

THE WHITE WIND STORIES

THE
PHOENIX
TEARDROP

JONATHAN EMANUEL

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Chapter One: A mission for a Crest Bearer

In a world far from our own, where time moves a little slower and the sun is just a little bit brighter, a young boy called Sim Saule set out on a journey from his home. Sim was around eleven or twelve years old and was very brave and wise for his age. Since only four years of age he had been trained to serve his nation and, more importantly, his king, the Great King of all Forria. Sim was a Crest Bearer, one of hundreds who had been given a powerful gift.

You see Sim's world, known to all who lived there as the White Wind World, was filled with an amazing thing - a powerful force that could change and shape anything that could be seen, heard, touched, or felt. The White Wind, or the White Wind force, as it was known, was a power that had helped to make all the nations of the world very strong. But in the White Wind World terrible wars were taking place.

As a student in the Crest Bearer Order Sim had been given a White Wind Crest, which was no larger than the palm of his hand, to which it was always strapped. But unlike other objects in his world Sim's crest was no ordinary thing. It was one of many vessels or containers of the White Wind force, and through it Sim could do powerful things. Like the rest of the Crest Bearers Sim had been trained to serve the Great King as a warrior and a defender of all that was still good and just in the world, and he had been taught to use his crest to do just that. His crest was silver and he was very

good at serving the Great King with its power to fight and defeat Forria's enemies. Because of this Sim had now been called to leave his homeland of Sheron Imotaval and journey all the way to capital of Forria, the great stone and glass city of Parr Serenity, where he would meet the King face to face for the first time and receive from him a mission of great importance in these terrible times of war.

Sim arrived at the grand stairway to the palace right on time, though he was a little out of breath for hurrying because he did not want to be late. Once he'd straightened out his silver tunic and brushed back his thick brown hair he was taken inside by one of over a thousand palace guards. Sim was very nervous. Being surrounded by so many knights and soldiers that were twice his size was quite intimidating, yet he was even more afraid of meeting the King himself.

The Great King had made all the worlds and ruled over all Forria since the end of the Twelve Black Days, when a terrible war between two very powerful races had burned almost everything to the ground. But the Great King had saved the people of Forria from death and had restored their land to a place of beauty and harmony. His love for this world of great mountains, silver streams, gleaming blue skies, and gloriously heavenly sunrises was only outmatched by his love for the people. It was the Great King's love for the people that had made him summon Sim to the palace today. Troubling times were afoot and the King had a special mission that needed the skill of a special Crest Bearer like Sim.

Sim bowed respectfully before the Great King as he sat upon his golden throne and seemed to shine with glory. Sim was very afraid but soon the Great King was smiling warmly. He stepped off of his great seat, his height more than twice that of the small boy, and knelt on one knee so that he could look Sim straight in the face. "Do not be afraid, young one," he said softly. "You are in the presence of one who has great love for Forria, great love for its people, and great love for you." All of a sudden Sim felt very calm, the Great King's words soothing him like a warm ray of light. The King held out his hand and gently placed it on the boy's shoulder. "I have much need for you and your skills, Sim Saule," the King said in a whisper. "Dark times surround the land of Forria and its people. The Great Wars against the evil Mitan Empire and their allies, the treacherous Dark Ones of Saruderos, have waged long and hard, but your people have remained strong. Now I call upon your strength, little one, for there is a mission that is in need of a Crest Bearer as young yet as powerful as you.

"Long have the Crest Bearers used their gifts to access the wonder and the power of the White Wind to defend Forria, and long has that service to this land kept it safe from harm. My father made the White Wind and now I need someone who knows its power to go on a perilous mission for me. There is a deep treachery to be undone. The Phoenix Teardrop, that ancient power that was stolen from these lands, must be reclaimed. I have chosen you to reclaim it, Sim." Sim did not quite know what to say. He was once again filled with dread and fear, but this time it was because of what the Great King was asking him to do.

Long ago, before the Great Wars that now rage, there was another war being fought. Two ancient races, the Dragons and the Phoenixes, were battling one another for dominion of the skies. If the Dragons won they intended to burn all the nations below to nothing more than ash, but the Phoenixes were fighting for peace and harmony with the peoples of the world. With fire and brimstone the conflict spread over all the world until only two from each side were left. When the last Dragon finally dealt the last Phoenix a deathly blow the Phoenix shed a single tear before its flames went out forever. The Dragon thought it had won but as it turned its evil, fiery eyes towards destroying all the nations a wise man, a mighty ruler sent from beyond the edge of the world, came to Forria and taught its people how to release power from the Phoenix's Teardrop. That man was the Great King. He knew that the tear had been shed out of sorrow, for the Phoenix had failed to protect the nations from a great evil. But the Great King showed the people of Forria how to use that same tear as a weapon to quench the fires and heal the land. In a stunning battle on the Mountains of Fire in Saruderos the Dragon was slain, its fire extinguished by the Phoenix's Teardrop forever.

But the story did not end there. After the Great King had come to rule over all Forria and keep its people safe from other powerful enemies that sought to take the place of the Dragons. The Steward of Saruderos, Shalek the Gale, who had been trusted to keep the Teardrop safe for Forria, chose instead to use it to make himself and all the people of Saruderos strong. They joined with the evil Mitans and used the Teardrop's power to gain

control the fires of the Dragons, which the Teardrop now had mastery over. And so the new wars began to rage. Now if there was any chance of Forria winning the war the Teardrop would need to be reclaimed. It seemed that Sim had been chosen by the Great King for that task. But he was terrified of the thought of it. "Fear not," said the Great King, "for you shall not fail in this task if your heart is pure and courage is your weapon."

Sim's small voice spoke softly and hesitantly. "Forgive me, Sire," he said, "but I fear that am too young and too small for this task. Perhaps someone who is older and wiser should be sent?" Sim was brave for his age but was afraid that he would not be brave enough for the King's mission.

The Great King placed his palm on Sim's cheek and smiled proudly. "Humble you are, young one. Yet because of this I know that you will not fail me." The King stood up and placed his own royal ring upon a string and around Sim's neck. "You carry with you the ring and signet of your king. Let it be a reminder to you that wherever you go my power and authority goes with you."

"Yes, your majesty," Sim answered with another bow, even though he could barely stand still because he was so afraid and was shaking. The King gave a slight nod of his head, as kings sometimes do, placed something secret into Sim's tunic pocket that he wasn't allowed to show anyone till later, and then sent Sim on his way. The young boy walked slowly and uncertainly from the throne room and out of the great marble doorways. As he went great and powerful men, knights, warriors, and advisors gathered about the

King's throne to watch him leave. It was their task to serve the Great King in continuing to plan and wage the war to save Forria, but it was now the task of this one young boy to help end that war forever.

Chapter Two: The Crest Bearer's Guide

Sim arrived on horseback at the outer wall of the palace and was lifted off the grey stallion by the knight also riding it. Once his feet were firmly on the ground Sim looked up at the knight, who only had one question for him.

"You know your way to the Teardrop from here?" he asked in a strong and firm voice.

"I do, sir," said Sim fearfully. The knight stared at the lad as though he were very concerned.

"You'll need more courage than that if you are to take back the Teardrop and save our lands, little one," he said.

"I fear I am too small for the task," said Sim sadly.

"Maybe so," answered the knight, "but you just remember that it was the Great King who put that signet ring around your neck. He could have chosen anyone. He chose you." Suddenly the knight reared up his stallion and went galloping off back towards the palace, leaving Sim standing all alone in the dust. Sim thought about what the knight had said and realised that it was true. The Great King, the one who made the Phoenixes, the one who ruled Forria and commanded thousands of knights and lords and soldiers, who were all far more mighty than young Sim, was also the one who had asked Sim to go on this mission. This made him feel just a little bigger than he really was and soon he decided that even though he was

afraid and many dangers would lie ahead he wasn't going to let the King down. He would be brave.

Sim quickly turned on his heels and began running away from the palace walls and towards the forest. He was very good at finding his way around the world. You had to be if you were going to be a Crest Bearer and defend the four corners of the land from evil. Soon Sim was inside the shadows of a hundred trees of the Jillrae Forest, darkness and dampness all around despite the fact that it was still early morning and the sun was shining high above. Sim was very good at running and had sprinted as fast as he could without pause towards the south end of the forest for at least half an hour. Any other boy would have been exhausted but not Sim. He was full of more energy than a dozen boys his age and had even outrun fully grown men before. He would reach the end of the forest before noon.

Sim arrived at a small stream in the forest, where he took a quick break and knelt down to scoop up some water to drink. He was about to go running off again when suddenly he heard a familiar voice come from behind him. "You're not going to go without *me*, are you?" it asked. Sim turned around with a joyful look on his face and there behind him stood another little boy the same age as him. Sim rushed towards the boy, who smiled even more gladly than he did, and flung his arms around him to hug him. Yet as Sim hugged the boy the boy seemed to go partly invisible, like he was only half real and the rest of him was half spirit-like. The boy laughed loudly. "Careful, Sim, careful!" he said, "Or you'll fall right through me and hit the ground. I'm only half real you know!"

"You're real enough to me," laughed Sim, "and I've missed you dearly."

"You didn't think that I'd leave you to go on this mission for the King all by yourself, did you?" said the boy, "I'm your Crest Guide. How could I do such a thing?"

"You're more than just a Crest Guide to me, Lente," said Sim, for that was the spirit boy's name, "you're like a brother!"

"Well then," answered Lente with a great smile, "as brothers we shall do this thing together!" Suddenly Lente began turning Sim round and round on one spot and looking over him as though he was checking him for something. Lente could touch Sim just like any other real person just so long as he didn't try to hold on for too long. Lente was a Crest Guide, one of many spirits from outside this world who were sent to help Crest Bearers understand the powers that they possessed, but as a spirit it meant that Lente was partially transparent and not fully physical or solid. If you leaned against him for too long you would eventually pass through him and the same was true if he leaned on, pressed against, or touched you. Still Lente was skilled in finding the right balance, and soon had Sim spinning around as though he was on a pottery wheel.

"Hold out a minute!" Sim cried out while laughing, "I'll be dizzy as ever if I don't stand still!"

"I'm looking you over," said Lente in all seriousness. "I need to make sure you've got everything we're going to need."

“Okay, but can I please stop spinning?” Lente stopped spinning Sim around and for a moment Sim had to pause to regain his balance. But soon his legs were steady again and he looked back at Lente.

“Do I look okay to your eyes now?” he asked.

“Indeed, Sim,” answered Lente with an impressed smile. “Do you have your sword?”

“Yes,” said Sim, patting the hilt of his silver blade with his hand.

“Your bow and arrows?”

“Yes,” Sim answered again, tugging on the strap across him to his sheaf full of shining metal arrowheads that hung on his back.

“Your compass?”

“That too,” said Sim, pulling it out of his tunic pocket and revealing its golden hand, which spun towards the east. “Not that I need it,” he added.

“You might be able to navigate the lands in your sleep but compasses that don’t point north come in handy for other reasons too,” Lente said wisely.

“Have you got your dagger?” Sim lifted up one of his legs slightly and tapped a leather pocket that had been sewn onto the straps of his boots. Inside was a pure silver dagger. Lente looked up from Sim’s leg and over his shoulder. “Is that your Crest Bearer’s cloak?” he asked curiously. Sim seemed very glad that Lente had noticed it.

"It is indeed!" he said excitedly.

"So you're now officially a Silver Crest Bearer?" Lente asked with joy.

"Grand Master Eruuke gave it to me two weeks ago, just before I left for the palace," Sim explained. "He said he was glad to give me my commission, seeing that I am the youngest person to ever be made a Silver Grade Bearer."

"He was right," said Lente, placing his hand on Sim's shoulder just like the Great King had done. "You were a fine student of the Crest powers, Sim, and an even finer Bronze Crest Bearer. You'll make an excellent Silver Crest Bearer and one day a very powerful Golden Crest Bearer. I can tell already."

"Thank you for your kind words," said Sim gratefully. "I couldn't have done it without the blessing of the King and your help."

"And I see that the King has sealed you with his approval," said Lente, moving his ghostly hand from Sim's shoulder to gently touch the signet ring around his neck. "Do you know what this means?" he asked with a wondrous look in his shimmering, blue eyes.

"It's a great honour, even if it scares me almost to tears," said Sim very reverently.

"He's given you his authority, Sim," said Lente excitedly. "Not even the great knights have been given that!"

"Perhaps he meant to help me be more brave," said Sim. Sim was remembering how knowing that the Great King had chosen him for this mission had made him feel and as he looked at his friend Lente seemed to agree.

"I think he wants you to be very courageous," said Lente. "The signet ring should be a good reminder of his blessing on you." After smiling proudly at Sim again Lente turned Sim towards the south and the two boys began walking, their mission still awaiting them.

Chapter Three: The journey to the mountain

Sim and Lente had been travelling for days before they reached the edge of the sandy seashores of southern Forria. They had passed the Talking Trees of Ubere and the Rising Waterfalls of Ellnaria, but were now almost at the edge of the country. Sim knew that had he have been alone he would have run and reached this point many days earlier. But Lente wasn't much of a runner and his company was preferable to speed, so they had walked. Sim had been a little worried about spending too long in these remote parts of Forria, since that's where the nation's enemies liked to come and make their strongholds, but Lente was convinced that they would be safe. Still Lente had been careful not to let Sim leave any tracks behind him as they crossed the sandy beaches and had used one of his many spirit talents to stir up some wind that blew away the footprints in the sand. Lente, being so light and ghostly, had left no footprints behind at all and so only had to erase Sim's. Once Lente was finished with this the boys headed up the steep, rocky Cliffside and towards Stone Mountain, which was the tallest mountain in all of Forria. It stood as high as the sky itself and as wide as the horizon. Stone Mountain was the last of Forria's main territories before the open sea and the paths to the southwest nations, the enemies of Forria, Mita and Saruderos.

Lente helped to pull Sim up onto the top of the Cliffside, though his touch wasn't as effective as that of a full human. Soon the boys were on top of the rocks and Sim was brushing the sand off his boots. But then Lente heard something in the wind. Sim had been trained well enough to know

exactly how to read even the slightest hint of concern from a Crest Guide, who had powers that went beyond what could be seen with just eyes and heard with only ears, and was soon listening too. It took only seconds for them to realise that not too far off were a great many men. They sounded like one of the King's armies and were marching through the rocky places of southeast Forria, loud breathing and heavy-footed. But as Sim and Lente stealthily moved through the paths in the rocks and caves to get a closer look, they both realised that this army was no friend of Forria at all.

Armed with dark, grey swords and spears made by the Black Fires of Saruderos, these dozen or so men were from the Empire of Mita. Its Imperial Courts had once been friends with Forria but when the once good and powerful races of Saruderos turned to evil and stole the might of the Phoenix Teardrop for themselves the Mitans turned to evil too. Their crimson cloaks and shiny, golden armour used to represent the royalty and honour of a great nation destined to yield the mighty strength of kings and noblemen. But now these colourful adornments only represented Mita's desire for bloodshed and wealth.

The invasion of Forria had begun when the Dark Lord of Saruderos, Shalek the Gale, had used the Teardrop of the last Phoenix to reveal the locations of the Gold and Wisdom Waterfalls in Forria. It took the Mitan Emperor, Noazu the XIV, only seven days to gather an armada of eighteen hundred ships and send his armies across the open seas. The armies of Forria and the Crest Bearer Order defended the shores of the land well, thanks to the guidance and instruction of the Great King, but ever since the Dark Lord of

Saruderos had started using the Phoenix Teardrop's powers to command lightning and storms the armies of Mita had begun to advance over the shores. Both Sim and Lente knew how dangerous and ruthless the Mitans could be. Sim had received many letters from his older brother, Tinnoth Rihn, who was a knight fighting overseas, warning him to steer clear of any Mitans he ever encountered. But even though Sim had been taught by the Crest Bearers to face his enemies with valour and bravery, both his brother's words and those now coming from Lente warned him to try and sneak around these foes. Mitans were cruel and vicious. The Stone Mountain was just seven miles away and to fulfil the Great King's mission Sim and Lente would need to get there in once piece, and that meant not getting seen and killed by the Mitans.

Sim and Lente had begun to crawl down the rocks and towards a thin line of trees, where they could pass by the Mitans in the shadows and not be seen. Sim was very good at moving quietly and seeing that Lente was almost as ghostly as air itself it was nearly impossible for him to make any noise at all. But as the two boys made their way around the marching Mitans, whose huge limbs and giant figures made their weighty movements very powerful but also very slow, the boys glimpsed for the first time the reason why the Mitans were marching in this part of the land.

These Mitans were no ordinary invasion force or patrol. They were dragging with them a young woman who was in chains and shackles. At first she looked human, her beautiful face and brilliantly blond hair glowing in the morning sun like water caught in light, yet as they first noticed her and then

watched more closely Sim and Lente began to realise that she was much more than human. "My goodness," said Lente, "they've captured a Sky Star!" The horror and anger on Lente's face could not have been any stronger.

The Sky Stars were a wonderful people, dwelling in cities made from light and cloud that floated just beyond the blueness of the sky that could be seen from the ground below. They were a fair, loving, and peaceful race, who had appeared on the lands below to give the people wisdom and precious gifts for as long as anyone could remember. Even Sim, in his few years of life, had watched Sky Stars come to the earth below to give gleaming treasures to the poor and the brave and the honest to reward them for their meekness and make sure that no one in the King's land went in need. It was said that their light is the purest thing of all and that the Sky Stars are only drawn to those of pure hearts.

But the treasure hungry Mitans had begun capturing Sky Stars when they visited land, and even though it terrified him to think of it Sim knew what happened once a Sky Star was captured by a Mitan for Lente had told him long ago. Lente's job was to give Sim secret wisdom on all matters, but it saddened the Crest Guide sometimes when the knowledge of the White Wind forces showed secrets that were dark and evil instead of secrets that were light and good. Still Lente was bound by duty to give to Sim all kinds of wisdom and so had revealed that when Mitans captured Sky Stars they took them across the Black Oceans and into the lands of Saruderos, where the Dark Lord, Shalek the Gale, the one who stole the Phoenix Teardrop in

the first place, had the Sky Stars thrown into the lakes of lava from the Black Fire Volcanoes. After he had the Sky Stars melted down into nothing but the elements that they are made of he would draw those elements out for use in making jewellery and crowns, large rings and diamonds, silk cloaks and necklaces, which were then given to the Mitans as rewards for their allegiance to Saruderos. It was a cruel and terrible thing to do and neither Sim nor Lente could just stand by and watch another Sky Star be taken to suffer that same fate. So they intended to launch an attack.

Sim may have been only eleven or twelve years old but he now had the bravery of a man three times his age. He drew his sword firmly and looked at Lente, who was very angry with the Mitans for what they had been doing and for what they planned to do to the Sky Star. Lente looked at Sim and nodded once, letting Sim know that it was absolutely necessary that they free the Sky Star. On the count of three Sim suddenly burst from within the shadow of the trees and rushed at the passing Mitan soldiers with great speed, Lente running alongside him. The Mitans saw him coming and, with their giant limbs and terrifying faces, drew their own swords and began to laugh and yell. Sim was nothing more than a child to them and they intended to crush him under their feet for even daring to attack. But Sim's courage was overflowing. He remembered the Great King's signet ring around his neck and also remembered that he was a Silver Crest Bearer, called into the service of Forria to defend its people and all that is good in the world from evil. That included the Sky Star and he wasn't about to forget this. Before the Mitans could even raise their swords to strike Sim

threw out his right hand, his White Wind Crest of silver metal strapped to his palm by the leather and silver glove he wore. Suddenly a brilliant burst of light and white coloured wind shot from Sim's Crest, as though someone had just opened up a curtain to reveal not only the bright and furious rays of a sunrise but also mystical streams of wind that were like water and vapour. The Mitans were all blinded and swept over by the power of the Crest. As they stumbled about in pain and terror Sim leaped into the air, acrobatic spins and somersaults guiding him weightlessly and as easily as a bird to great heights. His sword was ready and in moments he had cut all but one of the Mitans to the ground before he even touched down.

Sim landed just as Lente arrived near him. Then the last of the Mitans, the one who was holding the Sky Star by her chains, let loose a loud roar and got ready to throw his large spear at Sim. "Look out!" cried Lente. Sim turned around and before the Mitan could even loose his spear thrust the dagger from the pocket on his leather boot through the air and into his adversary. The Mitan fell to the ground with a mighty crash, just like all his comrades, and in that moment the chains that bound the Sky Star burst into puffs of smoke.

Sim exhaled, slightly relieved that he had won the battle in spite of the odds. He looked at Lente who smiled at him proudly. Then they looked at the Sky Star, who was now free. A strong wind blew about her and suddenly she began to shine more and more radiantly, as though freeing her from her chains had somehow let her be a true star again. "Are you alright?" asked Sim hesitantly. He didn't quite know whether he should be

talking to a creature of such glorious beauty and majesty, remembering that he was only human.

"I am fine now," she answered in a soft yet special voice that sounded a bit like it had an echo following it. Her answer ended Sim's doubts as to whether he should have spoken and left him feeling quite joyful. "You have done us a great deed this day, young sir," she then said with thanks.

"I am no sir, my lady," said Sim humbly. "I'm just a Crest Bearer on a mission for the King."

"Then, Crest Bearer, I am in your debt," she said with a joyous smile on her face that made Sim feel warm and happy inside and dearly appreciated.

The Sky Star stepped towards Sim, her white robes and silk dress blowing about her in the breeze along with the fine locks of her hair. "Speak your name," she said.

"I am Sim Saule," said Sim.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, little Sim," she answered. "I am Dekianna Mal Tei Su, a Day Sky Star of the Northern Heavens."

"It's an honour," said Sim. Just then Lente cleared his throat with a cough that was meant to remind Sim to introduce him. Sim seemed a little confused by this and nudged Lente in the arm, whispering "she can't see you" as subtly as he could.

"On the contrary," said the Sky Star to Sim's surprise, "the eyes of a Day Sky Star see all, including fellow spirits from higher worlds sent down to the lowers, as we are sent, to aid the peoples of the lands." The Sky Star turned and looked straight at Lente, which was something that Sim was not used to anyone doing. Usually a Crest Bearer's Guide could only be seen by the Crest Bearer they were assigned to and other Crest Bearers, but Dekianna Mal Tei Su could see Lente as clearly as Sim could see him. "It's a privilege, Lente, Sun of Stene," she said without Sim even introducing him.

"The privilege is mine, my lady," said Lente with a respectful bow. Sim hadn't seen Lente talk to anyone outside the Crest Bearer Order before and he felt kind of odd about it. But Lente soon placed his arm around Sim and smiled gladly. "We're both very pleased to meet you and I am glad that we could help."

"The Mitans were going to take me to be melted down in the Black Fire Volcanoes of the Dark Lord," said the Sky Star, "but you have saved me from certain death and terrible pain. For this I shall give to you a gift."

Sim was about to object to being rewarded for doing what was only right. He had been taught to serve selflessly without hope of personal gain and Lente was very proud of him for this. But before the words could even come out of his mouth the Sky Star raised her hand and drew out from nothing but the invisible air a crystal eagle's feather, a quill for Sim to write with. Sim and Lente watched in awe as the quill lowered itself into Sim's open

hands and rested on his palm. "Keep this timeless quill safe, Sim, son of Rihn, for it shall serve you well in a time of great need," said the Sky Star.

"What shall I use it for?" asked Sim, still awestruck by the gift which was immensely beautiful.

"It shall be like the display of courage that you have shown today," she answered with a gentle smile. "You were brave enough to rescue me in spite of the foes you faced, who were far greater in strength and power than you. So too shall this quill be. It shall unwrite anything that seems more mighty than what is good. It shall even be able to unwrite what is a lie and let the truth prevail," she explained.

For awhile all Sim and Lente could do was look at the quill, its crystals glistening with rainbow colours as it lay in Sim's hands. But then the Sky Star began to walk away from them and back towards the north. They seemed very sad because of this and started to run after her. "You're leaving?" asked Sim.

"So soon?" added Lente.

"I must go," said the Sky Star. "There are duties that await me still in the lands under the skies. By order of the Great King there are spirits in the mountains to talk with and creatures in the forest to rally. These are dark times and the task of a star in the dark is to bring light. But do not despair," she added to encourage the two young boys, "for you are not alone. The signet ring of the Great King is with you and now that you have saved my

life the favour of the light shall follow you too. Remember your courage and always know that no matter what dark thing is written it can always be unwritten by the light.”

Suddenly the Sky Star was gone. Neither Sim nor Lente could see her anymore and for a moment things seemed quite a bit duller. But then Sim looked back to the shimmering quill in his hand and remembered what the Sky Star had told them. It was something to be cheerful about and soon both boys were glad again. Then Lente quickly knelt down and scooped up some sand from the earth beneath him. He used his gifts to make wind and swirled the sand up into a wave that swept about in the palm of his hand. Suddenly he began to weave the swirling sand into a silk-like sheaf for the quill and in a moment had made the case. He handed it to Sim, who smiled gladly because he so loved to watch Lente using his mystical gifts and then took the sheaf gratefully. “This will do for something to keep the quill safe in for later,” said Lente.

“Thank you,” said Sim, placing the quill carefully into the sheaf and then sliding the sheaf into the pocket of his tunic. “I wonder how and when we will use it.”

“She seemed to think that we will need it later so I expect that we will find out at some point,” answered Lente. “It was very brave and courageous, what you did for her, you know.”

"I only did what had to be done," said Sim. "She needed help and you gave me the courage to be that help. Plus you saved my life so you are to thank too."

"Well, we do make a great team," said Lente. "Now how about getting to that mountain?"

"Indeed we must," said Sim, "but first you have to tell me how she knew your name. She even knew to call you *sun* of Stene instead of *son*, which is only proper since you are a child of a great light. I never said a word to her about you."

"Oh that's simple," said Lente with a smile, "Sky Stars know everything!"

Chapter Four: Of wars and battles in the Deep

The sun had set many times before Sim and Lente had reached the Stone Mountain and climbed all the way to the top. They had to contend with steep rock faces and jagged edges before they finally ascended over the peak of the mountain and back down the other side. Sim had complained that it was taking so long, claiming that a month had gone by, but Lente was adamant that only a week had past. Neither really knew how much time had truly gone by, but both started to feel better once they were headed downwards.

While on the way down they had met a mountaineer whose sparrow had told them the best way down the other side and Sim, who was an eager climber, had led the way to the ground. Lente, who was not too much of a lover of heights, had tentatively followed and now the two boys were almost at the bottom. But no sooner had they closed in on grassier land did Sim and Lente find themselves in the company of a group of travelling animals. Led by a wolf the creatures had been forced from their places beyond the mountain and the wolf was very angry about the reason why. "War!" he shouted furiously. "That's why we are uprooted from our homes and cast into the barren and harsh territories of the mountains."

"But surely the war is far from here?" said Sim. He was very concerned for the creatures, who looked weary and weak from fleeing from their dwelling places.

"It was until a month ago," said a deer, who was not used to walking on such jagged and uneven rocks, "but the Mitans have a new class of warrior within their military ranks that is giving unnatural speed to their soldiers."

"No longer do the King's armies fight just the centurions, legionnaires, and foot soldiers of Mita's Imperial army," said a rabbit in fearful tone. "Now they face the magic of Dark Wizards and Black Fire warriors from Saruderos too!"

"It has helped them move quickly through our lands," added the deer.

"What treachery!" said Sim as he looked at all the animals and Lente in anger. "How did they breach our borders?" he asked.

"It seems that the Dark Lord Shalek has mastered the Teardrop's gifts for opening up the Sea Walls," said the wolf. Everyone was full of much rage because of this but the wolf was perhaps the most angered. This was because it was an army of wolves, bears, lions, and other fearsome creatures from Forria who had failed to stop the Dark Lord Shalek from escaping away to Saruderos with the Phoenix Teardrop back when Shalek was just a Gale and was capable of being stopped. Since then he had done nothing but become more and more powerful, and the wolf blamed his own kind for this. Knowing that new armies were arriving in Forria through the Sea Walls, which were far easier to travel than normal oceans, because of the Teardrop only brought sorrow to his heart. "Now with the Teardrop under his mastery more and more each day even the very wonders of Forria are bending to his will!"

"But perhaps you can change all that," suggested a tiny squirrel who had stood quietly at the back of the large gathering until now. Staring curiously at the signet ring hanging about Sim's neck the squirrel soon moved to the front of the group and climbed upon the back of the deer to look Sim straight in the eyes. "I see a great amount of courage in you," said the squirrel in voice that suggested that he was far older and wiser than his small form appeared to show. "And with the King's approval I think you may yet do many great and courageous things for Forria and its people."

"I hope to," said Sim. He wasn't really sure how to take the squirrel's words, being that they had come from something quite cuddly and sweet, but was nonetheless honoured. "I will certainly try not to let anyone down. I am on a mission for the King."

"A mission of great importance," said the squirrel, as though he already knew everything about Sim and the mission. "It will take you deeper into the war than even we animals have been, young one. Of battles in the Deep I can only tell you this - there is much danger and much sorrow. Make sure you keep about you your courage and your wits. The heavens are always watching."

Sim nodded obediently. He was not unaccustomed to taking advice even when it came from creatures as small and seemingly helpless as squirrels. Invisible to all but Sim, Lente however seemed far more cautious about the squirrel, as though he could tell that there was more to this little creature than had met the eye. He was about to take a small, rolled up scroll from

within his ghostly tunic when the squirrel oddly glanced in Lente's direction, almost as if he could see the Guide, and then suddenly leapt from the deer's back, through Lente, and onto a rock. "Let's keep moving!" he shouted in a loud and firm voice that was urgent and full of warning.

"The squirrel's right," said the wolf. "Mitans will be after our scent if we don't pass through the caves and shallow waters soon enough!" With that the animals began to run, scurry, gallop, and fly off towards the larger rocks and caves along the mountainside. Just as they left the wolf turned back to call to the boys, saying "Keep to the muddy paths if you want to avoid the Mitans and their dark allies. The skirmishes spread for miles and patrols from both sides are many!"

Soon Sim and Lente were stood alone again. Lente had let go of the scroll in his tunic and presently both boys were just watching the last of the animals disappear into the shadows of the caves. Then Sim turned to Lente and with a face of mild fear decided to speak. "We should keep to the mud paths then," he said.

"The wisdom is sound to me," Lente answered. Seconds later Sim was off, climbing down the last of the rocks and off towards the trees and long grass. Lente however remained behind for a few moments to stare at where the animals had gone and think of the odd, cautious feeling that he had felt while the squirrel was talking. But soon he was running after Sim and passing through the long grass too.

It took the boys about two hours to leave the mountain parts, though the giant rock could still be seen for hundreds and hundreds of miles away. Sim and Lente had kept to the mud paths as suggested by the wolf and were presently passing along a muddy stream towards the place where several of Forria's southern villages were seated. They had seen nine different Mitan patrols nearby but had also been encouraged by three much larger Forria army groups that were tracking and pursuing the evil ones. Lente had much wisdom with regards to evading patrols which helped Sim a lot, seeing as how he had only just become a Silver Crest Bearer a few weeks earlier and was very inexperienced when it came to war, and they had gone unseen by any foe.

Some five hours into the afternoon of the second day of travel past the mountain however Sim and Lente came upon a sight that they would rather not have seen. It was a very sad sight indeed. One of the villages that they had expected to stay in for the night was just a few metres past the hill upon which they now stood, but as they looked ahead from the hill they saw nothing but fire and smoke. The village had been completely destroyed, all its buildings burned to the ground. The fires were still raging. Sim didn't know whether it was the smoke, the heat, or the sorrow that was causing his eyes to water but tears were falling from them nonetheless. The Mitans had attack and destroyed the entire village, leaving most of its people dead. It was a terrible sight to behold.

Sim wiped his own face but then put a comforting arm around Lente's shoulders as Lente watched the flames in horror. Sorrow seemed to strike

the spirits harder than it did full flesh and bone people, who had tougher hearts than most and were able to bear far more pain. Lente couldn't stop the weeping as he watched the survivors of the village crying for their own fallen soldiers, husbands, and mercilessly slain citizens. It seemed a very sorrowful night indeed as nothing but tears fell from the eyes of many, and Lente seemed to feel that sorrow more than any other. But as Sim tried to comfort him a voice came out of the dark shadows of the night towards them. "Weeping shall not help you anymore than it shall help them." Both Sim and Lente turned around in surprise to see two people they had not expected to encounter.

Upon two white stallions rode two of the most skilled and powerful Crest Bearers in the history of the order. First came the stern, strong, and fearless Golden Crest Bearer, Temeb Rauna, a man of many more years than Sim yet still young and in his prime. Over his shoulder hung a cloak of pure, golden silk. And next to him rode the formidable and beautiful Golden Crest Bearer, Chesta Gi, a woman of equal years and power to Temeb yet a somewhat kinder soul. On her left hand was a ring of gleaming silver. As they approached Sim and Lente were filled with almost as much reverent fear and respect for them as Sim had been filled with in the presence of the Great King. Both boys bowed immediately.

Temeb had spoken first, his voice firm and seemingly unforgiving. Now he spoke again. "Dry your eyes, master Lente, Sun of Stene, for not with tears shall this treachery be undone but with the might of fist and sword."

"Yes, sir," Lente answered, wiping the tears from his eyes firmly with his hand.

"Yet not out of pride or false strength but out of valour and noble honour shall both fist and sword be readied," said Chesta with soft yet wise words. Her attempt was to comfort and encourage the boys somewhat in the wake of the destruction before them and Temeb's cold address, yet Temeb had little time for it and quickly moved the conversation on.

"What business have you here so far from the Crest Cities?" he demanded impatiently. "These are not the places for *children* to be."

"We are sent by order of the King, sir," Sim answered sharply, stepping forward and straightening out his tunic to respectfully present himself and the King's signet ring to a man both superior in rank and power to him. Temeb could almost not believe his ears as he heard Sim's words and saw the signet ring between his fingers. Turning around, Temeb looked at Chesta with shocked and almost offended eyes. Chesta too seemed confused by this and yet managed to hold her peace. Temeb could not.

"You are sent by the King?" he demanded again, this time far firmer and angrier than before. "For what purpose?" Temeb leapt from his horse, revealing for the first time his Guide, a man looking similar in form and age to him, who was sat behind him on the stallion.

"A task of great importance, sir," said Sim as Temeb bounded towards him and stood right in front of him, towering over him. Temeb seized the King's

signet ring from Sim's fingers, not fully pulling chord upon which it rested from around Sim's neck but nearly doing do.

"Speak it!" ordered Temeb to Sim's fear.

"I cannot, sir," Sim answered hesitantly and with much fright. Temeb seemed even more offended by this and now pulled hard on the signet ring's chord to draw Sim closer to him.

"What did you say?" he asked in a softer yet far more dark voice. Sim was terrified.

"I mean no disrespect, sir, but I am bound to secrecy," Sim answered.

"It's true," said Lente as Temeb moved closer to Sim as if to strike him, "he is to speak of the mission to no man. To beast and creature, spirit and force yes, but to man, no. It is the will of the King." Temeb glared at Lente and then looked back at Sim who fearfully watched him. Sim had been on the receiving end of this powerful warrior's wrath once before, though in that case Temeb had been the just one. Now Sim could only hope that Temeb would believe him and spare him the outpouring of his scorn.

It seemed that this was not going to be the case. Temeb's eyes began focus as though his rage were no longer containable. The thought of a child being charged by the Great King with a mission that Temeb had not even been told about let alone charged with instead was most offensive to him, and Temeb thought the boy to have been lying. But just then Temeb's Guide spoke, his voice just as firm and stern as Temeb's yet somehow

tamer. "He speaks the truth, Temeb," he said strongly. Temeb turned around in overflowing anger and glared at his Guide.

"Lies!" he shouted so loudly that it only increased Sim and Lente's fear and even made Chesta feel uneasy. But Temeb's Guide was far less moved.

"You would do well to watch your words!" he answered in a voice filled with more anger than even Temeb had shown.

"The King would not have sent a child to do the task of a man!" Temeb argued.

"A man in service to the Great King would not call his own Crest Guide a liar!" the Guide answered. It was perhaps only Lente out of both him and Sim who knew what a great crime it was to call a Crest Guide a liar. To question the speech of a Guide was to question the Guide's very purpose. They were sent that they might offer wisdom but to call that wisdom a lie was to accuse the Guide of being no better than Shalek the Gale himself. Temeb seemed to also have some understanding of the accusing scope of his words yet was far from repentant. Temeb's Guide turned his face from Temeb in stern disgust. Temeb clenched his teeth in anger. It was not the first time he and his Guide had argued and it would not be the last. Yet in this instance it was the Guide who was right and Temeb could not deny it. Closing his eyes briefly he turned back to Sim and, though still appearing very angry, finally loosed the boy and the signet ring from his grasp.

"If you are on a mission for the King," he said in a bitter and frightening yet whisper-like voice, "then you had better fulfil it!" Suddenly Temeb turned from Sim and Lente and leaped back onto his stallion, scowling at his Guide while mounting up onto the saddle. In a moment he rushed the horse off into a gallop, riding past Sim and Lente so fast and with such fury that neither boy had time to even show their appreciation to him for letting them continue with the King's mission or to his Guide for vouching for them. They watched him and the Guide ride off into the shadows beyond the flames of the village, and then turned around to see Chesta sitting on her stallion with her Guide, the both of them looking down at the boys.

"Whatever the mission you have been sent on it must be of great importance or the King would not have sealed you with his ring," said Chesta.

"The Great King has placed a vast responsibility on you, young Sim, son of Rihn," said Chesta's Guide. "Do not fail him or what you see here that has happened to the village shall take place all over Forria. Nowhere shall escape this here fate."

"I understand," said Sim in a timid voice.

"I don't think you do," said Chesta. A concerned frown now made her beautiful face appear stern and fearful. She had a great many worries about Sim indeed. "Terral, my Guide, does not speak lightly when she says that a great responsibility has been placed upon you, Sim Saule. You possess the authority of the King. If this task proves to be too big for you and you fail us

there shall be no return. It shall only be the end.” Sim stood silently looking up at Chesta and her Guide, Terral. Suddenly he felt small again and that only made him more afraid. After awhile he began to softly speak.

“Then perhaps...” he muttered, “...I should give the ring and its charge to you, ma’am... or maybe to Master Temeb? Your wisdom and strength shall surely prevail.” Terral looked at Chesta with tearful eyes as Sim spoke these words, horrified and greatly grieved by what he had just said. Chesta felt her Guide’s sorrow and reached down to place her hand gently on Sim’s head.

“A task from the Great King is never misplaced,” she whispered softly. “It was handed to you, young Sim, and you must bear it. It grieves me greatly to think that you do not believe it should be yours, for in spite of every fear it is. Do not fear the mission nor its scale. Do not doubt. Hold onto only courage. It is all that can help you now.”

“But ma’am, maybe you are right,” said Sim as Lente lightly touched his shoulder, “if the task be too big for one so small then the same flames that burn here shall destroy all of Forria. My homeland shall be set ablaze. All shall be conquered. The Mitans shall lead us all in chains to the Black Fire Volcanoes of Saruderos and we shall all be melted down.”

“Tis the truth, Sim,” said Chesta, “but hear also this. Fear I do as Master Temeb fears. You are small indeed for this burden. Yet Temeb must accept the words of his Guide, Sareesh, and so must we all. You were chosen by the King. Do not underestimate the mission just because of how young and

little you are. Do not fill yourself with pride and arrogance because you were chosen for the task. Instead understand the truth. Recognise how small you are and then rise to the challenge. It is the only way for you to succeed and the only way for us all to survive.”

With those words Chesta pulled herself back upright on her stallion with the grace and elegance fitting for a lady of the court and hastened her horse into a gallop, carrying her and Terral off into the distance. She and Temeb had much work to do if they were going to rally the Crest Bearers and stop anymore attacks on the villages across Forria’s borders. Sim was now alone, only Lente present to help him. Together they would have to stop the same terrible fate of the village that had been destroyed from spreading all over Forria, and that meant going into the very heart of Saruderos, the fiery lands of the Dark Lord Shalek himself, to take back the Phoenix Teardrop. But now Sim didn’t know if he had the courage to succeed anymore.

Chapter Five: The White Pillars

Far from the sorrowful fires of the south, in the majestic forests of western Forria, the Great King and much of his council arrived on horseback to discuss many matters with a gathering of creatures of both wonder and marvel. As the Great King dismounted his golden coated stallion, a beautiful beast with two eagles wings on its back and seven unicorn's horns crowning its head, he beheld a large congregation of many different kinds of beings assembled before him. From fairies and tiny, mystical human-looking creatures with butterfly wings and peacock's feathers, to eagles made from sparkling dust, herds of deer formed out of crystals and gleaming gems, mermaids, and other human-like races formed only from the most shimmering of river water, the gathering was truly a sight to marvel at. For the Great King and his councillors seeing these creatures brought them much joy. But soon the matters that needed to be discussed were remembered and seemed to somehow make the glorious display of creatures seem a little less bright and wonderful.

The Great King had stepped forwards and onto a rock that rose up out of the damp grass and high into the air, so that he could address all the creatures before him who were just as much a part of Forria as the humans that lived there. Upon his shoulder perched an eagle that wasn't like the other ones that were present, but was crowned with golden feathers and bronze armour. Before the Great King had even prepared to speak the creatures, large and small, had all bowed reverently and honourably to him. He held just as much respect in their eyes as he did to human eyes and

while the Great King loved all the creatures as dearly as he loved the humans of Forria it was the eagle who was most impressed with the reverence that was shown. You see before humans had even been allowed to live in Forria it was already home to animals and wondrous creatures like the ones gathered now. Yet these beings had peacefully chosen to share the land with humans and had even called a human king their own king. For generations the Great King had ruled over both man and beast and now he had called the latter to him because a terrible threat approached them both. The eagle knew this and was pleased that the creatures still trusted in the Great King as though he had always ruled them as a man.

When all was peaceful and quiet and the creatures had all risen from their bowing, the Great King looked about all those gathered and began to speak. "A time of darkness and trouble has come upon Forria," he said with a saddened voice, "the armies of Mita and the fallen ones of Saruderos move against the lands of Forria to destroy all that is good and pleasant in this place. They have all but conquered the southern borders and now they approach the middle country. My councillors here have brought word of attacks against villages inside this kingdom, villages of both man and beast. The homes of those who are flesh and bone, and the homes of those who are spirit, and the homes of those who are in between now suffer greatly because evil has tried to triumph over good. Even the Sea Walls, our loyal friends of ocean and tide, have been made at times to bend to the Dark Lord's will. These are said times for Forria indeed."

The Great King paused as small sounds of sorrow and grief came from the wondrous creatures around him. Every creature gathered here knew just as well as humans and all the other races that the war in Forria had been very dreadful. The King's words were a weighty reminder of troubles that were not too far off. The Great King was deeply saddened by how much the creatures were hurting. Even his councillors, who were mighty men and women of great skill and valour, felt the grieving that was shared by all the creatures. Yet the Great King had words to encourage and strengthen all his subjects. He had called the creatures to this place to lift their spirits and renew their courage.

"But be not afraid," he said in a loud and bold voice, "for your King has not forsaken you. The tides of this war shall be turned. Forria shall be restored to peace once more and the sun shall rise on a new horizon in which there shall only be goodness. I have commissioned one of my own to go forth and recover the Phoenix Teardrop, that ancient power that was stolen away by a treacherous snake long ago. Let your hearts be filled with hope for the Teardrop shall be returned unto the shores of Forria and shall wash away every scar and stain and blemish. The scourge of the Mitans shall be erased. The grip of Saruderos shall be loosened and cast off. The fires of war and destruction shall be quenched and dampened until nought but the seas of peace and eternal tranquillity remain. Be not disheartened for your King has spoken. Forria shall once again be free!"

A sudden uproar of cheers and joyful song came from the mouths and hearts of every creature gathered, their ears very glad to hear that which

the King had spoken. For so long had they waited to hear of the Great King and now he had once again decreed his will for all the lands of his Kingdom. As the cheering and singing raised a gloriously beautiful sound heavenward even the human councillors were stirred to rejoice and began to clap and applaud loudly. Their King had relit the fires of courage and faith within them. He had promised to them that he would not let their land fall and now they had begun to believe that promise.

As the King nodded his head as a firm declaration that his words were true the eagle upon his shoulder began to loose its voice up towards the sky. Soon the skies above the gathering place filled with all kinds of birds of many shapes, sizes, and colours, all singing their own songs to celebrate what the Great King had said. Then the King looked from his eagle and to the gathered ones again to speak. "Now go," he said in a shout of great resolve, "go and tell every creature you know of what the King has decreed. Tell it to the beasts of the field and the beasts of the air. Tell it to the creatures above the ground and the creatures below it. Tell it to all who dwell in the forests and those who dwell in the streams. Go, ye, and tell it to those who are in the depths and those in the heights. Tell those who live above the clouds and those who live below them. Tell the winds and the breezes. Tell the earth and rocks. Tell the soil and the mountains. Tell the trees and the flowers. Tell the moons and the stars, and let not one part of Forria go untouched by the King's words, for they shall surely come to pass and all shall share in the majesty of them when they do.

“Go, ye, and shout to every kin of every city of every part of every land. Tell them all that their King calls to them. Tell them I say be strong and be ready for the victory is nigh!” As the King exclaimed his great order he released his hands into the air and suddenly every creature in the gathering place began to rush away in determined and excited spirits. The word of renewed strength in Forria and the return of the Phoenix Teardrop was strong in their hearts and now they were hurrying to tell everyone they could about it.

As wondrous colours and sounds followed the mystical creatures as they went across the sky and the sea, through the forests and the mountains, the King turned back to his human councillors who stood looking in awe and gladness at him. “The four corners of the world have been released to spread my word,” he said, “go too shall you to all the cities and villages of this place and command them to stand firm for their King and their land. We shall all soon taste victory together!”

“Yes, Sire!” said all the councillors in gleeful shouts. Soon they were on their way, mounting upon their horses, to encourage the humans of Forria too.

The King turned to the eagle on his shoulder and took him by the claws upon his hand. “A special task have I for you, old friend,” he said softly.

“Speak thy bidding and it shall be done, my master,” answered the eagle in a voice of many shades and tones.

"There is now the duty of strengthening my chosen one," said the King. "Fly now, Ginnil Eli, to the rising walls of sea and water and adorn the chosen child with my glory and honour. In the name of his King shall he defeat the vile ones in the darkness."

"It shall be done, my lord," said the eagle, Ginnil Eli. At once the eagle's wings unfolded, spanning the width of the Great King's arms, and carried him upwards on top of the winds and towards the west. The Great King watched as a golden sunrise appeared to hail the beginning of a new day for Forria, in more than just one sense of the phrase.

Away from the west and the spreading of the King's words Sim and Lente walked through marshes and muddy streams towards the deep south. They were still of solemn spirits after seeing the village that was burned down and destroyed. They had in fact seen three more just like it and then watched one of the tree villages of the fairies set aflame too. It seemed that the Mitans were following the cruel and evil commands of the Saruderos minions, Dark Wizards and Black Fire warriors, who for spite had always wanted to burn everything in Forria to ashes ever since their leader, Shalek the Gale, had stolen the Phoenix Teardrop. He was said to be jealous of everything wondrous and wanted to be the only one in possession of anything truly mystical. And so now even the dwelling places of fairies were being attacked. Sim and Lente could have used some stirring words like the ones that the Great King had given the wondrous creatures of Forria to lift their spirits but were about to receive something far different from that instead.

As Sim and Lente crossed a particularly thick and slimy part of the marshlands they both suddenly heard the terrible roar of a great beast coming from beyond the mist and marshy fumes. Sim had in mind to draw his sword but Lente thought otherwise. His wisdom was sound as seconds after hearing the roar the two boys found themselves faced with the approach of a forest bear. Unlike wild bears who keep very much to themselves and talk only to those they like forest bears were very noble and almost royal creatures, gifted with a powerful wisdom that was even greater than the wisdom of a Guide like Lente. Sim knew that the bear that had run at them was a forest bear as soon as he and Lente saw the stripe of silver fur all along its back, which was common for forest bears who lived by the rivers of silver of often drank there.

The bear stood in front of Sim and Lente and for a moment said nothing and only breathed deeply to catch its breath from running. Sim stroked the bear's head to comfort the creature, though he had to rise up onto his very tiptoes just to reach. Eventually the bear caught its breath and began to speak in a very deep voice. "Are you Sim Saule?" he asked urgently.

"I am he," said Sim straightaway.

"I have a message for you, Sim," said the bear as Lente stepped closer to hear better.

"A message from who?" asked Sim curiously. Sim had spoken to many forest bears before but never had any come to him bearing a message.

"Is your Crest Guide here with you?" asked the bear.

"He is," said Sim, glancing to his left hand side though he knew the bear could not see Lente.

"Greetings," called out the bear in Lente's direction, his eyes wondering aimless about that area. "I am called Goad. I am a forest bear from the Urik forest bearing wisdom for your assignment here."

"Pleased to meet you, Goad," said Lente though the bear did not hear him.

"Lente said he's pleased to meet you," said Sim in Lente's place.

"Have you looked into your wisdom scroll since you have been on this journey?" the bear asked in Lente's direction.

Lente shook his head. "No, he hasn't," said Sim.

"Good," said the bear in a sigh that was filled with much relief.

"Why? Whatever's wrong?" asked Sim and Lente at the same time.

"It's my message," said the bear anxiously. "I and many of my fellow forest bears were looking into the wisdom waters to see what new knowledge we might discover when we saw in the water writing of a strange kind. Not the kind that comes from the heavens in the tongues of the Great King, but of a kind that comes from Saruderos."

"Saruderos?!" exclaimed Sim in horror.

"The lands of the dark ones?" added Lente fearfully.

"I believe that they have started to use magic in the lands of Forria," explained the bear with a troubled look in his eyes. "That has not been done since before the Dragons and Phoenixes had their war."

"We were told that Dark Wizards had come to Forria to help the Mitans fight," said Sim solemnly. "It is most likely them who are using the magic."

"If that is the case then it explains why we saw some of their magic writing in the wisdom waters," answered the bear with a hint of anger in his gruff voice. "Magic is just like the ink that is used to write it. If you get just a little in water it can turn the whole pool black."

"Does that include my Crest Guide's scroll?" asked Sim nervously. He knew all too well what could happen if magic came into contact with Lente's scroll.

"Yes, young one," answered the bear sadly. "The scroll is only supposed to be used when your Guide needs to read about something that he doesn't already know about, which is why normally he won't use it much. But since you are headed into places that neither of you will know anything about you should expect to be using the scroll a lot. You might not have used it yet but you will soon. Unfortunately that means that you'll be too far in not be affected by the Saruderos magic." Turning towards where Lente was stood the bear spoke with grave warning. "If you use the scroll now you will get magic all over it and it will be blackened forever. You'll never be able to use

it again!" Lente was horrified at this. His precious scroll was the only thing he possessed that connected him to the place that he was from while he was here. If it got ruined he would have to go back to his home realm, beyond the sky of the worlds, and would never be able to return again. He would have to stop being Sim's Guide. Both he and Sim knew that a Guide has no place in the real world if he or she is unable to give wisdom to the person they are assigned to, so Goad's news had shocked them greatly.

"What are we going to do?" asked Lente fearfully. "I almost took out the scroll earlier to read about something!"

"I'm sure we'll figure something out, Lente," said Sim hopefully. "Perhaps we should just trust that we won't need the scroll?" he suggested. But the bear shook its head sadly.

"I have been told that you will most certainly need it," he said. "I was sent to tell you this message by a Sky Star. She gave me the warning for you."

"Dekianna Mal Tei Su!" exclaimed Lente in a loud voice.

"We saved a Sky Star some time ago," explained Sim to the bear as he looked back and forth between both him and Lente. "She said that her favour would follow us and now I see that it has. Had it not been for your sighting of the magic in the waters and her message to you for us we might have used the scroll unknowingly and it would have been ruined forever. But now that we do know what shall we do?"

The bear lowered its head for a long while to think as Sim and Lente stood anxiously waiting to see if any of his wisdom could help them. Lente would have usually known an answer but since he didn't on this occasion his only other option would have been to look it up in his scroll. Since he couldn't do that he felt strangely useless and paralysed. But soon the bear had thought of something that might work and led the children off towards a forest.

"There was an old tale," said the bear, "of a time before magic, when the dust of a shooting star was used instead. Nothing created in Forria was created to be bad but sometimes beings and creatures in the world can make them bad. Magic is one of those things. It's like using fire to burn down a city instead of using fire to heat one. Magic wasn't meant for mankind but for magic-kind. The Saruderosi were the ones who first broke that ancient law. But the old tales say that before magic was even by those it was meant for shooting stardust was the only thing close to it. Perhaps if you can dust your Guide's scroll off with shooting stardust it will protect it from magic. I know of nothing else that can help."

"The wisdom is sound to me," said Lente after much thought.

"My Guide agrees," said Sim though he didn't really understand how or why this would work.

"There's only one problem," said Lente.

"He says there's a problem," said Sim.

"I know," said the bear with a frown. "The problem is how to get the shooting stardust."

"Don't you know of a place?" asked Sim with a worried look.

"Not since the Dark Ones of Saruderos burned all the shooting stardust wells on the earth to the ground," said the bear and Lente at the same time. "Shalek the Gale is jealous of anything mystical and wondrous that he does not control," Lente explained.

"If there's nowhere on the earth then..." Sim muttered.

"That leaves only the sky," answered the bear. All three looked up at the sky and in silence wondered how in the world they were going to get to those heights to even begin to look for some shooting stardust. "Come on," said the bear suddenly and soon they were off again.

A little while passed before Sim, Lente, and the bear arrived at a tall white marble pillar that was overgrown with moss and grass and vines, which stood as tall as a doorway in the middle of the forest. Sim looked up at it and wondered what on earth it was. He'd never seen a pillar in the forest before. But Lente and the bear seemed very pleased with what they were looking at. "What is it?" asked Sim in confusion.

"It's a White Pillar," said Lente with a smile.

"I can see that," answered Sim.

"No, Sim, it's a White Pillar built by the Sky Stars themselves," explained Lente.

"Why would the Sky Stars build such a thing in the forest?" asked Sim.

"Isn't that a little odd?"

"Not when you realise what it's for," answered the bear as he stood up on his hind legs and leaned against the pillar to test its strength.

"May I ask what it is for?" said Sim. He had now begun to scratch his head because he couldn't figure out what a stone pillar in the forest could possibly be good for.

"Pillars are used by humans to hold things up," said the bear. "The Sky Star's use them to hold things down." This was an odd thing to say indeed and Sim had no idea what it meant. Both Lente and the bear knew he was clueless at this point and so the bear decided to try and explain before Sim could even ask another question. "In manmade buildings and such pillars are used to hold things up, like ceilings and roofing, yes?"

"Okay?" said Sim, focusing with great concentration to understand.

"Well the Sky Stars don't live in buildings on the earth, they live above the sky," the bear continued. "If humans build ceilings and roofs between them and the sky it seems prudent to assume that the Sky Stars build something between them and the sky too."

"But they live above the sky not under it," said Sim.

"Which is why their pillars hold things down rather than up," answered the bear patiently.

"I don't understand," said Sim.

"You will soon enough," said Lente with a laugh. "Tell Goad that if he's planning what I think he's planning then we're ready to go now."

"Lente says 'we're ready to go'?" said Sim before the bear could even think of another way to explain the pillars to Sim.

"Okay then," said the bear in a very pleased tone. Soon he and Lente were urging Sim to try and start climbing the pillar, though Sim still had no idea what he was doing or why he was doing it. With the bear encouraging them from down below Lente followed Sim up the pillar and soon both were scaling it to great heights. When Sim and Lente had first looked at the pillar it had seemed to reach no higher than a door post, but now that they were climbing up it the white column seemed to go on and on forever. There was something very easy about climbing this pillar, as though it not only somehow made them lighter but also helped them to climb it as well. Sim could not believe his eyes as within only minutes he and Lente had climbed up to the very sky, higher even than the peak of the Stone Mountain, and were now looking down at the earth and ground below like birds must. They couldn't even see the bear anymore and could only see a small patch of green which must have been the forest. Yet the pillar seemed to go up and up into the sky and clouds endlessly. This did not do Lente too much good because he didn't rather like heights, but still he kept climbing. Suddenly

Sim and Lente could only see white around them and that's when they realised that they were inside the clouds.

"I'm not sure I understand this," called out Sim, though he did enjoy the gloriously brilliant scene of clouds and sunshine about him.

"I'm not sure I like this," said Lente, who had to keep changing where his hands and feet were gripped so that he didn't pass through the pillar and fall off it.

"Are you alright?" as Sim fearfully. He had just remembered how difficult it was for Lente to handle the physical world.

"Just keep climbing," suggested Lente. He had had quite enough of talking.

The boys climbed on and soon they felt like they were at the very top of the sky. Neither knew what could possibly be beyond it but they were about to find out. Sim had just tried to fan aside some thick clouds that were wrapped about the pillar and blocking him from seeing any higher up it. But as he did he could feel a strange pull on his hand. He looked twice to make sure that nothing had a hold of him yet still he felt like he was being dragged up.

"Hold on, Lente," he called out nervously, "something's got me, I think!" But before Lente stopped climbing he began to feel the pull on his arms too. It was an even stranger feeling for Lente than it was for Sim since Lente couldn't even remember the last time something had pulled him. That only happened in his own realm where he could be pulled. Lente began to call

out. He was very uncomfortable with the feeling of being pulled. But as he did and Sim did too the two boys began to slide up the pillar, their whole bodies pulled through the thick wall of cloud. Suddenly Sim and Lente were on the other side of the cloud but were astonished at what was happening to them. They were now sliding downwards while still on the same Pillar but towards more sky and sunshine. As they fell downwards faster and faster Lente looked up as if he was about to scream at Sim. But before he could he saw a very unusual sight indeed. The earth and the ground were now above them. Everything was upside down and according to how things worked in the world they knew Sim and Lente were falling *up*. Yet up seemed to now be down, the ground was where the sky should be and the sky was where the ground should be, and Sim and Lente were about to reach the bottom of the pillar.

With a gentle puff of cloud Sim hit the sky-ground and rolled over onto a road made out of nothing but sunlight. Lente soon followed. As the boys stood up they looked at one another in confusion and then at the pillar. "I am bewildered," said Sim, rubbing his head even harder this time. "Is that the top of the pillar or the bottom?" he asked. "And are we standing the right way up on ground that looks like the sky or upside down on the sky while looking up... or down... at the ground?"

"If I give you an answer I think it will only confuse us more," said Lente with a giggle. He had known something about how White Pillars were used but had never imagined that it would be that strange. Turning to look up at the ground that was now above them he laughed even more. "Still I see what

Goad was talking about. The White Pillar is now holding something down... the ground!"

"It looks like it's holding the ground *up* to me," said Sim.

"Not if we're upside down and things are working the wrong way round," answered Lente. "Think of it as if we're standing on the ceiling of a room," he suggested. Sim would liked to have tried to figure it all out but both boys soon remembered that they had to find some shooting stardust quickly so left the matter there because there was still the King's mission to fulfil. If they were ever going to figure out what was really happening in this place that was above the ground yet upside down, it would have to be another day.

Lente led Sim along the sunray road and towards some large, wondrous looking cities made of clouds and starlight. It was a sight to marvel at, the light and clouds weaved together to look like crystal and silk that formed buildings and structures. Once they had entered the city they soon realised that they were in the place where the Sky Stars lived. One of the Sky Stars came to them as soon as they appeared inside the city. "You must be Sim Saule," she said in pleasant voice. "We've been expecting you."

"You have?" said Sim in shock.

"Remember, Sky Stars know everything," said Lente as he nudged Sim.

“At least everything we need to know,” she answered with a smile. That’s when Sim remembered that Sky Stars could both see and hear Crest Bearers’ Guides. “Come,” she said softly.

Sim and Lente followed the Sky Star through the brilliantly shining city and towards a well. Sim couldn’t stop looking around. He’d never seen a city made of clouds and light before, and the fact that as he walked he left footprints in the clouds and on the light road made him even more awestruck. The Sky Stars around the city were looking at Sim and Lente very curiously. They had not had visitors in a long while and found the two boys quite interesting to watch. Then Sim remembered that where Lente was from wasn’t too different from this place.

“Your home is like this, isn’t it, Lente?” he said while still looking around in astonishment.

“Somewhat,” said Lente, “though we have buildings of the finest gems and pure gold, not just of clouds and light.”

“It must be a wonderful place to live in,” said Sim with a wide smile.

“That’s true,” said Lente with a sigh that showed that he often missed his home. “Still,” he continued with a happy look, “I like to travel and visit you and your world.”

Lente had just finished firstly showing Sim how to run on top of very light clouds and secondly reminding him that he had no shadow up in this place, when the two boys arrived at a well made from flowing water that seemed

to pour down from the ground above endlessly. The well was upside down, its watery walls flowing from the ground above like a great waterfall, and Sim was awestruck at the sight of it as he looked up at it. The Sky Stars, now a great many of them in fact, had led the boys there. Sim was the first to peer over the edge of the well of water to see inside of it. It was glistening with dust from shooting stars, and yet the dust never fell out of the well but swirled around inside of its watery walls as though it were completely weightless. "The dust of all shooting stars is kept here now," said one of the Sky Stars.

"It has been ever since the Night Sky Stars told us that the wells on the earth above were being burned to ashes by the vile ones of Saruderos," said another.

"We've been waiting for you to come for sometime, Sim Saule and Lente Sun of Stene," said the Sky Star who had first met the boys in the city.

"We've collected lots and lots of shooting stardust for you. It will protect you well against the magic of the Dark Wizards, but use it sparingly. It will take a long time to gather more."

"We will," said Sim gratefully. Then he slowly moved his hands up into the well as the Sky Stars instructed him and scooped out a handful of shooting stardust. It sparkled and glistened in the cup of Sim's hand like silver sand and made his palm feel all tingly. Lente had already begun to weave Sim another sheaf, and this time it was made out of clouds. Sim filled the bag

with the shooting dust just as soon as its cloud material became more solid, and then Lente closed it.

“We are indebted to you for helping us so generously,” said Lente to the Sky Stars. “You have given us much of your stardust. We will make sure it doesn’t go to waste.”

“It is we who are indebted to you,” said one of the Sky Stars. “You saved one of us from certain pain and torment with bravery and valour. For that you shall always be smiled upon by us and all our kind. We will continue to shine at night for you to light your way, and shall help the sun wake you early in the morn for each brand new day.”

Sim and Lente bowed respectfully to the Sky Stars who were stood by them. Moments later one of the Sky Stars pointed out a White Pillar to them. It was the same one that they had climbed to reach the sky city. Somehow it had moved from where it was when Sim and Lente arrived in this heavenly realm, but Lente soon explained to Sim that it was in fact the clouds that made the city that had moved and not the pillar. Having been wished well on their way Sim and Lente hurried to the pillar and began to climb up it again and towards the earth above. Just as before they soon felt that uncomfortable tugging feeling and found themselves turning upside down again. But this time the sky went back to being above and the ground went back to being beneath. Sim and Lente slide all the way down the pillar and back to the ground in the forest where the bear, Goad, was stilling waiting for them. After they hit the ground with a little more caution than

when they'd used while falling on the soft clouds, the two boys stood up to greet Goad and tell him all about what it was like up at the top of the pillar.

"I wish you could have come with us," said Sim.

"Oh no," said Goad with a laugh, "we bears don't climb very well at all. So you gathered much shooting stardust then?" he asked.

"We did indeed," said Sim. "The Sky Stars were very generous."

Chapter Six: Battling the Wizard

In a place of darkness and shadow, where not much could be seen at all, there was a thin column of white smoke rising from a hole deep in the ground. This dark place seemed to be outside for there were lots of noises, like the sound of dripping water and rushing streams, as well as the sounds of creaking trees and a strong wind, but there seemed to be no sunlight at all. In fact the only thing that could be seen was the white smoke rising from the hole in the ground.

Then suddenly something else appeared. It was a shadowy figure that looked like a frail old man who was all hunched over and bent. He seemed to walk closer and closer to the column of smoke as if he was trying to find something inside it, something that he could hardly see given that it was so dark. Suddenly he threw out his hand into the column of smoke and began waving it around frantically. The smoke column was disturbed, its vapours rushing about here and there in the pitch black. Then in a single moment a red flash of light shot out from inside the smoke as the old man cast his hand through it. "At last!" cried out the old man in a voice that was crackly and worn. He peered deep into the red flash that kept pulsing like a flame and soon he could see a face inside of it.

"Did you get it?" asked a different voice. It was coming from the face inside the flashing light and it sounded very sinister and dark, yet oddly young.

"I most certainly did," said the old man. If anyone had been with him in the dark they would have just about been able to see his wrinkled, pale face

now that the flashing red light was illuminating him slightly. He seemed very old indeed, older than anyone else who had ever lived. But there was something very strong about his eyes. They had a focus and a firm glare that even the angriest eyes lacked. "I have sent it to you," the old man said into the flashing light as he stopped waving his hands in the smoke.

"Where are you?" said the voice from the flash. He seemed frustrated with the old man and quite impatient.

"Closer than you think," said the old man.

"Shall you come to me?" asked the voice, again impatience filling his every word.

"Only if you fail *him*," answered the old man.

This seemed to scare the face that was appearing through the flashing light and suddenly it vanished. The old man stood alone in the dark as the smoke continued to rise from the hole in the ground. After awhile he began to laugh a wicked, twisted, and evil laugh.

Somewhere that was far from where the old man and the mysterious face had been talking, over a river that was as wide as the Stone Mountain itself, a large flock of oddly coloured ravens flew towards the north. Unlike normal ravens that were a glossy black colour these ravens were crimson and red, like the colour of blood. They even had red eyes and as they flew they left behind them a black trail that stretched after them like a storm cloud. The flock of ravens was heading north with something that the

sinister, old man had given to them. When he had said that he had sent the mysterious face something he had meant that it would come by these ravens. Though they could not be seen carrying anything they did indeed have something with them. It was something that was invisible yet more powerful than anything that could be seen, and they had been sent to deliver it to someone very evil indeed.

Still further north, where there were lusciously moist hills of the greenest grass under a bright and sunny yet showering sky, a large battalion of Crest Bearers rode south upon dozens of horses. Each Crest Bearer had on a cloak that signified his or her rank and the cloaks were coloured bronze, silver, and gold. There were many of bronze coloured cloaks, fewer of silver, and only three of gold. The Crest Bearers wearing gold were at the front of the battalion, commanding and leading it. Two you will remember from earlier - their names were Temeb and Chesta. The other gold Crest Bearer was a fellow commander like them, though they were still superior in rank to him.

The Crest Bearers of the battalion stormed south across a few small streams and over yet more damp hills as fast as their horses could carry them. Temeb had forced the group to move quickly for there was urgent need for Crest Bearers in the deeper south. After destroying many of the villages of Forria's southern region the Mitans had moved back south again. This was in order to claim a foothold inside Forria territory, where they and their evil Saruderosi allies could build camps and forts. If the Crest Bearers allowed footholds to be gained then Forria would never be free from war so

Temeb and Chesta had gathered as many Crest Bearer warriors as they could find on short notice and were about to launch an attack.

But as they rode strong and hard towards where the Mitan armies were gathering Chesta looked up and noticed something in the sky that worried her a great deal. The blood-red flock of ravens had just reached the skies over the hills and now Chesta and the other Crest Bearers could see them clearly. No sooner had Chesta spotted them and stopped riding, her rage towards these creatures now clearly boiling over, did Temeb and the others spot them too. Temeb took only seconds to glance at the birds before looking back at Chesta and throwing his arm forwards. As he pointed he shouted furiously, "Attack!" Suddenly all the Crest Bears, bronze, silver, and gold alike, armed themselves with bows and arrows and began barraging the sky with all the force they could muster. The ravens were sent into a frenzy, speedy arrows made from pure gold and silver whipping through the flock to cut many of the ravens down. But soon dozens of the many hundreds of ravens had flown quickly to evade being shot, escaping by gliding on strong winds to flee south and east.

"They are trying to escape!" cried Chesta, as though it were imperative that all the ravens be shot dead. The Crest Bearers strived with all their effort to aim and hit even the ravens that were speeding away by stronger breezes, but soon some ten or twelve of them were out of range. As the Crest Bearers lowered their weapons Chesta looked at Temeb as if very worried. "They can only have been sent by *him*," she said anxiously.

"*Him* or his servant," Temeb answered in a stern voice. "*They* must know how to overcome us now," he concluded, using a wisdom that few possessed.

"Then Sim Saule shall be doomed," Chesta answered. She meant to keep her voice down so as to not alarm the other riders with her words, but her fear of the danger that seemed to now be approaching Sim was too great. No one had actually said what this danger was or why the ravens were so feared but both Chesta and Temeb knew exactly what it all meant. The secret would shape the future of Sim's mission. Temeb raised his hand to her as if to order her to take control of her fears and remain calm. But even in all his fearsome stature he was also afraid.

"The boy will have to face this peril alone," he said solemnly, "for we can spare none of our riders to help him."

"Let me go," Chesta suggested, earnestly eager to help little Sim. But Temeb shook his head firmly.

"When the ravens reach their destination the true strength of Sim's character shall have to be proved," he answered. "He shall face this evil by himself and prevail or he shall die by it."

"But, Temeb"-

"Enough!" Temeb shouted. "My decision is final. We have orders from Grand Master Eruuke himself. Sim Saule now follows the orders of the King. His fate can no longer be our concern." With that stern declaration Temeb

turned his horse around and began to ride off, faster than before. The other riders soon followed him. Chesta was the last to leave. She did not want to abandon Sim to the terrible device that the ravens were now carrying into his path but she also knew that if she, Temeb, and the riders with them failed to attack and destroy the Mitan strongholds all Forria would perish. Their mission was too important to abandon, and everyone with them would be needed, including her.

Just before sunset Sim, Lente, and Goad the forest bear had crossed over a small stream and begun heading up a slightly steep hill towards the further south. Smoke from more destroyed villages could be seen for miles away, but Sim and Lente had been told by Goad that they must not become disheartened. Courage was the only weapon they had against the enemies of Forria and if they were to succeed in their mission they would need to focus on courage alone. So Sim had decided not to think about failing his mission. The sight of smoke from more destroyed villages had only reminded him of what would happen if he failed, so he chose to put those images out of his mind and think only on the King's signet ring. It was a great encouragement to him. To help lift his spirits Lente had begun singing stirring folksongs about the might of the Great King and the power he possessed, and Sim had even joined in despite not liking to sing that much. Goad, who was a wonderful singer with the powerful voice of a baritone, had also joined in and presently the three were filling the hills with music.

But as Lente led them all into the second verse of a new song Goad stopped singing. He even stopped walking and soon Sim and Lente noticed. "What's the matter?" asked Sim, "don't you like this song?"

"Even Sim likes *this* song," said Lente, though he knew Goad could not hear him. Goad seemed distracted and even confused and began to look around at things that neither Sim nor Lente could see.

"Whatever is wrong, Goad?" asked Sim. He was now starting to get worried.

"There's something in the air," muttered Goad as best he could in spite of his preoccupation.

"What's in the air?" asked Lente as he looked around to see if he could detect something.

"Something foreign," said Goad, even though he could not have possibly heard Lente's question. "Something magic!" he shouted as he suddenly realised what was afoot.

"Magic?!" exclaimed Sim in shock and fear.

"We need to move quickly!" said Goad as he swiftly turned from looking around the place and focused on Sim. "On my back, quick as you can, lad! Get your Guide on too!" Sim and Lente hurried to Goad and threw themselves on his back like you would throw yourself onto a bed. Goad had quickly laid down on the grass to make it easier for the boys to climb up but

it was still quite difficult. Soon enough though they were mounted upright upon him and almost straight after they were Goad began to run as fast as he thick legs would carry him. Over the hills the three of them went until they were headed downhill towards a bed of water and rocks just outside of another forest. Goad seemed very afraid, as though something was following them, and soon enough Sim and Lente started to feel afraid too. They couldn't see what Goad had picked up in the air but did notice that, oddly, the sky had begun to turn not just dark from the coming sunset, but stormy too. The winds were getting very cold and were blowing stronger and stronger by the minute. Soon the trees in the forest were bending and straining against a gale and flashes of lightning were crashing all over the sky.

"It's a storm!" cried Sim as the noise of thunder and wind filled up the whole forest.

"It's a warning!" answered Goad, fighting against the gale to keep running as fast as he could and get the boys to safety. Lente felt himself slipping off of Goad, his spirit like essence far lighter than that of a real boy and so easier to get blown over by the wind. Sim noticed and tried to keep Lente on Goad's back by holding onto his arms, though he had to keep changing his grip every time his hands started to pass through Lente. Somehow they managed and soon Goad had gotten the boys to a large, badger's cave near a giant tree stump. Lowering his head quickly Goad let the boys slide off him and get back on their own feet. He was breathing very heavily, tired and exhausted, but managed to speak still.

“Hide down there,” he said breathlessly. “Trouble approaches! The wind is warning us of it!”

“The wind?” said Sim as though he didn’t understand.

“It’s White Wind that the worlds are made out of, Sim,” said Goad. “When trouble enters the worlds the Winds are the first things to know. You should learn to heed their signs and warnings. Now get down into that hole, good and hidden now. I’ll go back to face whatever this peril is that approaches us.”

“I can help!” cried out Sim, his brave little heart forcing him to try and look after the bear, Lente, and himself.

“Beasts as strong as I are meant to protect important people like yourself,” said Goad. “Do not fear for me but think only on the charge that the King gave you. That’s more important.” Suddenly the bear turned on his hind legs and started to run back towards the hills. Lente saw the look of fear on Sim’s face, as though Sim knew that he might not see the kind bear again, but pulled his friend down into the hole anyway. Lente knew that the bear was right and that Sim had to fulfil the King’s mission. And so the two boys hid until sunrise.

By the time the sun had set and risen again the storm had all but vanished. Calm breezes were blowing across the hills and the forest again and the sun was shining brightly. Seeing this as a sign Lente had led Sim out of the badgers’ hole and out into daylight again. Sim was quite worried about the

bear and wanted to go looking for him immediately but Lente wouldn't let him go anywhere without eating something first. Sim had been living off of fruit from trees ever since they had left the capital and so as usual Lente climbed up a tree to get an apple for Sim, who ate it readily, though he had tried to hide his hunger. Lente had a few berries, seeing how he was only half real and therefore had half the appetite. When he was satisfied that Sim was full he used the wisdom he already had to track the bear's paw prints in the earth. It took Sim and Lente about two hours but soon they had caught up to where the bear last stood. "Oh no!" said Lente as they came to the last set of paw prints.

"What's wrong?" asked Sim as he caught up with Lente to look at the ground where the final two prints were indented.

"The prints stop here," said Lente with a frown. He was quite confused.

"What does that mean?" said Sim. He was so worried for Goad that he didn't really have his thinking-head on.

"Well bears don't fly so I think it's safe to say that we've lost the trail," said Lente in frustration. He was frustrated about being at the end of the trail and about Sim's silly question.

"Right, of course," said Sim, who was now starting to use his head properly.

"But if the tracks stop here that means that Goad did too, right?"

"Perhaps," said Lente, looking around to see if he could find anymore clues.

"But since he's not here he had to have been taken. Bears don't just float

off and leave no trail behind. They're big and weighty. I'd say he must have been lifted by something."

"But what?" said Sim. "We don't even know what he came out here to face. Who would want to lift a bear anyway?"

"I could always use my scroll to find out if we're right," suggested Lente. He'd already put his hand in his pocket to get it and Sim seemed to think that this was a very good idea.

"Hold on," said Sim urgently, "let me cover you and the scroll with shooting stardust first or you could end up in trouble. Goad said that there was magic afoot." Sim quickly reached into his bag and pulled out a handful of glistening, silver shooting stardust. As he did Lente turned towards him and closed his eyes.

"Do it quick," said Lente, "I don't like being dusted much." Sim threw the handful of shooting stardust straight at Lente and he was enveloped in it like someone had thrown a bag of flour at him. Lente started to cough and sneeze but the sparkling silver dust from Sim's bag soon settled and seemed to disappear. Its effect on Lente however was very clear. He looked all shiny and bright, like silverware that's just been fully polished. It was a very good look for him indeed and Sim was impressed.

"Read your scroll quickly, Lente," he said as he smiled at his friend, "for I don't know how long the shooting stardust will last. You never can tell about these things." Lente agreed and, after looking at his arms, legs, and body

as every part of him glistened, pulled out his scroll and unravelled it. It looked like if you were to keep unravelling it the scroll would never end, but Lente only pulled it open as far as he needed to. Then he began to read. Lente was a brilliant reader, a quick one too, and learned much about what happened to Goad in only a few seconds. Sim smiled as Lente silently read and was pleased. Sometimes the scroll wouldn't give Lente the answers that Sim asked for and Lente had told Sim that this was because Sim had to learn some things for himself. But this time the scroll was full of information and that meant that Sim and Lente didn't have to waste time trying to figure it out on their own. But as Sim smiled Lente's face suddenly became quite sad. What he had read had troubled him greatly.

"He's been taken hostage!" Lente cried out in terrified voice.

"Abducted?!" exclaimed Sim in equal fear. "By who?!"

"Some dark magic force," said Lente as he rolled his scroll up and put it back into his pocket. "It swept down on him like a rain cloud and scooped him straight off the ground a few hours after he left us in the forest."

"Magic from Saruderos?" asked Sim. His fists were clenched and now he was angry. Goad didn't deserve that fate.

"Yes, that's what the scroll said," answered Lente. "He's been taken to a Mitan and Saruderos war camp not too far from here. It seems that the Mitans are collecting up beasts and creatures so they can be melted down like the Sky Stars in the Black Fire Volcanoes too."

"That is terrible!" said Sim. "Why would they do such a thing?"

"Because they are evil," Lente answered. "They want to help fuel more fires outside of the volcanoes by using living creatures instead of coal and wood. The scroll even said that they are cutting down trees and villages for their wood and burnable materials too."

"But why do they need more fires?" asked Sim. "Does their greed have no end?"

"The scroll said that they are angry with the beasts and mystical beings of Forria," Lente explained. "Forria's wondrous creatures have been spreading news from the Great King that soon this land shall be free and victorious. The Mitans don't like the sound of that and neither do the Saruderos Dark Ones."

"I want stop them," said Sim determinedly.

"So do I," Lente agreed.

"But how?" Sim seemed very concerned. "I don't think I can attack a whole war camp of Mitans and Saruderos Dark Ones by myself. I've only just become a Silver Crest Bearer."

"That's what the scroll said," Lente answered with a discouraged sigh.

"I think we'll have to find help," said Sim.

"But that could take too long," answered Lente fearfully. "We don't even know how much more time Goad the forest bear has left. And as much as I want to save Goad he did tell us to put the King's mission first. Should we really be going off to build an army when he said to go to the dark places to get back the Teardrop?"

"...I don't think so..." said Sim hesitantly. "But we can't just let Goad and so many other innocent and noble creatures suffer this terrible fate."

"You won't have too," said a voice that neither Sim nor Lente were expecting to hear. Both boys turned around in surprise to see a familiar creature alongside many others walking towards them.

"Is that..." Sim began to mutter.

"It is," answered Lente, with a heavy frown across his brow. It was the squirrel who had been with the wolf and other animals that were fleeing the Mitans through the mountain passes. He had returned and was guiding some thirty or forty deer and tigers towards Sim and Lente.

"What a sight!" said Sim. He was astonished to see the squirrel again but even more amazed to see so many tigers at once. Herds of deer and antelope were a beautiful yet common sight all across Forria but tigers had been hunted by the Mitans ever since the war had begun. The Mitans like to skin the tigers and use their coats as decorations in their war tents, so the tigers had been told to flee to the mountains where they would be safe from the hunters. But now the squirrel had gathered them out of the

mountains to fight. "You're the squirrel we met before," said Sim as the squirrel and the tigers stopped in front of him.

"*We?*" said one of the tigers in a frighteningly fierce growl that startled both Sim and Lente.

"I am a Crest Bearer, noble tiger. My Guide is with me," Sim answered in a cautiously polite voice. The tigers were very intimidating.

"Thank the Great King that they can't see me!" said Lente in a whisper, though the tigers could not hear him anyway.

"What are you doing here?" asked Sim of the squirrel.

"I helped the animals of the fields and hills escape the Mitans," said the squirrel, "and now I am here to help you rescue Goad and the other captured beasts."

"You are?" Sim said in surprise. "How do you know of Goad and the other captured creatures?"

"Goad is a friend of the tigers here," said the squirrel, "and no beast in Forria is unaware of the treacheries being carried out by the Mitans. The signs of it are clear in the winds and the skies and in the hearts of the prides and herds. We're here to help put an end to that evil work."

"I'm glad," said Sim, "for we'd have had a hard time doing it on our own."

"The Mitans have done great crimes against us," said the fearsome tiger, "but we have heard the words of the Great King spoken through the wondrous creatures sent out with his message. Victory is nigh!"

"So I urged them from their hiding places and called them to courage," said the squirrel. "This day we shall attack the Mitan camp where the evil ones have captured Goad and carried him off to. No more beasts or creatures or Sky Stars shall be taken." All the tigers roared loudly to agree with this as the deer firmly stomped their hooves, and Sim and Lente were greatly encouraged. Soon they and all the animals were hurrying off towards the place that Lente's scroll had said the Mitan and Saruderosi war camp was located. Sim and Lente were still too afraid of the tigers to ride on their backs and so had mounted the back of a great stag, who was well able to carry them and the squirrel towards the camp and battle.

But what neither Sim, Lente, nor any of the other creatures that the squirrel had gathered knew was that the place where they were headed, the location of the war camp, was also the place where the blood-red flock of ravens had been sent. The ravens that had survived the attack by the Crest Bearers were now circling high above the camp, which was filled with dozens of giant tents that housed hundreds of mighty Mitan warriors. The ravens had arrived to give to one particular warrior within the camp a special gift. It was a dangerous and deadly thing that only someone of sinister heart would want to receive.

In the largest of the war camp tents Goad had been tied up in front of a fire. The cruel Mitan soldiers were whipping him and beating him with vicious instruments because one of the more knowledgeable of their number had discerned that Goad was a wisdom gifted creature. The Mitans were trying to force Goad to give them secrets about Forria but Goad was brave. Even with all the pain and cruel things that the Mitans were doing to him Goad would not even speak a small secret. He knew better than to betray Forria's King and its people.

Soon the Mitans were tired of their whipping and beating and left the tent to rest. As they went out a smaller person came in. They seemed to fear him greatly, despite the fact that he was less than half their size. In truth Mitans were more like giants and so made this person, who was comparable to most men, seem quite little. And yet they were the ones that were terrified of him. He was robed in thick black cloth and his face was hidden by a large hood. Goad would not have been afraid of him compared to the mighty Mitans had they not seemed to tremble in his presence. He could have been no older than sixteen or seventeen years of age and yet had a strong build and darkened eyes that struck terror deep into the hearts of the Mitan warriors. Then Goad understood why. As the young man moved his hands from within his robes there was upon his finger shown a ring of pure black metal. It was made from the dark dust of the Black Fires. It was the ring of a Dark Wizard. This person was from Saruderos. He was one of the Dark Ones.

Goad clenched his sharp teeth as the young man stood before him in silence. Had he have been free from chains and ropes Goad would have leaped at the young and torn him to pieces. Bears were vicious like that when it came to enemies from as far off as Saruderos. It was in Saruderos that the Phoenix Teardrop now resided because the most powerful of the Dark Ones had stolen it and taken it there. The people of Saruderos were the sworn enemies of the people of Forria, and the Dark Wizards were the most hateful of all Forria's foes. They spared no one.

Goad wriggled in his restraints but the young man didn't seem afraid at all. He slowly took down his hood and revealed his face. For a moment Goad was terrified. The young man looked much like Sim, only a little older. At a glance he could have been mistaken for him. But then as Goad stared harder and closer the man's darker eyes showed a blacker soul beneath that soon became clear. He might have looked a bit like Sim but this young man was nothing like him. This man was evil.

"I have questions for you, bear," he whispered in a dark voice that was familiar. It was the voice of the mysterious face that had spoken to the old man through the smoke and flashing lights. It was to this young man that the old man had sent the ravens and Goad's gift of wisdom had made him aware of this.

"No matter who you serve, vile one, I shall tell you nothing!" Goad answered in harsh growl. But the young man smiled.

"You think you know who I serve," he answered, the sinister lines of his lips forming on the sides of his face.

"*He* may be pure evil and you may share in *his* power, but *he* has no strength compared to the Great King!" said Goad forcefully.

"I think you will find that you are mistaken about that," said the young man. "Your *great king* is nothing more than a weak fool and he shall die in the fires of the Black Volcanoes just like you and the rest of Forria's people."

"You should watch your words, Wizard," Goad shouted, "for they shall be your undoing!"

"No, forest bear," the young man hissed, "my words shall be your undoing. Tell me your wisdom or I shall draw it from you by a fire in your soul!"

Goad turned away and refused to speak anymore. He was not afraid and would not give the Wizard anything he sought. The young man stepped backwards and sighed as if disappointed. "Do you know much about the blood of Crest Bearers?" he asked darkly. Goad did not move. "It is said that when the worlds were created the White Winds were used like words that are used to form sentences. The worlds are like the sentences, forest bear, aren't they? The worlds themselves say many different things. There are signs and warnings shown through different seasons and stirrings. The darkened skies foretell of rain and wind. The orange horizon speaks of autumn and leaves falling. In Forria when magic is about the storms come. In Mita when victory is won the skies turn crimson. The words of the White Winds are as clear as the changing seasons of each year. They are as

obvious as light in day and dark at night. But only the Crest Bearers have been given the means of understanding the White Wind. They can harness it like the sail of a ship harnesses the ocean breezes.

“Long ago the Dark Wizards of Saruderos learned to understand something that is just as powerful as the White Winds. It used to be called something different, long ago, but ever since the last days of the Dragons and Phoenixes it has been called *magic*. The people of Forria have been taught to fear magic. ‘*The Great King says we mustn’t practice such dark things*’, they say, as though it is deadly to them. We Saruderosi think differently. We are not afraid of the dark. Magic has become to us like the White Winds are to the Crest Bearers. Now we write sentences in the world like the White Winds once did. It has made us powerful!”

“Your lies only deceive you!” shouted Goad suddenly, as though he could contain his anger no more. “Your magic makes you as blemished as the Dragons were themselves. Magic was made for the mystical beings of the worlds not humans like you!”

“No, forest bear,” the young Wizard shouted back, “magic was made for men! With it we wage great wars and with it we conquer land after land. Forria shall be no different just because its king says that magic is a curse to men. We shall prove to all the worlds that only through our magic can true victory be won. That is why I asked you about the blood of Crest Bearers. Do you know how much blood has been shed by them? Do you know how many of them have died trying to fight our magic? Hundreds,

thousands have fallen. Their blood is proof that our dark magic is greater! And now I shall show you more proof!" Suddenly the Wizard threw back his cloak and lifted a long Coil Wand towards the ceiling of the tent. The tent covers were thrown aside as a sudden wind gust through the place and lifted the tent from where it stood. Lightning began to strike and as Goad looked around, he and wizard now exposed to the outside, the skies turned stormy and all the hundreds of Mitans in the camp came quickly out of their tents to look upon what was happening and began to tremble. The Wizard's wand, which was made out of twisted metal, wood, and a black dust that had been melted into shape like glass, began to glow all kinds of crimson and red shades. Goad watched in terror as the Wizard began to loudly laugh and several lightning bolts struck his wand. Suddenly the Wizard started to rise up into the sky, his wand still held out high and firm. Then the ravens, which had kept circling the camp even in the storm, began to swirl around the Wizard and his wand itself. As they did the blood crimson colour on their feathers started to strip away as though it was like water that was draining from them. The stream of colours went into the wand and made it glow even brighter. Then suddenly the storm ended and in a flash all the ravens burst into broken fragments of feather and dust. When all had settled Goad looked down from the sky along with all the Mitans and at the Wizard who now stood back on the ground before them all.

"What have you done?" Goad asked in horror. He didn't have to be a wisdom gifted bear to know that something terrible had just been accomplished. The Wizard lowered his wand and looked at Goad darkly.

"We Saruderosi have been collecting the blood of Crest Bearer for many years and now we have enough to start coating the Coil Wands of all Dark Wizards with it," he answered. "Mine shall be the first to release the Crest Bearer's blood mixed with magic. It shall be like poison to all it impacts! No one shall escape death anymore! Not even the dust of a shooting star shall defend my enemies from my powers now!" The Wizard laughed maliciously at his evil plans. Magic had been the mightiest weapon the peoples of Forria had ever faced. Now that magic had been amplified one hundredfold by being mixed with the powerful blood of Crest Bearers. Goad could only fear what this would mean for Sim and Lente, whose only defence against magic was shooting stardust. Rumbles of thunder drummed away in the sky. Things were now far graver.

Only a few hours after leaving the hills with the squirrel, the tigers, and the deer herd, Lente started to feel very sick. He had tried to pretend like he was okay for quite awhile but now could not even sit upright on the stag's back. When he fell off and hit the ground Sim realised that something was wrong. "Lente!" cried Sim as he leaped from the stag to help his friend.

Sim got Lente to a soft area of grass as the others looked at him, wondering what was happening to his invisible friend. Soon Sim had helped Lente to lie down. Sim was the only one who could see Lente but after directing the others they had all managed to help get Lente moved to a better resting place. "What's wrong with you, Lente?" Sim asked desperately as Lente turned very pale white and started to become more and more invisible to Sim.

"Something awful," Lente muttered. It seemed to be getting very hard for him to breathe and speak.

"It's magic," said the squirrel in that wise voice that seemed very odd coming from him.

"Dark magic from Saruderos?" said Sim fretfully. "But we dusted him with dust from a shooting star."

"Somehow the magic has..." Lente could hardly speak anymore.

"The magic has gotten stronger," said the squirrel as though he had heard what Lente had started to say.

"How can that be?" Sim asked.

"There are many ways," answered the squirrel. "What we need to do is find a way to help him."

"None of you can see or hear him and I don't know what to do," cried Sim.

"How can we help him?"

"We must"-

Before the squirrel could even finish his sentence a loud trumpet blast came from the west and startled everyone gathered around Lente, catching Sim off guard the most. As Sim and all the others turned to look west they saw coming towards them a great group of people. At first they couldn't make out who they were but soon enough the gold and crimson flags being

carried by some of them made it clear. They were Mitans. But the longer Sim stared at the approaching troops, who were some fifty or sixty in number, the more he realised that they were not just any Mitans. They were the Mitans from the war camp that Sim and the others had planned to attack. They carried with them in cages and bound by chains a vast number of creatures from Forria, bears and deer, wolves and horses, as well as mystical beings like golden eagles, fairies trapped inside of glass boxes, and unicorns. In the largest cage of all Goad was tied up and bound. When Sim saw him he became very sad. But then the squirrel tapped Sim on the arm, as he knelt by Lente, and whispered a grave warning. "Beware the Wizard," he said. Sim looked to the robed man walking besides Goad's cage and was immediately struck with terror. It was the Wizard and in his hand was his blood-drenched Coil Wand.

With but a single wave of the Wizard's hand the entire Mitan army, all its soldiers and their captives, came to a complete standstill. By now Sim had stood to his feet among the tigers and deer, who were already prepared to fight. But the Wizard seemed to want to say something and came to the front of the Mitan army. Soon he was stood in front of Sim and held out his hands as if to call a truce and keep the zealous animals from attacking him. "I would speak," he said in a strong and forceful voice, though none of the animals wanted to listen. Then he looked directly at Sim. "*You* must be the one." The Wizard stood directly before Sim, making the young boy look very small and weak indeed. But Sim held his ground bravely.

"I must be who?" Sim asked, squaring his shoulders and steadying his nerves so as not to appear weak before his adversary.

"You're the one who has been sent on a special mission by Forria's *great king*, aren't you?" said the Wizard, a smirk appearing on his face as though he found the thought of Sim being the one who was sent on the mission to be amusing. "He must be getting desperate if all he can muster is a little child to serve him."

"Watch your words!" called out the squirrel forcefully. "Uttering speech against one chosen by the Great King is punishable by death!"

"And are you the one who's going to punish me?" the Wizard answered mockingly. "You could not harm me if you tried, little squirrel!"

"You know not who I am," the squirrel answered in a surprisingly calm voice. It was almost as if he was confident in being superior to the Wizard somehow. But the Wizard did not seem to want to bother with the squirrel anymore and turned back to Sim.

"Tell me, little man," he said, "how do you intend to fulfil this mission from your king? Are you as wise as the wisest of your order? Are you as strong as the mightiest of your kin?"

"I shall be all I need to be to serve my Lord and King," Sim answered boldly. The tigers and deer about him all agreed and soon they began to cheer and roar in accord. But the Wizard was unmoved.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked.

"You are a Dark Wizard of Saruderos," Sim answered. "That much I know."

The Dark Wizard laughed. "I am not just *a* Dark Wizard," he said, "I am Inisha Merr, the greatest Wizard of the Saruderos order. I am the student and apprentice of Shalek the Gale himself, and one day I shall take his place as ruler over the whole world!" While the Mitans seemed to cheer and agree with this out of fear of the Wizard Sim and the animals were very angry at what the Wizard had said.

"None but the Great King is the true ruler of the world," said Sim defiantly.

"His time is at an end!" the Wizard answered with a spiteful hiss. After he had spoken he began to raise his Coil Wand.

"Be ready, Sim," said the squirrel, "he means you nothing but harm!" Sim stood ready, his left hand on the hilt of his sword, his right hand gripping his Crest, ready to use both at any moment. But the Wizard laughed again.

"Your pitiful talents are no match for my dark magic powers!" he said. "You cannot even defend your own Guide from the presence of my Coil Wand, let alone the unleashing of its wonders." The Wizard's words shocked Sim. Yet he was not half as shocked by what the Wizard had said when he watched the Wizard turn and look straight at Lente, who still lay on the grass in pale sickness. "He looks so helpless," said the Wizard in a tone that sounded like he cared, yet was meant to mock and insult both Sim and Lente.

Sim looked fearfully at the squirrel. "He can see Lente," he muttered, the very thought of this frightful enough to turn his stomach.

"Magic achieves many things," said the squirrel, though he did not take his eyes off of the Wizard.

"Do you not think that this contest has already been won?" the Wizard asked.

"What do you mean?" said Sim, clutching his sword hilt tighter than ever.

"Your Guide has failed you simply by my being here," he answered, "yet my Guide, my Coil Wand Spirit, remains unharmed by your mere, weak presence." As the Wizard spoke a man who looked identical to him, yet who was partly invisible and ghostlike as Lente was, appeared from behind the Wizard. For a moment he stood just staring at Sim but then he walked over to Lente, whom he could see for they were both part spirit, and began to glare down at him as if offended by something.

"Sick you are, yet it is you that sickens me!" the spirit like villain hissed at Lente in a voice that was like an echo. Lente could barely raise his head to look his opponent in the face. Still he tried, not being one to back down from a challenge too easily.

"Don't talk to me," Lente whispered, for that was nearly all he could manage. "You are a traitor."

"You're the traitor!" answered the spirit. "You serve the Bearers instead of your true master, the great Shalek of Gales. You are foolish to even think that you will survive his wrath!"

"Leave him alone!" said Sim. Everyone else had been watching in confusion, for none of them could see either Lente or Inisha Merr's Guide. But as Sim called out in anger towards the spirit that they couldn't see they now started to realise, to their surprise, that Sim could see the spirit just like the Wizard could see Lente. Sim had figured, as the squirrel somehow already knew, that the vision ability must have worked both ways, and soon Sim was standing defensively in between Lente and the spirit, glaring at him with all sternness. The spirit hissed hatefully at Sim but then the Wizard raised his hand.

"Let him be, Raz," he said. The spirit turned to the Wizard and then after a moment walked away. Sim never took his eyes off the spirit, Raz, until he had gone back to stand next to the Wizard he served, for he wasn't going to let anything happen to Lente. Then Sim looked back at Inisha Merr.

"Why are you here? What do you want?" Sim asked forcefully.

"My request is simple," answered the Wizard. "I could easily order this army of Mitans to attack and slay all these here that you have amassed. The battle would be quick and many of you would be killed. Whoever survived would end up in cages of metal and chain and glass, and you would be sent to the Volcanoes of Saruderos to be burned. But I am not without a

mind that can see valuable opportunities when they arise and so I have called this truce that we may make a bargain.”

“What?” said Sim in stunned surprise. He'd never heard of a Dark Wizard making a bargain before and every fibre in his body warned him not to trust what the Wizard had said.

“I want something you have,” said the Wizard. “In return for it I shall spare the lives of you and all your friends here.”

“Don't listen to him, Sim,” warned the squirrel.

“I think you should,” said the Wizard, “for if you do not I will order these Mitans of strength and ruthless power to strike and all of you shall be laid to waste upon the hillside.”

“I will never trust a wizard!” Sim declared boldly.

“Not even to save yourself and your friends?” the Wizard answered. “What about your forest bear here, or the fairies that shall be crushed into jewellery for the Mitan princesses, or the unicorns who shall be ground into sparkling dust to paint the Mitan palaces with? Don't you even care about the wolves and horses and other animals who shall be thrown into the new fires of Saruderos to help keep alight the eternal flames of destruction? That is what awaits them and those of you who are not slain if you refuse me.” Sim stood silently. He was afraid that even though the Wizard was evil he was also telling the truth. Sim could not bear to see so many wonderful creatures destroyed like the Wizard had described. “Come now,” said the

Wizard as he stepped just a little bit closer to Sim, “don’t you want to save your little Guide friend there?”

“Lente?” Sim said as he looked from the Wizard to his best friend and brother on the ground.

“If I spare you then you can both flee as far away from us as you like and I’m sure that he’ll get better,” the Wizard whispered. “Stay here and fight and I will make sure that he’s not just made sick by the presence of my dark magic. I’ll make sure I use magic on him and kill him where he lays!”

Sim looked back to the Wizard in horror. He didn’t want to see Lente killed. All of the animals, in particular the squirrel, watched Sim carefully, wondering what he was going to decide. Then the Wizard spoke again. “At least hear out my offer,” he suggested with a dark smile. After awhile Sim nodded.

The Wizard put his arm around Sim and took him a little way away from the other animals and Lente. Even that short amount of space seemed to make Lente feel a bit better and soon he was breathing easier again and even managed to sit up. Meanwhile the Wizard made his offer to Sim. “There aren’t many who know exactly what this mission is that you have been sent on, little Crest Bearer. It seems that your king has trusted knowledge of it to only a few humans and otherwise only beasts and creatures. This has made it very difficult for Shalek the Gale to determine what you are trying to achieve. But the Dark Lord has learned that you are trying to achieve something and that should tell you something about his power. He has

learned your name and your age. He knows the place that you call home and he knows the faces of all those you love, including your Guide there. That is why he sent me, Sim. That I might show you that through his dark powers and his armies there is nowhere that he cannot reach. I made the friend you call brother sick just by finding you. Imagine what the Dark Lord can do to your real brother.” Sim drew away from the Wizard in terror.

“Tinnoth?” he said in frightful dread.

“He’s still fighting as a noble knight on the shores of Mita, is he not?” the Wizard asked, though he was well aware of the answer already. “With just a single wave of his power the Dark Lord can see to it that your brother never makes it home. But I can stop this.”

“You can?” said Sim desperately.

“Just hand to me that which I seek and I promise that I will send word to the Mitans that fight on their own borders and make sure that your brother is left unharmed,” he answered. “He will have to return to Forria and give up the silly attempt by your king to stop Mita’s invasion forces before they cross the sea, but at least he will be alive. Don’t you agree?”

“What is it that you want?” Sim demanded angrily for he was very afraid for his brother’s life. The Wizard smiled a dark and evil smile.

“I want the signet ring that your king placed around your neck,” he said. Sim stepped back again in shock and clutched the ring as tightly as he could.

"Never!" he shouted.

"Do not test me, child!" yelled the Wizard. "I will do all the terrible things I say unless you give me what I want!"

"You speak of a bargain but you offer only treachery and deceit!" Sim yelled back. "I will never give to you the seal of approval that my King, the Great King of all lands, has given to me. Entrusted with it was I and no reward shall ever loose me from it! My friends and I will perish here on this hillside before we turn over the sign of our allegiance to the Great King to you, and I would never do my brother the dishonour of betraying the oath to which we are both sworn. He would rather we all died and so would I!" Sim was suddenly filled with such rage that he threw his Crest bearing hand forwards without even thinking about what he was doing. In that moment a brilliant flare of light and wind shot from his hand and at the Wizard, sending him flying into the air. The blast of power was so great that even the Mitans were repelled and cast to the ground, the earth itself being torn up all around too and dust scattering about for miles. At the same time the chains, cages, and glass prisons holding all of the captured creatures were shattered, as though Sim had in one motion caused an earthquake and an explosion at the same time.

"Take them!" cried the squirrel suddenly. No sooner had he spoken did the tigers and deer herds pounce and gallop from where they were stood and attack the enemy forces. The tigers were filled with rage and did terribly painful things to some of the Mitans with just their claws and teeth, while

the stags attacked the Mitans with their antlers and horns, and the does trampled over all the many Mitans that had fallen down afterwards.

"Quickly!" said the squirrel as he scurried over to Sim and leaped up onto his shoulder. "We must find the Wizard!"

Sim shook himself as if to wake up from a deep sleep. He did not know what had come over him but could only remember the immense rage that he had felt at the thought of handing over the King's signet ring. Now he realised what his rage had done. His friends were overturning the Mitan army. Sim readied himself and drew his sword. "Right!" said Sim. Then he began to run quickly through all the fighting to see where the Wizard had landed. Meanwhile Lente seemed to get his strength back all of a sudden and stood up immediately to run after Sim and the squirrel. But from behind him Raz, the Coil Wand Spirit, suddenly appeared.

"You are mine!" he shouted in a hateful roar. Suddenly Raz lunged at Lente and hit him on his side. Lente couldn't remember the last time he'd been struck so hard. It could only happen when one half human half spirit being attacked another and this was what was happening right now. But Lente was not about to be taken without a fight. He jumped up quick as a flash and used his wind creating powers to send a gust of breeze at Raz that knocked him straight off his feet.

"I'd stay on the ground if I were you!" Lente said as he leaped on top of Raz and held a gleaming dagger to his throat. This was no ordinary dagger. It was Lente's dagger and like him was half real and half spirit, which meant

that it could do Raz great harm just like a fully real dagger could harm a fully real person.

On the other side of the battle Sim and the squirrel had run to find where Inisha Merr had been cast. It took only seconds for Sim to spot him lying in pain and agony on the grass and rocks quite far off for he had been thrown such a long way and his landing was a harsh one. "There he is!" said Sim as he pointed in the direction of the Wizard.

"Get him, quickly!" said the squirrel. Sim went running off with his sword ready to pin the Wizard to the ground. But then something happened that no one was expecting to happen at all. As Sim ran the squirrel jumped off his back, scurried behind him, and then began to mysteriously change. Light and strange energies started to swirl around him and surround him and soon he wasn't a squirrel anymore at all, but looked just like a man. When Sim arrived near the Wizard, his sword ready to strike, the man who was a squirrel just a moment earlier picked up a fallen Mitran's sword and got ready to strike too.

"Where is it? Find the Wizard's wand!" he demanded. Sim turned around when the voice that once belonged to the squirrel came out a man that he had never seen before who was now standing beside him. Sim was startled.

"Who are you?" Sim cried in near terror. But suddenly the Wizard lunged forwards with his Coil Wand firmly gripped in his hand and loosed a sparkling flare of magic towards Sim. He should have been caught off guard but Sim's training had served him well and he held out his Crest to defend

himself. The Wizard's magic power crashed against light and winds from the Crest as though it was water being repelled by a knight's shield. But now the Wizard was standing and ready to use his full magic strength. He began to utter strange words in a tongue that Sim couldn't understand. The Coil Wand started to glow with blood-red energy and light.

As this happened Goad, the forest bear, who had been freed from his cage and ropes, had just finished killing a Mitan with his powerful claws. He looked over the battlefield and noticed that Sim and the Wizard were fighting, but as the Wizard called upon the blood-magic power that he had drenched his Coil Wand in Goad realised something terrible - Sim had no weapon with which to defend himself against such power. His Crest would work against ordinary magic but not magic that had been mixed with the blood of other Crest Bearers. Their blood would give the magic the strength it needed to defeat Sim's powers and then he would be killed. So Goad made a very brave decision in that moment. He decided to sacrifice himself in order to save Sim and the mission that the King had sent him on. Just as the Wizard used his wand and sent out his terrible blood-magic attack at Sim, its crimson and black energy gushing at the boy like a spear of oil and fire, Goad jumped into the air, far higher than any other bear could have done, and seconds later came crashing down on top the Wizard. There was a terrible noise that sounded like smashing metal and then a flash of bright light. Suddenly the black and red waves of energy from the wand shot out in all directions, and in that moment Sim could see against the bright light the silhouette of Goad hitting the Wizard and blocking his shot. Sim only

realised that Goad had put himself in between him and the Coil Wand's power after Goad landed on the ground. "Goad!" Sim cried aloud. But seconds later the Wizard was up on his feet again and ready to strike once more.

"Sim!" shouted the man who was the squirrel, urgently. Sim looked to the Wizard but after a moment was unafraid. The Wizard soon realised why. He was now only holding half a Coil Wand, the other half snapped off and lying in fragments on the ground because Goad had struck it. He could not believe his eyes as he looked at his weapon and realised that it had been destroyed. Then rage more powerful than that even within the angriest man filled him.

"What have you done?!" he screamed furiously. He was about to leap into attack, though no one could be sure if he meant to kill Sim or Goad, but before he could Sim thought quickly and then plunged his hand into the bag hanging on his side that held the shooting stardust. Grabbing a great handful of it Sim threw the dust straight at the Wizard. Struck by it like Lente was the Wizard began to scream and yell in agony. Shooting stardust was the only thing in the world that could truly vanquish magic, and the Wizard had just been struck by more of it than any other wizard had been in a lifetime. Like he was burning he screamed out again and again, and to Lente's surprise even Raz began to cry out in pain too. Then suddenly the Wizard threw off his cloak and transformed into a column of black smoke that soared from the ground and high into the sky out of sight. As he

vanished Raz disappeared too, leaving Lente holding a dagger at nothing but the ground.

“Goad!” Sim cried out loud again. He didn’t want to waste another moment thinking about Inisha Merr or Raz or even the battle that was still being fought around him. He just wanted to help the bear who had not moved since he hit the ground.

“Steady, Sim!” said the man who was once the squirrel. Just as Sim fell to his knees at Goad’s side the man arrived nearby too and quickly held Sim back from touching the bear. “He’s been touched by a Coil Wand, Sim,” he said warningly. “You mustn’t touch him or you could be injured too!”

“We can’t let him die,” said Sim fretfully. Goad clearly looked like he was going to die. He had crimson blood and black dust, both from the wand, all over his underside and was very weak. Being struck by dark magic was a terrible thing and Sim knew it. Soon Goad’s life would end unless Sim did something to help.

In the few moments that it took Lente to run over to Sim, the mysterious man, and Goad, the battle was over. The Mitans were completely slain and the animals began cheering for victory. But then they and the freed captives saw Goad lying on the ground and began to hurry, gathering around to see how they could help. “Does anyone know how to heal the wound of a Coil Wand?” Sim asked desperately.

"There is no way," said a fairy, who had been loosed from a glass cage. Of all the creatures present the fairies would have known about magic the most. Yet all she could say was that there was no help for Goad.

"There has to be," said Lente with tear-filled eyes. "Perhaps if I read my scroll?"

"You will find no answers there," said a unicorn. "Dark magic can only be countered by light magic. Many kinds of magic can be weakened by the dust of stars, and all kinds of magic are defeated when faced with the power of the White Wind forces... But these things only happen during a contest. This magic has already struck our friend. When already inflicted no magic can be undone by any gift or strength we here possess. It is a truth of ancient times."

"Look," said a tiger who had spoken much earlier before the battle, "the mystical beasts speak the truth. The magic is written as a curse upon the forest bear." As everyone looked closely they saw black writing in one of the oldest languages in all of Forria appearing all over Goad's body. Everyone, including young Sim, could read it for it was used often to write blessings to others in Forria. Yet in Saruderos it was used to write dark things and curses. The writing that was appearing all over Goad contained a frightful speech that made everyone feel sick just by reading it.

"Do not speak it!" said the mysterious man who was once the squirrel, his voice firm and commanding. Everyone obeyed, though many of the animals seemed concerned about this man, not knowing who he was or where he

had come from. Still he spoke on. "To do so will give haste to the magic's power."

"It's a magic curse," said Lente, who was crying and felt hopeless about the whole thing. "Will it not kill poor Goad surely enough anyway?"

"Not if you keep a hold of your courage and all else that you have been equipped with for this task," said the man. He was now staring straight at Sim and suddenly the young boy remembered something astonishing.

"Of course!" he said. Suddenly Sim was up on his feet and rummaging about for a sheaf in his tunic pocket. Then he pulled out the crystal quill that Dekianna Mal Tei Su, the Sky Star, had made for him and Lente as thanks for them rescuing her from the Mitans.

"The Sky Star..." muttered Lente. "She said that it could be used to unwrite anything that was a lie."

"This must be what she meant," said Sim eagerly. "This quill must somehow be able to unwrite the powers of the curse that is written upon Goad."

"But I don't know how to instruct you to use it," said Lente.

"But I do," said the mysterious man. Sim, Lente, and everyone else looked at the man wondrously.

"Who are you?" asked Sim.

"A friend," he answered. "That is all you need know for now. Come quickly. We have little time to save Goad."

"Tell me what to do," said Sim.

"First realise the lie," answered the man.

"How?" asked Lente.

"By realising the truth," said the man. Lente felt odd for it was only now that the man had looked straight at him and made it clear that he could see and hear him. It wasn't something Lente liked very much.

"The truth is that I can save Goad," answered Sim, who didn't notice the man directly answer Lente since he was too busy thinking about what the truth was. "I know I can save Goad because the Sky Star said that this quill would help me in a time of great need. That time is now."

"And Sky Stars know everything," added Lente, "which means that Dekianna Mal Tei Su knew that the quill would be able to save Goad. That's why she gave it to us!"

"So if that is the truth what is the lie?" asked the man, eager for Sim and Lente to understand it all.

"The lie is that there is nothing that can prevail against this magic curse," said Sim wisely. "The Wizard kept talking about how magic was the most powerful thing in all the worlds but if this quill was gifted to me that I might

use it to save Goad then his words are proved a lie. We can prevail over the dark magic by the power of this quill!"

"Then that is what you must write!" said the man firmly. "Be fast, Sim Saule, and write upon the forest bear the truth to undo the lie!" Immediately Sim turned and without even hesitating began to write what he had just said about the quill prevailing over dark magic upon the bear's furry coat. Strange ink that was like both sparkling water and diamonds came out of the quill as Sim scribed. It dried upon Goad's fur as though Sim had been writing on a scroll. Suddenly the writing which he was forming began to glow with the same sparkling gleam as the shooting stardust in Sim's satchel. In a moment Goad was all lit up with shining writing that consumed all the black writing of the magic. Then the writing began to fade and to everyone's surprise and abundant joy Goad stood up.

"You have saved me," he said in wonderful amazement as Lente threw his arms around Sim in gleeful gladness and the tigers, deer, and mystical beasts and creatures all cried out in celebration and thanks.

"Goad!" cried both Sim and Lente as they stopped hugging one another and started to hug the grateful bear.

"How shall I ever repay you?" Goad asked humbly.

"You owe us nothing," said Sim with a happy smile. "You saved my life!"

"Tell him that we're just glad to see him alive," said Lente joyfully. Sim repeated the message and then everyone started to dance around and

laugh because everything had turned out wonderfully right in the end. But as they celebrated no one noticed the mysterious man turn quietly back into a squirrel and wonder off, going back into the forest and on his way. It was only hours later, after everyone had worn themselves out celebrating, that they realised that he had disappeared.

"I wonder where he went," said Sim curiously as he lay by the campfire that the tigers had made to keep everyone warm for the night.

"I wonder who he was," said Lente in a far less curious and more wary tone. Lente was very uncomfortable with many things about the squirrel transforming man, but most of all he was uncomfortable about how he, a Guide who was invisible to most, was clearly visible to him. The man had even spoken to Lente directly and that was only rivalled in how unusual it all was by the fact that he could change into a squirrel too. Lente's scroll didn't have any knowledge for him on the subject and neither did Goad, so for the time being everyone just let the matter rest. For now they were too happy thinking about how Goad had been saved and after celebrating wanted to decide what they were going to do next. There was still the mission to fulfil and Sim had a bad feeling that they had not seen the last of Inisha Merr or his Guide, who had both fled using their magic powers. Still, not wanting to dampen a very pleasant end to a difficult day, Sim chose to put those things aside and joined Lente, Goad, and all the animals and mystical creatures in singing a great many songs about how powerful the King was and about how his words were true – victory was being won in Forria.

Chapter Seven: The Sea Wall to another land

The next morning Sim, Lente, and Goad made their way across fields and fields of dry grass towards the very edge of Forria. It had been decided that they would go ahead with the mission for the King while the tigers, deer, mystical creatures, and other beings went back north. The tigers had in mind to attack all the Mitan war camps between the coast and the Stone Mountain and all the other creatures had agreed. So after bidding them farewell (and asking them to keep an eye out for that mysterious squirrel transforming man) Sim and Lente continued south with Goad.

About three hours into their trek Lente realised that they were almost at the very edge of Forria. If any of the three had thought they were in danger before then they had no idea of what they would face once they left Forria. The Great King's country was the only safe place in all the world from the powers of evil. Forria was surrounded by nations and realms that were enemies to it and the chief of these enemies were Mita and Saruderos. But to reclaim the Phoenix Teardrop Sim would have to travel to the very heart of Saruderos where the Teardrop was kept. Until now he hadn't really thought much about it, but now that he had it made him feel very afraid.

Sim, Lente, and Goad arrived at the edge of Forria and beheld a wondrous sight that was marvellous to see and seemed to put Sim's fears out of his mind for awhile. The great sea that divided Forria and Saruderos was not like a normal sea that stretched out for as far as the eye could see under the horizon. It was a sea that stood upright like a giant wall reaching as

high as the sky and beyond. Sim looked at the Sea Wall in astonishment as its watery tides splashed up and down and it glistened with beautiful ocean colours. Even though Lente and Goad knew all about Sea Walls neither of them had ever seen one before. It was quite amazing to them too.

After a long while of just looking at the Sea Wall Goad decided to urge the boys on. "Come on," he said excitedly. "If you're going to reach the heart of Saruderos then this is the way." Sim and Lente followed Goad down the sloping sandy shores until they reached the edge of the beach, from where the waters shot up out of the ground.

"How do you suppose we sail on this sea?" asked Sim in curious wonder.

"You don't sail on Sea Walls," said Goad wisely, "you only find the paths through them."

"There are paths through these types of oceans?" said Sim as if this was hard to believe.

"Most walls have doors, you know," said Goad.

"Normal seas and oceans that run flat like the ground take days, months, and even years to sail," said Lente as he gazed up at rising waters, "but Sea Walls are as thin as walls made out of brick or clay. All we have to do is find the place in the wall where we can step through and then ask the Sea Wall to part for us."

"We have to ask it to part an opening for us?" said Sim.

"Yes," said Goad as Lente nodded in agreement, "Sea Walls don't let just anyone through, you know. You need special permission, else anyone, including the Dark Ones of Saruderos and the evil Mitans would be able to come straight into Forria. Long have the Sea Walls been our friends and served the Great King by keeping their doors shut to enemies and troublemakers. The Saruderosi and Mitan forces have to spend years on the flat oceans just to sail here, and even the flat oceans don't let them sail easily. I guess it's just a shame that that vile Gale, Shalek, has recently learned how to force the Sea Walls open by using the Phoenix's Teardrop."

Goad led Sim and Lente along the beach to look for the opening in the Sea Wall. They felt like they had been walking and carefully looking for about half an hour until Lente thought he saw something. It took all three to realise that what Lente saw was just a swarm of fish swimming up the Sea Wall. A little later, while Sim and Lente were still looking and Goad was sniffing around to see if he could smell the scent of anyone who had stood near the waters recently and maybe found the opening, a strange looking creature came towards the Sea Wall. It looked like a snake at first but as Sim and Lente saw it they noticed that it had legs, like those belonging to a lizard. "What's that?" said Sim curiously for he had never seen such a creature before.

"I don't know," said Lente. "Let's go have a look." Sim and Lente went running off towards the creature and soon stood in front of it. It seemed to take no notice of them at first but then it glanced upwards and looked at the Crest that was fixed to Sim's right hand.

"You're a Crest Bearer," it said as if surprised.

"I am," said Sim with a smile. "I don't mean to sound rude but, what are you?"

"Just something that wanders the worlds and travels here and there from time to time," it said.

"But your kind must have a name," said Sim.

"Maybe you should ask your Crest Guide," said the creature. Sim looked at Lente, who was just as clueless as him when it came to naming what the creature was.

"I don't think he knows," said Sim.

"What are you both doing this far from the Crest Bearer places?" the creature asked.

"We're on a mission for the Great King," said Sim.

"The king of Forria?" asked the creature, its small eyes looking up and down Sim as though it was examining him.

"What other Great King is there?" said Sim.

"I've been to many different worlds," said the creature as it started to walk up and down in front of the Sea Wall again, "and I've met many, many great kings."

"But there's only one who rules all the worlds," said Sim in a pleased voice. He was very proud of his King.

"Perhaps," said the creature. "Still I would like to know why this great king of yours sent you all the way out here by yourselves. Your Guide can only be a little older than you, right? Is that not how it works?"

"Lente is a half a year older than me, yes," said Sim, "but we're both very brave. And I have received the signet ring of the Great King, sealing me with his approval and authority."

"Is that supposed to be good for something?" the creature asked, though it seemed like he already knew that it was.

"Why, yes," said Sim. "The King's authority is the only sovereign authority there is. All must obey his commands."

"The Saruderosi do not," said the creature.

"No, but..."

"If the King's authority is so absolute how come there are those who can choose to disobey him?" asked the creature.

"The King is not a harsh King," said Lente. "He loves those who serve him and is sorrowful for those who turn from him. But he is good and just." Sim looked at Lente and nodded. Then he repeated what Lente had said to the creature.

"It sounds to me like he's just the same as every other king," answered the creature. "You can't be a *great* king if there are so many who don't serve you. In fact I think only those who dwell in the world of Forria serve him and I can't see why anyone would want to."

"It is a privilege to serve," said Sim. His voice was a little more raised now because he didn't like what he was hearing the creature say and neither did Lente.

"Is it really a privilege to serve a king who can't protect his own borders, whose lands are overrun with war, whose people die daily by the jagged swords of the Mitans and poison witchcraft of the Saruderosi?" asked the creature.

"It's not the Great King's fault that these troubles are upon Forria," said Sim crossly. "He is the one who shall deliver us out of them."

"I hope for your sake he does," said the creature. "I'd hate for you to have served him with all you have and it all end up being in vain." After a moment the creature turned and began to walk off along the sandy shore. Soon it was out of sight, though Sim and Lente did not stop looking at it till they could see it no more.

"Why do you suppose it said all those terrible things about the Great King?" asked Sim, who had been quite upset about the whole matter.

"I don't know," said Lente with a frown. The creature had not only puzzled him but had also made him a little angry. He felt just like he did when he

first listened to the squirrel who turned out to be mysterious, yet this time there was another feeling too. It was like the type of feeling that you get when you look at something or someone that you don't like, even though you can't give a good reason for why you feel that way about them. Lente had in mind to pull out his scroll and start reading but just then Goad's deep voice came from the other side of the beach.

"I've found the doorway," he said loudly. Sim and Lente ran over to him as fast as their legs would carry them and moments later all three were stood in front of a part of the Sea Wall that swirled like water going down a plughole.

"Is this it?" asked Sim.

"It is," said Goad. "We have to ask the Sea Wall to let us go through now."

"How do we do that?" asked Sim. "Shall I take out the quill that the Sky Star gave me?"

"No, Sim," said Lente while laughing, "that would be like you asking me if you could come into my house by writing your request all over my front door. We only have to talk to sea to get its attention."

"Oh," said Sim with an amused smile. "Shall you talk to it or Lente?" he asked Goad.

"You're the one with the King's signet ring," said Goad.

"Oh," said Sim again, though this time he was a little nervous. Clearing his throat as if to make a great speech before a large crowd Sim stepped forwards. Then he coughed again and straightened out his tunic to smarten himself up. Finally after Lente urged him on he spoke, quite quietly and yet with great respect. "Dear Sea Wall," he began, "my friends and I have a request to make of you." Sim looked at the waters as if expecting a reply. There was no sound but the calmness of the rushing waters so after awhile he continued. "I am sent on a mission by the Great King. See here the King's signet ring about my neck sealing me with his approval? I ask in his name that you open up for us a path through to Saruderos that my friends and I may make our way to the perilous heart of that dark land to claim back the Phoenix Teardrop. Then we shall bring it back to Forria to present it before the Great King that he may restore peace and serenity to these lands and shores." After Sim had finished speaking he looked at Lente who thought he'd done a splendid job. Goad was nodding boldly as if to let Sim know that he thought so too. Just then the swirling waters of the Sea Wall began to slow down as if there was no swirling at all. "Something's happening," said Sim excitedly.

"I think the Sea Wall heard you," said Goad with a great smile. Suddenly the Sea Wall burst open and parted like a curtain in front of Sim and the others, and dry ground appeared in the gap. Sim and Lente were amazed but Goad quickly hurried them through the gap before it closed. It took only three steps for Sim and the others to move through the curtain in the waters and emerge on the other side, and when they had fully stepped through

they found themselves standing on shores that were very different to the ones they had just left.

“My goodness!” said Sim as he, Lente, and Goad stood on the other side of the Sea Wall on shiny, black sand under pitch black clouds and a blood-red sky. Even the water of the Sea Wall was a different colour on this side, its glistening ocean shades replaced with fiery heated tones and larva like hues. A strong gust of wind came rushing through the Sea Wall and at Sim, Lente, and the Goad, as if to urge them to hurry onwards to complete their mission so that they could come back as quickly as possible and return home. Sim could not have agreed more. In the blink of an eye he and the others had just arrived in the dark lands of Saruderos, and though this was the place where the mission from the King would now be completed the blood-red colours of the sky and rolling thunderclouds of pure black soot were only a sign that there was much peril here. If Sim and his friends were going to even survive this realm, let alone finish the King’s mission, they were going to need to move quickly.

Chapter Eight: Rivers of Dust and Black Fire

Almost as soon as Sim, Lente, and Goad had arrived in Saruderos did they find themselves in trouble. Firstly Saruderosi and Mitan soldiers patrolled the shores to the Sea Wall almost once an hour and soon arrived in great force to survey the beach. Sim, Lente, and Goad had to run as fast as they could just to escape being seen. They hid themselves away inside some caves while the troops marched through and then hurried off the shore and towards some large rocky places where there were more caves to hide in. Secondly Lente started to get sick again. Saruderos was filled with dark magic and soon the young Guide could hardly breathe. Sim thought quickly and decided to keep dusting Lente with shooting stardust. Every half hour or so he would sprinkle a small handful of the dust over Lente to protect him from the power of the magic and this seemed to work. Soon Lente was a lot better and well able to follow Sim as Goad led them both towards the place where the Phoenix Teardrop was being kept.

It was always dark in Saruderos, as though the sun had risen but was being blackened out by the thick, dark clouds. It was hot too, like there were furious fires that constantly raged just a few metres below the ground. Sim had to keep wiping his brow and Goad found it very difficult to move quickly with his heavy fur coat. Lente, on the other hand, was fine, his spirit nature letting what little breeze there was in the terrible land pass through him easily. There was a horrid smell too, not like the fresh and bright air of Forria, but like a dirty, burning smell that made the heat even more

unbearable and was a constant reminder to Sim that this place was not nice at all.

Not much was known about the layout of the land in Saruderos. The Crest Bearer armies had rarely made it this far inland and so maps were vague at best. Still Sim was quietly confident that he and the others would find their way, though neither Lente nor Goad knew why. It was something to do with a gift that the Great King had placed in Sim's pocket when he was at the palace, but Sim had been sworn to secrecy about it and so even now said nothing of it.

From what Lente could remember of this land from his wisdom Saruderos was much larger than Forria, being almost four times its size in fact. Furthermore it was shaped a little like a crescent moon and the Sea Wall stretched all along its inside shore, which was curved. Lente also remembered that Saruderos' capital city, Haithur, was near the coast, some three or four miles from the Sea Wall, meaning that almost as soon as they had arrived in this land Sim, Lente, and Goad were within striking distance of the Dark Lord himself. Shalek the Gale had had the capital built there so that the people of Forria would always be able to see its mighty size and power through the Sea Wall from their side. But Goad found the fact that it was too dark in Saruderos to see any part of the realm from Forria through the Sea Wall amusing, and said that this proved that Shalek the Gale was not as smart as he thought he was. Goad disliked the Gale more than he disliked Dark Wizards like Inisha Merr. Goad said that Shalek was like a terrible storm that had tried to ruin all that was good and peaceful in Forria,

but also said that the Great King would one day come to Saruderos to slay the Dark Lord himself. This was a day that both Sim and Lente looked forward to, but for the time being they had to keep their minds on their own mission.

Goad led Sim and Lente through the sharp and jagged rocky places past the shore and towards some grey Dust Hills. These hills were not hills of grass but of a strange stone like material that was covered in a grey dust that was like soot. Goad said that this was the place where the Saruderosi would dump all the ash from what they had been burning in their great fires. He was careful to lead the boys through the lowest parts of the hills so that they didn't fall into the dust and get stuck. As they went along Lente used his wind powers to cover their tracks.

The better part of a day past before Sim, Lente, and Goad arrived anywhere near the capital city of Saruderos, not that any of them knew it seeing how it was always so dark there. When the boys and the forest bear finally reached the edge of the ash hills they saw for the first time the capital, Haithur. It was a fearsome sight to behold indeed. Razor sharp, pointed and jagged buildings made from dark metal and black glass rose up miles and miles into the sky like swords, while bursts of fire and smoke towered high from almost every city block and district. There was crashing thunder and flashing lightning, the sound of war drums and the cracking of whips, as though this land never rested from the machine its people called war. There must have been hundreds of thousands of humans in the city, each and every person there either serving the Dark Lord Shalek as a

warrior, wizard, or spy or suffering as a slave who was made to do his bidding in the mines and the furnaces. And as the people went about their gruesome tasks, training for wars or beating the slaves, great flags stained with blood-drenched colours and the black symbol of a claw waved from flagpoles high in the sky to show all the worlds that Shalek was the ruler here.

Sim didn't even want to speak because he was so afraid of going anywhere near that place. As far as the eye could see there was only evil, darkness, and suffering. Yet Goad reminded him that it was the Great King who had called him to travel into the deep to recover the Teardrop, and Sim knew that he had to complete his mission. Goad led Sim and Lente down towards the outside wall of the city, where they could all hide in the trees and shadows. They got there soon enough but when they arrived they found someone familiar waiting for them. "We meet again," said the man who was once a squirrel, while crouching down in the shadows where Sim, Lente, and Goad had meant to hide.

"You!" said Sim in a slightly raised voice, though he was careful not to expose his presence to any Saruderosi inside the city walls. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I am a friend," said the man softly as he welcomed Sim, Lente, and Goad into the shadows to hide with him.

“Some friend!” said Lente in annoyance. “You won’t even tell us your name and you keep trying to fool us by changing between being a man and a squirrel. I have in mind to sever all ties with you.”

“That would not be wise, master Lente,” the man answered calmly.

“The fact that you are a man, at least right now anyway, and can see me can mean only two things,” said Lente angrily. “You are either a Crest Bearer or you are a wizard!”

“A wizard?” said Sim in fear. He didn’t like the sound of that.

“You know the rules,” said Lente. “Only Crest Bearers and heavenly and spiritual beings like Sky Stars can see Guides. But even the magic users have learned how to see my kind too. Remember that the wizard, Inisha Merr, could see me?”

“So what are you?” asked Sim, “a wizard or a Crest Bearer? If you are the former then you are a foe, though I think it not in your character since it was you that helped me to use the Sky Star’s quill for Goad. If you are the latter then I know you not, nor have I ever heard of one of the Crest Order being able to turn into an animal.”

“I am neither,” said the man. “I am just a friend. I was sent to help you by the King.” The man reached into his garments and pulled out a ring that was similar to the signet ring that the Great King had given to Sim. Sim and Lente were astonished at this, but Goad seemed confused.

"You possess a signet ring too!" said Sim.

But Goad said, "That isn't a signet ring belonging to the Great King." Sim and Lente looked at Goad with frowns on their faces. They too had noticed that the ring was slightly different in its design but now thought that perhaps the man had done a greatly treacherous thing and forged a false ring for himself. But before Sim and Lente could even begin to feel angry about this Goad the bear spoke again. "That is the signet ring of the Great King's father," he said. Now his face turned to astonishment and wonder, like this was something that was more amazing and marvellous to him than anything else he had ever seen before.

"The Great King's father is the Great High King of all," said Sim in astonishment.

"He is the one who made the White Winds and whispered into them his commands," said the man wisely. "He is the one who sent his son, the Great King, to rule here with all authority and power. He is the one who through the Great King made the Phoenixes of ancient times and built upon them the foundations of the world. He is the one who has sent me to you now, and I come in his authority and in that of his son, the Great King." Suddenly and almost out of nowhere the Great King's eagle, Ginnil Eli, came swooping down from the blackened skies and landed on the man's hand that he had outstretched for him as though he already knew that he would come at that exact moment. Sim, Lente, and Goad were amazed at

the eagle's coming and then bowed reverently when they realised that this eagle was the Great King's eagle and one of his most trusted servants.

"Rise," said Ginnil Eli in his voice, noble and firm, "for the King hath sent me here to bestow upon you his blessings and his strength." Sim and Lente both looked up, though Goad remained bowing for that was the proper thing to do for an animal. "Your journey is almost complete, Sim Saule. Now upon you must be placed the glory of the Great King that you may use it as a weapon to smite the hearts of Forria's enemies. Have you your sword?"

"I have," said Sim reverently. He quickly pulled out his silver blade from its sheaf and held it out before the eagle so that he could see it.

"You bear the blade well," said Ginnil Eli, "and so now it shall be adorned with majesty." The eagle lifted off into brief flight from the man's hand and lightly touched the blade of the sword with his claws before flapping his wings and landing back on the man's hand. After a few moments the sword began to glow and Sim almost dropped it because it startled him so. But then as Sim tightened his grip the blade of the sword suddenly turned to gold and an ancient text that said *He who bears the sword of the King shall bring victory to all his people* appeared, engraving itself into the sword as though written in an ink made from pure light. Sim and Lente watched in awe, and even Goad raised his head slightly to see it and marvel. Then when the writing was finished the sword stopped glowing and lay still in Sim's hand. Sim was astonished.

"Thank you for this honour," he said softly and gratefully after awhile.

"Put your sword away, Sim," said Ginnil Eli, "for soon will come the time when you shall have to draw it in the face of your enemies." Sim did as he was told, though he couldn't stop looking at the sword for a little while. Then the eagle spoke again. "The Helper will aid you to the heart of this perilous place where you shall reclaim the Phoenix Teardrop." The eagle looked at the man who was once a squirrel and nodded respectfully.

"He is the Helper?" asked Sim curiously.

"It is the name given to him by the Great High King of all," said Ginnil Eli, "and it shall be his purpose to you here in the dark." The eagle turned and looked at Goad. "But first there is a task to be dealt with. Rise, good wisdom bear." Goad raised his head and looked at the eagle with great respect.

"What would you have me do?" he asked, willing to obey any command that was given.

"You must take Sim Saule and his Guide to the Rivers of Dust and Black Fire where a great liberation must take place," said the eagle, "for only then shall the chains that bind not only the Phoenix Teardrop but also the peace of Forria be truly loosed."

"It shall be done, my lord," said Goad.

"Lente, Sun of Stene," called out Ginnil Eli to Lente, whom he could see as clearly as he saw Sim.

"Yes, master eagle," Lente answered with a firm bow of his head.

"Be ready and alert to use your scroll, even in the deep of dark surroundings and the storms of magic," commanded Ginnil Eli, "for you have been appointed to Guide Sim Saule even when he ventures into places that threaten to do you harm. You must have as much courage as Sim needs to have. Courage shall defend you both."

"I understand," said Lente obediently, though the thought of risking his scroll and his life amidst dark magic scared him more than a little.

"Now I must fly," said Ginnil Eli. "The Sea Walls are not eager to remain open to travellers so long as Saruderos is an enemy to Forria. Be quick to finish your mission and meet me to go back through."

"Yes, master Ginnil Eli," said Sim, Lente, and Goad together. Suddenly the eagle took off and swept across the sky into the distance. He was returning to the Sea Wall and to Forria. After he had gone Sim looked back at Lente, Goad, and Helper and smiled with an encouraged spirit. "I think that we shall do well with the King's blessing," he said, thinking presently about how much courage the Great King had instilled in him. "What lies at the Rivers of Dust and Black Fire?" he asked Helper. Helper's face turned solemn.

"It is a place where courage shall be your only defence," he answered. "It is where the Voice of the Black Fires resides. He is a treacherous foe."

"You speak of one whom I have never heard of before," said Sim. It made him very concerned that yet another unknown adversary now awaited them.

"That is because he is a secret ally of the Dark Lord Shalek," said Lente.

He said this as though the words had just popped into his head after being only a feeling or gut instinct. But he was right.

"Long ago the Black Fires turned against the White Wind," said Helper. "It is the reason why the Dragons followed them in fire and brimstone to the ancient war against the Phoenixes. Once an enemy of the White Wind the Black Fire made its own voice that it might speak what the White Winds do not. And so when Shalek the Gale betrayed the Great King and stole the Phoenix Teardrop it was the Voice of the Black Fires that helped him to do it. But Shalek has kept his alliance with the Voice of the Black Fires a hidden secret that the Voice may whisper into the hearts of his enemies and not be seen as a foe. Long has the Voice of the Black Fires travelled here and there, from world to world, whispering lies and deceit. Sometimes he comes an old man. Other times he comes as a serpent. Some have even seen him come as a great Fire Dragon. He takes many forms like I do, yet he is not a friend." Suddenly Sim and Lente realised something important.

"A serpent!" said Sim and Lente at the same time. "That's what it was!"

Both boys now knew that they had already met the Voice of the Black Fires. He had come to them on the beach before the Sea Wall and said those terrible things about the Great King.

"Beware," said Helper in a firm voice. "The Voice of the Black Fires does not just speak. He can also send ancient powers and curses into distant

places to help the armies and allies of Shalek the Gale in his war to conquer all the worlds.”

“I think that is how the Dark Wizard, Inisha Merr, took possession of the Crest Bearers’ blood,” said Goad with a saddened shake of his head. “Is there no treacherous thing that these vile ones will not do?”

“They are fallen and so in the darkness they forever reside,” said Helper.

“They want to spread darkness everywhere but you must not let them continue. I am here to help you do that.”

“That is your namesake,” said Sim with a thankful sigh.

“Indeed,” said Helper.

“Then tell us what we must do at the Rivers of Dust and Black Fire,” said Goad as he stood up and got ready to act.

“You must set free the ones who have been taken captive by the Voice,” said Helper. “And for this you shall require two of the gifts that you possess.”

Helper led Sim, Lente, and Goad away from the towering walls of Saruderos’ capital city and through a forest that seemed to stretch for miles and miles. The trees of the forest were thin and withered, like they hadn’t seen rain in over a year, so the group had to keep to the most shadowed parts of the forest to not be seen by passing Saruderosi. Helper said that even the animals in this land would betray them to the Dark Lord if they

saw them, so everyone had kept especially alert. When they finally reached the other side of the forest Helper led Sim and the others up a slightly cambered field of dead grass. On the other side of it were the Rivers of Dust and Black Fire.

Sim, Lente, and Goad all leaned against the top of the grassy field to secretly peer down on the rivers below. There were six of them and each of them ran in parallel to one another, stretching as far as the eye could see from a single ocean to all the parts of Saruderos. Each river was a wide stream, not of water but of moving shadows and darkness. Powdery dust and flames that were black like silhouettes ran along the shrouded streams instead of normal water, and from each river came a terrible stench that smelt like everything was burning and melting. Helper said that these rivers were like veins that carry blood throughout the human body, except for they carried the magic energies in Dust and Black Fire to all the different parts of Saruderos. Sim had to keep dusting Lente with shooting stardust because they had gotten so close to the magic in the rivers.

"What now?" asked Sim eagerly. The rivers were already making Lente feel sick and Sim didn't want to hang around them for too long for the health of his friend.

"Watch," said Helper. As Helper pointed his finger forwards Sim and the others looked back at the rivers and saw that they were beginning to bubble and churn like a cauldron that was thick with hot tar. Soon people began to come up out of the rivers. At first they were completely covered in the Dust

and Black Fire but as they came out of the streams the darkness seemed to drain off of them. That's when Sim and the others first recognised who these people were. They were captured Crest Bearers from Forria.

"How can this be?!" cried Sim.

"They are our people!" said Lente angrily, though he had little strength with which to be angry.

"They are prisoners of war," said Helper.

"Captured by the dark forces," added Goad, who seemed to have much wisdom about this.

"But Crest Bearers are mighty," said Sim. "They would rather be killed in battle than taken captive to be slaves." But slaves the Crest Bearers were, for as Sim and the others watched they soon saw that heavy, rusty chains bound the twenty or thirty captive warriors. It was only after all the captives had come out of the streams that their slave masters appeared. Giant Mitans from Mita, who stood eleven or twelve feet off the ground, were carrying heavy anchors that linked all the prisoners' chains together so that none could escape. The biggest of the Mitans also had in his hand a great whip that was entangled with sharp pieces of metal and broken glass for harsh beatings. Sim could not believe his eyes as he watched fellow Crest Bearers being lined up for what would be another daily whipping session.

"We have to do something!" said Lente furiously. "I won't just sit here and watch those vile Mitans beat and whip fellow Crest Bearers.

"That's why we're here," said Helper. But as Sim, Lente, and Goad looked at Helper he was suddenly no longer a man but now a squirrel again. "I will lead you down there but *you* must free the captives," he said.

"Very well," said Sim, though he was not quite used to seeing Helper as a squirrel again.

"Remember, Sim Saule," said Helper just before he started to move, "you have to free them not just of the chains that bind their hands and legs but also of the chains that bind their hearts too."

"What do you mean?" asked Sim.

"You will see," said Helper.

Helper scurried down the slope of grass and mud and led Sim, Lente, and Goad towards the rivers by some shadows that were being cast by huge river rocks. They arrived nearby the rivers quickly enough but Lente began to feel even sicker than before. Sim went to dust him again but Helper said that it would be no use and that Lente should stay where he was. Lente agreed, not that he had much choice, and made Sim promise that he would defeat the Mitans. Sim was just as angry with the Mitans as Lente was and vowed ardently to free the captives. Leaving Lente sitting behind a rock just far enough away from the magic of the rivers to still be able to breathe, Sim, Goad, and Helper hurried further in towards the riverbed. They got

within three or four metres of the Mitans and captives just before the whipping was about to start, though they were still hidden from sight behind the riverbed rocks.

"I can go no further for now," said Helper. "It's up to you." Once Helper had nodded his little squirrel head a few times to encourage Sim to be brave and strike immediately, Goad gave them a count in. When he reached three he and Sim leaped from behind the huge rock that was hiding them and attacked. Sim threw out his Crest holding hand and suddenly blinded all the Mitans with light and White Wind, while Goad pounced onto the nearest Giant to knock him down. Then Sim drew his sword and began to run along the riverbed, cutting and swinging forcefully with his blade as he went. The Mitans may have been giants but they were still very slow and Sim was able to strike at their legs and bellies and catch them off balance while they rubbed their eyes for the pain of being blinded by his Crest powers.

Sim launched into a somersault and attacked two Mitans that were still standing while Goad leaped back onto his feet after mauling the Mitan he had jumped at and ran at the giant Mitan leader who was holding the cruel whip. This Mitan had just stopped rubbing his eyes in pain and saw Goad coming. He was about to raise the whip to swing down on Goad and surely injure him but Sim saw him before he could do this. Taking out his bow and arrow, Sim aimed skilfully with one eye shut and his teeth clenched. Then he shot a single arrow straight at the giant Mitan's hand and knocked the giant whip from his grip. The Mitan stumbled about in agony because of the arrow in his hand and then tried to run at Sim to take revenge. But Goad

pounced from the ground and knocked the giant to the ground and mauled him to death too.

When the battle was over Helper came out from behind the shadows as Sim and Goad finished off the last of the Mitan giants and then turned back to the Crest Bearers who were chained up as prisoners. "Well done," said Helper to Sim and Goad. Lente called out 'well done' too though he was still unable to come any closer without getting far sicker. Sim and Goad were pleased that they had defeated the vile Mitans like Sim had promised and quickly went over to the Crest Bearers to loose their chains. But that's when something happened that they were not expecting. The Crest Bearers who were captives started to get very afraid.

"What have you done?" they cried in terror. "You have doomed us all!"

"What are you talking about, sirs?" asked Sim. He was just as shocked as Goad was that Silver and Gold Crest Bearers, who surely outranked him in authority and power too, had said such a thing.

"You have slain the captors and now we shall all perish along with everyone in Forria," said one of the Gold Crest Bearers.

"How can that be?" said Sim.

"It cannot," said Helper as he turned back into a man and stood before the large group of prisoners.

"Not you again!" they said angrily. "We don't want to hear anymore of your lies!"

"What are they saying?" said Sim, who was very confused.

"Do they know you, Helper?" asked Goad.

"We have met before," he answered, "though it was long ago before they became slaves not just in body but in mind and soul and spirit also."

"We are not slaves," said one of the older Crest Bearers. "We are heroes!"

"Heroes?" said Sim in shock.

"How can this be?" asked Goad.

"By being prisoners here we are protecting Forria from being invaded by Saruderos and Mita," the captives answered.

"That is what they believe," said Helper with a sad look on his face.

"Why do you think this?" asked Sim. He could not understand it at all.

"The Great King asked us to protect Forria by becoming prisoners of the Black Fire Rivers," they answered, almost as though they were proud of this. "It has kept Forria safe from attack for over one hundred years."

"The Great King asked you to do this?" said Sim in horror.

"He would not do such a thing," said Goad.

"But he did," they answered. "The River Man told us so."

"Who's the River Man?" asked Sim and Goad together. Just then the Rivers of Dust and Black Fire started to bubble and churn once more and everyone turned around to see what would come out of them. Sim had in mind that it might be more Mitans and so readied his sword, but Helper lowered it with his hand.

"The blade of metal will not do you any good here, young Sim," he whispered. "The River Man uses a blade of deceit." As Sim and the others watched the rivers began to part and soon an old man came out of them. He was very frail and bent over, robed in black veils and a thick cloak that dripped with the dark forces of the river. He had come up from beneath them where there was only darkness and shadow. This old man was familiar. He was the old man whom had earlier sent the blood-drenched ravens into Forria to serve the Dark Wizard, Inisha Merr. Now he had come up out from under the rivers where there was only darkness and white smoke and stood before Sim and the others.

"Why are you bothering my slaves," he said in a sinister and dark voice.

"They are no longer slaves but are free," said Sim boldly.

"They don't want to be free," he answered with a wicked smile. "They are serving their king by being my slaves."

"The Great King enslaves no one," said Goad strongly, "for he loves and protects all that are his."

"No!" shouted the old man, "he is full of hate and despises his people for letting the Phoenix Teardrop be taken away. That is why he punishes Forria with the threat of war!"

"How can you say such a thing?" cried Sim. "The Great King cares for the people of Forria. You are speaking lies against him!" The old man made a fierce yelling noise at Sim as if to frighten him. It did a little, but Sim was still very angry about how this man had said such awful things about the King. "Was it him who told you that you had to be slaves?" Sim asked the captives, who seemed very afraid of the old man.

"He speaks on behalf of the Great King," they answered. "What he has told us is the Great King's will."

"Don't believe it," pleaded Goad. "This old man has done nothing but lie to you and deceive you."

"You are the ones who are deceived," they answered. "The Great King had to punish someone for letting the Phoenix Teardrop fall into these dark lands. It is better that we suffer and not all of Forria."

"Tell them the truth!" Sim shouted at the old man who did nothing but laugh. Sim turned to Helper. "Why don't you try and convince them?" Helper looked down in sorrow.

"I have been coming here ever since they first arrived to speak to them the truth," he said. "But they have not listened to me. They are bewitched by the deceits of the old man."

"I'm not the one who's been deceiving them, Nobbar," said the old man. He had called Helper by a name that only he could have known. This was meant to remind Helper that he and the old man had been adversaries for longer than anyone else there had even been alive.

"Hold your foul tongue, Vayso!" Helper shouted, for that was an ancient name by which the old man was known. It was the first time that either Sim or Goad had seen Helper angry. It was as if he was only allowed to get angry with those who didn't really belong in Forria or Saruderos or any of the White Wind worlds. Like Helper the old man was really from beyond the worlds and Sim somehow knew that he was not all that he appeared to be. Soon Sim turned to Helper to whisper to him.

"Who is he really?" he asked warily.

"He is the deceiver," said Helper. "Some call him Shadow and others use his ancient name, Vayso. Still he is known to others as the River Man. You know him by the form in which he was when you first met him. Yes, Sim, he is the same serpent as the one who tried to deceive you. That means that he is also the Voice of the Black Fires." Sim clenched his fists angrily as Goad readied his sharp teeth. They both realised who this old man was and were now filled with so much rage because of the evil things he had done that they wanted to attack. But the old man smiled wickedly.

"I think it's time we shared some words, Sim Saule," he said slyly.

"I will not speak with a liar," Sim shouted.

"Be careful!" said one of the prisoners, "for if you stir his wrath he shall be loosed to strike Forria."

"No he won't," said Sim. "He's lied to you all. You're not supposed to be his slaves or prisoners. The Great King would not want that. Surely you must remember what it was like to serve the Great King, even if you have been slaves for so long? Did the Great King ever ask you to do anything so cruel as to become slaves to a deceiver?" The captives began to think and after a little while began to believe that Sim might be right. They had spent so long believing the old man's lies that they had forgotten the truth about the Great King that they used to serve. Soon they began to talk amongst themselves.

"Perhaps the boy is right," they whispered. "What if the Great King never meant for this to happen at all?"

"Silence!" shouted the old man. Suddenly he was afraid that the captives might start to believe the truth and this made him very angry. "Have you not suffered here for over one hundred years, and are not Forria's shores safe because of your enslavement to me? Has not every word I have said to you come true?" he demanded. The captives didn't know what to say. It was as though they were torn between two places at the same time and could no longer think properly for themselves. Sim quickly stepped forwards to help them.

"He's lying to you," he said zealously. "The Great King protects all his people from slavery, and that includes you. I don't know why you came here

but it was not because it was the will of our King. He never meant for you to be slaves. Your sacrifice is only helping to serve this deceiver and the other Dark Ones of Saruderos. Right now Forria's shores are under attack by Saruderosi and Mitans. If your slavery was meant to prevent that then why has the invasion already begun?" Confusion struck the prisoners when they heard Sim's words. The thought of the very invasion they thought they were preventing having already taken place turned their stomachs. But still to the old man's pleasure some doubted.

"You could be lying to us like you say he is," they said, their confused minds clouded with double thoughts and second guessing. Sim found himself without words. How could he prove that the war was already raging?

"What else can I say?" he earnestly asked of Helper. Helper looked away from Sim and towards the riverbed rocks.

"What you cannot say your friend shall show," he answered. Sim looked over to the riverbed rocks and was astonished to see Lente struggling to pull himself up onto the top of rock that he had hid behind so everyone could see him. He had used almost all his strength to stand upright but found just a little more to take out his scroll. Sim was afraid because Lente looked as though he was about to die, being so close to magic. But Lente was no longer fearful. He had heard every word that was spoken about the captives and knew what his duty was. And he had more than enough courage to carry it out.

"Behold!" he said in as loud a voice as he could. Suddenly his scroll began to glow and filled up the whole riverside with flashing images of Forria. The old man was dismayed as visions of the burning villages of Forria destroyed by the Mitans, the captured Sky Stars, mystical beings and beasts taken prisoner by the Dark Ones of Saruderos, and the blood-magic powers of the Dark Wizards filled the sky like ghostly images that the prisoners could even touch and feel. Though nothing but pain and grief shone all about Sim and Goad were amazed as the truth was shown and erased every doubt that still lingered.

"Let them believe and be free because of what they have seen," Helper whispered softly into the air. "Let others believe and be free because of what they have not seen." Suddenly Lente slumped onto the rock in exhaustion and his scroll stopped glowing. The images vanished and for a moment there was silence. Then, after Helper had assured him that Lente would be alright, Sim turned to face the old man and spoke.

"Behold... the deceiver," he said. Almost as soon as the captives heard Sim's words they became very angry and tears of rage began to stream down their faces. The old man had promised them that by being his prisoners he would not let Forria be invaded, yet now they had seen that the invasion had already taken place long ago.

"You lied to us!" shouted the strongest of the Golden Crest Bearers. His rage began to spread like fire onto all the other captives.

"He lied to us, he lied to us!" they shouted angrily. Suddenly the captives threw down the chains that they had been loosed from but still held onto and began to run at the old man. The old man cried out in fear as they grabbed a hold of him to kill him. He wriggled and wrestled but soon they had a good grip on him, even after he transformed himself back into the serpent that Sim and Lente had met on the beach to the Sea Wall in Forria. The Crest Bearers seized him by his tail and legs and held him up high into the sky, saying 'Deceiver, deceiver! You shall lie no more!' Then they wrapped the chain to the anchor that the giant Mitans had been holding around the serpent's neck and threw it and him back into the Rivers of Dust and Black Fire without hesitation. The rivers bubbled and churned as though someone had made them much hotter than they ought to have been, but then there was silence. The rivers now seemed less poisonous and furious than before and soon thin lines of water began to break up the magical Dust and Black Fire that filled them. As Sim and Goad began to shout and applaud the Crest Bearers started to celebrate and dance for they were now truly free after more than one hundred years. As they cheered the name of the Great King Helper looked at the rivers and watched them being purified with a grateful heart. A tear fell from his eye soon after for he was greatly pleased that the truth had prevailed and made the captives free.

Chapter Nine: March of the Diggers

No sooner than the rivers had cleared up did Lente feel wondrously better. After a moment he got up and joined the celebrations of the Crest Bearers, and was soon dancing with Sim and Goad. Later, when the celebrations had finally died down, Sim asked the Crest Bearers what they were going to do now. "We don't know," they said uncertainly. "We've spent so long thinking that the Great King wanted us to be slaves that we've forgotten what it means to be Crest Bearers. Why we even gave up our Crests to the deceiver when we first arrived here. Now where will we go?"

"There is always the path back home," said Helper wisely, for he knew that the Great King very much wanted to see them all again.

"But will the Great King forgive us?" they asked. "We have served the Dark Ones with our powers, our knowledge, and our strength. The deceiver even took some of our blood to mix with magic that it might make the Dark Wizards more powerful." Sim, Lente, and Goad seemed sad because of this. While they were happy that the captives were now free even they were worried about what the Great King would say of the things that had been done. But Helper was full of wisdom for all those gathered nearby.

"There is no treachery that cannot be washed clean by the Great King," he said softly. "Go back to him and you shall find him waiting to clothe you in white robes and restore to you your honour. He shall destroy any weapon formed by the Dark Ones through their enslavement of you." Sim, Lente, Goad, and all the Crest Bearers were very pleased at these words and were

greatly relieved too. Soon Helper had the Crest Bearers on their feet and ready to go back home. "Do not despair about your Crests either," he said comfortingly, "for one day those shall be taken back from this dark land and returned to you too."

"Does that mean that they will be able to see their Guides again?" asked Lente, who had noticed much earlier that there were no Guides among the captives.

"Their Guides shall be waiting for them in the land of the light, Forria your home," said Helper. The Crest Bearers were glad at this for they had not seen their Guides in over a hundred years. But then one of the Crest Bearers became fearful.

"But, good sir, we don't know the way back to our home," he said. All the Crest Bearers had forgotten the path back to Forria through which they had come to Saruderos because they had travelled it so long ago. But just then Sim was reminded of something that Helper had said to him earlier and took out from within his pocket one of the gifts that he carried with him. It was his compass.

"Before he died my father gave me this compass," he said. "It does not point north but is good for something else. It always points the way home." Sim smiled warmly and handed the compass to one of the Crest Bearers. They were very grateful that Sim would give up a gift given to him by his own father, but Sim was happy to do it. It meant that they would be able to return home after being slaves for so long. And so the Crest Bearers

gathered what few possessions they still had left and began their journey home. Helper had been sure to make certain that they took with them the weapons of the fallen Mitans that lay around about the rivers, for the journey home might see them encounter enemies. But he also assured them that because they had finally believed the truth the grace and favour of the Great King would protect them too. Soon they were gone over the hills and towards the east and sunrise.

“That was a very good thing that you did,” said Lente to Sim while patting him on the back proudly. “Your father gave you that compass.”

“It was only right to give it away,” said Sim. “Helper said we would need two gifts and you already risked your life by using your scroll. Besides, we already know the way back home.”

“And to our homes we must go as soon as this mission is done,” said Goad eagerly, for he had wanted to leave Saruderos and go back home almost as soon as they had arrived.

“Then let us not spend anymore time in this dark place,” said Sim. Sim turned to Helper to ask what to do next.

“Now you must finish what the King called you to do,” he answered. “Go and take back the Phoenix Teardrop.” Sim could tell what Helper was going to say next before he had even said it and didn’t really want to hear it. But it came nonetheless. “This is something that you must do alone,” he said.

“Does that mean you’re leaving us?” asked Lente with a frown.

"No, Lente," said Helper. "It means that *we* are all leaving Sim now."

"What?" said Lente. He didn't believe or like what he had just heard. "But why?"

"Because that is what the Great King has willed," said Helper. "He didn't call Goad to reclaim the Phoenix Teardrop and he didn't command me to do it. He charged Sim with the task and Sim alone."

"But I'm Sim's Guide," said Lente sadly.

"I know you are," said Helper kindly, "but not even you were called into the Great King's throne room to receive the mission. Only Sim was. Where Sim has to go now not even you can follow. There is too much magic about and too much danger. One day there will be a time when together you and Sim will travel into even the most magical of places and unto the most deadly of territories, but it is not today. Today Sim must complete his King's task by himself." For awhile all Lente could do was look at Sim sorrowfully. He had wanted to help Sim all the way till the end and Sim had wanted that too. But Helper was right. The King had given the mission to no one else but Sim and now the time had come for Sim to finish what they all had helped him start. So Sim hugged Lente as tightly as he could and then said goodbye to Goad and Helper. Then Helper turned back into a squirrel and led Lente and Goad off, back along the way through which they had come, leaving Sim standing all alone by the six rivers.

When Sim was finally by himself he turned around and started to walk in the direction that he thought would best lead him to the Phoenix Teardrop. He had not been allowed to tell anyone else but Sim had been given a map to the Teardrop by the Great King, and it was a map that only he was allowed to read. Sim soon pulled it out from the deepest of all his pockets. The map showed him a secret way into the very heart of Saruderos where the Phoenix Teardrop was being kept, and the King had marked out a special path through the map to get Sim straight to that place.

It seemed like Sim had to walk for days and days on end till he finally reached the place that was called Black Heart. It was shaped like a giant sphere and made of bones and marble. It stood off the ground like a massive globe, as though someone had actually taken one of the moons and put it on top of the earth. Because he had no idea of the purpose of this structure Sim had been very careful not to be seen by anyone on any part of his journey to this terrible place. He had passed stealthily by Black Fire pits where the Saruderosi Dark Minions were melting down metals and precious gems for the Mitans and the Black Ice arenas where Dark Wizards were training to use magic and other forbidden powers. Sim had seen for himself how Crest Bearers' blood, taken from the captive Crest Bearers at the six rivers and even from wounded Crest Bearers on other shores who had been fighting in the wars, was being poured out into cauldrons so that ravens could be dipped in it. Thousands of ravens were being sent all across Saruderos to carry the blood to chief Wizards so that they could drench Coil Wands in it and increase the powers of their students. All these

things had been very frightening for Sim but now he beheld something far more terrifying. The giant bone and marble globe that he had come to had within it many stone faces. All of them were twisted and deformed like gargoyle faces chiselled into stone and rock. But the faces could move and talk, and made frightening sounds and noises all the time. They would shout and speak in ancient languages, saying curses and wicked verses about how the Dark Lord Shalek the Gale would slay the Great King and bring all the world to darkness and fire. They scared Sim a lot for on the map his path to the Teardrop was marked clearly – Sim had to go to the stone sphere and that meant being seen by the horrid faces.

But as Sim climbed down the dusty rocks towards the sphere, his heart pounding in terror, Goosebumps all over his skin, he was reminded of the King's signet ring that hung around his neck. He held it tightly and tried to be very brave as he got closer and closer to the stone sphere and its faces. Suddenly one of the faces saw Sim and opened its dark mouth to speak, a marble yet moving and drooling tongue flapping out of it. "You must be the chosen one," it said in a vile and evil voice. Other faces started to open their eyes and look towards Sim as he stood still before the giant, stone sphere. "Come to take back the Teardrop, have you?" Sim was shocked at the face's words, for it knew his mission.

"We're not men anymore," said another face with a wicked laugh, "so we learned with ease the truth behind your mission from the animals and beast that spread news of it across your homeland."

"Then you know that I am sent of the Great King?" said Sim in a strong voice, for he was trying to be as brave as he could be.

"Curse the Great King!" said the faces viciously. "You shall fail him in your mission!"

"I shall fulfil it," Sim answered boldly, "though I would have from you two things."

"We will give you nothing!" said the faces defiantly. But Sim took out the King's signet ring and held it up to them.

"You will give me what I seek as surely as the Great King is ruler of all things!" he said firmly. He had remembered that the Great King had told him to be courageous, and against all the fears inside of him Sim was willing to be bold. The faces groaned and shook in terror and fear of the signet ring and the authority it represented.

"Curse you and curse the signet ring," they said in terror. "It has the dominion of the Great King and has stricken us with trembling!"

"Tell me what I want to know," Sim ordered.

"Speak it then!" cried the faces, for they could bear the presence of the signet ring no longer.

"Tell me, have you told anyone about the mission that I am on?" he asked. Sim was worried that if the stone sphere faces knew of his purpose in Saruderos then others might know as well.

"Only the creatures of this land," said the faces angrily, "for your King has commanded that no human be told unless permitted by him. Not even we can break that law."

"I am glad," said Sim as he thought about the possibility of Shalek the Gale finding out. "Now tell me where the path of the Diggers lies," he ordered again. But the faces recoiled and whined in fury and pain.

"We won't betray the secrets of the land to you, Crest Bearer!" they said, though it seemed very painful for them to do so. Sim frowned angrily and stepped forwards with the signet ring firmly outstretched.

"By the authority of the Great King you will tell me what I ask!" he shouted. "I come with a map to the Phoenix Teardrop. It tells me to demand of you, the faces of the stone sphere, the place of the Digger paths and I shall have the answer from you!" The faces groaned again but they could not stand the agony of refusing a command given in the name of the Great King.

"To the trees! To the trees!" they cried in anguish.

"Vile beings you may be," said Sim, "but I take your trembling speech as truth. However if you are lying I shall return with the signet ring and the full authority of the Great King to smite you all with the sword that he has

engraved for me.” Sim turned from the stone sphere and began running towards the trees around it, as the faces cried, shouted, and groaned in furious rage.

The groaning of the faces could still be heard as Sim arrived some three miles around the outside of the sphere and at the trees. Soon he was stood in the shadow of the trees and found near their roots a great many holes leading to tunnels that burrowed deep under ground. Sim looked at the map of the King once more to make sure he had read its instructions correctly and then said to himself that he was taking the right path. The map said that he should enter the tunnels and follow them down to the very bottom. And so he did. It was only while inside the tunnels of dirt, the smell of steaming hot mud, and darkness that Sim began to realise one of the reasons why he had been chosen for this task. The tunnels were so small that anyone older or bigger than him would never have been able to crawl through them.

After what must have been hours of crawling through damp and warm mud Sim reached a place under ground where the tunnel he was in seemed to join with other tunnels. He had entered a large cavern beneath the surface and once inside realised that he was not alone. Sim used his Crest to make a little light and soon saw stood about in the cavern a great many people. But they were not human people. They were tiny, no larger than Sim's arm in average height, and had large shining eyes. They had seen Sim as soon as he entered the cavern and were now very afraid. Sim was a bit afraid of them too for though they were only small there were thousands of them, all

hiding in the cavern for as far as Sim could see in all directions. "Who are you?" Sim asked curiously, though he was a little hesitant and fearful. After awhile one of the tiny people stepped forwards with a small spear no longer than a needle in his grip.

"We are Diggers," he said warily. "Who are you?"

"I am Sim Saule," said Sim. "I'm a Crest Bearer from Forria."

"We haven't seen any Crest Bearers like you in Saruderos for over a thousand years," said the chief Digger. "You still have your Crest. The only ones who we've seen lost their Crests long ago and are slaves to the Vayso."

"I'm a free Crest Bearer," said Sim. "I'm here on a mission for the Great King." When Sim said this all the Diggers gasped and immediately came out of their hiding places to bow down. Sim was surprised to see thousands of them come out of little holes and caves and fall onto their knees before him. It made him feel a little bit uncomfortable. "What are you doing?" he asked nervously.

"You're from the Great King," said a Digger woman. "You are to be hailed among our kind."

"Command us and we will obey you," said the chief Digger.

"Me command you?" asked Sim with an odd look on his face.

"Yes, Master Sim Saule," answered all the Diggers. "It is the way it is meant to be." Sim felt like this was not right but something told him to check the map that the Great King had given to him, so he did. He was surprised to read that the next thing it was telling him to do was to give the Diggers a command. It told him to order the Diggers to *begin their march*. So Sim looked up from the map slowly and then spoke.

"I'm supposed to tell you to... begin your march," he said hesitantly.

"Yes, sir," said the chief Digger, "we shall do so at once!" Suddenly the Diggers began running around and getting into lines like an army. It was as if they had been waiting to do what Sim had commanded them to do for all their lives and had practiced how to do it everyday. Sim watched them run about and gather tiny swords, spears, shields, and lances from places that looked like little huts and houses made out of mud and dust. They put on tiny helmets and readied little lamps with glowing lights in them, and soon were organised into nearly eighty lines of one hundred. Then the chief Digger stepped forwards. "We are ready to begin the march," he said firmly. Sim didn't quite know what that meant.

"Forgive me, but, what is the march for?" Sim asked.

"For two thousand years we Diggers have been digging beneath the ground of Saruderos," said one of the Digger commanders. "We were told to do so by the Great King of Forria, and so we obeyed. It has taken us this many years to dig tunnels under ground to the places where he told us to dig to and once we had finished we made openings leading down to this great

cavern so that someone sent by the King could come down here to us. He told us long ago that when that person came he would have for us a single command - to begin the march. And so now we are ready to go to battle with you against the evil Saruderosi and help you enter into very palace of their dark ruler."

"You're prepared to go to war?" asked Sim. He was a little afraid of the thought of a great battle.

"Yes, Master," said the chief Digger. "We are assembled and ready to do our part that you might succeed in yours." Then the Diggers began marching through the tunnels that led away from the place where Sim had entered in from. Soon Sim gathered enough courage to follow them, though he had at first been hesitant because he was afraid of going to war. Sim had looked at the map from the King again and realised that the Diggers' tunnels were going to lead him straight to the palace of Shalek the Gale, where the Phoenix Teardrop had been treacherously kept for so many dark, long years. The Diggers had known for a long time that they were going to have to fight in a war to help claim victory for Forria. Now Sim realised that he would have to be ready to fight in that war and enter the palace itself to take back the Teardrop.

Chapter Ten: The Phoenix Teardrop

The Diggers ran with all their might through the tunnels they had dug long ago that led straight into the palace of the Dark Lord, Shalek the Gale. The tunnels were large enough for Sim to run too and so rush he did after the tiny Diggers, who in spite of their size were far more speedy than he was.

The tunnels were dim and warm and had an unexpected cosiness to them. Sim found himself feeling very safe as he ran amongst the Digger army, and would never have known what the tunnels were protecting him from. Sim didn't know that up on the surface above him there were armies of tens of thousands of Saruderosi, who were more cruel, malevolent, and vicious than even the Mitans, stationed for miles outside of the palace. Shalek the Gale had long ago ordered that no less than fifteen thousand warriors be stationed around his palace walls at any one time and ever since then the capital city, Haithur, had been filled with armies.

The Saruderosi armies were grouped into hundreds and thousands, each group led by a Primary Dark Wizard and his or her apprentice. Then within each group were lesser Dark Wizards and other magic users like Gem and Seeing Stone Witches and Night Whisperers, all of whom possessed the gifts of summoning the evil energies. Then were the Saruderosi human soldiers, who like the Mitans were powerful in stature and highly skilled in the arts of combat. But these men used large spears made from Black Fire itself to fight with, and their armour was shaped out of the toxic dusts that up came from the six rivers. They were more feared than the Mitans in

every land and had promised to bring their wrath to the shores of Forria if the Mitans failed to conquer that country.

Also within the armies were terrible creatures like Goblins and Serpent Men, both of whom were races that came from humans but were changed and enchanted by dark magic after Shalek the Gale stole the Phoenix Teardrop. And so surrounding the palace and the capital city's central districts were armies made up of these fearsome foes. But also in the skies were Black Sky Riders, who were mounted upon giant flying beasts that looked like winged scorpions and could spit fireballs. These riders were Shalek's personal guard and followed him wherever he went, watching all the lands of the capital city below like hawks for even the most subtle sign of the approach of the Dark Lord's enemies. Had Sim or anyone else tried to even venture beyond the walls of the glass and metal capital city they would have been seen immediately. Then something terrible would have happened to them. They could have been attacked by the thousands of Dark Wizards, soldiers, Goblins or Serpent Men in the army, or could have even been gobbled up by one of the flying scorpions.

So even though Sim didn't know it the Great King had done him a wonderful thing by having the Diggers prepare tunnels for him to use to get inside the palace. Soon enough the Diggers had led Sim all the way to an upwards rising tunnel that went directly into the inside of Shalek's domain. It was a way in that no one knew about save the Diggers and it would let Sim get to the Phoenix Teardrop without even being seen by any of the armies or evil forces outside the palace.

Sim used his hands and feet to climb up the tunnel towards its top as the Diggers got a hold of tiny ropes no thicker than cotton to scale the tunnel walls for themselves. Once Sim was at the top the chief Digger turned to him and said, "You'll have to go the rest of the way alone. Our duty now lies on a different path to yours."

"What do you mean?" asked Sim, who was a little afraid of going on alone.

"The Great King has said that only you can go and get the sacred Teardrop," said the chief Digger. "We can only help in other ways. You will see what we mean soon enough." So the Diggers began to quickly burrow other paths out of the upwards rising tunnel, like moles tunnelling deep under ground. It looked very much like they were trying to spread their army across a great distance under the palace, but before Sim could figure out what they were doing one of the Diggers urged him to stop watching them and go into the palace. Eventually Sim did, climbing through the hole in the palace floor through the tunnel to find himself in a very dark room.

Sim made his Crest glow slightly again as he had done inside the Digger's cavern to give a little light to the darkness. Once he did he looked around to see that he was in some kind of storeroom. It was full of old scrolls, boxes, and crates full of things that seemed to have lost their use a long time ago. Sim curiously rummaged through a few boxes here and there and read some of the crumpled scrolls. He discovered that they were from ancient times, perhaps before Shalek the Gale had even decided to turn against the Great King and steal the Teardrop. The scrolls spoke in much

detail of the dangers of humans trying to use magic and warned that it was too wondrous for them not to be corrupted by it, though much of the text was too complicated for young Sim to understand. In the crates were many different and odd things like eagles feathers, broken pieces of crystals, and even old maps and drawings of places and people that Sim had never even heard of or seen before.

Sim soon stopped looking through all the things because he had managed to find the door out of the room by the little light he had made. But just before he was about to open the door something caught his eye in one of the last crates. It was an hourglass that was made from pure gold and had inside of it water instead of sand. Sim picked it up and studied it curiously for he had never seen an hourglass filled with water before. It was then that he noticed what was inscribed on the side of its casing - the words *the hand of the Great King controls all*. Sim didn't know why but something made him feel like he should take the hourglass with him, so he placed in his tunic pocket where he had kept his father's compass and then turned to the door and left the storeroom.

Sim slowly ventured into the outside corridors and found himself in part of the palace that greatly surprising. Unlike the rest of the capital or even what he had imagined the stately home of the Dark Lord of all Saruderos to look like this part of the palace that Sim stood in was old and dusty, damp and dark, with giant cobwebs formed all over its crumbling walls and faded carpets. It was as though this part of the palace had been forgotten long ago and left to rot. Sim didn't like being there one bit and hurried to find his

way to the grand stairway that was marked out for him on the map that the Great King had given to him. Soon Sim had to use his sword to cut through thick, sticky cobwebs to get to a large wooden door that was almost completely sealed with moss. But then suddenly a voice came out of nowhere and startled him. "You won't get through that way," it said with a cough. Sim leaped around to see who had spoken to him and that's when he saw a dim lantern on the side of the crumbling, cobweb covered wall. It had a face on it that came out of it like the faces that had come out of the stone sphere, but this face was kind and yet somewhat sad looking.

"Who are you?" asked Sim softly as he walked towards the face with a curious look in his eyes. The face coughed and spluttered as though it was difficult for it to speak but then soon answered.

"I am one of the old lanterns," it said in a whisper.

"An old lantern?" said Sim.

"Once there were many of us," answered the lantern. "We used to live in this place long ago before the Dark Lord came. But then he smashed down the old palace and built his new domain on top of it. This corridor and a few old rooms and I are all that is left of the former place now. Here we are lost and forgotten."

"I didn't know that there was anything here before the Dark Lord came," said Sim.

"Oh yes," said the lantern, "there was once a time when wondrous beings like lanterns and chariots and river spirits dwelt here. We were protected by the great Phoenixes and loved much the Great King. But then the war came and all the Phoenixes had to go off to fight in it. Once they were defeated the Dark Lord came to make his dwelling here and has ruled this place ever since."

"That's very sad," said Sim. "I am here to serve the Great King. I have come to reclaim the Phoenix Teardrop." As Sim said this the lantern's face lit up with glee and joy like it had not felt in over a thousand years.

"You mean this truly?" it asked excitedly.

"Why yes," said Sim. "I have both the signet ring of the Great King and his map to guide me to the Teardrop." Sim held out both for the lantern to see. Soon the lantern was crying with great happiness.

"This is a wonderful day indeed," it said. "Quickly, young one, you must hurry up to the palace and claim the Teardrop from its vessel of capture before the Dark Lord discovers you."

"Indeed," said Sim eagerly, "but the map says I am to go through to the Dark Lord's palace corridors by this door."

"I would dare to say that that door is sealed shut beyond repair," said the old lantern, "but if the Great King says that your path lies through it then do not hesitate to obey him." Sim nodded in agreement and turned to the door. He was about to try and heave it open in spite of the thick moss growing all

over it and the rust fusing its hinges when the old lantern spoke again.

“Remember, little one, that the Dark Lord is always watching the Teardrop. It is his most valuable weapon and he will not let it be taken easily. Use whatever gifts you possess to make sure that he cannot stop you from escaping with it.”

“I will,” said Sim, “and thank you.”

“There is no need for thanks,” said the lantern with glad eyes, “for you have brought great, joyous tidings to the ears of an old lantern that thought that hope’s candle had long ago blown out.” The lantern bowed its face in great thanks and honour to Sim and then watched him tug on the door handles with all his strength and actually heave the door open just a little. Sim smiled one last time and then squeezed through the tiny gap in the door that had opened for him. The gap would have been too small for anyone bigger than Sim to get through but being only eleven or twelve years old, and not very big for his age anyway, Sim had managed to pass through and was now stood in a very different part of the palace.

Sim looked around in amazement as he found himself inside a corridor that was dark with thick curtains and walls that were covered with what looked like dragon scales. The only light in the whole place was coming from very hot cauldrons filled with furious fires that were not the usual colour of red and orange but were green and black. Sim glanced behind him and noticed that the door that he had just come through was not even visible from this side of the corridor because of the dragon scales and how dark it was,

which is probably why the Saruderosi had no idea that there was even a door there. Sim quickly moved into the shadows just in case anyone was about and saw him come through anyway. Then he took out his map to find where he was. He couldn't quite believe that he was now so far into the inside of the palace that he was actually stood in the corridor leading directly to the Dark Lord Shalek's private chambers. Somehow the door from the old palace, which was all but buried and forgotten, that led into the new palace, which was the tallest structure in all the capital, had landed him right in the middle of the building and on its highest level. Sim thought this to be marvellous. Shalek had amassed hundreds of thousands of soldiers in huge armies to guard and protect himself and the Teardrop, his defences spanning for miles and miles across the capital city, and yet Sim, nothing more than a little boy, had done what had never been accomplished before and reached the very outside of the Dark Lord's own chambers by stepping through a forgotten doorway that was flights and flights of stairs away from where he was stood now. Sim was amazed at the wisdom of the Great King who had made all this happen, but kept his wits about him as he began to walk towards the large oval doors that formed the entrance to Shalek's chambers. Sim read on the map that behind these doors was the Phoenix Teardrop.

Soon Sim was at the door and saw that it was covered in jagged sharp pieces of metal, which stuck out like razors as if to stop anyone from opening the door itself. But the Great King had left instructions for Sim on the map and Sim followed them carefully. First of all he took some of the

shooting stardust from his satchel, as was written to do so on the map, and dusted the door with it. This seemed to make the razor sharp spikes on the door soften like when ice starts to melt, and soon they were all but running down the door like wet paint. Then Sim followed the next instruction which was to write something on the door with the quill that the Sky Star had given to him. Sim was astonished at how the Great King must have already known before he had even left the palace of Forria that he was going to receive all of these gifts, for the King had written the instructions on the map ahead of time. Still Sim forced himself to focus and copied down on the door what was written in the map. It said *all paths to and from the Phoenix Teardrop now serve the Great King and his chosen one*. Sim watched in awe as the writing sat on the door for a moment in its shimmering light and then began to seep into the wood of the door and all through the black, melted metal that was running down the door and along the corridor. Sim didn't know what all this meant but was greatly pleased when the doors decided to open up for him all by themselves.

The doors drew back with a low, rumbling, creaking sound that made even Sim's ears ring. He had been afraid that someone might hear it but no one seemed to. It was as though no one but the Dark Lord came to this part of the palace and the Dark Lord himself seemed to be nowhere to be found. So Sim quickly stepped through the doors and entered Shalek's chambers.

Inside was a fearsome sight. Shalek had walls covered in blood and scratches from giant claws. His curtains and bed linen were torn and ripped and there were scorch marks from fire all about the place. Scattered across

the vast reach of this chamber, which was more like a great hall than a bedroom, also where trophies from wars and battles including the swords of Shalek's enemies, the Crests of fallen and captured Bearers, the shields of warriors from Forria and other countries that long ago fell like Tibesia, Hanayro, and Gydesia, and a golden bow and arrow that belonged to one of the mightiest warriors from the ancient history of all the worlds. Still there were more swords of a different kind covered in smelly, black tar and an old, rotting, green liquid that looked like blood but must have come from some creature or being that Sim knew nothing of. What perhaps scared Sim the most was when he almost stood on the skull and bones of a bear that could have looked just like the forest bear Goad when it was alive. Sim soon realised that the Dark Lord had gather a great collection of bones and skulls from many creatures including unicorns and horses, tigers and wolves, fairies and golden eagles, and even humans. They lay about the place as though the Dark Lord regularly came here to smash them and throw them about in his rage. Still there were more bones from giant beasts like the flying leopards from Canatenail, a place far beyond Forria's southern sea, and ocean tigers from Innoa, a country west of Hanayro. Then Sim saw the largest of all the bones gathered in the Shalek's chambers. It was the skull of a Phoenix.

Sim felt nothing but fear and cold inside of him as he stood before these terrible things. So he quickly took out his map again and saw that it was pointing towards the end of the chamber, where there was a hanging curtain

of crimson silk that was the only curtain in the room that was not torn. Sim ran towards it but as he did something caught his eye.

In the corner of the room was a shiny mirror that was leaned up against one of the human skeletons from the collection. It had caught Sim's attention because something quite odd was coming out of it. It was making noises. Sim moved towards it cautiously and soon realised why. Inside the mirror were moving pictures and images that were blurred with fire. They were showing things that were happening in other places and soon Sim realised that he knew something about what was being shown to him through the mirror presently.

Through the fires in mirror came images of a familiar person that Sim had had the misfortune of meeting. In a pit of black smoke and molten lava the Dark Wizard, Inisha Merr, had been chained up and dangled over a vast fire. Sim was terribly afraid as he watched through the mirror Inisha Merr screaming and shouting in fear, pain, and anger all at the same time. He was saying things like 'mercy' and 'vengeance' but was then being dipped into the lava and quickly pulled out again. Sim knew that being burned like this was awfully horrific and couldn't watch anymore so turned away. He was shaken with fear still as he heard Inisha's screams and yells and then heard a voice talking back to him. It was saying things like "you will not fail me again" and 'a taste of my wrath will punish you for your defeat'. Sim dared not look back into the mirror again but knew that the Dark Wizard was being punished because of his failure to take the King's signet ring from Sim in Forria. Without the ring Sim would not have made it this far, and

Inisha Merr was to blame for that. Sim felt oddly sorry for the Wizard who was just a little younger than his own brother, Tinnoth. But he also knew that the Wizard was evil and that being evil always came with a price to pay.

Sim left the mirror and tried to forget what he had seen and heard, running quickly back towards the curtain where the map had told him to go. When he reached it he looked up and down it to find its drawstring. It didn't take him long to find it and soon he had it in his hands and was able to tug on it firmly to open back the veil. Suddenly glorious light filled the chamber as Sim stood looking at what was behind the curtain in astonishment. Upon a stone pedestal sat a glass sphere upon a plate made of diamonds. Inside the sphere floated a single teardrop of sparkling blue and red colours, and from it came all the heavenly light that now filled the room. It was the most beautiful thing that Sim had ever seen. It was even more beautiful than the Sky Star realm that Sim and Lente had climbed up to. Its radiance was like all the sun rises of the world at the same time, and the light felt warm. Sim was filled with wonder as he looked upon it, and for awhile that was all he could do. But then suddenly someone spoke from behind him. "So this is why *he* sent you!" it shouted viciously. Sim jumped around in a fright to realise that he was not alone. To his terror and trembling there stood behind him the Dark Lord of all Saruderos, Shalek the Gale.

Wreathed in Black Fire and red wind that seemed to pass through the walls of the chamber and of the palace, Shalek the Gale stood before Sim. He was a giant man with burning crimson eyes and completely white skin like

powder. He looked human and yet was not fully real, as though the wind had caught him and trapped him in the place that was in between what could be seen and what was invisible. He was burning as though stood in a pit of fire and yet was in no pain. The fire was coming from his soul and as he spoke furious heat came from out of his mouth.

“You dare to enter my domain?!” he bellowed in rage. Sim was shaken by the Dark Lord’s speech and soon stumbled backwards in fear. But something inside of him made him cling onto the King’s signet ring with all his might and as the Dark Lord tried to move towards Sim a force that Sim could not explain stopped him. “You will die for this!” the Dark Lord screamed. His voice was so loud and fearsome that the walls of the palace chamber were slashed and shattered as he yelled. Fire shot out from him and the winds surrounding and passing through him swept up like a tornado that tossed everything in the room, save Sim, the pedestal, and the seeing mirror, to and fro. “Get out!” he roared, “Get out!” But Sim was too afraid to try and run for the door which was now blocked off to him by the Dark Lord. He stepped back again and squeezed tighter on the King’s signet ring, but then something happened that he did not expect. From around Sim came another wind. It was a wind that he recognised. It was White Wind. It seemed to form a protective barrier about the boy that kept the storm being made by the Dark Lord at bay. Sim was astonished as the Dark Lord seemed get injured by this wind, as though someone was slicing and cutting at him with a blade. He staggered back in fury. Sim looked down at the

signet ring and that's when he realised that it was the Great King's power that was protecting him.

"The Great King is with me!" Sim said to himself in joy.

But Shalek the Gale roared again in anger and wrath, "You shall not escape my vengeance!" The Dark Lord raised his fire wreathed hands and lightning began to strike out at Sim, who cried out in fear. But the White Wind swept about to protect Sim and knock the lightning bolts aside and away from him. Sim had closed his eyes for his terror but now opened them again to see every attack of the Dark Lord being thwarted. Suddenly courage filled him and he realised what he needed to do.

Sim turned around and without hesitation stretched out his hand over the glass sphere containing the Phoenix Teardrop. "In the name and the authority of the one true Great King I reclaim you and return you to the lands of Forria," he shouted. Suddenly the Teardrop rose up from its diamond plate, while still inside the glass sphere, and shot into Sim's hand. As it did the Dark Lord screamed out as if in excruciating pain. Suddenly the walls and ceiling of the chamber completely crumbled away and their stones began to explode as if smashed with hammers and chisels. Sim turned around with the Phoenix Teardrop in his hand and looked at Shalek, who glared back in hate and fury. Just then the Dark Lord sent out flares of green and purple magic energy. They shot up and into the night air now that the walls and ceiling of his palace had fallen away. Every Saruderosi soldier and Dark Wizard in all the land saw the flares rise up and explode

like fireworks in the dark sky. Even the Sky Riders and their flying scorpions saw the signals and that's when Sim realised that the Dark Lord was calling all his armies to himself to stop him from escaping.

"You will die before I give up the Teardrop!" he hissed with a wicked glare. But Sim had a feeling inside of him that told him something different. He didn't know how but by some power he knew that he was about to escape. It was only seconds later that he heard the war cry of a familiar peoples.

"For the Great King and his chosen one," came their voices. Sim looked all around and saw that out of tunnels that spread across the whole of the capital city the Digger armies were coming. They ran out of the tunnels with mighty speed and even mightier courage and attacked the Dark Lord's armies. The Dark Lord could not believe his eyes as hundreds of thousands of tiny beings rushed at the thousands of strong men and warriors in service to him and overturned them in chaos. The Diggers were too small for them to even see in the dark and were too quick for them to defend themselves against. Sim watched as the Diggers attacked and killed a great many of Shalek's warriors in only seconds and sent the whole city into turmoil. At the sight of all this Shalek could only scream out in rage.

"You will pay for this!" he bellowed. He tried to rush at Sim but he was prevented again by the White Wind of the Great King. That's when the Sky Riders and their fireball spitting, flying scorpions began to dive down from their great heights to attack too. "Kill him! Kill him!" cried the Dark Lord maliciously. The Sky Riders were coming and as Sim looked up in fear they

swept down to gobble him up. But then Sim remembered the map that the Great King had given to him. He quickly took it out and read one of its last instructions. It said to take out the hourglass and turn it upside down. Sim remembered the tiny hourglass that he had felt compelled to keep earlier and quickly pulled it from his pocket and read its inscription.

“The hand of the Great King controls all,” he said. Then following the Great King’s orders Sim turned the hourglass upside down as quickly as he could and no sooner than it was down did something amazing happen. It was as if the hourglass could control time itself for the Sky Riders froze right where they were in mid flight in the sky. They did not move an inch and were all but motionless in the air above the palace. Sim looked at them in bewilderment and then looked at the Dark Lord who watched in vile anger. The Great King was with Sim and Shalek knew it. He looked at Sim and had never before wanted to kill anyone more than now. His rage had boiled over and could not be contained. He started to grow in size as his flames made him bigger and his winds rushed about in a storm that grew larger and larger, filling the air with thick, black smoke, gleaming, green fire, and powerful bolts of lightning.

Shalek the Gale was about to strike with all the power that he had, and something inside Sim told him that he shouldn’t just stand there and wait for the White Wind to defend him again. Knowing that it was time for him to leave Sim quickly dashed forwards towards the Dark Lord, who was more wind-like than solid now. He clutched the King’s signet ring as tightly as he could again and in a flash of light he had run straight through the Gale. Sim

glanced back once in astonishment and realised that Shalek had not been able to stop him from running to the chamber doors.

“No!” screamed Shalek as he watched the chamber doors open obediently for Sim and let him out. Sim rushed from the Dark Lord’s chamber and down the corridor but as he did he saw that the Diggers had not just marched to war against the Saruderosi army. They had marched against the palace itself. As soon as the Diggers saw Sim running out of the chamber they started to stab with spears at the palace floor above the roofing of the tunnels that they had dug. This made the tunnels collapse in on themselves and soon all the palace foundations had begun to crumble into the deep cavern under ground. Sim was very scared as he ran north along the palace corridor and the rest of the building about him fell into a deep chasm. But his fear was misplaced for even while trying to escape the Dark Lord and all his armies were caught up and fell downwards into the gulf along with all the walls and stone bricks of the palace, and yet Sim’s path of escape remained intact.

“Run all the way to end of the corridor,” said a Digger as Sim passed by. Some of the Diggers had still been fighting the Dark Lord’s armies as the tunnels collapsed and the palace fell in on itself, but once everything had begun falling into the gulf the Dark Lord’s armies had started to tumble in as well. Now the Diggers were retreating into tunnels that were too small for Sim to run through too. These tunnels would take the Digger armies to safety but they wanted to make sure that Sim escaped safely with the Teardrop first. Sim did as he was told and reached the end of the corridor.

Then he met someone whom he had not expected to encounter but was very glad to see. It was the King's eagle, Ginnil Eli, flying besides him.

"Come, Sim Saule, quickly!" he commanded. Sim ran to him and soon the eagle grasped the small boy in his claws without hurting him but still holding onto him tightly and launched into flight. Ginnil Eli carried Sim high into the sky and away from the palace as the whole building fell down into the gulf and dust, smoke, and fire began to shoot out from the chasm like lava from an erupting volcano, filling the sky with hot and fearsome colours.

"Now is the time to turn the hourglass back to its upright place," said the eagle. Sim quickly obeyed and turned the hourglass back upright and put it back in his pocket. The inside waters went back to resting at the bottom of the hourglass and as Sim turned back to look the Sky Riders stopped being frozen in time and plummeted straight down into the gulf along with the Dark Lord, the palace and all its armies.

"We have succeeded!" cried Sim in a joyful voice as Ginnil Eli sped him over the capital city and back towards the distant north where the Sea Wall stood. "Thanks be to the Great King, we have succeeded!"

"Yes, Sim, by the power of the Great King your mission is accomplished," said the eagle gladly. "A great victory has been won this day," he added in a voice that showed just how very proud he was of both Sim and the Great King.

Soon Ginnil Eli had landed Sim by the Sea Wall, though Sim had not known how the eagle was so able to speed him such a great distance so quickly.

Sim found his feet as the eagle placed him down on the shiny sand and was overjoyed to see Lente, Goad, and Helper all waiting for him by the rising ocean. He ran over to them and hugged both Lente and Goad, though he thought it best just to bow respectfully to Helper, who was presently in the form of a man. All three were very pleased to see him and soon he was telling them all about the Teardrop and how the White Wind powers of the Great King had helped him to recover it. Sim showed them all the Teardrop and both Lente and Goad were amazed. Then Helper told Sim to keep the Teardrop as safe as he could until he handed it back to the Great King. Sim agreed and placed its glass sphere container inside a new sheaf that Lente weaved for him out of shooting stardust. Then Helper said that it was time for him to leave and before Sim or anyone else could even ask why or say goodbye he had turned back into a squirrel and vanished. Ginnil Eli said that this was the way of those who are sent by the Great High King of all and that Sim shouldn't worry for they might see Helper again someday. Sim and the others were comforted by this.

Then Ginnil Eli said that they should hurry back through the Sea Wall before the Dark Lord and his armies found their way out of the gulf that they had fallen into. He warned Sim that the gulf led to the same place where the freed Crest Bearers had thrown the deceiving serpent, the Vayso, and that it would only hold the Dark Lord and his minions all for a little while. This made Sim and Lente feel angry because they had wanted the war to be over straightaway. But Goad thought differently. "Do not be angry because of this," he said wisely. "The Great King sent you on a mission to recover

the Phoenix Teardrop. If he had meant for you to slay all his enemies and end the war he would have charged you with that task but he did not. I am sure that he has a plan to end the war soon. We should all trust him to do this as he knows best for he is the Great King.”

“You speak the truth,” said Ginnil Eli. He knew that the King would end the war and save all Forria by his own plans and that just like Goad had said they should all trust in the King. So Sim and Lente decided that they would and let the matter rest. The Ginnil Eli said goodbye to them and flew off towards the east.

“I think he must have duties to still fulfil in this land,” said Goad.

“Maybe he’s going to help the Diggers who still live here or the old lantern that you spoke of,” suggested Lente, “or perhaps he intends to guide the Crest Bearers who we helped to free home.” Whatever the reason Sim and the others all knew that just as it was with Helper they would someday see the majestic eagle again. And so they turned away from the shadowy skies of Saruderos and passed back through the Sea Wall by the curtain like opening that they came through earlier. In even fewer steps than it had taken them to get to Saruderos did they arrive back in the serene and precious land of Forria, which was a sight for sore eyes compared to that dark place called Saruderos.

A few days later Sim, Lente, and Goad met Temeb Rauna, Chesta Gi, and the Crest Bearer battalion that had been fighting in the south. News of Sim’s victory had already spread far and wide across Forria and celebrations were

taking place everywhere. When the Crest Bearers had finished hugging Sim, Lente, and Goad and thanking them for their bravery Temeb took Sim aside to talk with him alone. "Now I know I have been harsh on you, Sim Saule," he said firmly, "but I want you to know now that I am very pleased with what you have done for the land of Forria and for its Great King," he explained. "You have made us all very proud this day."

"Thank you, Master Temeb," said Sim humbly, "but it was not I that did all these things. Were it not for the help of many friends and the authority and power of the Great King I would certainly have failed."

Temeb looked at Sim and smiled for the first time in many days. "I know now why the Great King chose you for this task. In humble spirit you have served him well," he said. He placed his hand on Sim's shoulder proudly and then turned to leave with his army. There were still battles to fight even if the enemies of Forria had been weakened by the reclaiming of the Teardrop.

A great many days later Sim and Lente said goodbye to Goad as they passed through one of the forests near the Stone Mountain on their way home. Goad had been told by Temeb that the Sky Star, Dekianna Mal Tei Su, had need of him as she walked the earth, and that Goad would be helping her with something very important deep inside the Tarury and Pito forests. Goad was glad to have been summoned to such an important work, even if he didn't know what it was yet, and said a fond farewell to his new

found friends. Sim and Lente were sad to see him leave them but happy that his great wisdom was going to be used for good elsewhere.

And so Sim and Lente journeyed the rest of the way back to Forria's capital alone. They had much to talk about as they went, from all the different wonders that they had seen on their journey to all the wonderful friends they had met and all the fearsome enemies they had faced. Sim even had enough courage to tell Lente what had become of the Dark Wizard, Inisha Merr, though Lente thought something like that might have become the Wizard's fate as soon as he escaped the battle on the hills.

Sim and Lente arrived at the palace in Parr Serenity exactly fifteen and a half weeks after Sim had first left. They entered the palace by royal decree and were astonished by the amount of people who had gathered to see them return, though most were not Crest Bearers and couldn't actually see Lente. Humans and animals, mystical creatures and even legendary ones, and beasts of the field and of the sea had all assembled outside of the palace to see Sim return the Phoenix Teardrop to the Great King. It was going to be a very momentous day.

Sim had been dressed in a special Crest Bearer's outfit of the finest silk and patterned materials for the occasion, and Lente had been given a special ring that he could wear for it was partly real and partly spirit-like. Then they were called before the King and entered his main audience hall in the presence of hundreds. "Come forth," said the noble voice of someone whom Sim and Lente had great reverent respect for. It was the voice of the Crest

Bearer Grand Master, Cythor Eruuke. He was a powerful presence with an aged yet strong face. He stood at least seven feet off the ground and had strapped around his right hand the world's only Crystal Crest. He was the oldest and the wisest of all the Crest Bearers and was the most powerful warrior in service to the Great King. Both Sim and Lente had only ever had the privilege of meeting him once before. They were honoured to see him again. "Behold," he announced to all who were gathered, "the Crest Bearer and his Guide who have served the Great King with honour and in victory." There was great applause for Sim and Lente by the many who were gathered to see them. Then when the praise settled down Grand Master Eruuke turned around and faced the throne. It was only then that Sim and Lente realised that the Great King was sitting upon his marble seat smiling down at them. After a moment he spoke softly.

"I called you to a purpose of perilous danger," he said, "and you have returned to me victorious. For this I am well pleased." There was another moment of clapping and cheering and then Lente looked at Sim to let him know that it was time to do what they had been practicing earlier. Sim took a deep breath for he was a little nervous. Then he did as they had rehearsed and stepped forwards with the glass sphere containing the Phoenix Teardrop in both hands. He also held the King's signet ring in his hands too. After a few more steps Sim was at the foot of the throne and carefully placed the glass sphere and the signet ring down at the feet of the King.

"The trophy for which you sent me, the triumph which I have won, and the authority by which the task has been championed, I place down at your feet, your majesty," said Sim quietly. "That which is yours has now been returned to you." The Great King looked at Sim and smiled with joy. Then he took his hand placed it on Sim's head as if to honour him.

"You have done a great thing, Sim Saule," said the King. "Thank you for your courageous service. For it I shall give you a reward." The King opened out his hands and the signet ring and Phoenix Teardrop glass sphere rose up to him by a soft wind that was under his control. They settled in the palms of his hands gently, the signet ring in his right and the glass sphere in his left. Then the King handed the signet ring back to Sim, who could not believe his eyes as he received it in his little hands. "May my authority and dominion be with you all the days of your life," said the King. He was very pleased with Sim and Sim could not have received a more honourable gift.

Sim hurried back to his place next to Lente who smile at him with more zeal than ever before. It might have been unrehearsed and a little out of place considering the ceremony but Lente could not contain his joy and threw his arms around Sim to embrace him. "I'm so pleased to be your Guide!" he exclaimed. Sim was greatly honoured by this but was also a little embarrassed for he was in the presence of both Grand Master Eruuke and the Great King. Also most of those gathered for the ceremony couldn't actually see Lente, which meant that all they could see was Sim looking a bit weird while embracing nothing but air. So Lente let him go and Sim

quickly tidied his clothes. But the Great King was smiling for Lente's joy was shared by all who were present, including him.

After a moment the Great King stood up, the Teardrop firmly within his hands. "These times have been dark," he said in a voice loud enough for all to hear. "Trouble had laid siege to the lands of Forria like the coming of dusk and the setting of the eternal sun. But now dawn is approaching again. The Phoenix Teardrop has been returned to its rightful place. Long ago did I bestow this gift upon the lands of Forria. It was shed in grief by the last of a great race meant to defend mankind, but I turned it into a symbol of hope. It was like the light that comes from the sun, for what purpose is there for a sun unless it gives light. But the treachery of Saruderos stole it that the Dark Ones might profit from its powers. It made their armies strong and gave them wisdom and learning that they should never have possessed. It increased the scale of their war one hundredfold and brought fire to the shores of every land. But now that treachery has been overturned."

The King held out the Phoenix Teardrop for everyone to see and it glistened brightly. "Now I shall bless all the lands of Forria with the grace and wonder of the Teardrop once more," he said joyously. "It is a symbol of how sacrifice became strength. Now let Forria be strong again." As the Great King said this he lifted up the glass sphere and made its light spread all over Forria. Wondrous colours more vibrant than the tones of a rainbow burst from the sphere, and the brilliance and glory of the Teardrop spread all across the land. It made the skies bluer than ever before, the grass

greener, the clouds whiter, and the air fresher. It graced the people of Forria, making them healthier and stronger. All sickness and weariness was healed. Old scars were made to vanish and fresh wounds were sealed up and made whole. Tears from sorrow were dried and fears and terrors were quenched. Courage was restored and swords and spears were made shiny again, their rusty and dull metals erased and made new and gleaming. The Crest Bearers' Crests began to glow and White Wind swept all around them and their Guides. Even Sim and Lente were wrapped up in the breezes and filled with more boldness and strength than they had ever felt before. All across the land there was a peace that brought rest to the mind and joy to the heart.

Then the glory of the Teardrop also went into all the different animals of the land and made them look more noble and royal than ever before. Those with fur coats saw that their coats were made thicker and glossier, while those with horns saw that their horns were now sharper and stronger. Those with scales became shinier and those with wings flew higher, and all across the different animals there was gladness. Then the glory came upon the mystical and legendary creatures and beings of the land and added to them more wonder than they had ever had before. Their magical energies shone brighter and their mystical nature grew more awesome. The unicorn's horns began to shine while the golden eagles' feathers glistened. The fairies began to sing and make magic dust that sparkled while the oceans were filled with mermaids and watery creatures that danced and sang praises.

Soon all of Forria was filled with singing and dancing as a new sun rose and added more light to the land and the Great King was adored for his goodness and his wisdom. This day would be known as the greatest day in the history of all Forria, for it was the day when the land was made whole again. And as the ceremony ended and the rejoicing and joyful festivals to celebrate the victory began the Great King stepped off of his throne and took Sim by the hand to show him someone that he had missed greatly. There amongst all the jubilant people and creatures stood a knight - Sim's older brother, Tinnoth Rihn. He had come back from fighting in the wars overseas to join in the celebrations and see his brother once more. "Tinnoth!" Sim exclaimed in abundant delight. He ran to his dearest brother and embraced him tightly. "I have missed you."

"I have missed you too," said Tinnoth while shedding a tear or two in gladness. "I am so proud of you, Sim," he said gleefully, "and I know our father would have been proud too."

The End.

THE PHOENIX TEARDROP

In the world of Forria, a place of wonder and amazement, a young boy finds himself on a mission of perilous danger. Sim Saule is a Crest Bearer, yielding a mighty power that was destined to defend peace and serenity in all Forria. But in these times there is much trouble for a great conflict where a war between the lands of Forria and its cruel enemies rages and all hope of victory seems to be fading. But the Great King of all Forria has called young Sim and his Crest Guide Lente on a mission that will turn the tide of the battle. Long ago the teardrop of the last ever Phoenix was stolen from Forria by the Dark Lord of Saruderos, Shalek the Gale. The Great King's mission for Sim is to travel to the dangerous world of Saruderos and take back the Phoenix Teardrop. It may be the only to turn the tide of the war and restore peace to Forria.

A novel by Jonathan Emanuel

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The logo features the name 'Emanuel' in a white, cursive, handwritten-style font. The letters are slightly blurred and have a soft glow, giving it a sense of movement or light. The signature is set against a dark, textured background that looks like a night sky with faint clouds.