressions, that made him finally aware that he was quite alive.

Looking down, he examined himself. Where injuries from least a dozen arrows should have stained his leather jerkin and leggings, he found nothing but an intact set of clothing, and not a scratch or otherwise. His fingers soon confirmed what his eyes disbelieved. It was as if he'd never been hurt. Looking up, he saw the glowing host hovering high above, their song having changed to one that for some reason made Danek think of ancient oak forests, fathomless oceans and stars too numerous to count. Searching around him, Danek saw that everyone's attention remained fixed on something he couldn't see. Rising to stand, which put his field of vision well above most, he gasped in awed unison with those around him.

It was like the place she remembered before being awoken, a place where time seemed insignificant, space inconsequential. Continuing to stroke the hair of Jabin with gentle caresses, Tamila looked up. As if through poorly spun glass, she saw the people of Asasa watching her. All these observations, however, were like a dream remembered on waking, as quickly

forgotten. She experienced a new and profound emptiness, a void that nothing of self, or life seemed capable of filling; she felt robbed. Given so much, so soon, only to lose it all at but the first taste of its sweetness. Within her she sought for an answer, any answer, a way out from her bared pain and maddening despair. Looking down, she saw the one whom only moments before she'd put all her confidence in, yet now, now he would never again aid anyone, nor receive it. In the moment it takes to change a thought, Tamila acknowledged there was only one who could save her. One outside, above and greater than any force, will, or terror that can afflict man's realm. Eyes run dry from tears, and throat parched from sobbing, she cried out a whispered prayer, 'Please, please help me. Help us. I, we need you. In some way, somehow, please make this right.

And her prayer was answered.

Neither man or dark spawn stood, all unconsciously bending their knee in awe of the being before them. He rose from the waters, engulfing within his presence the figures of Jabin and Tamila, in a beauty beyond description. His face radiated knowledge, power, timelessness and care. His eyes were like piercing swords, paining all they fell upon with the understanding they were seen for who they truly were. Yet soft also, gentle eyes from which malice had never glinted ill will, a purity so patent as to negate any accusation of wrong against it. This was the Creator, and none could stand against the exercise of his will or the purity of his being.

Yet not all were so inspired by his proximity. The Horde, especially, cringed in apprehension, well aware of their anathema, the impurity of their genesis. Having seen their makers demise, they anticipated similar destruction.

Likewise, no few of the elfin faces looked troubled, expressions akin to horror in the knowledge of lives lived heedlessly, now held in the balance by the gaze of the life-giver; the discerner and judge of the thoughts and intents of their hearts. Most, however, rejoiced, seeing before them their first father and deepest root. To these the experience did not threaten judgement but deliverance, not the threat of disapprobation but the promise of freedom.

Quinn was one of those whose heart leapt, its desire manifest before him. Only haunting moments earlier he'd thought the binding thread of his life—his faith—disconnected. Emptiness had surged through him like a freak wave. A wave now receded, leaving behind it a shore uncluttered by doubt.

The Creator spoke with the Azure Ancients first, a few words to the whole before communicating with each. Quinn's skin tingled as if gently caressed, his spirit soaring at words of both praise and encouragement. By the end it was not only his faith that stood purified, but his understanding. The long unanswered questions finding answer; matters that had once frayed the edges of his faith, now mended; the greatest wonder of all now being that he had ever thought to doubt in the first place. With that happy thought, Quinn began to dwell on his 'last task', as the Creator had put it.

Sosthene sat and wept two-fold tears of joy and shame, guilt and forgiveness, the creator's encompassing voice lingering in his mind with words that both burnt and soothed, rebuking as they blessed. The Azure could still remember the vain effort of trying to stop the flow of words that had broken past the barrier of his own lips. Words spoken against his will, yet nonetheless

from his very heart. The creators aura had compelled into the open and illuminated his deepest thoughts, shaming him before his master in their affronting distrust while simultaneously revealing them for the what they were. He saw clearly his mistaken thinking now, the answers received completing the puzzle, reinforcing a faith that had erred in the arena of presumption. In resting his faith on having answers, Sosthene had effectively closed the door to both, forgetting that faith was the desideratum to understanding, and not the reverse.

Loathing the corruption of the Dark Lords, he now saw how they had become what they were, the seed toward such a path already self-sown in his own thinking—Pride. It blinded its victims to all but what they wanted to see and hear. That was why Sosthene wept. All the advantages and power of an Ancient, a life spanning century upon century, had not prevented him from forgetting that all was a gift.

Yet, there was one other reason he shed tears. A promise. A blessing and curse. It was the creators will that Sosthene remain on Asasa as the last of the Azure—indefinitely.

MADNESS

Gripped by terror, Foeomen peered out from one of the many caves that pockmarked the bluff. The truth of what he'd seen

and heard battled his intrinsic pride, which coursed like blood through his veins, futilely resisting the truth that hammered him with forgotten flashes of what really was. Having witnessed everything of the recent battle, and seen the Hated Ones glorious ascension from the pool, he'd heard the words spoken to the Azure Ancients as clearly as if spoken to himself. One communication in particular, however, had resurrected a long subdued truth about himself.

It cannot be true..., his pride insisted, *I am immortal, had no beginning, will have no end.* However, the crack had formed, and the weighty veneer of lies repeated throughout time immemorial, were not now weighty or thick enough. The tendrils of self-truth long since thought put to death, began again to root themselves into Foemen's existence.

Foemen was at the culminating end of prides path. Truth, rather than permeate and change, found a wall of egoism so impenetrable it crippled all attempts to overcome it. Yet truth requires no rest, grants no respite when first allowed its confronted. It nibbled the Dark Ones foundation.

I am not the Hated Ones creation, I am a god. I am. I AM.

In a bid to distance himself from the source of his doubts, Foemen departed the cave and headed North east. He had a need to be with his own, but of his brothers he could sense only two. One of those had gone mad it seemed, leaving Foemen with little choice but to pursue the remaining survivor. It was with considerable trepidation that he set off in pursuit of Damd.

In another cave not far from the one Foemen departed, sat Chkurl. Having crossed the brink of sanity, he no longer recognised how troubled his ruminations had become. Jumbled memories flashed across his mind, mingling randomly with the

here and now to create visions that terrified and confused. He had become caught between two realities, one without, the other within, both despairing. Several Azure had tried to ease the prisoner's torments, their loathing deferring to their philanthropic mindset. But, for his outward appearances as a man, he was a mind ancient and lost to evil.

The prisoner no longer remembered his name, all of self gone but for two desires; to escape and to kill. The second remained unclear, detached as it was from reason. So kill became generic, unmotivated, random. An innate command he could no longer help but fulfil. As to escape, the manacle that held him to the wall would soon be loose, his teeth working their way through the last of what remained of his left wrist.

A NEW ERA

‘Children of Asasa.’ The Creators voice annulled all else, incarcerating each listener to a world in which nothing existed but his words. Pleasure, like a child's at its fathers praise, swept through the people; though some showed shame and fear. The Horde's uneasiness was tangible.

‘This time will forever be remembered within Asasa's history, remembered as an ending and a re-dawning. For you here

today it is an ending. You will be the last of this age. For those after you, it will be a new beginning.’ With this the Creator turned to his priests and smiled.

‘It is an ending my faithful servants, receive your reward.’

As these words echoed their last, the Azure priests of the Most High and bi-millennial leaders of over one hundred generations of men, changed in their appearance. Ascending into the sky, their body’s became as light, before soaring to join the throng above.

They left behind only two of their number.

Sosthene stared up at his departed brothers with a look so tragic one might have wondered at the absence of tears. Yet no tears were left.

Quinn also gazed at his departing brothers, his smile as bright, a joy that said he would not be too long behind them.

With the deepest expression of care the Creator looked upon the two Azure. He focused on Sosthene, and something passed between them. With a nod, the Azures melancholy was replaced with a more resolute expression. Turning away, he went to a place he could be alone. Quinn watched his departure, reflective of the pain he knew his brother must feel.

Turning back to the people, the Creator’s eyes fell upon the Horde. These had assembled themselves together at the rear of the gathering. Seeing where his attention was focused, those Assasians nearest the dark-spawn quickly distanced themselves.

‘It is a beginning. I make the impure, pure.’ Too fast to see, figures of light shot out from the Creator, each claiming one of the Horde. These in turn fell to the ground as if dead. Yet they weren’t, rather they were now very much alive. All who

watched could see the change. Within each now resided a living, light emanating spirit. Shock was clear on many faces, not least of which were the Horde's.

‘Can blame be placed on the vessel for performing the task to which it was made? Can the child be accused of wrong for obeying those whose authority he has only known?’ The Creator's words chided as they explained. ‘I make children of whom I will, and give life to whom I will. From this day forward the world of Asasa has more than one race, learn to live in peace.’

Without further reference to what he had just done, the Creator continued, ‘To you all, I give a king. Within his line shall abide my seal, and by his power will I make witness my approval. To you he will be my voice, my arm, my heart.’ Here he swept his arm to point at all, ‘But you, I appoint as his judge. My seal will always abide within the line of his descendants, but my approval will be seen only in their power, according to the purity of their heart. So know, people of Asasa, to him upon my power resides, he shall be immovable. And he that lacks it, lacks also my blessing, and it is for you to judge them.’

Nobody saw exactly how it happened, most aware only that the air shimmered, and the Creator and his host were gone. In his place, in the very centre of the pond, stood a regally dressed couple, light silver crowns upon each.

By degrees everyone's mind came to grips with all they'd seen and heard. There began, dispersed at first but with ever increasing enthusiasm and joy, a cheering accolade in honour of both the glory of their Creator and his chosen rulers over them. For a long time there was only cheering, hugging, and tears of joy, amazement and wonder.

Isolated from what was going on before them, stood the Horde, feeling the most profound emotions of all. To a creature they knew the change that had occurred within them; their tie to the Dark Lord's power had been broken, replaced by something immensely more powerful and pure. Each realised the ability to think autonomously, to reason and decide their own fate. For the first time since their creation, they knew freedom.

In their first life-wakening moments the foremost thought had been unbelief; for they originated from the spawn of those who radiated spurned everything the Creator cherished. However, in an instant they had become the children of everything opposite to their originators; shown mercy when all they understood was violence; granted life when all they had been created for was death. Deep and fundamental changes were occurring within their thinking, changes that were but the birthing pains of four new races on Asasa, each with a path to choose and a place to make their mark in the world. Slowly at first and then in larger groups, they began to leave the valley; the Elf's, for the most part, glad to see them go.

THE KING AND QUEEN

To one side stood Sosthene, the other Quinn. Last of the Azure Ancients. Between them sat Jabin Ralisian and his new wife Tamila. First King and Queen of Asasa. Jonn & Tanya, with Tamila's mother stood off to one side.

Behind them at the base of Lord-King Mountain, the Creators Pool—as it was being called—attested to the power of its namesake. The strong breeze sweeping the valley failed to ripple the pools waters, and the reflections in it seemed sharper

and more real than the landscape they mirrored.

Before the royal couple and bowed in homage, the people of Asasa spread, no longer a sad face among them. Shortly after the Creators departure came the discovery that no dead or wounded were to be found, nor any sign of the battle that had raged earlier. All those thought lost to life now stood again with their brethren, whole and unscathed. It was the culminating marvel cementing in everyone mind the glory of the One who worked it. Reinforced as each looked about to see a fertile mountain valley, thick emerald grass rolling in waves over the previous churned and bloodied mud. It was an idyllic scene of beauty that caressed away the images of the prior horror as if a dream.

Many who now stood knew that they had been dead or dying. Yet, like a nightmare, nothing empirical remained as witness to what only memory claimed was true. All the horrors and trials of the past months now seemed like a misty anamnesis, easily forgotten. Though, as change is prone to do, there remained a sense of loss. A loss of what was, of the Ancients in particular. Yet this was supplanted with an excitement of what was to come, each soul present knowing they would be part of a new era, one in which the might of the Dark Lord's had been broken and Elfin-kind was again free to dominate the world instead of hiding within it.

It was Sosthene who raised his voice to address the people, a stoical set to his face replacing the sadness that had been there. With one hand placed on Jabin's shoulder, the Azure's voice carried to each ones ear as if he were standing beside them. His fingers glowed where they made contact with the king.

He expounded a story to them few knew.

‘Early in the dawn of settling this land it was decided by

oracle and the guidance of the Sacred Book, that a family would be sought out, and from that family one be chosen as first descendent to a seed-line of kings that would rule the people of Asasa. To this one would be given the gift of Dunamis.

‘It was judged by the Ancient Azure that such a gift confined to only one royal seed-line would counteract the threat that constantly hung over our heads—The Dark One’s.

‘However, centuries passed before such a family was found, one that all the prophecies pointed to; one with whom the Azure were satisfied as indeed the Chosen. Jabin Ralisian was that one.

‘Though priests of the Most High, closest to the knowledge of his will, we were yet ignorant of much. Learning through trial that the plans of the Creator do not rely on man’s understanding to unfold themselves. He used those who thought they foresaw, in ways unforeseen by any but Himself. Thus we found ourselves powerless and at the mercy of our ignorance. Yet, it was within this period that, for the first time, many of we Ancients learnt of true faith.’ Sosthene glanced at his brother with a shamed expression, receiving back a look that reflected so well the forgiveness in the face of his master. With an inward sigh he continued, relating to the people events that led to this very moment. Each part of the story heightening their wonder with the marvel of how providentially their lives had been used and led; like one giant puzzle in which they, their ancestors and their descendants are pieces, without whom the puzzle would not be complete.

Sosthene spoke long to an intent audience, describing all events involving the Ancients. Often quoting prophetic passages, expounding events and giving cause to certain

decisions. From time to time he emphasised lessons to be remembered and taught to their children, and children's children. Some things he said remained unclear, mysteries that meant nothing to those that heard them; of future things, for future peoples.

At the very end he placed his other hand on Tamila's shoulder, and to everyone's wonder spoke in a voice not his own but the Creators. Words that for all the coming age would never be completely forgotten, and only by a few completely understood.

'To my people I give a king, and to their king I give a people. The greatness of each will be witnessed in their service to the other.

'To the king I give a queen, and to the queen a king. In each shall the one find power and in each shall the one find truth. I am of above, you are of below, but free souls I have made you and rulers of your hearts and minds. Therefore, my children, choose wise paths for your feet to take. Remember, I am never far from any of you. Walk my ways, honour your king, and guard your freedom. This age is begun.'

EPILOGUE

Translated from the works of Rupiarcos D'thull, Historian for his Royal Highness, king Joshen, nineteenth ruler of the Three Realms.

In the days that followed, in the age to become known as the age of kings, at the dawn of that age, the coronation of the first king and father of all kings was celebrated. His reign was to last two hundred and thirty-seven years, his crown then passing to his first-born son, Prince Quinn.

Proceeding his crowning, plans were made to establish The Stronghold as capital of The Three Realms. Under guidance of Quirinicotilius, one time Azure Ancient and now chief councillor to First King Jabin, construction was begun on a Temple, built in honour of the Creator and commemoration of all that had occurred on its site. By the Creators power (what was known as Dunamis, but now The Mark) the Temple was completed, housing at its centre the Pool of the Creator; remaining to this day unrivalled in magnificence.

Yearly, as it is to this day, the king would enter the temple to receive revelation and prophetic message for his people. Of the year's remainder, as it is to this day, only the Queen was permitted entrance; there, she baths in the pools sacred waters during the ides of each month (The reasons behind this rite are unknown to all but the royal house. It is speculated to correlate with the revelation of divine origin; the Queen being, if not first, then closest advisor to the King).

In the closing years of the first-royals reign, Sosthene (he who has been known by many names: The Hermit, Wanderer,

Sorcerer, Royal Tutor), took his leave of the royal court and remained unseen, as legend tells, for near three centuries. Some say he still roams the lands today, ageless, full of ancient wisdom and able to access the power of The Mark through physical contact with the king.

Uncertain years after the temples completion, Danek, Chief builder of the royal house and much sung hero of the Last Battle, began construction upon the royal palace. It was a project that spanned two decades and remains singularly unique in that it was aided by the people of the Northern peaks—the northerner Trolls—who had yet to establish a realm of their own within Triad. Shadowed only by the temple's grandeur, the palace was astonishing for its workmanship and has remained home to the royal household to this day, having been threatened only four times in the two millennia since. The first threat being the First Goblin war of 689, followed closely by the civil unrest of 721 during the period of King Jarom's madness and unholy alliance with the people of the arid lands. In 1474 the Second Goblin War saw the stronghold almost overthrown while the throne still stood empty. The royal brothers Rodinn and Trunam at last ceasing their hostilities for the sake of the kingdoms survival; the eldest of the twins, Rodinn, taking the throne after seven years of feuding. The fourth and last threat has been within this writers lifetime, with the arrival of the Inconnu (The Outsiders) in 2803.

Of the daybreak period of this age, few names stand as prominently as those mentioned. However, others do beg acknowledgement. From the pioneers of the northern lands, such men as Haron Barwell and ReIn O'Harl; frontiersman of what is now the Realms of La'Bas and Lowni, forerunners to the colonists of both.

Such men as Tamon and Tihl, brothers both and grandsons to Elder Tanon of the then city of Landpoint. Who with king Jabin's eldest brother, prince Jahas, set sail for the New World—the then Motherland (Two centuries were to pass before the crossing was attempted again. On account of the maps gained from that first endeavour, safe passage was won without incident and the New World began to feel again mans influence.

Of the others there is too many to remark; Dorandi Mayan and those that swore with him to hunt down and rid Asasa of the ever plotting Dark One's beyond the far northern forests of Deep Lowni, where winter holds dominion against the sun. Only fourteen returned of the seventy that left, but with them they carried the head of the one called Foeomen—said to be one-time servant of the High Dark Lord in the Age of Ancients.

Of Tonya, queen of king Weniol, who refused to leave the temple nor eat food until her husband recalled his army from warring against the Trolls of Arrab'ad'Labas; a war that had stripped the land of young men, forced the kingdom into poverty and filled the people with disdain for the throne.

Of Raymon Longbow, and Galinad Strong-arm. Of Siborum o'lasden and his twelve sons who together took sail to Ill-fate Isle to rid the world of the Dark One abiding there, remaining unseen again for five years only to be found one day washed up on the shores of Rlowni, all mad beyond cure.

Suffice it is to say that history is filled with remarkable people too numerous to number. Though the work at which I, Rupiarcos d'thull, toil as historian to the king, deals with facts found and the certainty of events, even I, at the end am dogged by the question: What can I, what can we, learn from those who've gone before us?