

The White Shadow Saga:
The Stolen Moon of Londor
Book I of III

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For my wife: my muse and my love.

The Stolen Moon of Londor



Chapter One: A Troubled World

In the dawn of Londor's greatest tragedy, the elf-mercenary, Gildan, sat near his campfire--pondering the fate of the world. The summer night was bitter, yet calm in this mysterious time. Gildan was accompanied closely by two fellow elves, Faragen and Telsar, as they rested uncomfortably underneath a large oak tree before their soldiers of the Obinoth Kingdom. The elves took refuge from their travels at the edge of the Plains of Erogd, a place which was all too familiar to them.

Many other campfires laid a short distance behind Gildan and the two Obinoth officers as the mercenary granted the soldiers under his authority short respite after two strenuous days of marching back into the west. Soft songs and inaudible conversations hazed the night air.

Gildan looked over to the trunk of the tree where the famed wizard, Randor Miithra, rested peacefully, sitting propped up with his wide-brimmed hat of blue felt covering his face. His cloak lay motionless in the weak breeze from the vast fields. Gildan smiled slightly as he brushed his tall, green hair back, forever grateful to the wizard's role in the recent victory of the mercenary and the elves of Obinoth.

As Gildan led the remainder of his army towards the Obinoth Kingdom, his thoughts were consumed with many items of business--with no apparent answers thus far.

"Is there anything either of us can do for you, sir?" Telsar asked.

"No," Gildan replied, looking at Telsar, a sturdy young elf, who reminded Gildan of himself in his younger days. "Just try and rest. We will be on the move again shortly."

Telsar nodded and shifted his silver armor before leaning back on his elbows. "I hope Obinoth is safe. I have much to attend to once we are returned."

"As do I," said Gildan. "Though I will no longer be able to assist you or your king, my future days are now certain to be full of work from those wishing to solve this mystery."

"Indeed, sir."

Gildan laid back in the soft grass and looked into the heavens. The memories of the recent night of catastrophe charged to the forefront of his mind, and he embraced the details of his victory, once again.

* * *

Two nights ago, Gildan and his elf-knights drew up at the edge of a dark, wooded valley--once again on the heels of the Obinoth's ancient foes. The twin moons rode high in the clear night sky, casting muted double shadows beneath the trees. For forty miles the army had crossed the Plains of Erogd, a region once known for its placid rivers and lush fields. But now the beauty of this land was tainted, its rivers polluted with blood and its fields heaped with the bodies of the slain enemy. None of the Obinoth had ever traveled this far east, and now fatigue weighed heavier on them even more than their pierced and dented armor.

Gildan paced alone before the awaiting ranks, his finely crafted, short yellow cape billowing in the constant breeze. The cape was the only personal clothing effect he kept with him, leaving his usual wardrobe of extravagant jackets, pants, and boots behind. These were set aside for uniformity of Obinoth's black clothing and silver armor, not very pleasing to Gildan's taste. His green eyes scanned the valley below, seeking out his next move, as his fingers tapped the silver buckle on his precious leather belt.

Telsar and Faragen approached quietly and stood at attention.

"We await your command, Gildan," said Faragen.

Gildan turned, looking beyond them to the gathered troops, seeing the fading morale written on every face. "We need to end this tonight," he said at last. "Send a small squad of scouts to get the lay of the land. I do not know much about this place. Have them search out the Rhingar forces, but tread with caution--the scouts must not be seen."

"Yes, sir," replied Faragen.

"Report to me once the sweep is complete." Gildan paused. "Now I must speak with our advisor."

The two lieutenants saluted and returned to the ranks.

As Gildan strode to the boulder at the dark valley's edge, he looked uneasily up at the mountains that surrounded the small valley on three sides.

For centuries the Rhingar had attempted to overthrow their neighboring country, the Obinoth Kingdom, yet had never been successful. The Rhingar wished nothing more than to seize the Obinoth capitol, Handefel, and destroy it--for it was in Handefel that the founding fathers of the Rhingar Kingdom perished during the Dark War. For the past eighty years the Rhingar burdened the Obinoth, bent on vengeance for the spirits of their ancient heroes.

For months on end both armies waged war at the edges of the Obinoth Kingdom until, at last, the Obinoth drove their enemies outside its borders. Yet they pursued the Rhingar into the east with orders from their king to eliminate them--no matter the distance traveled. The Obinoth were determined more than ever to convey to the Rhingar that they would never yield to them.

There, standing alone upon one of the many boulders and puffing a long-stemmed pipe, was Randor Miithra, the eldest servant of the elven god, Ethindar. Randor, as he was simply called, was invested with all the magic and arcane wisdom of his famed order of wizards. He stood tall, shrouded in his deep-blue cloak, uncowed by the continuous battles and lack of rest. Though he had seen eight thousand winters, he looked like a human of thirty. His face was shadowed from the moonlight by his ever-present hat.

This campaign was not the first encounter for Gildan and Randor, befriending one another many decades ago. Gildan always welcomed the opportunity to fight alongside his oldest friend and closest confidant.

Gildan stepped up onto the boulder and held silent.

"I see you have finally sent scouts about the perimeter, my old friend."

"Indeed. You have tracked the Rhingar for me across Erogd, but I will let these elves survey this instance," Gildan replied. "But...what do you make of this, Randor?"

"That is a good question," the wizard replied. He slid his dark-tinted spectacles up his narrow nose and puffed again at his pipe. "Do you know where you find yourself?" Randor grinned slightly.

"No. I have traveled far and wide, but this place has no particular memory for me."

"Before you lies the Valley of Siln."

"Siln," whispered Gildan. "What can you tell me of this place?"

"A featureless, barren place, with neither inhabitants nor wildlife--unless you love the company of scorpions." Randor paused to savor the pipe's comforting taste. "Only one road leads into and out of the valley..." Gildan turned his head and looked at the

wizard. "This lonesome road is the one that you and the Obinoth now control."

"Are you certain of this?"

"Although many years have passed since last I was here, I doubt anyone has altered this land."

Before the elf-mercenary could reply, Randor raised his hand and added, "I cannot be certain of their strategy here, but nevertheless, we must not falter now. You hold the advantage, Gildan, and you must keep it this time. I grow weary of all this cat-and-mouse."

"Trust me, Randor, when I say that I will hold true to my vow and see this to its end. The Rhingar are fools, and we shall slaughter every foul one of them. Besides, the gold I was paid is wearing thin to my terms of this job." Gildan scanned the forest, looking for some clue to evil's whereabouts. Even aided by the light of the two moons, his green eyes picked up nothing helpful. "They are unpredictable this night," the elf observed. "Not one campfire, nor a single piercing shriek. Yes, the Rhingar are behaving most strangely."

Randor nodded. "If there is anyone in this world I believe in, it is you, good elf. I believe you are capable."

Gildan turned away and stared at the valley below. "The day is not yet won."

"Right you are, my friend," Randor answered as he laid his hand on the mercenary's leather shoulder guard. "One step at a time."

Some time later the ten scouts from the north and ten from the south arrived and knelt before the large rock, removing their dark cloaks and revealing their silver armor, which shimmered in the moonglow. Gildan and Randor came down from the boulder together, and as soon as Gildan's feet touched the grass, his sternness returned. "Report."

"We found no trace of the Rhingar," one scout answered. "No other roads lead into the valley, and on the mountains the paths were impassable. We could observe no movement within the valley."

Gildan's youthful face darkened at the unwelcome news. "Fall back into formation," he commanded, exasperated. As his scouts retired, he clenched his fists. *Dare we march into Siln blind? I dislike such uncertainty*, he thought.

"What is your plan, then, Gildan?" Randor asked as he tamped a few more wisps of tobacco into his pipe.

"The key to this battle is the road," Gildan began. "If we secure that, our enemy will not escape us again. Two hundred and fifty will be sufficient to secure the road, and the rest will follow you and me into Siln." Gildan raised his tired eyes to the heavens. "We move by stealth, under moonlight. I believe that our position and numbers are still unknown to the Rhingar." He sighed.

"I sense fear within Siln," Randor said reassuringly. "The time has come for the assault."

"Right away." Gildan strode to the center of the front rank. "*Ne lui len!*" At the sound of these words, Telsar and Faragen came forth from the ranks and faced their respective companies. "*Tenu mon-tros*," shouted Gildan, and the Obinoth came to attention as one. Being that Gildan was well-traveled, he continued to speak in the Obinoth native tongue, relaying orders that would be given on the march and thereafter.

Randor inspected the battalion from where he stood, and was pleased. Praying silently for the elves' courage and composure to hold true, he watched the elf-mercenary

shift his gaze across the ranks of soldiers and knew Gildan's speech held more.

"The darkness hides our enemy well," Gildan observed. "Are you ready for this, Randor?"

The wizard nodded. "You shall see powers of mine that you, nor any Obinoth has yet seen in this campaign. And even so, it shall be but a small taste of my true magical abilities."

Gildan looked at him, perplexed, knowing that Randor Miithra employed magic only in the gravest of circumstances. "Are you feeling well?" Gildan asked.

"Never better."

"Then why...?"

"Do not question it, my friend. The time has come for a different strategy on my part. There are others in the world who need my help. The Battle of Siln will be my conclusion with the Obinoth." He paused, letting Gildan absorb the gravity of his statement. "Take that however you like."

Randor looked to Gildan, who was obviously curious about where this was going. "I doubt that my full strength will be called upon, but what I have planned is wonderful, indeed. I advise you, however, not to place yourself in harm's way once the conjuring begins."

Gildan nodded and felt at ease. "Once this is over, Randor, we will both bask in the glory of victory. You above all have my greatest trust and undying aid. If you are ever in need of any ally, do not disregard my words."

Lowering his head to hide any emotion, Randor replied, "I pray the day does not come when I need the aid of those I am meant to protect." He placed an arm on Gildan's shoulder. "I do honor your pledge, and shall accept if necessary." Randor looked into the clear heavens and sighed. "After all, no one is invincible."

"And yet what you do is phenomenal," Gildan replied. "Your strength and wisdom have carried you through the ages. You have protected elves and the lesser for more than eight thousand years." Gildan brandished at last his beloved sword, Marghelor, from its sheath. The blade was double-edged and extraordinarily long, just over forty inches of devastating steel.

The wizard looked suddenly tired. "I am grateful for each new day I am given to assist the progression of this world. This is as it should be."

Behind the two leaders stood the battalion, armed and ready for the night's engagement. Randor was clearly done with speaking and uttered these last words: "Let us hasten into Siln."

"*Orig-nah!*" Gildan yelled proudly as he pointed his sword ahead, the blade gleaming slightly in the moonlight.

Randor extinguished his pipe and tucked it into his cloak as the Obinoth began to march in perfect form, with the wizard and their mercenary leader forging the way.

Telsar remained at the edge of the valley with two companies of soldiers to safeguard the path, ready to fend against the Rhingar if they meant to sneak past the Obinoth that marched into the valley. Telsar and his companions watched their brethren advance toward the inevitable conflict.

* * *

The entrance to the valley was a steep and fairly smooth decline, save the deep footprints of the Rhingar that scarred the earth. Almost without sound the elven troops

progressed down into the beginnings of the valley.

At the base of the long path flowed a wide river. Fortunately for Randor and his followers, though, it was shallow and easily forded. No sign came of the Rhingar's whereabouts as the Obinoth emerged on the far bank. Randor felt the hearts of the elves falter, and he lovingly embraced their fear, knowing that fear drove the will of the strong. In all his years of service, Randor had seen this emotion elevate those in power many times. But in all this time, he had never experienced fear of his own. He often wondered if Ethindar voided this feeling from his existence.

Staring at the tall line of trees before him, Randor noticed that the forest felt suddenly very forbidding and that the trees appeared mutilated--something he had not seen before in this region. The trunks were gray and knotted and appeared weak and pithy. *What magic has come into being within Siln?* he wondered.

The narrow path into the dark forest forked in five directions just inside the canopy. All about the forest floor laid thorny vines, mounds of dirt covered in moss, and large piles of rotted trees entangled in wretchedness. Gildan knew that he must divide his army once again. Seeking no counsel, he spoke, "*Min gaist-thos. Fui len nah.*" Acknowledging the command, Faragen took two-hundred and fifty more men from the corps--Gildan weighing this squadron heavier since they would not have the benefit of Randor's presence.

The wizard caught a movement to his left as the group of elves marched cautiously through the woods. The wind had grown warmer and stronger, as if warning its newest guests to retreat from the forest's brooding presence. Randor advanced through the crying gale and clenched his cloak tighter to his chest. The leafy canopy hung low over the paths, and he thought it odd to see them so long and already black even now, in midsummer.

Gildan scanned beneath the trees, hoping to glimpse some sign of the Rhingar, to hear some careless sound that might lead him to them. Columns of moonlight managing to break through the thick canopy were all around. All was quiet, and only the shallow breathing of the Obinoth could be heard. Each set of eyes looked around uneasily, anticipating the unseen Rhingar.

Wanting desperately, but foolishly, to scream and thus draw his enemies forth, Gildan sniffed the blustering wind for a scent but detected nothing. He looked to Randor, hoping that he knew the true way, but the wizard trod on ahead, apparently oblivious to the elf's silent plea for wisdom. Gildan caught up to Randor with four quick strides, clutching his sword tighter. The Rhingar were well known for their cunning ways of concealment, and after three years of hard work Gildan was not about to fall victim to their wiles now.

A long, eerie shriek rang through the forest, jolting every Obinoth soldier into full alert. Gildan glanced over his shoulder and observed the structure of his battalion.

As Gildan turned back to the path before him, the Rhingar sprang from the darkness on all sides, each armed with a dark blade, almost unseen in the moonlight. The Rhingar were built in similar fashion like the Obinoth, their complexions were as gray as the armor they wore. Unearthly cries of war erupted from every dark tongue as their yellowed eyes focused on vengeance. It reminded Gildan of the war's beginning, when the Rhingar flooded the borders of Obinoth and his excitement rose as the enemy raced ahead; in mere seconds the Rhingar would be within blade's range. Shouts from the

Obinoth rang out, mostly commands to the various units to hold their tight formation together.

The fear was palpable among Gildan's army, and their swords shook like leaves of the forest as the screaming Rhingar advanced. The enemy trampled up bits of moss, which dislodged from the earth only to be caught up by the wind. Randor and Gildan moved apart, leaving enough space between them that they might fight without endangering each other. No sooner had they done so, a swarm of Rhingar made haste toward Gildan and encircled him. But suddenly Randor threw back his cloak, exposing his steady hands, his only weapons. Though he now felt numb with fatigue, he knew that the magic, once summoned, would flow regardless. Time was of the essence now, however, and only short-versed spells would be practical.

The Obinoth troops behind the two leaders were engaged in pitched battle, with the Rhingar so far unable to break their formation. Swords met, and the sparks from clashing steel flickered like falling stars through the heavens. The Obinoth were surrounded; no longer could Randor or Gildan see what was happening to the Obinoth army not too far away. Twenty foes rushed toward Gildan, and as the first sword stroke came, his senses triggered a parry. He didn't have the chance now to thank himself for his gifts. Raising his sword, he was ready for the next two Rhingar to reach him, and deflected every slash and thrust perfectly with over embellished style. All his energies channeled to the task at hand as the emotion of battle consumed him.

Randor, entrapped now, stretched out his left hand; it swayed gracefully before the Rhingar that challenged him. His enemies shifted slowly around him, pointing their sharp blades inward, yet hesitant, for the dark elves knew who Randor was and dared not attack in frivolous haste. Randor preferred not to use his magic this early on, nor did he wish to destroy the forest with spells of fire and luminosity, the most potent short spells he had at hand. The illumination spells would do minimal damage, blinding the Rhingar at best, but the fire would ignite the wood, and the winds would only spread its rage. No, he would hold the magic in reserve for as long as the Obinoth could withstand the enemy on their own.

Then, in the blink of an eye, four Rhingar charged Randor with swords aimed at his chest. With little effort, Randor sidestepped and ducked as one blade swiped the air mere inches above his head, whistling in the night air. Pivoting, he landed a back kick in the attacker's ribs, knocking the dark elf to the forest floor. The remaining three came within arm's reach, and Randor's hands moved with blinding speed, punching, grabbing, and ripping. Blood flowed from his staggering opponents, and within seconds the last one fell.

Gauging his position, he saw that the Rhingar had opted to attack Gildan, deeming him easier prey than the wizard. The Rhingar neither saw nor heard Randor coming, and when they finally detected his presence, it was far too late.

"*Nara tihra!*" he shouted, thrusting his arm forward, and a bright flash of green light shone throughout Gildan's encircling foes. Eight Rhingar were launched violently upward and away into the night, their mutilated bodies landing a dozen yards away. Gildan was now freed on one side, and Randor grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him outward. The two stayed close as Gildan regained his breath.

"What are you doing?" asked the elf.

"Strengthening your offensive," Randor replied. "The Obinoth need you."

Gildan looked up and saw that he and the wizard were free of immediate threat, though the Obinoth were slowly beginning to crumble. The once solid formation was now scattered, and guidance was lost. Their advantage was diminishing. Cries came from both armies, chilling the very spine of the world.

"Stand aside." Randor raised his arms. "I need you to protect this perimeter while I conjure a spell. Can you do this for me?"

"Consider it done," Gildan replied, bringing his sword up with a wicked smile.

The relentless battle raged on a mere hundred yards from them. If the Obinoth were to have victory, it must come soon. Randor suddenly saw a weak point in the Rhingar's attack. To the wizard's left, a large cluster of the enemy tarried, not helping to contain the Obinoth.

Sidestepping, Gildan took place beside the wizard and suddenly felt the air around him grow cold as the spell began.

"*Nara eth sohn barad lei nus ten aoen*," Randor murmured, clasping his hands together. Beams of red light blazed out from the cracks between his palms and fingers and shot high into the canopy of dark leaves. The bright color bathed Randor's face and reflected off his dark spectacles.

Blades of both Obinoth and Rhingar drowned in the blood of their antagonists as elves from both armies were shoved, stabbed, cleaved, and thrown. The smell of death thickened the night air all around them as all lives hung in the balance of war.

Though the spell was short in verse, the potency of this particular magic took time to establish. Unbeknownst to Gildan, the time to release the magic drew closer. He desired more than anything to rush to the aid the soldiers, for the mood that possessed him made him believe he could destroy the entire Rhingar horde by his hands alone. And yet, dangerous magic was afoot, and he dare not cross its intended path.

Randor's body was scorching, burning from within. His hands blazed with an unearthly fire. With a flick of the wrists, a blinding red light arced outward. A hundred shards of steel streaked from his palms through the night, piercing a hundred Rhingar as if their armor were paper. The reddish glow faded as the screams of the dying echoed through the forest.

"Charge, Gildan!" Randor cried as he charged away to the clash, no longer careful of where he trod. Randor had been silent for too long; now the battle would go to the bold.

As Gildan raised his blade and charged, Randor let out a vicious cry and drew back his hand to let fly with another spell. "*Nara dheigen*!" yelled the wizard, sending dozens of burning white rays toward his enemies. As the light coursed through the air, each Rhingar it touched fell convulsing on the blood and gore of the forest floor, purged of life. In this way Randor slaughtered the enemy, dozens at a time, eventually allowing the Obinoth to advance.

The spirit of the Obinoth grew strong once more as the Rhingar retreated into the darkness ahead. Cheers flowed from the mouths of the Obinoth as they marched over the mounds of fallen enemies. Randor knew that the fleeing dark elves hastened to rejoin the last of their kindred northward--the direction also of the detached company of Obinoth. With the forest around Gildan now cleared, the sounds of battle faded. He rallied his army so as not to lose their prey again in this mysterious valley. His sights still lay to the north, for their war was not yet completed.

"You honor me with your bravery!" Gildan proclaimed, to which the soldiers responded with a loud war cry, making him feel exultant. A tear of pure emotion trailed down his pale face, and raising his sword, he yelled, "*Tu trose!*"

"*Tu trose!*" the Obinoth returned in the universal cry that meant, "Elves, to the death!"

"*Tu trose*, indeed," added Randor with a nod. The wizard offered no other words of celebration, knowing that the reaction was premature, for the enemy still lived, and those many Obinoth of the detached companies were not yet victorious. "Come, my friends!" he shouted. "We are needed ahead!"

"*Orig-nah!*" commanded Gildan, and the Obinoth marched through the darkness in haste. Randor resumed his place leading the elves. Fate, he knew, ultimately claimed whatever it longed for, and at this moment no one knew what or whom it stalked.

* * *

The Rhingar escaped to the north at a fast pace, though they were beset with fatigue. Gildan and Randor commanded the pursuit, encountering obstacles of fallen trees and murky water every step of the trek. The moonlight was dimmer now as the Obinoth pressed through the heart of the forest.

Gildan paused and listened. In the distance, sounds of war cries and the clanging of swords urged his troops forth.

"We're close," Gildan whispered.

"Yes," replied Randor. "It will not be long now."

"Then let us charge with full speed."

"So be it," Randor said simply.

Gildan peered over his shoulder and extended his sword. Through the rare columns of moonlight, the Obinoth hastened into the unknown forest. Randor did not try to keep up--the battle belonged to the elves now--though he would remain close by to grant secondary aid if necessary. The wind stung the elves' eyes but did nothing to daunt their inspiration. Their ears rang with the sounds of battle as they raced toward a clash that they could not see very well. Their sight grew dimmer and darker as prayers sprang like fountains, all asking for light to grace the path ahead.

Randor softly uttered a spell, and to the Obinoth's surprise, a shimmering comet of silver light arced through the air above Gildan's head and beyond. Randor's unexpected aid struck the Obinoth with dismay, however, for they could see the battle as plain as day before them. Rhingar filled their sight, with no Obinoth soldier to be seen.

One last row of tall trees barred Gildan and his followers from the skirmish. Rushing through the forest, the elf-mercenary led them into the Rhingar's midst, and before the dark elves knew what was upon them, Obinoth blades struck, killing many. The Rhingar were bombarded, and the last remnants of discipline they possessed melted away. Gildan sought out his companions as he hacked down one enemy after another. All that he found, however, were more Rhingar to meet his sword, bejeweled with dark blood. Bodies of the enemy tumbled all around him.

Randor was left in solitude at the edge of his gracious light. Pausing in his advance, he crossed his arms and watched over his allies. To the wizard's satisfaction, the Obinoth pressed farther north, with not one of Gildan's soldiers falling to the dark swords. The Rhingar were soon surrounded, and the Obinoth companies were reunited.

Gildan smiled, prouder than ever to see his battalion together again. Free from

danger for an instant, he shouted, "*Tu trose!*"

At long last, Randor sensed the battle drawing to its end, and he calmly approached as the final shrieks of agony from the enemy faded. The Rhingar were defeated at last. The elves of Obinoth were burdened no more, and celebration began at once. Randor took out his tobacco pipe and lit it with great satisfaction.

Gildan drew away from his army, and smiling toward Randor, said, "Come. Share in the victory."

"I am not one given to partake in such festivities. This night is yours to rejoice in, for it was you and the elves that brought victory."

Faragen came forth from the crowd and fell to one knee, lowering his head humbly, and the rest of the Obinoth followed suit--except Gildan who knew better from past adventures with Randor. "Your wisdom and strength will endure through the ages within our people's songs and stories, Great Servant."

"Rise, Lieutenant Faragen," Randor said, uncomfortable with any form of adoration. He placed his hands on the elf's shoulders and brought him to his feet. "Do not kneel before me, but rather give your thanks to Ethindar alone. I cannot bless you or your kind as he can. Praise Ethindar for the mana from the moons, giving your kindred and the rest of the world their strengths."

Faragen nodded and, turning, motioned for the army to rise. "What is your next command, Gildan?" Faragen asked.

"Search for the wounded first." He paused, and knew his next words would not be pleasant for the Obinoth to hear. "Then I want you to bury the slain in this forest. Collect all their personal items, for these shall be returned to their proper places in your kingdom."

"It shall be done."

Faragen took sole command of the army and led them southward, leaving Randor and Gildan behind.

"I will require an exact count of those alive," Gildan said.

"All in good time," replied Randor. As they strode into the thick of the forest, the magic light dimmed and then was no more.

"I have to admit that I can no longer remember the reason for this war's beginning," Gildan confided in Randor. "My memory has been altered by the constant change of conflicting feelings." He laughed quietly. "I almost forget how much gold the Obinoth king gave me, but I am not that far gone yet."

"The Rhingar may not be prepared to strike again soon," Randor said, "but I am sure another force will greet the Obinoth in the future."

"If I catch wind of an uprising, I may consider aiding the good people of Obinoth again--if the price is in my favor." He wiped his blade clean with a small white cloth and sheathed it.

Their pace slackened as they drew closer to the Obinoth, who were already at work over their fallen brave, using small spades and hatchets to dig beneath the forest floor.

A group of soldiers searched the forest for survivors, and when Faragen appeared from behind a great beech tree, his expression unclear, Gildan and Randor greeted the elf kindly.

"What tidings do you bring?" Gildan asked.

"Sixty-three have been returned to us, sir, only a few of them seriously afflicted. This raises the count of Obinoth within the forest to three-hundred and twelve."

"Thank you," replied Gildan, and Faragen saluted, proceeding with his duties.

Randor studied the heavens, deep in thought. "The dawn approaches. We must be away with the sun."

"Their labors here will be complete before then," Gildan assured him.

"Sixteen days shall it be before we see the border of the Obinoth kingdom. It will be a wondrous sight, Gildan."

"I can already smell the gold set aside for me."

* * *

The two were standing alongside the grave, which was six feet deep and stretched ninety feet in length. The slain elves were laid inside with great reverence. Swords and jewelry were removed and stored on the path leading out of the forest. Randor propped his back against a tree and looked into his tobacco pouch, noticing that it was almost empty. It would be five days before they reached a decent city.

Finished at last with the burial, the elves filled the grave with dirt and tamped and smoothed the earth. The sounds of labor ceased, and Gildan turned to the soldiers. Without uttering a word, the battalion came to attention and awaited command.

"Those bound to the possessions of the dead do so as we move out. We take the high pass and rest upon the Plains of Erogd tonight. At sunrise we make haste to Obinoth." Gildan's speech was drowned by a deafening cry of happiness from his elves. Raising his hand, he brought silence back to the forest. "I am honored to stand before you as your leader. You ennoble my existence." He smiled, looked to Randor, and turned back to his elves. "So, come. Let us march, my friends."

Gildan pointed to the west, and the army set off. Seventy elves remained behind and secured the belongings of the dead to their persons, each latching three or four swords to his belt and tucking jewelry into side pouches.

Only Gildan and Randor stood reflecting in the forest. Randor stood upright and dusted off his cloak. "Come ahead, my good elf," Randor said, beckoning.

* * *

Free at last of the darkened forest, Randor and Gildan followed the path under the shining heavens, listening to the sweet sound of the battalion's voices raised in cheer. The warriors had already crossed the river and were gathered with the company that had been left to guard the passage. With no reason now to remain vigilant, all were in the valley for celebration. The news of battle's end had been told, and praise was given to the two leaders as they approached the opposite bank. Swords were raised high into the night sky. Taking the lead, Randor directed Gildan to the water's edge. Gildan relaxed and let the soft breeze cool his sweaty face as he gazed blankly toward the high pass. Slowly his strength was returning to him.

Randor's eyes were drawn to the stilled water as he looked at the twin moons' reflection there. He took one step into the river; then something stopped him. A powerful sense of befuddlement filled him as he watched the moonlight on the ripples. Many ripples spilled over one another, distorting the once perfect mirroring of the moons as Randor watched in horror, feeling confused and yet powerless to find any resolution to this sudden, strange feeling. He tried to shift his sight, but a greater power locked his eyes to the celestial forms in the water. When the ripples ceased, only one moon's reflection

remained.

"My vision falters," he whispered. And slowly he raised his head and stared at the sky, saying, "This must be a nightmare." But much though as he wanted it to be, it was not. Only one moon now shone down on Londor. "Gildan!" he gasped.

The elf broke free of his stupor and noticed Randor's weakened state. "What happened, Randor?" he asked in panic. Rushing to the wizard's side, he caught him just before he fell.

"Look into the heavens, I ask."

Gildan looked upward in confusion and soon saw the source of Randor's fright: the moon, Beldas, was *gone*. He blinked his eyes rapidly, trying to refocus, but when he looked again, he still saw the empty spot in the heavens. "But how...?" He looked to Randor. "Did you see what occurred?"

"I--I do not know," was his pain-filled response. "I watched it vanish in the water's reflection."

"Did magic cause this?" Gildan grew cold, and his fear began to creep into his soul. "Did it disintegrate? Did it fall into the Black Void?"

Randor did not reply, and the Obinoth around Gildan did not see what had occurred either to Randor or to the moon. Gildan lifted the wizard higher and placed his arm under Randor's, aiding him across the river. The elves, concerned for Randor, followed the two leaders across unbidden. Telsar and Faragen strode through the water and were at Gildan's side, aiding him to the best of their ability. As they reached the western bank of the river, Randor dropped in a swoon. His pipe broke free from his trembling lips, and his hat was caught away by the wind and skipped end-over-end across the river cobbles. Randor clasped his hand over his chest, feeling a sudden, growing pain, as Gildan hovered at his side and tried to keep him awake. The rest of the Obinoth, now aware of the moon's strange disappearance, looked about themselves in shock and began to wail in anguish at the world's unthinkable loss.

Gildan, sobbing now, knew not what to do. His body gave way to shivering, and his mind reeled with dizziness. No wizard, and least of all Randor, ever fell in sickness.

Gildan and the two lieutenants knelt around the motionless Randor, dumbfounded; the three elves could only exchange worried glances. Gildan removed the sweaty strands of hair from Randor's quickly paling face.

"Is he dead?" Telsar asked.

Gildan pressed his fingers to Randor's neck and felt about. "I do not feel the blood pulsing through his veins." For the first time in his life it became difficult for him to speak. "Let it be said that he passed after Beldas, leaving a void here on earth to match that left in heaven."

It was a tragedy beyond all knowing, for the elves depended utterly on the formation of the heavens. The moons, Beldas and Cadmor, were the source of all mana bestowed on the race. The balance, not only of the elves but also of the entire world, was controlled by these two celestial beings. And since Randor Miithra and the rest of his order were directly connected to Londor's spirit, the sudden misconfiguration of the moons would affect all their existence. All of Randor's strength, magic, and well-being lay solely with heaven's gracious mana. The idea of Londor's only source of power vanishing was unfathomable.

What could possibly do this? Gildan asked himself. What could subject the world

to such ultimate downfall? Gildan staggered, grieving, to his feet. *We are doomed for certain.*

"What shall we do?" asked Faragen.

"We must turn to the Council now. Only they can help. Surely the Great Tree still houses their wisdom in spite of everything." Gildan turned back to Randor. "Help me carry him out of this accursed place." The two officers aided Gildan in lifting Randor up onto their shoulders. He lay heavy in their damp and shaking hands, but their will was strong.

The climb was slow and arduous, and now the only concerns were the moon and Randor, the flush of victory over the Rhingar already a distant memory. The steep road now lay behind them as they drew level with the high pass. "Careful," he ordered. "Make way..." The Obinoth kept their distance from the three bearers as they advanced to the front. "Right over there." A blanket from a nearby soldier was placed on the ground as Gildan let go of Randor's body.

Not willing to endure further torment, Gildan took leave of the others and approached the boulder where he and Randor had stood earlier that same night. The Obinoth army stayed at Randor's side, grieving.

What could have been done to prevent this? Gildan pondered. *Could the Council not foresee this before it happened?* He crossed his arms and paced aimlessly about, blocking out his surroundings as he continued to beat his soul with questions he could never answer. Telsar and Faragen approached unnoticed and stood at attention. Gildan glared over his shoulder and returned to his inner quandary.

"Do you want us to set camp here tonight, sir?" Telsar asked.

Gildan nodded slowly. "Try and get as much rest as possible, for we must be in haste for Obinoth. There is no doubt you and your soldiers are needed there. I have business someplace else--yet where is still not known to me. I have the feeling someone will need my help."

"Yes, sir," Telsar responded, quickly returning to the collection of the army.

"Do we take Randor to Obinoth or to Mudalfaen?" Faragen asked.

"Neither, my friend," Gildan answered. "There were some caverns to the west within Erogd. In three days time we will place his body in a cave and cover its entrance. Randor dearly loved Londor--so we shall give him the world as his tomb. He would have wanted it this way."

"As you wish," Faragen said.

Gildan returned his gaze to the troubled heavens and sighed. The wind changed direction and grew bitterly cold and the temperature plummeted. It was strange to feel this, especially in midst summer. "This is, indeed, Londor's greatest downfall," Gildan whispered.

Chapter Two: A Troubled City

Two miserable months had passed since the vanishing of the moon, Beldas, and with each new sunrise Londor fell ever closer to ruin. Not even the wisest could see the terrible ending of the world, nor even how much longer life would carry on. Though the races of men and dwarvenkind did not physically feel the oncoming downfall, the world around them was slipping away nonetheless. Wizards of all races lost most of their abilities, so that even the simplest of spells were all but impossible to conjure.

Both the Vinar elves, the most common elves in the world of Londor, and high elves felt the absence of mana and were forced to endure continuous pain and sadness day in and day out, and though the Council of Mudalfaen was painfully aware of the world's troubles, not even their collective wisdom could make a whit of difference for the many allies in their care. Shortly after the disappearance of Beldas, all communication among the Mudalfaen alliances ceased as every kingdom sealed off its borders and remained in a state of high alert at all times. Those who wandered the lands found themselves subject to arrest and persecution, particularly at night when the true chaos of weather and sorrow came. Everyone was now suspect in the moon's disappearance--the greatest tragedy in Londor's history. Every soldier, knight, and wizard labored days and nights on end to protect the world around them, and kings, queens, princelings, and high councils throughout the land made every effort to keep their citizens at home during this time of crisis, allowing no one to leave without strict approval.

The elven valley of Dunane saw the collapse soonest. Though the days still graced them with mostly pleasant weather, come nightfall, dark clouds swept in just after sunset. The gloomy formations hung low, accompanied by frigid winds and dense fog. On many nights, great storms beat down on the valley as thunder and lightning cracked overhead.

Dunane's capital, Norganas, was held prisoner to nature, and all hope lay out of reach. Each night was anticipated with dread.

In the city's chief observation tower, rising above the southern wall, two elf-knights stood watch on the top level. It was from this high structure of white stone that they kept watch over the vast forest to the south, as far as elven eyes could see. The two pulled their newly acquired cloaks closer to their bodies, huddling close together to keep warm, but it was of little good. Rain poured down in great sheets, and cracks of lightning lit the landscape as if it were day, and whenever the rain let up, dark fog enveloped the entire valley. The constant winds from the south, undeterred by the forest, howled through the city and swept over the Mondranos Mountains to the north and west.

A sudden blast of wind knifed through the narrow opening of the watchtower, stinging the two elves' pale faces.

"I swear, Captain Fenrahn, if this weather persists, it will be the end of me!" young Etrigos cried. He clenched his chattering teeth and gazed out at the bleak world around him. "I honestly cannot tell you how many nights it has been the same."

"Fourteen," Fenrahn replied mildly. "Fourteen straight, to be exact." He remained at the opening as Etrigos retreated to the center of the circular room and stationed himself by the hole in the wooden floor, where a ladder led down to the many levels below.

"We need furs for this climate."

"And where do you expect King Zelok to obtain these?" asked Fenrahn. "I can tell you we have none in storage."

"But these cloaks are useless!" Etrigos moaned.

"We'll all just have to make do."

"I'd much rather be inside, sitting next to a roaring fire alongside my brothers. I wager they are feasting as usual on this evil evening."

"Just as the rest of the valley feasts within the warmth of their homes."

"I envy them, Captain."

Fenrahn sighed but did not move from the observation portal. "Our duty will be done with the coming of the sun."

"Still, I do not understand why you, sir, are made to stand watch over the city--you rank above us all."

"I don't wish to be locked away in the palace, dealing with parchments and politics." Fenrahn turned and, with a tired smile, said, "I take this time to train my knights and pass along my teachings firsthand."

"When I am made Captain of the Order," Etrigos began with his head held high, "I will gladly stay inside the palace." He laughed, but Fenrahn was not amused. He cleared his throat. "Sorry, sir."

Fenrahn shook his head and returned his gaze to the forest. "You have much to learn."

Etrigos gathered his frozen courage and approached the window. The captain stood three inches taller than he, though both were of the same build and wore precisely the same attire: the brown jacket of the knights of Dunane, with brown trousers tucked into knee-high leather boots. Both elves wore their hair tied back in ponytails, Etrigos having silvery hair while Fenrahn's was that of gold. The cloaks were the newest addition to their wardrobe, so that nothing distinguished Fenrahn from the rest of his order save the silver tassel that hung on his chest, denoting his rank.

"I am surprised by this dangerous situation," Etrigos said, "that King Zelok has not authorized us to arm ourselves with swords or spears."

"I believe that our master remains of a mind with his ancestors. Our people have not known conflict for eighty years. After the Great War, that was the end of our struggles." Fenrahn considered himself blessed not to have experienced that dark time. "But rest assured, Etrigos, we have weaponry if the occasion calls for it."

Fenrahn closed his eyes and leaned against the stone wall. Above his head blazed one of the four torches mounted in the stones, lighting the room but dimly. The captain appreciated the warmth of the fire, and it relaxed him for the moment. "Mudalfaen has ensured our peace for the past eight decades." He paused. "I only wish some of our allies could share in Dunane's harmony. Many are still afflicted by petty skirmishes. Alas, those who once knew peace now share the same problems as those who knew it not. All of Mudalfaen's allies are falling victim to the same downfall. Peace has escaped us."

"I still hold on to faith," said Etrigos. "We shall be saved."

The young elf's spirit seemed to help Fenrahn keep what little hope he had left. "I can tell you this," Fenrahn replied. "When we received word of Randor Miithra's death, Dunane fell into great despair. Many say that if a Randor could not endure this unbalance, what hope do elves possess?"

"That was a tragic day, Captain. Though I never saw the Great Servant, I have heard the countless stories of his deeds and shall miss him nonetheless."

"So shall we all, my friend....His legend will carry on." Fenrahn drew in a deep

breath of cold air.

It was clear to Etrigos that the captain was not well, and naturally, Etrigos felt concerned for his beloved officer.

"Are you hungry, sir?"

"No," replied Fenrahn softly. "I have lost my appetite, I am afraid. No longer can I enjoy the foods provided to us."

"Can I get you some wine, perhaps? Maybe that will help."

"No, Etrigos." He looked over to the worried elf and gave a faint smile. "If you need food or drink, please feel free to take a short leave."

"What of the watch?"

"What of it?"

"I fear to leave, in case something should happen..."

"I doubt anything will occur in your short absence." Fenrahn laughed quietly. "I even doubt anything will occur this night, or the next."

"We can never be too certain."

"Right you are, but those who travel under nightfall are quickly seized now. Every kingdom is overprotected. I believe we are safe in this high state of alert."

"I pray you are right."

"You were inquiring about food, were you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, off you go, then."

Etrigos saluted and said, "Right away, Captain." He was newly invested in knighthood and not yet comfortable with rest and respite. Fenrahn shook his head and gestured for the knight to leave.

"See you shortly."

Before Etrigos set off, some impulse turned his eyes to the ground before the forest. Slowly his view scrolled up the dirt path that connected Norganas to the forest. Up the hill his silver eyes traveled as the cold air stung him. As fate would have it, a bright blue flash of lightning banished the darkness. "Captain!" Etrigos yelled.

Fenrahn bolted upright. "What is it?"

"There are riders on the road, sir!"

"Impossible." Fenrahn did not accept what he heard. He thought the elements present played with the young knight's mind.

"No, sir! I saw two on horseback, just outside the forest!"

"One would have to be mad to ride in this weather." Fenrahn moved the shaking Etrigos from the window and stared into the darkness. "I see nothing."

"My eyes do not deceive me, Captain....At least, I hope they do not."

"Incoming?"

"Yes. They ride for the city."

"Only two, you say?"

"Thus far. But there could be hundreds out there--or even thousands in our forest."

"Do not let your mind run away, Etrigos."

"I cannot help it, sir."

"Were the riders of elvenkind?"

"They were concealed by cloaks...I could not see their faces." Etrigos pulled on

Fenrahn's clothing in desperation. "We must inform the palace at once!"

"Not just yet," Fenrahn replied as he trained his eyes on the unlit path. "We could be imprisoned and stripped of rank if we give false alarm. I do not know about you, my friend, but I value my placing in Dunane."

"As do I, Captain."

"Then we must be patient."

"Patience is something I have yet to learn."

"Then let tonight be your lesson."

Another great flash of blue revealed the road once more, and now Fenrahn could see the two riders, paused on the path, their intentions unknown. "There, you see?" Etrigos breathed.

"Yes, Etrigos. Quite right you are." The captain turned away from the window and said softly, "Keep close watch on their actions."

Etrigos nodded and obeyed, leaving Fenrahn to debate with himself what to do. Only he and Etrigos knew of this potential threat. "From what I saw," Fenrahn began, "one was tall and slender and the other was shorter in stature...perhaps humans."

"I could not tell, honestly," Etrigos offered. All thought of nourishment was gone, and nothing could peel his eyes away from the ground below. The forest was a little more than a mile away from Norganas, up a steep hill. It put the riders too close to home for Etrigos's liking. In a chain of brief flashes of lightning, Etrigos noticed movement from one of the riders. "Captain, one has drawn a blade!"

Do they mean to attack us? Fenrahn asked himself. *What purpose do they have for Dunane?*

"What shall we do, sir?"

"We await their next movement."

* * *

The journey through the immense forest was not an easy task for the two riders. Their mission was all haste, and secrecy was of the essence in this, their fifth straight day of hard riding. As they had drawn ever nearer to Dunane from the southwest, nightfall became worse with each sunset. Clouds darker than the heavens loomed low, and rain beat down heavily on their cloaks. Both worried of being captured by the kingdoms they rode through. The cruel elements of nature held Dunane captive, making the valley's forest a nightmare for maneuvering. And not just the weather barred the way, but also many fallen trees and mighty boulders that lay as if scattered by some giant hand.

Neither rider had ventured into this elven realm before, and no real plan had been formulated for reaching their destination slower than they expected. Just when the lead horseman thought the worst was behind them, the paths grew more twisted than ever, making speed impossible. Trusting his rattled senses, the leader eventually headed up a steep and narrow road.

At last they were free of the dark and difficult forest; Norganas was in sight. A grand line of mountains rose high above the city and stretched beyond the horizon to the east and west. Few lights shone from the city, other than those in the many towers that rose high above the walls. Because they were unexpected, the two riders knew full well that by approaching the city they could send the elven military into action. Scanning the valley below, the leader could see only one path leading to Norganas, down one final hill. Perhaps there was a chance they could enter without detection.

The lead rider, the taller of the two, glanced over to his companion. The smaller rider looked up and nodded as he shook out his drenched cloak of blue. The leader pointed to the city ahead, as the wind howled at them and thunder banged overhead.

The leader thrust his hand down to his saddle and gripped the hilt of his sword. Drawing it, he held the blade before his face. The double-edged blade, though it had passed through many generations, showed no sign of its age. Just then, a long series of lightning flashes illuminated the land, its blue light reflecting off the blade and into the leader's eyes.

A frigid gust blasted the two weary travelers, cutting through their sodden cloaks and chilling them to the bone. Both sat as if frozen in their saddles, dreading to move toward the city but craving its shelter even more. As much as the leader desired to bear on into Norganas with full speed, he knew that the time was not right.

"I never even had the opportunity to say farewell to my family," Etrigos said as he paced the floor in anguish. Captain Fenrahn still had not given the command on their next action, and this only heightened Etrigos's anxiety. How he hated uncertainty. "Our city could fall tonight; we may not see another sunrise!"

"Calm down," Fenrahn said. "I will inform the palace of what we have seen."

"What would you ask of me, sir?"

"You know of the alarm horn in each tower?"

Etrigos nodded. "I have been told of them before. Never have I seen one, though."

"Yes," Fenrahn replied. "This is because we have stowed them away in ignorance. There hasn't been a need for them until now. The one we possess in this tower is on the floor below us."

"But where, sir?" Etrigos asked. "There are so many boxes and chests stored there."

"I do not know. Now, go in haste and find it, my young elf. I need this from you."

"Yes, Captain." Etrigos saluted and scurried down the ladder.

On the floor below, a single torch dimly lit the wooden crates and various-sized chests that lay stacked against the walls. In his haste, Etrigos missed the last rung and fell hard onto the wood floor. A cloud of dust rose up, and through his own coughing he heard Fenrahn call out, "Are you all right down there?"

"Yes," Etrigos replied. "All is well." Sitting up, he shifted to his knees and scanned the room with blurred vision. There was no clear choice where to begin. After studying the situation, he said to himself, *I'll wager none of these chests have seen an elf's hand in a good while*. Deciding on the nearest chest, he prayed that fortune was on his side. It was a small, red chest, completely caked by dust. A brass lock hung open in the latch. Removing it, he opened the lid and was met with the familiar scent of incense.

He wondered how the essence could hold its richness after all this time. The sweet smell reminded him of the wondrous festivals in the forest, feasts in the palace, and the warmer days of the valley. In this dreamlike moment he forgot all his troubles and let his soul sink deep into the past. Unbidden, the present situation crept through his dream, returning his thoughts to the chest before him. Staring back at his widened eyes were rich fabrics, smaller wooden boxes, and cloudy glass flasks filled with bluish liquid. The contents had no particular arrangement, and Etrigos saw nothing resembling a horn. Rummaging carefully through the chest so as not to break the flasks, he placed the stacks

of cloth on the floor. The glass clanged softly together as he reached to the bottom of the chest.

There in the far corner, he saw an oblong shape wrapped in an old, dingy cloth. He grasped it without much thought, peeled back the cloth, and saw that it was indeed a bull's horn of red with a white mouthpiece. Smiling, Etrigos admired its beauty, then stood and tucked the horn into his belt.

"Etrigos? What say you?" Fenrahn's concerned voice called out.

"I have the horn, sir!" he answered triumphantly.

"Excellent work."

Etrigos began to climb the ladder, making sure his grip was stronger than before. It was not long before he was at Fenrahn's side once more by the window. He took the horn from his belt and presented it to the captain, who grasped the horn and inspected its condition. Though it had lain unused for many decades, it looked as if it had been crafted only yesterday.

Etrigos beamed. "This instrument has been preserved well. I hope its inner workings hold true as the outside has."

"As do I."

Fenrahn looked at the shiny horn one last time and handed it back to Etrigos. "Sound the alarm."

With a nod, the elf-knight approached the northern window. The palace lay sparsely lit, as if the majority within were sleeping. He hoped the horn's note would reach those inside, despite the wind and thunder. Slowly he raised it to his chapped lips as Fenrahn looked on. Turning back to the window, Etrigos took in a deep breath and sounded the horn.

A long, deep note poured forth from the watchtower, piercing the sounds of the gale. At once, more lamps and torches sprang alight throughout the palace. The alarm had been heard. Relieved, Etrigos lowered the horn.

"Well?" Fenrahn inquired. "What occurred?"

"Our call was received." Etrigos's heart pounded as he leaned on the wall to calm his nerves. He hugged the horn close to his body and sighed. "Thank Ethindar."

Fenrahn looked closely to the path below and noticed that the riders were gone, but then he caught the barest glimpse of them as they rode into the city. "And so they come," he spoke.

"How many?"

"Just the two."

"I pray the army is on its way."

"I assure you," Fenrahn replied confidently, "the enemy will not get far inside the city."

* * *

The lead rider lifted the sagging hood of his cloak. There seemed to be no break in the storm; it would remain on them until they took refuge in the city. The palace was their objective, but access would no doubt prove difficult. He looked over his shoulder to his companion. But as he glanced into the forest, a loud noise came from Norganas, spurring him to new haste. Without warning or thought, he thrust his sword forward. Digging his boot heels into his horse's side, he surged ahead and barreled down the path, his companion scrambling to catch up.

The wind hit them, driving rain into their eyes, as they raced across uneven ground strewn with puddles and stones. Drawing closer to the ungated, arched entryway to Norganas, they could see that it was unmanned. The leader scanned the city walls and the surrounding area for any who might wish to obstruct them, for he expected to be greeted, especially now that a horn had been sounded.

At last down the hill, they now charged through a broad pool of gray water. The leader leaned forward and urged his steed ahead. Through the stinging rain they saw a red stone street just beyond the entrance. The leader smiled, his cloak flailing wildly behind him, its hem tattered by the relentless winds.

Passing through the gate, the two were sheltered from the rain for a moment, then met it once more as their horses galloped ahead on the cobblestones. They were now on the main road of Norganas. The street was lined with long, low houses of red and brown. Multistoried buildings rose on each corner of the intersections they passed. The leader glanced around for signs of life, but only the two riders moved in the city. Every home and merchant shop remained unlit as the palace came into view in the distance. Only there could the riders see any signs of habitation. The leader prayed that the lights in the palace towers were not of his doing, for at the palace there would be soldiers--hundreds of them. He and his companion would soon be heavily outnumbered by the Dunane, who no doubt anticipated a massive attack on their kingdom. Little did the Dunane know that on this night only two came into their presence.

A large bend in the road veered away from the palace, but the leader had no choice but to remain on the road, for fear of becoming lost once again. The structures of Norganas began to thin out as they pressed on until they found themselves in the deserted marketplace. Hundreds of wooden carts, covered by thick canvas, filled the open space and crammed every alleyway. Not one sound pierced Norganas now save the staccato of galloping hooves.

The way ahead was the leader's main concern, and the potential threat of elven assailants. An attack was inevitable; the only question was when. Surely the elves of Dunane would come to defend their city. Perhaps, though, the alarm was unknown to the citizens, since their way of life had been unthreatened for so long.

The riders had to reach the palace before they could be intercepted. Soon they passed through the marketplace, and the road curved back toward the palace, much to the leader's relief. As they again saw the mighty towers, the road steepened.

From behind, another deep note of the horn bellowed out, this time with greater urgency. The riders ignored the elves' signals and rode on; the palace was almost in reach. They spied the grand entrance as the road leveled off. A pair of red doors twenty feet high appeared to be the only way inside. No decorations adorned the dark stones of the palace; not one banner hung from the turrets. The doors were plain in craft, without trim, each having but a single silver ring to serve as a handle.

Coming to the palace doors, the two reined in. Slowly the leader dismounted, his heavy boots splashing in the water. He grasped his sword and held it before him, praying that the doors would not burst open with a host of armed elves to greet him. His companion could still flee, but for him, at least, a safe exit was not to be had. The leader wanted to charge the doors and fling them open, for the incessant downpour was driving him mad.

His frightened companion looked around for the elves, but still the city remained

quiet. To the pair's left was a stable connected to the palace; it stood open and dark. The mounted rider then dismissed his surroundings and turned his focus back to his friend, who was reaching for one of the silver rings at the doors. Biting down on his lower lip, the leader hoped for the best. Surely, he thought, the Dunane would lock the doors to their palace, but nevertheless, he had to take the chance. He regretted now that they had not taken time to make a secondary plan. Originally, the two were to arrive in daylight, but the nightly appearance of storms had delayed them until now. If the doors were locked, he would be at a loss, with no ally within fifty miles of Dunane.

Gently he pulled the ring, but the door would not budge. With a stronger grip, he tugged again--but still the door did not move. He released the ring back to its resting place with a clank.

He had resheathed his blade and grabbed the reins once more, when his companion pointed to the stable. Entering the gloomy structure, they were relieved finally to find respite from the storm. The still-mounted rider strayed to the left while the leader searched in the opposite direction. On the stable's plain wooden walls hung the many tools of the blacksmith's trade: various hammers, rods, tongs, and hooks. The ground was covered with brown straw. Keeping out the wind and rain was a roof of clay tiles, supported by wooden posts spaced some ten feet apart. Both men looked around for any discarded food or bottles of drink but found nothing.

At last the leader found a small fire pit in the stable's floor. Leaving his horse's side, he approached the long and twirling wisp of smoke that rose from the embers. As he came closer, he welcomed the warmth. Kneeling beside the coals, he warmed his numbed hands. He took in a deep breath and closed his heavy eyelids for a moment. The need for food, rest, and warmth had made him all but delirious. Opening his eyes, he realized there was a bucket beside the fire. A smile swept across his face as he grasped it and drank a portion of the cooled liquid. It wasn't much, but it filled a bit of the void in his belly. "At least some fortune is on our side," he whispered, and he pulled back his hood and shook the thick blond hair that lay matted against his forehead. "Lorn, come and join me, will you?" He looked over to find his friend still struggling to free his frozen feet from the stirrups. "What's the matter, old friend?"

"I cannot get down," he mumbled. "I could use some help, Seth."

Seth rose with the bucket, laughing quietly. "Is my horse unsuited for you?"

"Indeed it is," the smaller rider answered. "I am a dwarf, after all. I don't see why you couldn't have allowed me to use my pony."

"A pony would not have been suited for this type of journey. This is a matter of speed, not comfort."

"What are we doing here anyway? Why do we seek these elves in the midst of a storm?" Lorn scratched his forehead, admitting, "I cannot exactly remember what you told me. My memory has been acting strange lately."

"I bear a letter to the King of Dunane." Seth looked to the street for any sign of threat as he handed the bucket to Lorn and began to work the dwarf's boots free. "The rest of the water is yours if you want it."

The dwarf gratefully drank the water, then threw the bucket to the stable floor and wiped his dark beard. "Letter? What's this letter about?"

"It is from the Council," he answered. "I cannot say more on the matter."

"Mudalfaen, huh?"

"My highest calling, yes."

"And they did not give you the details of this letter you've risked your life to deliver?"

"No," Seth replied, "though even if they had offered me explanation, I would have closed my ears. If I do not know of a letter's contents, it will not affect my duty of delivery. You know how clumsy I can be when I am nervous."

"All too well."

"Truly, it is not my place to know until the letter is in the hands of the recipient."

"I wouldn't go into something like this blind."

"Not knowing is less a burden."

"Maybe so." Lorn threw back his drenched hood and ran his stubby fingers through his dark, shoulder-length hair. He was thick but short in stature, standing an entire foot below the slender-built Seth who was just above six feet tall. "Where do we go now?"

"I didn't plan this far in advance, I'm afraid. The weather has ruined any hurried plans I could make. I can tell you, though, we probably will not be safe anywhere in Dunane tonight."

"We should be exempt from danger, correct?"

"Dunane is an ally of Mudalfaen. This should guarantee our safety." Seth knew all the Council's guidelines, laws, and allies by memory. His training, however, made him rethink his logic. "There is a possibility that I am wrong."

Lorn did not like that comment at all. He had placed his complete trust in Seth; already the dwarf was scared. "What do you mean? Friends do not attack friends."

"The past two months could have turned Dunane's thinking to not accept anyone from beyond their borders. There is a chance of that." Seth tapped the silver badge on his chest, bearing the Great Tree of Mudalfaen. "This badge has allowed me to move freely within the Council's lands."

"Then it shall be this symbol that saves our lives."

"But, as I was about to say, it could also be meaningless now."

Lorn came down off his borrowed steed and held his stomach. "Oh, I didn't think my insides could feel any worse, but this news proves they can."

"Just trust in Mudalfaen as I do, and all shall be well."

"I will always trust you, Seth."

Before either could say another word, the doors to the palace opened abruptly. Instinctively Seth and Lorn retreated to the stable's back wall, where they stood motionless in the dark. Dozens upon dozens of brown-cloaked elves armed with blades and torches bore down the street. Seth guessed they were on their way to the southern tower. Only three elf-knights remained at the palace and stood close to the red doors. Seth could see the fear of the Dunane as their swords and torches shook in their grasp. Lorn felt himself begin to choke and buried his face in Seth's attire to muffle his cough and avoid giving them away.

One elf-knight stepped away from his companions and looked around, obviously curious. Seth immediately tensed his muscles as the elf came closer. It was too late now to retrieve his sword. His horse was twenty feet away, and any swift movement to his weapon would surely be seen as an aggressive act. He would never forgive himself for leaving something so key to his survival this far out of reach. "Keep moving," Seth

muttered very quietly. "There's nothing in this stable." The elf-knight kept his gaze in the two travelers' direction, and suddenly his golden eyes shot wide with the discovery of Seth's horse.

"There's something in here!" the elf cried. He ran back to his companions and pointed with his sword toward the stable.

Seth had to act quickly. The sword called out to him, and he dashed in seven enormous strides to retrieve it. Drawing the blade, he spun around and stood in front of Lorn. The dwarf, astounded at Seth's speed, backed against the wall. Lorn could not aid his friend in battle, since he possessed neither a weapon nor any fighting skills. The elves stood side by side along the stable's entrance, and three blades gleamed in the torchlight--all pointing at Seth. They stared at the armed intruder, with no one on either side daring move. Seth did not wish to be charged, nor did the Dunane wish to engage him with such a small number.

"Lower your weapon!" an elf ordered.

"Drop the blade, human!" demanded another.

Seth did not respond or comply.

"The enemy is in here!" the last elf-knight declared. He waved his torch to draw others of his kind to their location. In no time, many elves heading south turned about and rushed to the stable. Now their swords were joined with the original three. Seth began to sway his blade in hand as the Dunane filed into the stable. Lorn and Seth were three-quarters encircled now and held in the corner.

The elves were shocked to see a dwarf in their presence. Lorn, not wanting to look at his attackers, covered his face with shivering hands.

"A *dwarf*?" many of the elves gasped.

"What do the two of you desire in Dunane?" one elf demanded to know.

Seth kept his composure and remained silent.

"Speak, human, if you want to live!"

"How many men and dwarves camp in our forest?"

"Lay down your arm!"

"A dwarf? Here?"

Countless interrogations and statements filled Seth and Lorn's ears, but all were ignored. The elves' voices began to fade as they parted down the center, allowing one of their own to come forth. Standing now before Seth was a mighty elf, uncloaked and adorned in lightweight gold-colored armor. His hair was silver, and his eyes were blue as the ocean. This elf-knight, Sir Uthrik, was second in command behind Captain Fenrahn. He kept one hand on the sheathed sword at his waist. Uthrik observed the situation and gazed at Seth, the primary threat.

"I marvel at your stupidity, human. Did you actually believe for one moment that you could enter our kingdom undetected?" He laughed and shook his head. Seth did not answer. "What say you to that?" Uthrik smiled, then noticed Lorn, and his expression changed. "And a dwarf rides to Dunane as well. What is the world coming to?" Uthrik turned to his soldiers and searched for an answer. "Have these intruders spoken?"

"Not a word, sir."

Uthrik's attention returned to Seth, and he felt the beginnings of annoyance. Naturally, Uthrik had not been his usual self these past eight weeks--the lack of balance in Londor spared no one. Each new day was a battle to keep his abilities as a leader. "I

strongly urge one of you to speak, or neither of you will appreciate my next course of action."

Seth knew that the time had come to speak. He did not wish for further trouble. "I am a friend of Dunane." He paused momentarily to adjust his introduction. "I mean, we are both friends to you."

"Well, which is it?" Uthrik asked. "One or both? I still say you are foes."

"I am a diplomat to the Council. My being sent here is justifiable. This badge warrants my words as truth."

"Whom did you kill to obtain that sacred symbol of authority?"

"None, I assure you. I have held this rank for two years."

"A likely story, to be sure."

"What more must I do to prove this to you?"

"First of all, you can state your affairs. Then I might consider allowing you to prove it afterwards."

"I have a letter from the Council."

"A letter, you say?" Uthrik grew curious and wanted to know more--much more. He craved resolution to the world's downfall, and to his own demise as well. "Give it to me at once," he demanded. Stretching forth his hand, he awaited the parchment.

"I cannot," Seth replied sharply. "It is to be placed in the hands of your king alone. Only he can break the letter's seal. If I hand over an unsealed letter, my head will be forfeit."

"Well, what does this so-called letter say? Has Mudalfaen found a solution to our problems?" Uthrik stared at Seth and prayed for relief.

"We are saved!" some elves cried.

"The Council has blessed us!" cheered others.

Uthrik raised a hand and silenced the stable. "Leave nothing from the tidings you will now tell me."

"I have no news from Mudalfaen, and I do not know of the letter's business."

"You lie!" Uthrik blasted.

"Never would I be so careless as to lie, my good elf."

"Regardless, His Majesty sleeps in his deepest chambers. We dare not disturb him under any circumstance. Your precious letter will have to be delayed."

"I suppose it can wait until sunrise," Seth replied.

"What is your name, Council Servant?"

"I am Sir Seth Highbinder of the Realm of Dan. Traveling with me is the dwarf Lorn of the Beowulken Valley."

Uthrik laughed, finding the dwarf amusing. "Beowulken?" The assembled Dunane laughed with their commander. Lorn, mortified, lowered his head. "What business does Beowulken hold in Dunane? We are not in any need of artisanship, Sir Seth. Dunane already possesses the greatest of the world's craftsmen."

"Lorn is my closest friend," Seth defended. "He does not bear crafts meant for you. We rode out of Beowulken together to deliver this letter."

"Very well," Uthrik said, still laughing. "Just keep that dwarf by your side at all times. We don't want any trouble inside the palace tonight."

"The palace?" Seth asked, somewhat shocked.

"Yes, the palace. You are under the Council's good grace. We have rooms held

aside for such noble guests." Uthrik looked at Lorn again. "Well, nobles such as you alone, my lord Highbinder."

"A room sounds lovely," Seth whispered.

"That is unless you have taken affection to the stable."

"No," Seth replied. "We'd much rather sleep inside. The wilderness has been most cruel to us these past days."

"Then it is settled," Uthrik said, turning to face his soldiers. The gathering came to attention promptly. "Excellent work, my friends! All is well this night. You have shown that the years of maneuvers have made you fine examples of King Zelok's military. Fall back into the palace, save four of you, who will attend to these horses."

"Yes, sir!" the elves answered heartily. They saluted and filed out of the stable, leaving four to tend the horses. Uthrik approached Seth and looked down.

"I thank you, Sir Uthrik, for attending to our animals--they have been sorely used."

"This requires no thanks, Sir Seth. I pray your letter holds meaning for us all."

"As do I," Seth replied. "The answer will be revealed soon."

"Gather what you need; then follow me." Uthrik strode to the opening of the stable. The rain still beat down onto the street. The elf shook his head at the kingdom's misfortune.

Seth placed his hand on the shaking dwarf's shoulder and smiled. Though Lorn was unnerved, he responded well to Seth's touch. "All ready, Lorn?" he asked, concerned.

"Y-yes, I am."

"Very well." Seth stepped forth and said to Uthrik, "We are ready when you are."

"Let us proceed inside."

Two elves stood just inside the palace entrance, waiting for their officer to pass through. Uthrik strode in first, followed closely by Seth, then Lorn, who shuffled his boots behind Seth's trailing cloak. Not much detail could be seen in the palace's main chamber. The lighting was dim, and the ceiling dark as night. Seth guessed it to be fifty feet or more above his head. Narrow windows were placed twenty feet from the marble floor, and a few torches flickered from sconces along the stone walls.

Nearing one of the great columns that supported the high ceiling, Uthrik left his guests at a considerable distance behind as he marched ahead purposefully. Seth and Lorn both caught glimpses of one of the columns' intricate craftsmanship. Even the dwarf was fascinated by the deep carved lines in the blue marble; though he was not really one for stonework, he appreciated all forms of art. Lorn tilted his head and reached out to feel its beauty, but a voice halted his movement.

"Do not lay one dwarvish finger on that!"

"I only meant to--"

"Pollute His Majesty's most valued works of craft!" Uthrik appeared quickly from the shadows and stood between Lorn and the column. A look of menace from Uthrik bore down on the dwarf.

"I am truly sorry," Lorn said sincerely.

"Sir Seth?" Uthrik uttered.

"Yes?"

"Do you see the set of stairs to your right?"

Seth peered through the dark and saw what Uthrik spoke of. "I see them, yes."

"Could you be as so kind to see yourself and this dwarf up to the fifth floor? Your rooms await you there."

"Thank you," Seth replied with a slight bow.

Uthrik continued to glare at Lorn, making sure without further words that the dwarf knew his place in Dunane. The elf melted again into the shadows with rapid steps. "Good night to both of you." His voice echoed through the chamber. "Do not touch anything of value that isn't yours!"

Seth threw his arm around Lorn's shoulders and led him toward the stairs. "Pay him no attention, my friend. This lingering hatred between elves and dwarves is absurd."

"I agree," Lorn answered. "I simply do not see its purpose." He thought back to his homeland. "Never have I encountered such bitterness from an elf before. All my elven patrons have always shown the greatest respect."

"Yes, it's true; not all elves are prejudiced. There are a few who hold friendships with the dwarvenkind.... Then again, there are many elves who would lop off your head for a wrong look in their direction."

"Oh, please don't speak so," Lorn was quick to reply. "My nerves are already on edge from this place. I cannot wait to leave."

"We shall be gone tomorrow afternoon." Seth yawned as he thought back on recent events. "We must also hasten our steeds if we wish to avoid the weather."

"Yes," the dwarf agreed. "Let us try to slip past those storms."

"My plan exactly."

They took the stairs smoothly. Up they went, their eyes shifting from torch to torch on the left-hand side of the wall, until finally they reached the fifth floor. Their feet moved from the stone steps to a carpet of deep red. A long, paneled hallway stretched before them with many doors on both sides. The walls were decorated with murals of elvish feasts, celebrations, and valorous deeds. The hall was lit brightly with many torches. Three waist-high tables stood against the walls, each with a silver vase sitting atop its polished surface. At the end of the hallway, one elf-knight stood rigidly at guard. Seth said to Lorn, "Shall we?"

"By all means. My body desires a bed and sleep."

The elf took notice of his visitors. "So you are the two making such distress."

"You are correct," Seth replied.

"I am relieved you are not a threat."

Seth looked around to see if any doors were marked with a clue that might point him to the right lodgings. Seeing no defining marks, he turned to the elf. "We were sent this way by Sir Uthrik."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. I am Council-sent."

"Good news comes with you, I hope."

"Perhaps," Seth answered as he and Lorn continued toward the elf. The elf marveled at Seth's badge; then his face dropped as he took a closer look at Lorn. The elf sneered and opened the door to his right. Seth and Lorn entered and were surprised to be followed by the elf-knight. The room was large, with one bed in the near corner. A fireplace with an inviting flame roared at the back of the room. The white walls were paneled like the hallway, and carved molding crowned their tops. A table with six chairs stood near the fireplace, yet there was no food.

"We hope you find this pleasing," the elf spoke.

"Yes," Seth replied. "It is magnificent. I can see that Dunane possesses great artisans."

"Thank you, sir. I shall inform my superiors of your compliment."

"Please do," said Seth as he sat down on the soft bed. "Good night to you, my good elf."

The elf bowed and smiled. Before he exited, he gave Lorn one last sour look. "The dwarf's room is across the hall." He stepped out of the room and closed the door.

Lorn took advantage of the lack of elvish eyes on his person and moved to the table. He ran his fingers along the finely polished wood and beamed. "Such detail and care went into this piece of work," he murmured. He inspected the high-backed chairs. "I will have to remember these designs for my own work."

"Please be careful over there," Seth warned as he unfastened his shoulder armor, placed it on the bed, then removed his cloak. Rising slightly to remove the cloak from beneath him, he discarded the drenched garment to the foot of the bed. Seth shifted his sheathed sword as he lay down, burying his head in the pillows. His eyes fluttered as sleep took him.

Lorn took off his cloak as well and threw it over the back of the chair nearest the fire. He warmed himself with the flames as he looked the room over again. "I do wish we had some food, though. My stomach hates me at the moment." He approached the bed and saw Seth well on his way to sleep. "If you'll give me your sword, I'll put it in a safe place."

"No," Seth answered softly.

Lorn took Seth's cloak, folded it, and took up his armor. Sitting on the bed, he found immediate comfort, and hoped his lodgings would be just as nice. Perhaps the elves would not deny him a peaceful rest. Lorn rose to his feet and returned to the fireplace, taking Seth's belongings and placing them on the chair next to his cloak. He smiled at the sleeping knight and at last opened the door, entered into the hallway, and closed the door behind him.

Chapter Three: A New Journey

The sun rose swiftly over the world, and all devices of evil fled the Valley of Dunane. The elves broke free of their fears and began to carry out their daily routines. Not one cloud marred the blue sky, and the temperature was pleasant for the new day.

Inside the palace, Seth still slept in his warm bed. His room was filled with soft rays of sunlight, and sounds of chirping birds entered through the window. No more horrid noises of clashing thunder or rain troubled his ears. He finally opened his heavy eyelids and fought the urge to return to slumber. His first thought was of the letter. Seth slipped his feet to the floor. The fire still burned in the fireplace, and he noticed two cloaks on the chairs as he rubbed his eyes.

"I don't even remember taking my cloak off," he chuckled. "Good old Lorn, looking after my things." As he stood up, his muscles felt stiff, and he stretched to shake the pain from his body. Though the rest had been short, he did feel much of his strength returning, but he was famished. He dusted off his three-quarter-length jacket of forest green and the pants of matching color. He walked over to the fireplace and grabbed his shoulder armor from the chair and, without a thought, placed it on his right shoulder, ran the strap across his chest and stomach, brought it behind his back, and fastened it behind him. With cloaks in hand, he started toward the door, thinking, *I wonder where Lorn's got to.*

He had not to go three steps to find the dwarf. There in the hallway he sat, on a small stool with his back to Seth. Seth crept nearer and saw his friend working feverishly on a drawing. Seth smiled and admired it. Lorn was nearly finished with copying a vase that sat on a table. Short, quick motions of charcoal stroking the brown paper rasped faintly in Seth's ears. He could not see the dwarf's intent expression, but he knew it well from previous encounters.

"How long did that take you?" Seth asked. Lorn jumped a little in his seat and looked over his shoulder with eyebrows lowered. "I pray I did not ruin your work."

"Not too badly, no," Lorn answered. "It is nothing I cannot fix." He returned to his drawing and smiled, keeping Seth wondering whether he had gotten on his friend's bad side.

"I must apologize."

"No worries, my friend." He quickly disguised the stray mark and held up the paper for Highbinder's inspection. "Can you see the error of your ways?"

Seth studied it carefully and answered, "Not at all."

"You see?" Lorn laughed. "I am that good."

Seth laughed with him. "Yes, you are. Why do you think I have so many examples of your work in my home?"

"That is because I tricked you into buying them."

"No," replied Seth. "Your creations are sublime." Changing the topic, he said, "I think we may be behind schedule. It is time to see Dunane's king."

"What is his name?" Lorn asked curiously.

"Zelok," Seth said. "King Zelok."

"An odd name, to be sure," Lorn mused.

"I wouldn't repeat that again within these walls."

"You may rely on that."

"Come," Seth said as he handed Lorn his cloak and started down the hall. Lorn quickly rolled up his drawing and placed it in his waist pouch, then put on his cloak, feeling just a bit peaked from the cold weather. Seth secured his own cloak underneath his armor, threw it around his free shoulder, and hooked it to the silver badge; he definitely wanted to keep the badge of the Great Tree visible at all times.

The journey downstairs seemed shorter than on the night before. They returned to the main chamber of the palace, where the two visitors could see in the light of day the sumptuous details of the elven artisans' craft. Great tapestries hung on every wall, and tall statues of past kings and heroes were erected in each corner. A small group of elves, adorned in cloaks of gold, strolled past, talking softly to one another, their eyes turned to Seth and Lorn. Seth had no clue how to find his contact. Seeing a staircase with a single door at the far end of the chamber, Seth thought that perhaps this could be the throne room. He turned his strides, and Lorn immediately followed suit.

But as they came mere steps away from the stairs, both were stopped by Captain Fenrahn and Sir Uthrik. "Good morning, gentlemen," Fenrahn greeted them.

"Good day to you," Seth replied. "My letter is due for delivery."

Fenrahn nodded. "Uthrik informed me of this not long ago. You must forgive me, for it was I who commanded the sounding of the alarm last night. My name is Fenrahn."

"You gave us quite a scare, Fenrahn," Seth admitted. "I do understand, though, that you were only doing your duty, just as I am."

"Indeed," Fenrahn bowed politely and said, "I am Captain of the Order."

"Then it is an honor to meet you," Seth extended a hand in friendship. Fenrahn returned the gesture, and both shook hands with no animosity. "I am--"

"Sir Seth Highbinder," Fenrahn finished. "I already know. Then there is Lorn, the dwarf, of Beowulken--a surprise to be sure."

"Greetings," Lorn said cordially.

"And to you," Fenrahn added mildly. Turning back to Seth, Fenrahn asked, "Tell me, Sir Knight, why did you two not stop at the southern gate last night?"

"We were not for certain how you would take visitors at night," Seth replied.

"This heightened state of emergency has changed much, and I feared we would not be received as allies. I saw no one as we entered the gate and my rattled logic could only think of reaching the palace. I am sorry that I caused such distress for your elves."

"Think nothing more of it," Fenrahn said with slight laughter. "I could not have arranged for a better training exercise for my knights. Besides, no harm came about."

"Very true," Seth said.

Uthrik came to a rigid posture and asked, "Shall I escort them to King Zelok?"

"At once." Fenrahn strode away wearily, heading for his bed, no doubt, after a long night on watch. "Inform me of their business later in the day."

"I shall, Captain."

"I will be in my quarters."

"Let us move on, sirs," Uthrik said as he led them away from the stairs. In the far corner of the chamber was a hallway barely noticeable to the eye. No light graced the area, as if secrecy was the most important consideration here. Uthrik ducked quickly into the corridor and left the two travelers unaccompanied once more. Seth led the dwarf into the darkness. Two torches at the end of the way beckoned them ahead. Between the flames was a simple door of blue wood, where Uthrik stood, impatiently awaiting his

guests.

"Does this lead to your king?" Seth asked. Receiving no answer, he said, "I haven't the time to be delayed much more, Sir Uthrik."

"Lower your voice at once," the elf said sharply. Seth and Lorn stood before the door as Uthrik stared ahead into the darkened surroundings. Seth placed a hand on the doorknob and looked at the elf-knight one last time. They exchanged glances, and Seth gently opened the door. "Good luck," Uthrik whispered as he left the hallway.

Seth grew nervous as just enough of the door was opened to allow him passage. His heart pounded in his chest, and his breathing grew more rapid. There were times on this mission when he wondered where he found the strength to carry on. He preferred having everything planned to the last detail and this mission in particular left far too much up to the vagaries of chance and human nature.

He shuffled his boots as he stepped into the well-lit room, but despite this, his and Lorn's entrance went unnoticed by the three people sitting at the far end of a banquet table occupying the small chamber. The table was bare save for three silver goblets and a bowl of fruit. Seth gulped as he looked at the two elves and a human locked in deep conversation. As Lorn cleared the threshold, he softly closed the door. "More elves," the dwarf muttered softly.

Seth affected a stern stance and marched ahead, leaving Lorn, who hadn't the courage to approach, at the door. Assessing the elves' status by their clothing, Seth studied the one sitting to the far left, who wore an elaborate robe of pure white. The robed elf's skin was fair, and his hair short and silvery. Though the room was well crafted with cut stone, marble flooring, and red curtains, it was not a throne room but merely one of many meeting chambers. The elf turned his eyes to Seth, who stopped his forward progress.

"Welcome," the elf said smoothly. His voice was at once light and regal. "Please approach, my friend, and sit beside me."

"Are you His Majesty, King Zelok?"

"Indeed I am," he replied. And pushing back his sleeves, Zelok stretched out a hand, gesturing for Seth to sit.

"I shall stand if it serves you well, Your Majesty."

"As you wish, young sir."

"I have come this day bearing a letter from Mudalfaen." Reaching into his pouch, Seth extracted the envelope and handed the letter over. The elf-king inspected the Council's gift, found the seals intact, and ripped it open. He unfolded the paper and glanced carefully over the writing. Seth watched as the elf sitting next to Zelok leaned in and spied the letter not meant for him, though Zelok seemed neither to see nor feel the second set of eyes on the parchment.

"Interesting, indeed," Zelok said as he discarded the letter facedown on the table. None were now able to read it.

"If I may be so bold, can Your Majesty tell me anything of what the letter conveys?" Seth inquired. This was the opportunity to have his questions answered, perhaps ending the mystery of his secret mission.

"Oh, yes," Zelok said as his mind turned in thought. "The Council rarely reveals its gracious will to its messengers."

"Yes, my lord, and I shall never question their bidding."

"Then you serve our masters well." Zelok took up his goblet and sipped the red wine. "Do you have any idea at all?"

"Not one single word. I pray it holds a solution to the world's illness."

"In a sense, it does," said Zelok. "As you saw firsthand last evening, my kingdom falls victim to violent storms. My people have grown sick, and despair eats at every heart."

"It is indeed horrible," Seth agreed.

"Magic is failing us, and rumors of the end are whispered in every dark corner of my realm. I have even heard of the decline beyond my borders."

"The problems you face are not yours alone, my liege," Seth regretted to announce. "I have seen the weakenings in many places this past month. The Realm of Dan's water supply has dwindled, and the crops do not mature. My king's magicians have not been able to conjure one spell since Beldas's disappearance. Humankind's ability to create magic is less enduring than that of the elves."

Zelok sank back in his chair, looked at the door, and saw Lorn standing very still. "You there, dwarf," Zelok called.

"Me, sir?" Lorn asked timidly.

"You're the only dwarf here," the elf-king laughed. "Come closer, please." Lorn crossed the floor slowly and stood by Seth's side, too shy to speak to royalty any more words than were absolutely required.

"May I present Lorn of Beowulken," Seth announced.

"You honor my court, dwarf of the Beowulken Valley," Zelok replied. The king turned his thoughts back to the matter at hand. "We are more than knowledgeable that the absence of Beldas in the heavens has caused great imbalance." He set the goblet on the table and folded his hands across his lap. "There has been resolution from no one thus far. Beldas' fate must be known, whatever the cost."

"Seth?" Lorn whispered. The knight turned to face him. "Is it that serious?"

Zelok answered for Seth, saying, "It is a matter of survival, my little friend. No one will be spared if something is not done to set the world right. No race will endure--not even the dwarves. The twin moons give the entire world its magic and prosperity. The weather, the tides, and every small link for life depend solely on the heavens' concord. I am not wise enough to say just how much time we have left, but the end draws near--and quickly. In this sickness, my kingdom will become flooded and the Dunane will be wiped away from Londor." Zelok's emotions began to surface. "As long as I sit upon my father's throne, I will not let my people die."

"I assure you, the Council will not let this happen," Seth said, trying to comfort Zelok.

"Yet I have not received counsel from Mudalfaen, my lord Highbinder. This is why I am taking it upon myself to investigate Beldas's disappearance." He paused. "This is where you come into play."

"My lord?" Seth asked, unsure that he had heard aright.

"Sitting at my side are two who set out this very day to restore dignity to my kingdom and to the rest of the world. You, Sir Seth, are their newest companion."

"An expedition?" Seth gasped. "This, then, is the letter's command?"

"Precisely."

"Then I shall honor it and do as you say."

"Good," Zelok replied with a sly grin. "Does the dwarf wish to follow?"

"Without a doubt," Lorn answered quickly. He did not want to be left in Dunane without Seth. The elves would make his stay such an utter misery that he would rather venture into a world of unknown hazards than remain. "I will follow Seth."

"Splendid," was Zelok's pleased response. "I originally had three to leave my halls before you arrived. One that I really had hoped for could not make it. But four is a worthy number, I should say. I did not expect... Council assistance." Zelok sat up in his chair. "Now, the time has come for your companions' introductions. The human you see here is Sir Malander of Muldane."

Seth acknowledged Malander, but Malander did not move. He was robed in all black, even to his gauntlets and knee boots. His hair was dark, short, and pushed forward, barely falling onto his pale forehead. What Seth found most compelling about Malander, though, was the black mask that covered the left side of his face. It was somehow secured without a strap and was decorated by a thin line of silver trim. A double-edged sword lay unsheathed across his lap. Malander stared into the far corner of the room, while his hands kept busy toying with a plain ring of silver on his left hand. Seth knew not what to make of Malander thus far, but he did feel the grim man radiating a mysterious aura.

"At my side is the mercenary Gildan Gundagrin," Zelok continued. Gildan raised his head to the sound of his famous name and awaited a grander introduction. "You are fortunate to have his blade within your party."

"Indeed," Gildan added proudly. "King Zelok, your luck is at its peak with me in your service."

"It is an honor to meet you, Master Gundagrin," Seth said. He had heard the many tales of Gildan's work and looked forward to seeing the elf's skills with the sword. He had also heard of Gildan's lavish mode of dress, and saw it fully in the garments he wore. Some might be tempted to laugh at his attire, but Gildan's proficiency in mercenary work assured him of respect throughout the world, and none dared mock him.

His hair was bright green and rose six inches from his head. Two long braids of hair, fastened by silver holders, fell before his ears and hung to his stomach, and three small jewels were fixed in his forehead, between his brows. Over his right shoulder was a yellow cape with a red and purple pattern of triangles at its hem, draped over finely designed armor of leather that covered both shoulders. He wore a long, green jacket with short sleeves trimmed in yellow throughout. Under his lavish three-quarter-length coat, yellow pantaloons were bunched at his knees. Very little of his red tights could be seen, however, for the boots rode high on his legs. Seth noticed that the tips of the elf's boots curled upward and inward and were made of the finest leather he had ever seen. Also, as bold accents Gildan wore leather gloves that winged out at the elbows, and a matching belt with silver buckle. In each of his slender, long ears, near the points, three small, silver rings gleamed in the light.

"You say it is an honor?" Gildan asked Seth.

"I would say so."

"Then you are correct."

"The person who did not arrive was meant to lead my quest," Zelok said. "But now I must find another to govern."

"I will accept your offer," Gildan said before Zelok could say another word, as if he knew that the position would be laid before him.

"True it is that I have chosen you, Gildan."

"Of course," Gildan replied with a smile. "Alas, this leaves me no choice but to raise the price of my services."

"Is that so?" asked Zelok, unamused.

"Ninety thousand gold pieces," the mercenary stated.

Seth's eyes shot open wide at the bold demand. "Ninety *thousand*?" he whispered. "Amazing."

"That is ridiculous!" Zelok said. "I can buy an entire army for that!" He grew restless in his chair. "I could send a battalion of my own knights, and the cost would be minimal."

"I see three things wrong with that," Gildan retorted. All in the room were witness to Gildan's skill at business negotiation. Zelok was offended. "First of all, an entire legion could not match my dexterity with the blade. Also, would you risk lowering your numbers needed for Dunane's defense?" Gildan paused, knowing that the bartering was nearly complete--in his favor. "Most importantly, Zelok, I have offers from others who desire to employ my talents." He made as if to rise from his seat. "Now, if you will excuse me..."

"Wait one moment, Gundagrin," Zelok said as he threw up a hand. Feeling in need of a drink, he took up his half-full goblet and drank it down in one go. "Ninety-thousand," he muttered.

Seth and Lorn looked at each other, stupefied. Seth daydreamed of the money and what he could do with it. The idea of being a mercenary filled his mind but soon faded. He knew that serving the Council was his greatest security. The benefits of Mudalfaen would always be there for him, while the life of a soldier for hire was full of uncertainty.

Zelok came to a hasty decision, and it took him a brief moment to express his thought. "Agreed. You shall have your money."

"This is magnificent news," Gildan said. Ninety thousand was not much to him, since his fortune stretched beyond many small kingdoms' entire resources.

"One-third shall be given to you now, and the rest once the moon is returned or its fate is known."

"Three-fourths now," Gildan replied as he raised a hand. "The one-fourth remaining I shall claim after I bring victory and balance to Londor again. Take it or leave it."

Seth could not fathom how Gildan could speak to royalty in this rude manner. But Zelok replied, "I will have one of my servants set aside your gold in the treasury."

"Thank you dearly, my liege," Gildan said happily. "Now I am ready for departure."

"King Zelok?" Seth spoke. "Could Lorn and I have some food before we leave? We have not eaten in two days."

"Please do, for I can ill afford to supply any of you with provisions for the journey. You can have some of these apples here." Zelok's thoughts dwelt on the expenditure of money to Gildan. "I have lost my appetite."

Seth took five of the small red apples, gave three to Lorn, and placed the other two in his pouch for future consumption. "I think these will do for now."

"Your horses are ready just outside my front gate," Zelok informed the four. "The prayers of the Dunane people shall be with you. Once you have a lead on your

investigation, please send word to me at once. We wish you good speed. I pray fortune is on your side."

"Fortune has always been on my side," Gildan added. "It is also in my pocket."

Malander was the first to move. As he made for the door he slid his sword into one of the two sheaths on his back and left without a word. Seth and Lorn then departed. As Seth stopped at the door to allow Lorn to pass through, he saw Gildan speaking to Zelok. From the looks of it, Zelok did not look pleased with the mercenary's words. Seth left the two elves and escorted Lorn down the dark hallway.

"Another journey," Lorn said. "I am not looking forward to this at all."

"I am sorry, Lorn. If I had any notion of this, I would not have asked you to come."

"You did not know what Mudalfaen had planned for you. Do not blame yourself."

"I shall blame myself if something happens to you."

"Be optimistic, Seth," Lorn laughed uncomfortably.

"It will not be safe out there in the open, but I shall protect you at all times. This is my primary function."

"Protect yourself as well."

Strolling back into the main chamber, they stopped midway to wait for Gildan, also taking this moment to partake of the meager food they had been given. As Lorn pulled the first apple from his pouch, he and Seth noticed two elf-maidens strolling toward them with their heads lowered, their faces covered by their long and golden hair. Both were dressed in long flowing gowns of white and blue.

Seth stood up straight as they approached and he could hear one of them slightly sobbing.

The two maidens were startled as they looked up and saw Lorn and Seth who both bowed politely. One maiden gasped as she saw Seth's badge.

"Good morning to you both," Seth said with a smile.

"Good morning to you, as well," replied the one who was weeping. "I am sorry we intruded with your business."

"There is no need to apologize, for you two have committed no offense." Seth looked into their eyes and could see despair written on their delicate and beautiful faces. He could plainly see that the world's imbalance did not spare them either, as sickness came for all upon Londor. Then Seth noticed the maidens looking at Lorn's apple and with quick reaction, Seth reached into his own pouch and took the two apples from his belongings. Holding them out, he said, "Here you go."

"No, my lord," the maiden said quickly, as if the offer was unthinkable. "I cannot take this from you."

"It would mean more to me if you took it," Seth said. He held them out farther and after short hesitation, they were taken by the two elves.

Lorn came forth from Seth's side and held two more apples outward and they, too, were accepted by the maidens. The dwarf bowed again, turned around, and began eating the one apple he kept, watching the front doors of the castle.

"Thank you, kind sirs," one elf-maiden spoke, looking at the gifts as if she just received a bag of gold. Her eyes beamed at Seth, and she kept a deep lock with the knight's blue eyes, finding him very gallant. As her heart began to flutter, she was dragged away by her companion, and both smiled as none could now see their faces.

Lorn stood still as he watched Malander pace the floor next to the front doors. The dark knight's head was lowered. Lorn wiped his beard clean as Seth was rejoined at his side. "That man looks like trouble," the dwarf commented.

"I wouldn't want to cross swords with him," Seth replied. "I wonder how much *he* is being paid to be here. If my knowledge serves me correctly, Dunane and Muldane have never cooperated militarily. True, they are both allies of Mudalfaen, but these elves do not interact with Muldane at all. So I wager that Malander, too, is hired for service."

But Seth proved wrong in his assessment. Though Malander had accepted mercenary work in the past, he refused payment from Zelok. The elf-king did not understand what had brought Malander to his realm, or how Malander found out about the secret gathering. Two weeks ago, Malander arrived in the valley, and Zelok accepted his aid. For the past fourteen days Malander had lingered about Norganas, particularly at night. Many elves noticed him wandering the dark alleyways almost as if sleepwalking. And one local tavern was graced with the grim man's presence every night. The Dunane were annoyed at first, but once they saw how liberal Malander was in dispensing silver coins, they welcomed him. Each evening he sat at the same bar stool and drank the strongest ale the pub had to offer. When one pint was emptied, Malander's hand rapped the counter, demanding another. The bartender always fretted about Malander's miserable mood after all that he consumed, and no elf dared speak to him for fear of a physical altercation.

Though Malander stood scarcely over five and a half feet high, his muscular build intimidated many. He looked very strong, and his temper was uncertain. As he moved in great, purposeful strides, he muttered strange words to himself, which Seth tried without success to interpret. Now Seth grew restless as he awaited Gildan. To fill the time until the elf arrived, he decided to speak with the fourth of the company.

"Malandar?" The grim man stopped in midstep and turned his head in Seth's direction. His glare was as cold as ice, making the hairs on Seth's neck stand on end. "What tidings do you bring from Muldane? I would like to enlighten the Council upon my return."

Malandar stood in front of Seth. "What do you want?" his deep voice asked.

Smelling some sort of potent spirits on Malander's hot breath, Seth kept a straight face to avoid aggravation. "My curiosity is meant only for Mudalfaen."

"Do I look like one who would converse on matters of Muldane?"

"Well...", Seth began.

"Why do you bother me?" His eyes never moved off Seth.

"I am passing time; that is all."

"Leave me out of your time-passing," Malander said as he turned back around. He threw up a hand and shook his head as he strode away. "Have some respect for a man of the sword."

"Thank you for your advice," Seth replied.

"You disgust me."

Seth did not know how to react, so he chose silence.

"You see?" Lorn whispered. "Bloody crazy, that one is."

"Appears he doesn't take well to people," Gildan's voice came from directly behind them. Neither had seen or heard the elf come into their presence. Seth looked at Gildan and gave a forced smile.

"When did you get here?" Seth asked.

"Just a moment after your folly," the mercenary laughed. "Surprised?"

"Yes," answered Lorn and Seth together.

"Stealth is a gift," Gildan boasted. "We must be under way now." He headed toward the front doors. "That is, if you hold true to your word, Highbinder."

"By all means, sir," Seth replied. "If my being here is the will of Mudalfaen, then I vow to do whatever I can."

Gildan shook his head slightly. "I will remember your saying that."

The four stood together and were ready to leave, but before any could lift a hand to open the way, the doors swung open and the chamber was flooded with the full light of morning. Their horses had been fed, brushed, and readied, and Seth was delighted to see his mount looking refreshed, showing no sign of the long and wearing ride to Dunane.

"Good morning, sirs," a Dunane elf spoke.

"Good day to you all," Gildan replied as he neared his white steed, already fitted with its lightweight armor of fine metal.

Malander wasted no time on greetings but merely leaped up onto his black horse, which wore only a simple dark saddle and reins. The three warriors sat on their mounts and waited as Lorn struggled upward. Finally, after some help from the elves, he, too, sat astride his horse, whereupon the Dunane servants let go the reins of the four chargers and returned to the palace, each giving a short bow before disappearing inside.

Gildan surveyed the street filled with citizens and merchants. He took in a deep breath, paused, and then, with a gesture of his hand, gave the call to ride. Little attention was given to the four as they rode along.

"What is your plan, Gildan?" Seth asked. He wanted to know what the mercenary had in store for him and Lorn. "I have always been one for structure and order within a plan whenever it is possible."

"Then you are in the wrong place," Gildan answered. "You must realize that Londor is void of structure now." He brushed off the small particles of dust from his jacket. "This disorder creates greater riches for me, but it offsets your staid mentality."

"Then I shall await your wisdom."

"You will receive it in full when the time comes."

The company cleared the bend in the road and entered the marketplace. Smells of many things enchanted their noses: sweet perfumes, roasting meats, and exotic scents they had never known before.

"How wonderful," Lorn commented to Seth. "I adore a place of bartering."

"I've been told that Dunane's market is one of the finest you'll ever encounter." Seth looked around with a smile and made sure Lorn was enjoying himself, for he knew that the rest of the journey would not be so pleasant.

"I have imported spices from Mugglon right here, gentlemen!" one merchant yelled as he held up a red flask for all to see.

"Roasted meats of a silver henoth!" spoke another. "Five gold pieces! What a bargain!"

"Overpriced," Gildan laughed quietly.

The four passed the market and came to the last portion of Norganas's main road. The south gate came into view shortly. Seth looked up at the observation tower that had given him and Lorn such grief the night before. The elf-mercenary looked up at the open

archway and perceived something he did not like: three riders entering the city, charging up the road with no indication of slowing.

"What the...?" Seth gasped.

"Elves," said Lorn.

"Worse," Gildan added. "*Northern* elves." He reached over his shoulder and grasped the hilt of his sword. With one smooth motion, Gildan pulled forward his hand, unsheathing his beloved blade. He held the five-foot-long weapon down at his side.

"Something is not right here."

Chapter Four: A Familiar Face

"This is strange," Seth whispered.

"Are they friend or foe?" Lorn asked.

"Quiet, dwarf!" Gildan commanded. "Let me handle this! Everyone, move!" He waved his sword at those in the street. "Stand aside, all of you!" As quickly as they were able, the good citizens of Dunane got out of the road, jostling one another and cramming into the alleyways, until at last the street was clear but for Gildan and his company--and the three oncoming riders. Gildan stared as the white horses of the Northern elves raced toward them. "They appear to be of royalty--two of them, at least," the mercenary observed.

The lead rider of the Northern elves glanced up and saw the four riders in a line, blocking the way ahead. With not enough space to pass safely, he reluctantly reined in his horse. The two behind him stopped as well, all three drawing to within mere feet of Gildan's company. The leader of the Northlings was an elf-prince. Gildan looked into the stranger's cold blue eyes. He was tall and well built, with a broad jaw and upright posture--the very picture of royalty--with long red hair that stood out against the white fur around his neck. Studying the trio, Gildan could see that each wore the same garb: a silver chest plate with white fur trimming the neck and shoulders, a silver stomach plate, and silver armor about the thighs. From neck to foot, each wore a suit of golden scales like a dragon's, on each arm a gloved gauntlet, and knee-high boots protecting the legs. From each man's thick leather belt hung a sheathed sword, half hidden beneath a long white apron that draped to the knees. The wind caught their white capes trimmed with the gold and red triangular pattern of royalty--much like the pattern on Gildan's cape. The only difference in dress was that the last of the three wore a bronze headband, while the other two wore gold.

"Stand aside, mercenary!" the lead Northern elf shouted. "Royalty claims this road over the lesser folk!"

"You are mistaken," replied Gildan. "I am not below you or any other. All kingships and the like have no hold over my existence."

"I would hold my tongue if I were you!"

"Not necessary. I say and do as I wish."

The prince surveyed Gildan and laughed. "I pity you; truly I do. You try to emulate that overpriced, secondhand sword wielder..." He paused in thought. "I forget his name." He looked more closely at the elf-mercenary. "Gundagrín. Yes, that's the one." The prince shook his head. "Pitiful."

"I *am* Gildan Gundagrín," declared Gildan.

"Seems impossible from the stories I have heard," the prince replied. "Gildan Gundagrín is said to be tall and magnificent, yet you are small, and fouler-looking than what has been told."

"Tales fall short of me," Gildan said. "My sword and I are legendary, however; I have proved this many times over." He raised his sword slightly to give the prince a glance at the ancient weapon. "Pray you never fall victim to my blade."

"I know I am a greater sword wielder than you, mercenary."

"Then what is your name?" Gildan asked. "Let me see if I have heard it before."

"I am Prince Arnanor, son of King Elgast, ruler of the Northern Kingdom. I am

heir to my father's throne."

Gildan looked distinctly unimpressed. "Sorry, Arnanor. I have never heard of you or your steel."

"Then you will know of me now."

"Yet I haven't the time to fool with you," Gildan said, wanting to get on with the quest.

"In haste, are we?" the prince inquired. Looking at the three who accompanied Gildan, he turned his mind to thoughts of their purpose.

"It is not your place to know of us."

"So you say," Arnanor retorted. "I ask that you stand aside. We must speak to Zelok at once."

"Does your coming concern the stolen moon, Beldas?"

"Yes, Gundagrín, it does."

"Then there is no need to seek Zelok out."

"Why? Are you deliberately trying to steer me away from my quest?"

"*Your* quest?" Gildan laughed.

"Do not mock me," Arnanor snapped.

"I am commander of Zelok's company. We now depart to seek an answer to this downfall."

Arnanor was astonished. "*You?* He could find no better?"

Gildan left the comment alone, saying, "I suggest you return northward before Mudalfaen knows you are here."

"They will not know of our brief alliance with Zelok."

"I am afraid to inform you, but they will now," Gildan said slyly as he turned to Seth. Arnanor looked at Highbinder's badge, and his mouth fell open in dismay. "The Council rides with me to my ultimate victory."

"So they finally decide to help," Arnanor murmured. Pointing imperiously to Seth, he said, "You there!"

"Yes, my lord?"

"Why hasn't the Council dispatched aid to my kingdom? Do they find amusement in the suffering of my people?" His pale complexion flushed to red as he gritted his teeth. "Our strength declines! The ice formations shift, and the earth trembles our halls! I will not be denied passage into this company! I will die before any more of my people do!"

"You are forbidden to join us, sire. The Council would never approve such an action by royalty. I must hold true to the laws of Mudalfaen." Seth did not like this confrontation, but he had to be firm, Mudalfaen had strict policy against allowing nobility to engage in battle personally.

"I will follow the four of you whether you accept me or not! I believe our lives are worth it. We accept the sacrifice."

"Do you also accept the swift punishment the Council will rain down upon you, your followers here, your father, and your kingdom? Have you thought of this, my lord?"

"What would the Old Laws do to me, a prince?" He smirked and leaned forward on his steed, awaiting a response. "Out with it, boy!"

"As I recall from study," Seth replied, "you will either be imprisoned for the rest of your Londorian existence or put to death--unable to pass to Ethindar. Your companions here shall face the same. Your kingdom will be considered banished from the Mudalfaen

Alliance, and all aid will be stricken from your people. Any problem that the Northern Kingdom faces will be your father's alone to mend. Your homeland will grow vulnerable, Prince Arnanor."

"Vulnerable?" Arnanor nearly shouted. "*Vulnerable*, you say? The Northern Kingdom will never be vulnerable if the heavens are balanced again! Even if Mudalfaen bans my kingdom, we shall be strong forevermore."

"Yet you will not be able to see this, due to your own chastisement. I will not allow you to begin this chain of events. I am sorry." Seth lowered his head, hoping this was the end of the debate, but he could feel Arnanor's eyes upon him.

"Save your breath," Arnanor replied. "We come no matter what you say."

"He is a stubborn one, Seth," Gildan said. "His head is as thick as that armor he wears."

"Seth," Arnanor said, etching the name into his mind. "I shall keep you in my sight at all times. Your badge will not save you from my fury."

"Do you expect me to uproot my entire way of life so that it pleases you?" Seth asked.

"I just expect you to watch your footing."

Gildan spoke. "I shall allow the three of you into our party." While Seth looked at him with obvious bafflement, Gildan nodded and added, "I know that you do not agree, Seth, but you heard what Zelok told us. He said we must find what has happened to the moon--at all costs. You cannot place rules on times like these." Gildan smiled. "Besides, I would dearly love to see Arnanor's work with the blade."

"What?" Seth replied.

"You are wiser than I thought, Gildan," Arnanor said, clearly pleased.

"I do not like you, Arnanor," Gildan was fast to say. "Just trust my judgment, will you, Seth?"

"Listen to the mercenary," Arnanor encouraged. "Not even our father knows we are here. After we find what happened to the moon, we three shall ride into the shadows."

"And if royalty dies?" Seth asked. "You know I will have to answer to Mudalfaen for that."

"We are gifted, Sir Knight," the elf-prince said. "We three will not perish before you."

"Then welcome," Gildan said. "Who follows you?"

Seth sat mute, unable to believe that his opinion was being ignored utterly.

"This, whom you see behind me, is my sole brother, Prince Muron."

Muron smiled--an act that Arnanor appeared unable to perform. He was only five feet tall and frail. His short hair was yellow and curly. "Greetings, good sirs," he said politely.

"Silence," Arnanor said sharply.

"And at Muron's side is the imperial knight, Sir Geil. He is the greatest warrior of his generation, and guardian over my brother--protecting Muron is Geil's only function."

Geil did not respond to his introduction but kept his full attention on the younger prince. One hand remained on the pommel of his sheathed sword. Of a height with Arnanor, he sat tall on his steed, his pale red hair tied back and falling just below his shoulders.

"Who are our other companions?" Arnanor asked. Each was given a short

introduction as the Northern elves' blue eyes scanned Zelok's party one by one. "I think it high time to ride!" Arnanor declared boldly. Receiving a glare from Gildan, the prince added, "Sorry, mercenary. We are ready on your word."

"Yes. You will be," Gildan replied. "I am the authority here. Your title lies useless outside your borders. Do not forget this." The Northern elves parted as Gundagrinn and his three followers rode forth. Arnanor turned his horse about and rode just behind Gildan. Seth rode third, followed by Lorn. Prince Muron was fifth, with Geil riding uncomfortably close behind. Malander kept well back from the others, riding alone in silent misery.

As Gildan guided the company eastward just outside the gateway, the Dunane people, watching their only hope for deliverance ride down the street, sent up silent prayers. And as Zelok's party disappeared from view, the Dunane went back to their affairs.

The riders climbed a steep hill to the east. Halfway up, Lorn drifted from formation, and noticing this from the corner of his eye, Seth, too, fell out. Muron quickly filled the gap and trotted happily along behind his brother. As Arnanor pressed Gildan with questions about the journey, trying to find a weak link in the mercenary's leadership, Lorn stopped and looked at Norgannas with sorrow. He did not want to remain with Zelok and his subjects, but fear over this unknown trek gripped his heart. Seth pulled near his longtime friend and inquired, "Something troubles you?"

Lorn sat still and fidgeted with the reins in his hands. So many ideas floated in his mind, and the ability to structure a comprehensible sentence did not come easily. "I am at a loss for words, Seth. I fear that this quest may be the end of me. I am not able to fend for myself if we are attacked." Then an even greater horror came into his imagination. "What if a wizard puts a spell on me? What if something happens to *you*? I could not handle separating from you in tragedy. I simply could not."

Seth patted Lorn on his shoulder and replied, "Do not worry yourself into a mess. We may not see any sort of struggle. No use fretting over things that may not occur. You will be quite safe." The rest of the company was on the flat hilltop, and they did not slow their pace. "We must not be left behind. Will you be all right?"

"I suppose," he answered.

Seth led the way, and both were surprised to see the company at a standstill. Arnanor looked at Seth as he rode to the center of the gathering. "Where were you?" the prince asked.

"Nowhere, my lord."

"I will not tolerate lingering, Sir Knight."

"I do regret our tardiness."

Gildan scanned the horizon and focused on the mountains to the east. He had no inclination where to begin. No true place in Londor spoke to his soul, though a southerly direction was his first preference. The elf had been to many of the planet's kingdoms. The Dunane Kingdom was close to the northern tip of the continent, with only Arnanor's homeland lying farther above. If they wished to reach the southern edge and its ocean, they must cross twelve countries. Gildan knew that southward lay a greater chance for a lead.

Arnanor drew as near to Gildan as possible. "What are you thinking? Is the responsibility of leading too far a burden for you?"

"Not at all," said Gildan. "I've led expeditions many times before, Prince. I will never relinquish my authority to you." He pondered. "I am merely recalling the evils I have defeated before, in case they might give me a clue."

"You do not have a clue thus far?" Arnanor asked. "We are following you blindly?"

"I have ideas, yet nothing solid."

"Well, amuse me with an idea."

"I will lead the company south to cover more ground."

"South?" Arnanor laughed. "That will not do, mercenary. I say we ride west. My family has enemies old and new there."

"My intuition does not speak of the west. South, say I."

Arnanor continued arguing, and Seth joined the elves' debate. The three voices drowned one another out until at last Gildan ended the nonsense. "Enough!" Gildan turned to Lorn first. "What say you on the subject?"

"Please leave me out of this, sir," Lorn replied.

"Prince Muron?" Gildan turned to the younger prince.

"He has no voice in the matter," Arnanor finished for him. "I speak for the three of us and I say westward."

"Malander?"

Malander stared off into the distance. "What difference does it make?" He glanced at Gildan for a brief moment, then returned his gaze to the hazy horizon. "I don't care what direction you choose, elf. We will not succeed in time to save this worthless planet. All is lost. Just lead us to our deaths, will you?"

Seeing movement, Gildan turned his head to the forest and almost doubted his eyes. Someone was walking out of the woods--a robed figure trudging alongside a brown steed. Gildan's eyes shot wide and he immediately leaped down from his saddle. The robed man's face was concealed by the deep blue hat he wore. Smoke poured out of his mouth, rising thick from his shadowed form. He seemed not to see Gildan and the six others on the hill as he climbed slowly. "I cannot believe my sight," Gildan murmured.

The robed man looked up to see the elf-mercenary strolling toward him. "Gildan Gundagrinn!" he said. "A sweet surprise I have found this day!"

"Randor!" Gildan cried with glee. "It is a blessing to see you alive!"

"Indeed it is." The two embraced in a long hug.

Gildan pulled back first and looked Randor over, half believing the wizard actually was there. The elf's memories were again flooded with the events of two months ago when the two witnessed the tragedy of Beldas. "I watched you die," Gildan said softly. "I laid you to rest in the cavern. It was not an easy thing to do." He lowered his head in sadness.

"Nonsense."

"How long did you remain in Erogd?"

"Not long."

"You must tell me what happened to you after the Obinoth and I left that accursed place."

"I will tell you all about it at another time. There are other pressing matters at the moment."

"Very well."

"What is going on here?" Lorn inquired.

"It is too early to tell," Seth answered, looking on.

"So how have you been?" Randor asked, inspecting the elf's eccentric attire. He puffed on his pipe and slid his dark-tinted spectacles up his nose. "You still haven't changed in your dress, I see."

"I am well. Even in this tragic time my fortune grows and my skills are at their peak." Gildan looked at his clothing and added, "You know I dress in the finest materials." He patted Randor on the shoulder and said, "I have missed you."

"As I have missed you, Gildan." Randor puffed on his pipe, then said, "Let us now leave these sentiments aside for a while."

Gildan nodded respectfully. "What draws you in this direction?"

"A matter of great importance," replied the wizard.

"Seems we are all in haste this day."

"True."

"It is unfortunate that our paths make this chance crossing. I must leave your side now in answer to King Zelok." Gildan peered over his shoulder and made sure none of his followers listened in on the private conversation. Leaning nearer to Randor, the elf whispered, "Perhaps you can advise me on a starting place for..."

"For finding the moon?" Randor asked.

"Yes."

"A simple task you ask of me. I will assist you and your companions with a single point of reference."

"Are you not bound elsewhere?"

The wizard gave a faint smile. "I was under way to Norganas, but I do not feel like walking all that way," Randor replied wryly. "I am bound to Zelok's plea; his prayers have been filling the fields' winds for eight weeks now. Though he did not specifically ask for me, he did ask for one of the Randor Order to assist him. I do not know what my other brothers are facing at this time, so I decided to aid Zelok." Randor shook his head and reached into his cloak; pulling out a small black pouch, he topped off his tobacco pipe. Closing his eyes, he took in a long draw of smoke. "You can tell me what Zelok said to you as we head south."

Gildan felt relieved that his intuition still functioned. "So the clue we need does indeed lie to the south."

"Perhaps." Randor paused. "We will go southeast, actually. I have an old friend who is very wise and powerful, who dwells not far from here. I know he will guide us to our destination."

"Your wisdom cannot help us?"

"In many things it still suffices, but in situations such as this, it fails me. This is beyond any of us, Gildan."

"So the great Randor Miithra lives," Arnanor's voice called out. Gildan and Randor looked up at the prince. "And he comes to Dunane of all places. I take it you are here to aid the investigation of the missing moon."

The wizard responded with a quick glance from under his spectacles. Arnanor smirked, hardly daring to believe in whose company he now stood. The tales and legends of Randor Miithra had reached every corner and dark place of the world, even the far-off towers of the Northern Kingdom. In all the prince's years, he had never thought highly of

any Randor, nor even seen one before. Arnanor had always taken the words of wizards with a large grain of salt, disregarding most of what they said.

"What draws you hence, young princes?" Randor asked, knowing that their being here would not go over well with the Council, whom he served.

"Don't worry, Randor," Gildan said. "No one in the Northern Kingdom knows they are here. The Council will not find out. The way I see it, they are but mere mercenaries from the North."

"You agreed to this?" Randor inquired. "I am surprised at you."

"It was my words that allowed the Northern elves into the company. They are under my command." Gildan readjusted his gloves and said, "Now that you are here, you complete the company. I give you control over the party if you wish it."

"Though I would not usually agree with this," Randor said, "I will welcome them. I welcome all who seek to help in this time of trouble." As the two started up the hill side by side, Gildan took up the reins and mounted. Those of the company introduced themselves, and Randor only touched his hat in acknowledgment. "We have tarried here long enough, I should say," the wizard said, mounting his horse in one graceful motion. "If you want to follow my lead, then I ask that you charge forth in my shadow." As he spurred his horse, the seven bolted down the hill after him.

They rode south, through the Dunane Forest without stopping, and within four hours they were beyond Zelok's realm. Many stories were told, and Sir Geil sang long songs for Muron's entertainment. Crossing the Caldron Hills, they reached the Silver Field, where they turned southeast. Gildan and Randor spoke the whole way, with Gildan filling in all the details he had received in Dunane. The sun sank toward the horizon, making Seth and Lorn dread nightfall. In the distance rose a line of mountains clad in thick forest. The company was approaching the Akros Mountains, the secret abode of Randor's friend, the Oracle.

As a precaution, he led them into the forest some miles away from the base of the Akros. "We should be safe here," Randor said, dismounting in a small opening not far from the entrance to the woods. The trees were gnarled horribly, and the dark canopy of leaves shielded the company from weather and prying eyes. The others dismounted, leaving their horses by the trees, and marched into the clearing. A small fire pit, recently used, lay in the center, ringed by white stones.

"An old campsite," Seth said. "Safe, you say? How do you know no one will be returning to this fire tonight?"

"This was my place of rest just yesterday. There are no others who would come into this forest these days." Randor took a seat by the pit and relaxed. "The Oracle goes unnoticed by the world, and the forest is all but lifeless. If any desired to live here, they would struggle to survive." He paused and looked about them. "But I have compassion for this forest. It used to be so beautiful in the autumn months." All sat around the fire pit except Seth, who prepared to hunt for the night's provisions.

"I will return shortly," he said as he walked back to his horse. Taking his bow, he soon vanished in the woods.

With a wave of his hand, Randor ignited the damp wood in the pit, and a flame sprang to life, warming the travelers. Its light graced the entire clearing, yet no farther.

In the campsite, Malander sat in the same manner he rode--away from the others--and kept his back to the company. The Northern elves huddled close together and spoke

in their native tongue, keeping their affairs to themselves. The elf-mercenary and Randor brought their tobacco pipes out and lit them.

"This place is somehow unaffected by the weather," Randor said. He looked up into the swaying canopy of leaves.

"Did you see this Oracle yesterday?" asked Gildan.

"No," he replied. "I arrived just as night took over the world. I dare not disturb him after sunset. It would be..." He paused. "It would be unsafe; I will leave it at that."

"Dangerous?"

"Let us not discuss this in the open, my friend. We have much still to say of our separate ventures, do we not?"

"We haven't the time to complete them to their ends," Gildan answered. Both laughed, knowing it was true. Gildan drew out his sword and laid it across his lap, inspecting its condition before letting go of the hilt. The sword was an uncommon weapon for an elf--no other of his kind would ever consider arming himself with a blade over forty inches long. "What type of tobacco are you using these days, Randor?"

"Esdacor," Randor muttered around the pipe clamped between his teeth. "My pouch soon grows bare, I am afraid."

"I am willing to share some Goldtrine I purchased in Dunane." Gildan reached into a pocket, pulled out a small white pouch, and shook it with delight. "My belongings are yours as well."

"Even your vast hoard of gold?"

"I wouldn't press my good standing, Randor," the elf replied with a grin.

Arnanor stared at the flickering fire. Not satisfied with its size, he snapped his fingers to gain Sir Geil's attention. "Take Muron and yourself for more firewood."

"Yes, my lord." He stood, as did the young prince. Muron stayed at the elf-knight's side as they disappeared into the thick brush nearby.

Seth returned to the fire, carrying a brace of four plump fowls--a type of partridge known as red hearths. Lorn, in awe of his friend's consummate bowmanship, welcomed him by making room on the log where he sat. Seth tossed the birds to the ground and looked at Randor. The wizard nodded and said, "Good work, Sir Knight."

"Thank you, sir." Seth knelt to the ground, and he and Lorn began plucking the long feathers from the birds. He suddenly felt very hungry.

Arnanor smiled and looked at his companions with disdain. Dreams were constantly in his thoughts about the future, when he would become monarch of the Northern Kingdom. Arnanor would never see the others in the company as equals--not even his own brother. He inspected the gold facets on his precious armor. The climate was warmer than he was accustomed to, but he didn't complain or wish to lighten his load, for wearing the royal armor gave him a feeling, if not of invincibility, at least of superiority.

"The food shouldn't be long," Lorn announced as he stretched the first bird on green wands over the fire. He rubbed his hands in the warmth and sat beside Seth to admire the roasting meat.

"This will be a decent meal," Seth commented. He glanced at Arnanor, who was impatiently awaiting the return of his brother and Geil. Both appeared moments later with armfuls of wood of various colors and sizes. It would be more than enough to get them through the night.

Randor looked like a statue as he stared blankly into the dancing tails of the blaze. The air around him was enveloped with the sweet smell of Goldtrine as its smoke swirled upward. Geil bent down close to the wizard, placed the logs on the ground, and tossed some of the smaller pieces in, sending red-gold sparks up into the night.

"Any thoughts on Beldas, Randor?" Seth inquired. Though he hadn't had time yet to speak to the wizard on the matter, he had no doubt that Randor would come up with an answer from all the lifetimes of experience and knowledge he possessed.

"None at the present time," Randor answered. "We do not need to be hasting about without a plan. We shall know tomorrow; I promise you this."

It bothered Randor greatly that he had not found a solution for Londor's troubles. In his eight thousand years, he had mended the problems of many kingdoms without delay, but this situation was steeped in an evil much older and more cunning than any he had ever seen. Whoever or whatever was at the bottom of this diabolical plot against Londor was no stranger to secrecy and darkness.

Lorn attended to the roasting meat, feeling of value for the first time since he left Beowulken. Juices trickled down in long strands and met the fire with a hiss. The dwarf thought about the drawing he had begun in Zelok's palace. The charcoal in his satchel seemed to call for his hand to move it deftly across the paper. His nerves calmed at the prospect of a normal evening--something he had not seen in two long weeks.

"Seems like a clear night," Gildan said as he looked up into the canopy. His view fell to a gap within that showed the lone moon creeping slowly across the black sky. He still felt strange at seeing it alone in the heavens.

"Fortunately for me, I missed the storms of the elven valley," Randor said. He removed his hat and stroked back his tangled hair. "Wretched weather, I should imagine."

"Fourteen straight days of it, the elves told me," Seth added.

Arnanor was consumed with disgust, miffed at not having his usual private tent and a royal battalion surrounding him, at his beck and call. As regret began to gnaw at him, he grew unsure why he had ever decided to enlist with such a shabby company. No one knew where to begin the investigation, and all in all, the motley group seemed most unpromising. To make things even worse, now he had to follow the orders of a Randor. Ultimately, though, the prince knew that it was his own choice to be here, and he would see this journey through--even at the cost of his own life. Though Arnanor was not concerned with the entire world's suffering, he could not abide seeing the Northern Kingdom fall into ruin. The rain still fell in his father's realm, and the rivers flowed more wildly with each passing day. The icebergs were melting rapidly, and a mood of impending disaster plagued the prince's mind. He glanced at Muron and Geil, who seemed content with their surroundings. *May this night end soon*, Arnanor said to himself.

"Why has the weather turned so inclement, anyhow?" Lorn asked as he turned the birds on the fire. "Does the moon have a role in this?"

"Yes," Randor replied, blowing a great ring of smoke into the air. "Much of the world--elves especially--relies on the twin moons." He pointed up into the heavens, to where Beldas should be. "For when Cadmor and Beldas are aligned with the God Star, it releases the purest mana." All but Malander and Arnanor listened to Randor. "Magic is manifested, giving the elves their life force, wisdom, prosperity, and spirit." Seth had heard all this earlier from Zelok, and he knew that Lorn had lost interest earlier in the elf-

king's words and no doubt was doing so now.

"What will happen if we do not succeed?" Muron asked. Although the scholars of the Northern Kingdom had lectured him on what to expect if the source of power was not rebalanced, Muron had never believed them--until now. "I thought all of those stories about drawing mana from the moons was a fable."

"Do not be so naive," Arnanor snapped, coming out of his despair, ashamed to hear such foolishness from his own blood. "You know, Muron, that our way of life and power is directly linked to the formation of the moons. Without the heavens, we will all die in vain!"

"This past month I have seen the beginnings of the world's ruin," said Randor. "The harvest is small, and great kingdoms are withering." Sighing, he confessed, "Even I become weaker, and over time I will be destroyed."

"I will not let that happen," Gildan proclaimed with all his heart. "You are too dear to me."

"I know," Randor answered softly. "You hold my undying trust, my good elf."

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Lorn interrupted. Gildan and Randor looked at the dwarf. "The food is ready if you are hungry. It isn't much, but it's better than boiled thistle, at least." He smiled and stoked the fire with a pine knot. This particular camp, anyway, was not as bad as he had feared. After studying the darkened meat, he brought the roasted birds one by one away from the flames and passed them out to his companions. "Please eat, everyone."

The food was devoured in a twinkling. Seth uncorked the first water skin and passed it to Lorn. As it made its way to Muron, the young prince drank and tried to give it to Arnanor, who shook his head and refused to touch it. "Have some water, brother," Muron encouraged.

"Sir Geil," Arnanor spoke regally.

Geil placed his half a partridge on the forest floor and stood before his master at once. "At your command, my liege."

"Bring my canteen from my steed at once."

"Yes, my lord." Geil hurried across the clearing to the prince's horse and untied a hidden skin of pure water from the North, which he brought to his master. After taking a long drink, Arnanor passed the skin to Muron. Not wanting it, Muron passed the Northern canteen to Geil.

Arnanor frowned and leaned over in anger. "Give that back to Muron!" he yelled.

"But I have already drunk," the young prince said, pointing at the skin of communal water. Arnanor snatched the inferior canteen and flung it through the air, though Malander caught it before it could burst on the ground.

"This hostility of yours cannot remain if you wish to travel with me," Randor advised. "Set aside your arrogance until you leave my side. This is one thing I insist on from you."

Arnanor didn't acknowledge the wizard but stared into the fire. "Who is he to tell me what to do?" he muttered under his breath. "Foolish wizard."

"You know what I am capable of, Prince," Randor answered, hearing every word the elf spoke. "You will respect me no matter what. You will also respect those around you.... We must band together for the purpose--search your heart for the higher calling."

"You expect me to trust *you*?" Arnanor blasted. "I have no reason to!" He glared at

Randor. "You admitted yourself that you do not know where we are to go."

"Not even the wisest and eldest of creatures know everything. I can only do what I can until my time on Londor ends. Still I learn, even at this great age. I yearn for knowledge so that I might pass it to those needing guidance."

"I find it hard to believe that with all your years, not even one notion about the moon's vanishing speaks to your soul," Arnanor said.

"I never assume, my proud but misguided prince."

After this interchange, a mood of silence settled over the company. The lone moon shone through a gap in the canopy. No clouds blocked its view, and the company looked up, each entertaining his own ideas about Beldas's disappearance. A gentle breeze rustled the trees. Randor pondered long over what should be done, but nothing came to him. His wisdom had failed him thus far, but he had to put it right, for no other on Londor could complete the task that was his to do. He then pondered whether the answer he sought lay in the higher whisperings of the wind.

"Any thought yet?" Gildan asked. "With all of me, I cannot conjure a solid idea."

Randor stood and placed his hat on his head. "I must meditate," he said, and turned away from the company. He strolled away to the south and was swallowed by the night.

"What's he doing?" asked Seth. "Is he leaving us?"

"He will never abandon us, Seth," Gildan answered. "Randor has gone to higher ground, to listen to the winds."

"To hear what exactly?" Lorn asked.

"The prayers of the world."

"How can this be?" the dwarf replied. "Is Randor a god?"

"He is a servant of Ethindar, Master of the elves and Lord of creation. Randor has the ability to hear the prayers meant for the gods, as all servants of Ethindar do."

"A servant?" Lorn was amazed. In his many years he had heard very little of wizards, magicians, and the various gods. His life as an artisan now showed, revealing his narrow learning of the wider world--indeed, Lorn had a hard enough time keeping up with the affairs of Beowulken. "How long has he served Ethindar?"

"Eight thousand years," Gildan calculated, watching Lorn's eyes growing even wider. "During that time, however, he does return to his master every so often."

"Is he immortal?"

"No," Gildan answered sadly. "He can die." The elf then laughed at the idea, which he thought ludicrous. "But do not fear. There are none living that could possibly accomplish the feat of slaying him. Not even a swarm of dark dragons could lay a scratch on him."

"He has failed on many journeys," Arnanor sneered. His opportunity to discredit Randor had finally come. He wanted to lower the company's faith in its leader, and with Randor gone from his presence, nothing could now stop his tongue from speaking his mind. "He is vulnerable, just like any other mortal. I am sure you all heard of his downfall with the Obinoth. Gildan, you were there. You and the Obinoth thought him to be dead after the moon disappeared. If Randor was so powerful, he would not have yielded so instantly to the moon's absence. I know of no one else who sickened on the night of that tragic event. You give this antique wizard credit undeserved."

"Randor Miithra is one servant," Gildan defended. "Never disparage his works!"

Arnanor gloated as Gildan glared at him.

Muron pulled the fur around his neck closer to his skin and drew closer to Geil for warmth. He had already begun to miss his homeland and its wonders: the snow-capped mountains, the white pines, his father's poetry, and his mother's tender touch. Though Geil had sung many songs to the young prince when times were calm, keeping his heart filled with music for many hours, his guardian could not sing forever, and it was at these times that Muron felt homesick. He noticed Sir Geil looking at him out of the corner of his eye. Muron was far from helpless, but because of his frail build, his father had ordered his most skilled and trusted knight to keep safe his second son.

"Another song, my liege?" Geil offered.

"That would be wonderful," Muron answered. "Too long has the air been denied your wonderful verse. You must sing more often, my friend." Seth and Lorn sat up, eager to hear another song of the Northern Kingdom.

Gildan rose to his feet, saying, "I will be in the presence of Randor if you need me," and he, too, left the fire. He heard the beginning strains of Geil's song as he left, but now was not the time for music.

Taking a circuitous route to the hill's peak above the forest, he strolled about and observed the lands lit by the moon in the distance. To the southeast he saw five orbs of light on the horizon, sitting on a cliff. "The Oracle," he whispered, as if hardly daring to speak its name. Gildan was curious about Randor's comment that this Oracle was unsafe after sunset. He wanted some answers. Slowly he refocused on Randor's position and awaited the time to approach.

There at the hill's center stood Randor with his head tilted back, remaining perfectly still. Hair whipping violently under his hat in the gusting winds, he murmured a soft spell to bolster his fading senses.

Though Gildan tried to listen to the faint words, he was outwitted by the wind. At last, Randor inhaled deeply and turned his sight to Gildan. The mercenary gazed curiously at the orbs of light.

"Join me, will you?" said Randor. "Your company is much needed. There are items of business you need to know."

Chapter Five: Ill News

"I see you gaze to the next leg of our journey," said Randor.

"Yes," Gildan answered. "Trouble, if you ask me."

"This is our only choice."

"I cannot help but have a grave feeling about this, Randor. It is an unshakable emotion. A great shadow lingers in my soul about this Oracle."

"When we stand before him tomorrow, your doubts will diminish."

"But can he truly aid us?"

"I honestly cannot tell you," Randor replied. "I have known him for three thousand years, and never has his wisdom failed me. This particular journey to his halls might prove different this time."

Gildan tamed his billowing cape and rested his hands at his side. "Will you be returning soon?"

"I will be among the gathering shortly hereafter. There are still pressing affairs within the winds, and I must attend to them....Obligations from my master beckon me here."

"Do tidings grow worse each day?"

"Long is the trail of voices in the air. The pleas have never been this great."

"What do they pray for?"

"Kings from many realms believe that the gods have stricken the world of its balance; they ask for the return of Beldas. They are confused why it is gone. Many blame themselves, thinking their leadership was flawed. They see..." He paused. "They clearly see the suffering of their people--without magic and ill beyond reach of any medicine. Wars rage this very moment, and kingdoms ask for my assistance." He shook his head, saddened to know he could not save those in need. "My soul aches and is torn in every direction across Londor. I cannot preserve all."

Gildan heard the despair in the wizard's voice and watched him slump in fatigue. It was a condition he had never seen in his old friend. "You are only one servant, Randor, and cannot be everywhere at once. Do what you can, and give your greatest effort. You exceed all my standards, and I admire you for that."

Randor nodded. "I know, Gildan. This world is in peril and needs my strength. If I could make one prayer to Ethindar, I would ask for an abundance of Randors to protect the planet. Alas, though, I am one of three who remain. I am thankful to be on this quest with you, Gildan."

"Aye, my good wizard, aye. We can find our way through the darkest of days. The sights we have seen are things few shall ever encounter." Gildan smiled as he dreamed of his grand future, imagining great wealth and many victories in battle. He never doubted that his legendary deeds would always be remembered. Looking to Randor, he knew that their friendship was important to them both. The elf-mercenary would follow him to the ends of the world and well beyond, even to the fiery depths of the underworld. Randor was the only person Gildan would sacrifice his life for--the clearest indication of just how dear the wizard was to him. Both had fought together many times, and this journey would be no different. Indeed, it was Randor who, over a hundred years ago, had once aided Gildan in obtaining the Dragonslayer sword, Marghelor, from the wicked clutches of Lord Zen-Forlak; the memories of that dark journey still made Gildan shiver to this day.

"Return to us soon," the elf said. "We need rest for the long road ahead." He patted Randor's shoulder and turned to descend the hill.

"Do not tell the others about the concerns of the outside world. I need the company's concentration here in this moment and task. The cares of Londor are mine alone to worry about."

"Our bond is strong, and I will never do anything to ruin that."

"Many thanks, young elf-warrior." Randor resumed his focus and loosed his soul to the winds for the last summons of the night. Though he would not be able to receive the entire collection of prayers, he would endure as many as possible. "I will return promptly," he said. Gildan was already on his way to the camp. He needed rest, and the morning would come soon enough.

In the firelight, the company was in deep conversation, guessing at details of the quest. All had their doubts about the next day's agenda. "What do we know about this prophet whom we are forced to meet?" Arnanor said, shaking his head. "Magic should not dominate our path. I have never concurred with such nonsense!"

"Yet we cannot afford to overlook any help we may find," Seth replied.

Malander simply laughed to himself, finding the argument amusing.

Talk ceased as Gildan strode into the firelight. Arnanor could not conceal his curiosity about the meeting on the hill, and indeed, all but Malander eagerly awaited Gildan's report. The mercenary lifted his sword off the cloth on the ground and began cleaning the blade, making eye contact with no one.

"Tell me your account," Arnanor demanded.

"Of which do you speak? I have many stories of interest."

"This one, in which you spend time away from my presence."

"I merely went to assess Randor's condition," he replied plainly. "A bit weary, but overall he is well." He went back to polishing his blade.

"What news do you bring?"

"None."

"You spoke not a word to him?"

"Randor was deep within a trance. Who am I to break into his divine reverie?"

"Who are *you*?" Arnanor began, trying to hold back a derisive laugh. "Why, you are the great Gildan Gundagrín, master of the sword, and the most renowned mercenary in the entire world!"

Gildan laughed and took no offense. "Indeed, I am all these things and more, but I have never been one to provoke allied wizards. If you want answers, then I suggest you take your questions to Randor."

"In time I will," Arnanor proclaimed confidently as he pointed his finger at Gildan.

"What were you discussing on my return?"

"We were at odds about this Oracle friend of Randor's," Seth replied.

"Ah, yes, the Oracle," Gildan whispered.

"What can you say about this?" Seth asked, hoping to calm the battle of words.

"No two here seem to have the same idea."

"I say nothing," Gildan replied sharply.

"You must say something!" said the angered prince.

"Your raised voice gains you nothing," Gildan retorted calmly, growing tired of

Arnanor's intemperance.

Muron, uneasy at the darkened forest around him, kept constant watch over his shoulder. No one but Geil noticed the prince's glances. Though Muron's sense of hearing had decreased somewhat in the two months since the moon Beldas's vanishing, he could not dismiss the foreign noises that seemed close by. He held his eyes open as long as he could without blinking, so as not to miss anything.

"Geil?" he whispered.

"Yes?"

"Do you...hear that?"

"I do not detect any strange sounds, my lord. I would suppose that those you hear are the natural sounds of this forest."

"I can clearly distinguish something odd afoot."

"What are you talking about?" Arnanor asked, thinking his brother foolish.

"Unfriendly sounds."

"Can you be more descriptive?" Gildan asked.

"Wait," Seth whispered. "I, too, can hear something."

"And I," Lorn added. "Faint...but it is there."

"Wolves?" Seth asked Lorn.

Lorn nodded. "Perhaps so."

A long, eerie howl rang out over the woods, followed by what sounded like a creaking and rustling of distant trees. Gildan and Arnanor were quick to their feet; the mercenary already held his drawn sword. Arnanor stretched out his empty hand, and Geil fetched the prince's sword from where it leaned against the log. The elf-prince held his blade high in readiness. Lorn clung close to Seth, and Muron respectfully took cover behind his guardian. Malander's eyes shifted wildly, as if a welter of preposterous ideas tumbled through his wretched mind. Arnanor turned about slowly with his blade pointed outward.

"That is a sound not familiar to this region," Gildan stated. "I think a small investigation is in order."

"Yes," Arnanor agreed.

"Someone needs to tell Randor," Lorn said meekly. "He would know what to do." Though he was surrounded by a group of armed companions, it brought him no comfort. More howls erupted all around them, growing in volume. Lorn moaned and buried his face in his hands, saying, "I cannot contend with this."

"We can handle this without Randor," Gildan said.

"Brother, what shall we do?" Muron asked from behind Geil, who shielded the prince from the unseen threat. The knight, scanning the trees for a possible clue, dared not relax his guard. The sounds were all too familiar to Geil, but not wishing to alarm the others, he remained silent and performed his primary function.

"Marghelor and I are eager to spill blood," Gildan proclaimed, holding his blade proudly before him. "Let evil come."

Malander finally came around and stood in grim anticipation, his sword still sheathed but his fingers resting on the pommel. Weeks had passed since he had a reason to use his weapon in combat. This was an opportunity he longed for, for it allowed him to forget his sorrows and fill the great void in his soul, to quench the burning fury deep inside him, which nothing in the world seemed able to extinguish.

Muron felt the sheath at his waist and realized that his sword was missing. Looking to his steed in horror, he saw his blade, still latched to the saddle. "My sword..." he gasped. "I must retrieve it."

"No, you will not," Arnanor replied boldly. Frantic, Muron leaned over and tugged on his brother's shoulder. "You heard me correctly, Muron."

"But why?"

"This is not your place. It is my duty, ultimately, to look after you. I will not lose you to something as trivial as this." Arnanor stepped closer to Geil.

"Your orders, my lord?"

"Remain here with Muron for the time being. Do not stray unless I order it. The remainder of the company and I leave for the surrounding forest."

"As you wish, sire. I await your next command."

"Come," Gildan said, gesturing to Seth and Malander. "You two will accompany the prince and me. Lorn, you will stay behind, if that's what you fancy." Lorn nodded his head and made it clear to the mercenary that he did not want to fight. Gildan strode away, leading Malander and Arnanor into the dark forest. Before Seth was able to attach himself to the group, the dwarf's shaking hands stopped him.

"What am I to do?" Lorn asked.

Seth looked down at the frightened dwarf and said, "Just remain calm until we get back. You will be much safer here than you would be with the four of us. Stay by the fire with the Northern elves."

Lorn looked up at Seth with eyes glazed over by panic. It tore at Seth that he must leave his friend behind, but he had no choice, for the other three were already heading away, and he could not remain any longer.

"Highbinder," Gildan's voice called out with urgency. "Quicken your pace at once."

Striding into the darkness, Seth soon found his cohorts, treading softly through the thick brush. Branches yielded to the pressure of their footfalls with a muffled snap as they moved in the blackness, swords at the ready.

The only sounds they heard now were their stealthy footfalls and the faint chirr of crickets. Soon the trees thinned out as they approached a clearing on rising ground.

"That hill," Arnanor said. "I would risk gaining it."

"You read my mind," Gildan said. "It will give us a brief advantage over the forest." In brighter moonlight again, he turned to those behind him and motioned them ahead.

Seth nodded and took in a deep breath, quickening his pace as they started up the hill through ankle-high grass. In the pale moonlight he could see the grand sweep of forest stretching for miles, with a line of mountains against the distant horizon.

The wind picked up as they gained the hilltop, where Gildan stood in front of his companions, staring into the sky. He could vaguely see Randor on the only other hill in the area, with a mile of dark forest lying between them. It appeared that the wizard did not hear the howls--or chose not to acknowledge them.

"Do we stop here?" Seth asked.

"For a moment, yes," Gildan replied, "though we cannot linger too long."

"Shouldn't we return for torches?" Seth inquired. "That would give us a greater advantage."

"We haven't the time," said Gildan.

Hearing a faint sound to his left, Seth whipped around. "Did you hear that?"

"Let us continue," Gildan ordered. He decided to keep an eastward heading, knowing that Rador was to their south and would soon disappear from their sight. Gildan took a last look at his mentor as he led the way once more down the hill, toward the forbidding forest, but after only a few steps, he stopped in mid stride, saying, "Hold fast." The sound he had heard was far closer now, though no one had yet seen its source. "Reveal yourself and you may survive!" Gildan growled.

"Survive?" said Arnanor. "I strike to destroy!"

From out of the dark brush, a massive form leaped high, soaring through the air and slamming hard to the ground, where it dug its sharp claws into the earth. The company retreated a few steps and gazed in horrified fascination at the seven-foot creature standing before them: a werewolf. The eyes of the beast, burning like bright red embers, were focused intently on the small group. A pair of long and twisted horns grew before its ears, dull in the light, yet menacing. It opened its great, slaving maw, showing long fangs. The werewolf raised its bulging, muscled arms, covered by tangled white fur. Though the monster was outnumbered, its sheer size and power made it a formidable adversary nonetheless. Moreover, Gildan and Arnanor were not fooled by its lone presence, knowing that its kind traveled in clans.

"Never have I seen such a beast!" Seth gasped, almost losing his grip on his sword. "My years of training now lie useless!"

"Foolishness," Gildan replied, displeased at the knight's lack of confidence.

"We are surrounded," Malander informed his companions. But with a quick glance in all directions, Gildan found this information to be merely a figment of the grim man's disordered imagination. Undoubtedly, though, they would be surrounded soon enough, making victory harder to obtain.

The company's enemy stood inert, each muscle tense, ready to strike. Keeping its eyes on its newfound prey, it opened its fists, and ten long, curved claws splayed out from its long, slender fingers. Rearing back, the werewolf howled deeply, then unleashed a demonic laugh. Squinting its eyes, it spoke. "Unarm yourselves, mortals!" This beast appeared to be a more advanced breed, for not all werewolves could speak. "Flee not, for I will only rip you apart more slowly if you do."

"Who are you?" Arnanor asked. Strangely, he felt as though he had seen this creature before. The prince's memory was failing him. He had seen many werewolves before in his land, during the decades of war between the Northern Kingdom and the werewolf legions. They were a fearsome adversary, to be sure, but many evil foes had fallen victim to Arnanor's blade, and whoever this beast was, he would not yield to it or any other. Yet Arnanor did find it strange that the attacks on his kingdom by the werewolves had lessened in the past year--in fact, no recent accounts were recorded at all.

"I am Yindraken, Lord of the Mazazuken Clan!" the beast declared with great gravity. Arnanor knew that this clan had been exalted above all its kindred, and that all wolf-kind feared them.

"I know all too well of you, foul creature!" Arnanor shouted, barely able to contain his hatred. Knowing that the Mazazuken were inclined to a boreal climate, he was baffled to find his enemy here. The prince was proud that his people had kept the Mazazuken at bay for thousands of years, though he did feel sadness at the number of

lives sacrificed to ensure the kingdom's freedom. Years of suppressed images and memories long buried in his young mind now broke open like a new wound. "Fate has brought you to me this night," he proclaimed. "You and your clan shall fall!"

Yindraken the werewolf laughed in derision as he stepped forward from the partial shadow and loomed closer to Gildan. Seth retreated and stumbled behind Malander. "The Mazazuken will never fall!" he proclaimed.

"By my hand I will see it done!" said the prince. "I am Arnanor, heir to the throne of the Northern Kingdom!"

"You..." Yindraken hissed. "You should not have told me this. Now I will take special care to kill you myself. My brothers will no longer fall victim to your demonic elves." Yindraken sprang for Arnanor's throat, his fangs bared. Gildan, who stood between the prince and the beast, ducked quickly as the beast soared overhead. Arnanor began his retreat and parried each of the werewolf's powerful attacks, which came furiously and without a pause. As precise as Arnanor was with his sword, he was not able to wound the beast.

As the lust for battle flowed through them both like a raging river, the world around them was shut out. But it was to Yindraken's disadvantage that he disregarded the other three of Arnanor's company, for Gildan, Malander, and Seth quietly surrounded the beast. Arnanor swung the great sword, slash after slash, as he fought for his life, drawing away to the edge of the hill's flat peak. Meanwhile, his three companions sidestepped to maintain a constant encirclement. Seth, covering the area behind Arnanor, felt his footing slip on the incline and fell backward.

Yindraken showed great skill in unarmed combat, for as Arnanor well knew, the use of swords, spears, or any other weaponry was considered beneath the Mazazuken. With blinding speed he spun around and unleashed a viciously clawed kick. Slip-stepping to his left, the prince swung his blade downward onto the wolf's thigh. But no harm came to Yindraken, and suddenly a powerful forward kick struck Arnanor in the pit of the stomach. The elf-prince's armor provided scant cushioning, and the blow knocked the breath from him. Curling around the kick, Arnanor was launched backward into the night and went tumbling violently down the back of the hill.

Gildan, enraged, could no longer stand back, and raising his blade, he rushed at Yindraken's back. The wolf, meanwhile, so gloated in his victory over the prince of Northern Kingdom that he was oblivious to the world around him. Closer came the elven mercenary, ready to strike down the evil, but just as his long blade came into deadly reach, Yindraken leaped over Gildan's head. Gildan spun about to continue the assault, and Yindraken retreated slightly, shaking his finger at the elf and laughing. With Malander nearing the enemy, and Seth regaining his feet, the company had Yindraken caught in a triangle once more. Without any real strategy, they fought bravely on.

But Yindraken continued to counter all their attacks with tremendous speed and power. "Surrender to me!" he yelled.

The company of three suddenly ceased their attack, and the battle paused as Yindraken summoned his buried mana not yet brought to bear. This was the first time the company had to work as one, and it was a difficult struggle. Their battle plan thus far was not effective and there was no point in carrying on in this manner. If they were to dominate this situation, Gildan would have to organize their collective skills. In the pause, the three watched Yindraken gather his strength. Seth leaned forward and placed

his hands on his knees, exhausted and out of breath, and let the tip of his blade sink to the ground. In the midst of his fatigue, he looked up and saw Yindraken staring directly at him. The triangular formation of the company was broken just as quickly as it had formed, and Yindraken was free of threat. The werewolf turned away from his enemies and toward the fallen Arnanor, lying on his back on the hillside. He wanted nothing more than to end the prince's life, thus placing his clan one step closer to mastery over the North. No longer would the elves be the victors. This fueled Yindraken's mind with each long stride he took. He would be remembered as the savior of his people, and for generations hereafter his name would be revered.

"We must act now," said Gildan.

Malander and Seth gave their rattled attention to the mercenary. "What is your advice?" Seth asked.

Gildan paused in short reflection, then said, "Seth, return to the camp and inform the others. We will need Randor's help. There is no doubt that our superior numbers will not last much longer. Yindraken's clan will be here before we know it."

Seth nodded, then realized that he would be alone in the unknown darkness. Captivated by fear, he debated agreeing to the elf's plan. But Lorn's cries suddenly haunted his soul. Seth would never forgive himself if something should happen to his friend.

"Are you listening to me?" Gildan asked, frustrated.

"Yes."

"Then why are you still here?"

Seth bit his lower lip and set his fright aside. "Right. I shall return shortly." He began down the hill to the west as quietly as he could manage. He knew that Randor could ward off the evil with ease, but first Seth had to reach him. The fate of the company, and with them the rest of the world, hinged on his trek to find the wizard. The group's inability to bring down the werewolf puzzled Seth's mind as he pressed on. Many times over he analyzed his techniques, but the answer was always the same: he had executed his sword techniques just as he had been taught, but without managing to put a single mark on his enemy.

Seth was halfway down the hillside when he began to tread more softly, using his toes rather than the flat of his feet. He stayed low to the ground and clenched his cloak in hand so as not to trip, knowing that he was not the best at balance when his nerves were in a dither. Seeing the way clear, he threw stealth to the winds and sprinted toward the forest. Hurdling a small row of thorn bushes, he thumped down on a dirt path. Seth did not know if this was even the correct way to the camp, and he prayed he had guessed right. Deeply he drove into the forest, branches slapping him across his face and chest, yet he did not yield to their sting. As the canopy above him thickened, the moonlight faded quickly, and the blackened land enveloped him as he ran down the twisted path. He still thought of Lorn, wondering what the dwarf was experiencing this very moment. Seth was also concerned with Arnanor, for his own good standing with the Council rested in the well-being of the princes.

The forest was quiet, with not even a rustle of leaves, as if the trees themselves stood frozen in fear of the werewolves.

Where is it? he asked himself, out of breath. His legs began to feel unstable. Seth saw the road fork just ahead--one path leading uphill, where the trees thinned out, and the

other leading down into greater darkness. He did not deliberate but chose the higher ground, and again moonlight appeared as he passed through the unfamiliar forest. Looking up, he saw that he was passing through a clearing--though not the one he desired. This particular setting was in a horrid condition: dead trees uprooted, rotted black leaves crunching with every footfall, and a small, befouled creek running through the clearing's center. Insects swarmed about the stagnant surface. Though Seth was terribly thirsty, he would never drink this vile liquid. The way across was not clear; he would have to maneuver warily through shattered wood and bad water.

From the corner of his sight he saw two shadowed figures move silently from tree to tree; they went past him without sound or confrontation. Chances were, the two either did not notice Seth or were not concerned with him--just yet. "Werewolves," he muttered as he pressed his back along a huge fallen tree trunk. *I must reach Randor.* He crept low, looking around him with every step.

Passing the midpoint of the clearing, he took refuge beneath a tree that leaned heavily to one side. He clasped one hand to his trusted sword and pointed the blade towards the moss-covered ground. He was not alone, and no longer could he trick his mind into thinking otherwise. Leaves rustled behind him; he could hear the faint sound of shallow breathing heard between gusts of the wind. Carefully he peered over his shoulder, but saw nothing. Seth did not like being in mysterious situations, nor did he take any pleasure in being detained from his duties. The gusts of wind increased, lulling the knight into thinking the threat was gone. Perhaps he had just imagined it all. Swallowing his fear, he sprinted ahead to a small gap in the trees, even though knowing that he would be exposed now to anything wishing him harm.

The two Mazazuken kept their distance from Seth for their own amusement, knowing that the human was no match for their powers. Seth's haste was considered an insult, and he had to be stopped, but patience was the key for the Mazazuken to take down this particular prey.

Off into the shadows Seth Highbinder ran, giving the last of his waning strength to the cause. His chosen path crossed many others, but he never strayed from where his feet carried him--this was not a time for second guesses. In the distance he saw a flickering light, which inspired in him a much-needed burst of extra power.

At long last he had found his companions. Only one last obstacle lay in his way--a great tree trunk lying in thick mud on the forest floor. He would have to jump well over six feet to clear it. "Almost there," he whispered. In a moment he would have reinforcements to balance the battle with the Mazazuken. But he could see no signs of movement within the campsite. He ran toward the down log, planted his feet, and leaped as high as he could, reached upward, and pulled, dislodging a chunk of bark. He was over. He looked to the ground below, but then his focus blurred as he collided with an unknown assailant. Tackled in midair, he hit the ground hard, wrapped tightly in the arms of a gray-furred beast. The two rolled through puddles of water and mud until, stopped at last, the enemy pushed off Seth's body and tumbled away, disappearing into the darkness. Seth stood upright and shook his head, trying to dispel the daze. The forest and the firelight blended as if seen through smoked glass, and he could not distinguish anything. His sword fell from his grasp and splashed into the water at his boots as a nauseating pain clenched his stomach. Giving in to the weakness, Seth collapsed in the mud, where he drifted in and out of consciousness, unable to move as he struggled with his inner self.

Stephens/The Stolen Moon of Londo

Had he really come all this way only to fall victim to the Mazaziken?

Chapter Six: A True Fire

As soon as the four left their presence, Geil, Muron, and Lorn heard more foreign sounds coming from the forest. Geil took up his sword and quickly took Muron's sword from the saddle. Lorn looked at both elves with weapons in hand, and it was suddenly apparent to the elves that this dwarf was unarmed. It baffled Muron and Geil to see a member of the Dwarvish race, even one from Beowulken, without a weapon, and Lorn wished now that he had a sword or ax. Without a word, Geil drew a small dirk from his belt. It was fourteen inches in length and rarely used by the elf-knight, kept only as a side arm. The elf handed it promptly to Lorn, who gazed in wonder at its beauty. The hilt was golden with a red-jeweled pommel, with a few elvish letters burned into the blade, though naturally, the dwarf could not read them.

Muron assumed a ready position, yet Geil, noticing that it lacked the form he had been taught, adjusted his stance.

"Use this weapon well, dwarf," Geil said.

"I shall use it to the best of my abilities," replied Lorn. "It is a splendid tool."

"In times of trouble it will protect you." Geil maintained his place by the prince, and as the elves turned their senses to the night, Lorn drew in behind the two, having no inkling what to do. As unseemly as it was, he had to rely on the strength and skill of the elves, and he trusted them completely.

"Whatever you need me to do," Lorn said, "I will do it. Though I am not a fierce warrior as you are, I can follow instructions well enough."

"Offer accepted," Geil answered. "Remain close by, and you will continue on this journey Randor has planned for us."

"Agreed." Lorn held the dirk tightly. Muron gestured for him to mimic his actions, and though Lorn found Muron's technique most uncomfortable, especially in the arms, he kept the weapon pointed toward the heavens as his heart sank in fear.

"Should we follow after the others?" Muron asked. "Something tells me all is not well with my brother...It is a strange feeling. I wish it would go away."

"I am ordered to stay here with you and the dwarf," Geil replied sternly. "This is my only intention until Prince Arnanor issues my next command. Our belongings also need tending, young master."

"My brother is far more important than anything else in this world. These horses and miscellaneous possessions hold no meaning by comparison. Supplies can be replaced..." Muron paused, growing emotional. "My brother cannot be."

Suddenly, from behind the three came a loud noise that sounded like a gasp of air, followed by a sustained sliding sound as of something colliding with muddy ground. Spinning around, they saw a tall, slender figure rise from behind the brush, swaying from side to side as they looked on in new wonder.

"What is that?!" Muron asked, horrified, holding his shaking sword outward.

"Who goes there?" Lorn yelled.

"Silence, both of you!" ordered Geil.

"Seth? Is that you?" Lorn asked, hoping that it was.

"Quiet, dwarf!" Geil blasted. "A torch, quickly!" Lorn grabbed a long blazing brand from the fire and passed it across his body. The flames guttered and crackled as they cut through the air and the brand made its way to Geil's outreached hand. Holding

the torch high, the elf saw a blue-cloaked figure with blond hair caked in mud. Then, in a blinking of an eye, it dropped to the ground.

"Seth!" Lorn cried out. "Dear me, he's hurt."

Geil rushed to the side of the stricken knight and knelt down, placing his sword hand on Seth's shoulder armor, which had been knocked loose by the violent tumble.

"Where are the others?"

But Seth spoke not, his mind still muddled from the attack. He rubbed his forehead, and Geil grew agitated and asked again, "Where are the others, Seth? Where is Prince Arnanor? Tell me!"

"One mile...roughly, away from here...atop a hill."

"Does the prince still live?"

Seth could only nod as he laid his head back in the mud. "Maza..." Seth began. Geil cringed and awaited the rest of the foul word. "Mazazuken have come."

Geil rose with his sword--his hatred for these creatures ran much deeper than Arnanor's. Now he debated whether to keep his oath to stay at the camp, stewing in resentment all the while, or seek revenge against the Mazazuken. This was a chance to settle scores in the drawn-out struggle between the elves and the wolves. He hated that he was not in a position of authority, for many of his fellow knights had fallen in battle against the Mazazuken clan, and any opportunity to serve up death and destruction to his enemy was not to be passed up lightly. Looking down at Seth's ashen face, he heard the distinct sound of wood cracking nearby. "Looks like you led the Mazazuken back to me." Geil smiled and swung his sword down, rousing his spirit to slaughter the evil. "Where is the prince?" Seth looked around himself and pointed weakly to the southeast, then coughed and held his aching chest.

"Geil!" Muron's small voice rang, filled with fright. Imagining the terrible things that could be happening during his short departure, Geil dashed back to the fire.

Lorn and Muron were standing as close to the fire as they could bear. As Geil returned, three large werewolves slunk between the company and their steeds, who became restless and moved about, neighing wildly in fear. Though the three Mazazuken were mighty, they did not compare to Yindraken. Gray fur covered them completely, and their eyes glowed red as their master's did. As two of them dug their claws deep into the wet earth, preparing to spring, the third stood upright and stared menacingly ahead.

"Which direction did they come from?" Geil asked, dumbfounded. He tossed the torch back into the fire and held the hilt of his sword with both hands. "Mazazuken," he hissed.

"I saw not their direction," Muron regretted. "We both were distracted by Seth's return. Before we knew what occurred, they were upon us." The prince lowered his head in shame. "All I could do was cry for help. I am sorry. I knew not what to do."

"You have encountered Mazazuken before," Geil replied sharply.

"Great, mighty gods!"

"Calm yourself, Muron. They can sense your fear."

The Mazazuken knew of these particular elves, and it amused them that revenge would be theirs at long last. The radiating fear given off by Lorn and Muron fed their boldness until the only thing that kept them from attacking was their leader's command.

"I wish Seth were here," Lorn said with fading hope. "We are doomed."

"Why do you come to this place?" Geil asked. Knowing that the Mazazuken had

not followed them from the Northern Kingdom, the elf-knight began to connect answers with questions he had been asking himself for months. Seconds passed with no response from the beasts.

"Perhaps they do not understand," Lorn suggested.

Geil laughed and shook his head. "They know many languages, Lorn. Do not let their ignorance fool you." He decided to use his primary tongue, knowing it would get their attention. "*Malor dei fon drafon Maza?*" Geil waited.

"*Malar xandror tui falcre!*" the leader of the trio replied in laughter, his fiendish voice invading the forest with a supernatural echo.

"What..." Lorn gulped. "What did he say?"

"It speaks of conquering a new adversary."

"Are we that new adversary?"

"Doubtful."

"We need Randor now!" Muron spoke. "We are trapped!"

* * *

After at last managing to stand, Seth staggered southward with his sword clutched in shaking hands. With what faculties he left, he thought only of Randor; he had to find the wizard. Fortunately, the hill he sought was not far. Being cautious not to alert the Mazazuken to his location, he could vaguely hear the sounds of trouble in camp, but he disregarded them, focused intently on his grueling trek through the bristly shrubs.

As he finally reached the hill, Seth breathed a little easier. A mysterious feeling came over him, assuring him that evil could not harm him here. No longer able to endure standing, he was obliged to crawl, yet crawl he did, digging his fingers into the ground to pull him upward. The grassy slope seemed never-ending as his sight began to fail him. "Randor," he whispered. Once more, summoning his last atom of power, he managed again to say, "Randor!"

It was enough. The wizard's concentration was broken, and he turned to see Highbinder collapse facedown in the grass.

Randor rushed to his side, surprised that there should be distress this early in the journey. "What has happened?" He knelt down, turned Seth over, and shook his shoulders. Seth shuddered and raised an arm to his sweaty brow. Randor looked around with sharpened senses.

"We...we need your help," Seth spoke softly. "The camp--hurry back to them, I pray."

A howl pierced Randor's ears for the first time that evening. "Werewolves?" he asked. "*Here?*" Quick to his feet, he tipped up his hat as he backed away, feeling a strong presence of evil. He drew both hands out from the warmth inside his cloak. He was not tempted to draw Seth's blade, knowing the knight would need it on awaking. Magic would prove ample defense against those who opposed this servant of Ethindar. "Seth," he whispered. "Remain here until your senses return. I will right the forest and keep safe our companions." Randor started past Seth but was halted by the appearance of a Mazazuken. The wolf soared through the air with its fearsome claws clutching at Randor. Its mouth bore long, white fangs that gleamed with slaver, desiring only to tear into the wizard's slender form. Randor stood guard over Seth and rubbed his fingers, knowing precisely what spell to cast, knowing also that negotiating with werewolves was out of the question. Magic would be his only recourse.

The Mazazuken hesitated and glanced to the east, where he saw his master locked in battle. The view to the other hill was clear, and Randor, too, watched as Gildan and Malander attempted to ward off three beasts. Randor was unaware of Arnanor's condition, and very much displeased with the two warriors. *The company lies divided more than I thought.* Boldly Randor approached the Mazazuken. Lowering his head, he stretched out his hands to do battle, and whether out of wisdom or out of fright, the Mazazuken retreated and loped off to the east.

Taking a closer look, Randor saw what exactly had occurred. He strolled to the center of the hill once more, where he faced east and placed both hands before him. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and muttered, "*Nara astei mon ustiffei thrathin-seigoh tar leisha.*" Exhaling a cloud of vapor, he watched as a luminous glow rose from his damp hands and three orbs of orange light flickered into form, hovering inches from his palms. As he reopened his eyes, Randor focused on the two Mazazuken closing in on Malander.

All that Randor needed was the opportunity to set loose his magic. He waited for Malander to grant him a path. The grim fighter held his enemies at bay as he feinted and wielded his blade with great skill. Seeing Malander now out of harm's way, Randor thrust his hands forward and sent his powers into the night. The three orbs screamed across the sky, forming comet-like tails behind them as they barely cleared the treetops. The magic's potency loosened Randor's posture as pain racked his body, and he could only pray for fortitude as he watched his work draw nearer to its intended targets.

Chapter Seven: Night's Fire

After watching their messenger sneak away into the dark forest, Gildan and Malander both focused on Yindraken, who was just disappearing over the hilltop. Seth had vanished nicely and without detection, hastening on his way to inform Randor and the others of the fighters' distress. Drawing nearer to Malander, Gildan had a plan that he felt certain would work. Malander, eager for once to hear what the elf had to say, leaned inward as Gildan stood at his side. "I have an unorthodox design in mind," whispered Gildan.

"I'm listening to you, elf," he replied. He gave his ears but kept his eyes on the hill, waiting for Yindraken to return. Even in this quiet moment, Malander's guard was up, for he knew that the battle was not yet near its end. As Gildan spoke the plan, Malander nodded. He found it risky yet interesting, and anyway, he was in the mood for a daring chance, so he agreed to follow the elf's lead.

In the brief respite from fighting, strength returned slowly to their weary bodies. The two cautiously made their way across the barren hill, and all was calm--or so they thought.

The sky was free of clouds, and the moon rode high above the horizon, shining its radiance onto the worried world below. Now the brightest star, the God Star, outshone the single moon, which was not typical at all. Gildan began finally to admit to himself that his life force and strengths as a mercenary were being affected by the absence of one of the heavenly divinities. He could not deny that elvish mana flowed from above, and for reasons unknown, this truth was all that he wished to accept. Gildan had faced greater foes in his many years, and many had fallen with far less effort than he had expended this night. True, Yindraken was a worthy adversary, but Gildan's prowess should outstrip that of the beast.

* * *

Assuming his victory perhaps a bit early as he strolled almost casually to the fallen prince, Yindraken dropped his defenses, forgetting the two enemies he had been pitted against. There lay Arnanor, helpless on his back, his armor bunched uncomfortably. He stared at the moon overhead, unable to move even a finger in his dazed state. His eyelids fluttered rapidly as he fought to keep consciousness. The sword that he bore was out of his grasp, lost as he tumbled down the hill. Unable to defend himself and unaware of the approaching threat, he tried to form a coherent thought.

Though he wanted desperately to stand, his body seemed beyond his command. The dreaded moment came when the Mazazuken lord stood grinning over the prince, ready to claim his victory at long last over the Northern Kingdom--a satisfaction Yindraken had craved for hundreds of years. It would be all too easy to rip his prey apart, but Yindraken had a few smug words of gloating to express first. Slowly he knelt down and grasped Arnanor underneath his chest plate, raising him four feet from the ground. The elf's head tilted back, unable to keep sight of his bane.

"I have waited for this moment for the longest time," said the beast, "and it gives me untold joy to bring your pathetic life to an end. The end of suffering for my brothers is at hand. No longer will we surrender to the elves and be forced back into caves! My father would be proud of me this day had he not been killed by your kind!"

Then, with a snarl, he grasped Arnanor by the hair, lifting his head so that the

prince might see his doom come. Both locked eyes. Arnanor was aware of what was happening, though he showed no sign of fear. Blood flowed in a thin stream down the elf's chin as he tried to find words to shout back at the wolf, but fatigue robbed him of all movement.

"You show much bravery," Yindraken said. "Pity it was wasted in such a lesser creature." Lowering the elf's head, he opened his jaws, aching for Arnanor's blood to spill out onto the hillside. "Know this," he added, "I will return soon to your homeland and destroy all that remains!" But as he laughed wickedly at the prospect, Yindraken failed to hear the quiet footfalls behind him.

Gildan came softly forward, sword pointed at Yindraken's head, the long blade gleaming in the light. Then, seeing the monster crouched over the prince, the elf-mercenary sprinted toward him, unable to withhold the battle cry building inside.

Hearing the shout, Yindraken turned, dropping his prey to the ground. Springing into a fighting stance, he raised his hands, eager to fight, as the elf drew closer. Gildan thrust his sword, piercing the cold air near the wolf's chest, missing by scant inches and cutting only fur. Spinning about, he made as if to attack again, secretly shifting his eyes to the silent, oncoming Malander.

Malander's long coattail billowed behind him as he bore in, one hand holding his sword hilt, stretching out his free arm in the Southern fighting style.

Yindraken stood motionless, waiting--in another moment, if neither should yield, the two would surely collide. Malander could no longer contain the pain of his past inside, wanting only to vent his feelings on his enemy. "Die!" he screamed, thrusting his blade as hard as he could. Victory seemed at hand as the blade drove in toward the creature, but then it stopped, caught in the bare hands of Yindraken. Malander twisted the blade, trying to cut into the beast's grip, yet no blood flowed from its hands. Looking at his sword in disbelief, Malander placed both hands on the hilt and pressed forward with all his strength. As if without effort, Yindraken held the blade still even as Malander then tried to pull it free.

"You are no match for me!" the werewolf gloated, just as Gildan whirled about, slashing deeply into his arm. Dark blood spurted out, drenching the white fur. Instinctively clutching his wound to stem the river of blood, the werewolf tried to retreat up the hill, but in so doing, he freed Malander's sword. Malander drew it away. With a shriek of agony, Yindraken fell to his knees.

"Are you all right?" Gildan asked as he came to rest beside Malander.

"Of course!" he replied sharply. "Always!" Malander turned to finish off the wounded creature. "My thanks to you, good elf. This will make an easy ending."

"Do not lose your caution."

On his knees, Yindraken panted heavily and licked his wounded arm, shaking violently. The battle was over for the moment, for the Mazazuken Lord had to regenerate his damaged limb. But as Malander smiled wickedly and quickened his pace, Gildan felt the presence of something else. The night sounds had stopped, creating an unnatural silence.

Slowly Arnanor came around; he could move his limbs, and now he was seeing only one of everything. The prince turned onto his stomach and pressed himself off the ground by his arms. He felt sick. He did not yet know that his nemesis had been wounded, or exactly where he was. The need to engage in battle crept back into his spirit,

and he got to his feet. Moving his head gingerly from side to side, he felt in the grass for his sword, but the effort was too much, and he collapsed onto his back. "Ethindar," he panted, "my Lord, please grant me strength to vanquish your foes."

"Take your clan and leave this place!" Gildan declared, but Yindraken did not respond.

"You cannot let him go, Gildan!" Malander shouted. "I will kill this creature for what he has done to us!" He raised his sword as a grin crept across his pale face.

"Humiliation is greater than death."

"Not this night!" Malander moved past Gildan in haste, knowing that werewolves needed little time to heal their wounds. And indeed, already Yindraken's panting had slowed as the two approached. Malander would cleave the monster in two and end this at last.

Yindraken was in disbelief at having been wounded, especially by someone such as Gildan. After fleeing from the fight, he had found temporary respite atop the great hill, only to collapse from pain and loss of blood. His thick fingers, clamped over the wound, stanching most of the blood flow, but still it seeped out onto his fur. He knew that if he did not heal quickly, the prince would soon flee, and it might be months or years until another chance like this arose. Raising his arm, he licked the gash. And with each lap, pain shot through his entire body; still, though the task was all but unbearable, it had to be done. He heard the two enemies treading toward him but he did not look up; movement in his left arm had not returned.

Malander drew inward without a care, swinging his sword playfully, when unexpectedly, Yindraken rolled forward, catching him off guard. As the Mazazuken lord rose to his feet, two of his kindred leaped through the air and landed on the ground behind him. Yindraken peered over his shoulder and acknowledged the overdue arrival of his gray-furred kinsmen, who stood behind their master, awaiting his command. Then, seeing the wound on their lord's arm, the two wolves snarled in unison.

"Now would be a good time for reinforcements to arrive," Gildan said, turning to confront the newest threat. "I hope Seth made his way to Randor and the others."

"Perhaps," Malander laughed. "If not, then we die together!" His laughter held a maniacal edge. Gildan had not the time to analyze his companion's mental state--to respect him as a swordsman was enough for now. Retreat was impossible, he knew, and these two newest enemies would not be the end of it.

Sensing movement behind him, Gildan glanced downhill and saw yet another pair of gray-furred Mazazuken, climbing toward them on all fours. "Two more, Malander."

The prince was forgotten as the beasts approached their leader.

"What are you waiting for?" Malander asked the beasts calmly. "Patience is a wretched thing," he whispered. "Strike me down if you dare."

"Appears they await a command from their lord," Gildan observed. "Well-trained minions have their weaknesses."

"If we take away their damned leader, then the rest will surely fall into our hands." Malander paused and studied the four protecting Yindraken. "Our task proves difficult...yet enjoyable." He snickered quietly, rolling his shoulders in sweet anticipation.

After a few moments, Yindraken appeared from behind one of his brethren.

"Master, are you well?" a wolf asked, and all four sets of burning red eyes glared at the

two whom they held accountable for his wounds.

Yindraken drew in a labored breath and replied, "Yes, Lieutenant. They have fought well, but now they meet their end."

"What is your decree, great master?"

"Tear these two apart and bring back the one who fled from my vengeance, for undoubtedly he has gone to bring more arms against the Mazazuken. Do this and I shall reward you greatly."

"To do your bidding is reward enough, master," the beast said proudly as it bowed. Yindraken removed his hand from his minion, and a pained smile came to his broad face. Victory belonged to the Mazazuken.

"What are you waiting for, you sniveling whelps!" yelled Malander, shaking his sword. "Strike me down! Don't hold back your fury from me!" He bounced up and down, taunting his enemies with the edge of his blade. "See you on the other side, elf," Malander declared as he charged away to his death.

"Yes, you shall," Gildan replied as he, too, set off.

Surprised by their foe's bold gesture, the Mazazuken stood dumbfounded around their leader. As their ranks broke, Yindraken found himself suddenly exposed to Malander in this final confrontation. Malander would rely only on his weapon and his skills, throwing himself at the massive evil. He made for the nearest wolf minion. With a long and powerful jump, he swung his blade, sinking its fine tip deep into the Mazazuken's shoulder and paralyzing its arm. Withdrawing his sword as soon as it struck, he sidestepped the wolf's stumble and slashed again across its belly. Blood and loops of viscera fell from its warm body. Then, burying the blade in its chest, the grim knight held the Mazazuken against his sword, watching in sick delight as it quivered its last moment of life. The dying werewolf's brothers could only watch, overwhelmed, as the ruined Mazazuken fell to the ground, gurgling its final breath.

Yindraken, snarling in rage, shouted to the remaining three. But Malander turned to them, laughing with glee, and shouted, "Come on, then!"

"Do my bidding!" Yindraken shouted, and his three minions bellowed as one and extended their claws. The battle was on, with two of the beasts facing Malander, and the other wanting Gildan for his own.

Gildan backed away slowly, full of confidence, taunting his enemy, who was not pleased by the elf's sense of amusement. Backing with lowered guard, the elf thrust an intentionally weak slash, playing with the small mind of the wolf, implying that this was a contest of little importance.

Watching his kinsman being mocked by this mercenary, Yindraken was insulted. War was a serious undertaking to his kind, and all its aspects were interwoven with honor and respect.

"I must deal with this myself," Yindraken spoke, looking to his arm and noticing that the blood no longer seeped from the wound. Clenching his fist, he found it working well enough for his needs. Gildan had slighted the werewolves' martial tradition, so it was he who would meet Yindraken's wrath first. Malander would come last, for the wolf-lord wanted to dispose of him in a more gruesome way.

Taking six large strides, Yindraken lunged at Gildan, who feinted and parried him away. Now the mercenary showed his true handling of the sword, slashing and spinning the long blade around his body in all directions, keeping the Mazazuken at bay. The once

flowing grass now lay flattened beneath their feet as they fought across the hilltop. Gildan caught a glimpse of Malander and attempted to join his side, thinking of uniting to improve their chances. The elf, for his part, thought this whole matter trivial and wanted only to be done with it so that they might concentrate on the larger task before them--the fate of the missing moon still had to be known.

As the battle continued, the Mazazuken began to lose concentration. Malander combined blows from his free fist and his feet with the thrusts of his sword.

"We will never suffer defeat by these lowly creatures!" Yindraken cried, charging toward Gildan with head lowered, reaching out to sink his claws into the elf's neck. But his eyes flickered to his right when the winds kicked up strangely. Impatient to rid his mind of the mystery, Yindraken turned and was horrified to see three flickering lights streaking through the sky, growing larger by the second. But before he could muster a coherent thought, one of the comet-like lights shot past him, blasting violently into the Mazazuken that was approaching Gildan's backside. Fire roared from a gaping hold in the werewolf's chest as it flew high into the air. It had no chance even to cry out in pain, for its death was instantaneous.

"What is this magic?" Yindraken snarled.

The two beasts fighting Malander met a similar death, falling in fiery pieces to the base of the hill. Ash and smoke swirled all about Gildan and Malander, who watched Yindraken sink to his knees in disbelief. The wolf-lord sensed that defeat was near, though he could not accept it.

"Randor!" Gildan spoke. "Surely it is his power that has done this." Striding before the fallen leader of the Mazazuken, he placed his blade to the ground, signifying the end. "Victory was never yours."

"What has happened?" Yindraken was confused. He looked to the heavens and searched for the foundations of the magic. "Give me the reason!" he pleaded.

"Withdraw your forces, beast," Gildan replied, gloating in the knowledge that the advantage was his alone. Yindraken's once proud and upright form was now stooped and shivering in pain. "The fires of heaven will show no mercy on your wretched being if you do not comply with my demands!"

"Never!" was the wolf-lord's answer. "I will keep my dignity!"

Impatient, Gildan raised his sword. "Then die."

* * *

In the camp, Sir Geil stood close to his two companions, confronting the three wolves. No sudden movements came from either side, and no words were exchanged--only menacing glares. Geil did not understand why the Mazazuken held back, for he had never encountered a werewolf that did not charge the moment it sensed an advantage.

Muron was baffled as well but stood ready beside his protector. Lorn was unable to focus, unmanned by worry over Seth, who lay in the mud not far away--or so he thought. None had seen Seth slip away to obtain Randor's help. The jewel-hilted dirk shook in his small hands, giving the Mazazuken a clear message of who was weakest in this lot.

"Why aren't they attacking?" asked Muron.

"It bothers me, as well," Geil replied smoothly. "I grow weary of waiting." He spun his blade around in a flashy display and continued, "Permission to proceed?"

"Are you mad, Sir Knight?" Lorn asked, regretting his words at once, not

knowing what had come over him. Geil looked angrily back at him, annoyed at hearing such words from a useless, frightened dwarf.

"Silence yourself, fool!" Geil demanded. "Do as I say!"

"Yes...of course, sir," Lorn replied politely. "I am sorry...I will do my best."

"Say no more." Geil turned to the young prince and asked, "Are you ready?"

"As much as one can be," he answered with a gulp. "I trust your judgment, friend." He had great faith in the high knight. For all Muron knew, the Mazazuken were merely waiting for more of their kind to arrive.

"Ne lar mon xentol!" Geil spoke.

"Fiegor!" came the unison response from all three.

"They will not surrender," Geil translated. Gripping his sword tighter, he said, "Then you will see your end here!" And with that, Geil bolted forward and charged the enemy. Three seconds passed before Muron and Lorn realized what was happening, and followed their leader, prepared for the worst.

The three Mazazuken stood tall on their hind legs and awaited their victims, but before they could react, Geil's terrible sword was upon them, cleaving completely through the first two. Then, with an airborne spinning slash, he decapitated the final beast. Fountains of dark blood gushed in all directions, drenching the ground where the three werewolves fell in pieces before their destroyer. Muron and Lorn, finally arriving at Geil's side, were astonished at the swiftness of the killing. Lorn turned away and covered his mouth, his stomach overcome by the gore.

"I have never seen you so fierce, Sir Geil," Muron said, shocked by the carnage. Looking a little crazed, the elf-knight stared down at his blooded sword. Though the enemies were defeated, Geil still desired more Mazazuken blood, knowing that others were somewhere about.

"Madness is given the glory, my lord," Geil said at last. The blood dripped from his sword to form a little puddle at his feet. The knight licked the corner of his mouth as the blood of the Mazazuken dripped down his face. It tasted salty and seemed to increase his stamina. Neither of his companions saw him do this, it being a guilty pleasure he indulged when given the chance. Rather than clean himself of the splattered gore, he left it as it was, as a warning to others who would cross his path. "Go back to the fire, you two," Geil said. As Lorn and Muron turned around and approached the fire, Geil sniffed the air, which was filled with the stench of death.

From the shadows behind Geil came yet another Mazazuken, charging inward on all fours. Drawing near the elf-knight's back, the creature jumped forward, but Geil avoided its attack by dropping to a knee and rolling sideways.

The werewolf gathered its assault, leaping onto a large tree and springing away towards Geil once again. Geil stood upright, and as the werewolf scratched the air with its claws, the elf retreated, swinging his blade in each direction the strikes came. Farther back the Mazazuken drove Geil until the knight slammed his back into a tree. The Mazazuken roared and swung at Geil's head, but the elf's reflexes outdid that of the beast as its fist met with the trunk of the tree, scattering shards of splintered wood and bark into the darkened forest. Geil struck hard the stomach of his assailant and the werewolf stumbled back to regain its composure.

Lorn and Muron watched on from the safety of the campfire, both knowing they could not help their fellow companion in this situation. They watched Geil being driven

back and pinned to a tree, but were relieved as Geil turned the tide back to his favor. The Mazazuken retreated and leapt from tree to tree once again, trying to outwit the elf. Still Geil remained diligent as the beast returned to do battle. Their ears were filled with the sounds of Geil's blade clanging against that of the beast's sharp claws and the exchange of Geil grunting and the Mazazuken snarling as the struggle continued.

"I am going to find Seth!" Lorn exclaimed, seeing the Mazazuken distracted by the battle.

Lorn passed the fire and directed his small steps in the direction he had last seen Highbinder. Out of the firelight, he could not see much, though his determination never flagged. Everything inside him desperately wanted to call out for Seth, but the thought of Mazazuken lurking nearby silenced him. Branch after stinging branch slapped the poor dwarf across his face, yanking at his beard, until he found his way to a dirt path.

The Mazazuken battling Geil soon grew frustrated from his lack of progress upon his enemy and attempted to disengage from the battle. Geil's hair whipped back as he bore ahead in a full sprint, and as he greeted his life-long curse, he swung his sword downward with all strength possible. The werewolf countered with an upward forearm block, unphased even when the blade penetrated its tough hide. Strike after strike of the elf's steel continued to rain down, and though the werewolf's forearms deflected most of Geil's rage, the elf-knight managed to penetrate its defense, gashing the Mazazuken's body in many places. The foul blood of Geil's opponent flung about in thick streams as the Mazazuken became more careless and suicidal in its attacks.

The horses behind the two combatants grew even more aggravated from the disturbance of the night. The three steeds of the North began to buck as the Mazazuken howled, sending the other horses of the company into the same panic. Geil darted his eyes quickly to his horse and noticed the rein that secured it to the tree was no longer bound.

"The horses, Geil!" Muron cried out. "They will get away!"

Seeing Geil distracted, the werewolf bolted from the campsite, disappearing into the shadows. As the evil fled from the two elves, the eight horses grew calm once again, leaving Muron much relieved. He did not relish the thought of chasing after the animals into the dark, werewolf-infested forest with only Geil at his side, no matter how fierce the warrior proved with his sword.

Geil turned around to the fire pit and saw Muron standing alone. Immediately he rushed toward the prince. "Where is that dwarf?"

"I believe he left to find his human friend."

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"Who am I to do such a thing?" Muron replied mildly. "He is not under my control, thus not giving me the right."

Disturbed at the prince's answer and knowing that Arnanor wouldn't be pleased with such an attitude, Geil took it upon himself to correct the situation. "What would your brother say if he heard that?"

"I don't care, really. I am not like Arnanor, nor do I plan to be. Individuality is a virtue." He crossed his arms and raised his head, striking a proud stance.

"You are incorrect," Geil said firmly. "You are of royal descent, and this betrays your claim to individuality as false. You belong to your father, brother, and the people of the Northern Kingdom. You, my lord Prince, are a servant to the elves, and a leader."

Never can you live for yourself alone." Geil knelt at the prince's feet, showing his profound respect. "I mean no offense when I speak in this way. My words and actions have been dictated by your father and brother. Like you, my liege, I am bound to serve the High Court, and I would not change that for the world. We both have our calling in life."

"You speak true," Muron answered. "At times I wish it were not so, but Fate has chosen otherwise." He helped Geil to his feet.

"Now is not the time for further conversation. Let us look for your brother."

As Muron turned to the path the four had taken earlier, Geil rested his hand, as normal, on the prince's shoulder. The knight never strayed far from Muron when on foot, lest he ever need to pull the prince from harm's way.



Though they crossed many paths, Geil trusted to his fading gift of intuition and wasted no time. Nearing the hill, he could feel the others close by. The wailing winds strengthened as they reached the base of the hill, and it was here that they found their fallen prince, lying on his back. Arnanor was motionless near a blazing Mazazuken carcass with thick smoke billowing from its opened chest. The prince was very pale, though not as ghostly white as Muron, who dropped his sword in disbelief. Shrugging Geil's firm grip away, he fell to his knees at Arnanor's side.

"Brother!" Muron cried, with tears running down his face. "What have they done to you? Please, don't leave me. I need you--" But before he could finish his plea, Arnanor opened his tired eyes and tried to raise himself up. Muron smiled in relief and attempted to embrace his beloved sibling, but before one finger could caress his form, Arnanor pushed him away with the little strength that remained.

"Leave it," Arnanor whispered, then looked around and asked, "Where is Geil?"

"He is right behind me."

"Sir Geil...", Arnanor managed with feeble authority.

"Yes, my liege?"

"The one who did this to me is on the hilltop."

"Who did this to you, my lord?"

"Yin--" He coughed, then took another breath. "Yindraken."

Geil felt numb and his knees buckled from hearing the name. Squinting his eyes, Geil boiled deeper in fury as images of the past flooded his mind. The horrid screams of his fellow knights being slain by this monster rang in his ears, the fallen souls crying out for revenge. Their young and innocent faces were his greatest nightmare, for they had sacrificed all to the kingdom. He would not let their deaths be in vain. If any were to find out that he had failed against Yindraken, he would never be able to show his face to the people who had suffered so from this enemy's onslaughts.

"Dispose of our people's enemy," Arnanor spoke. "Take Muron with you."

"I will eliminate your foe," Geil answered. He gestured for Muron to remain behind, then began his march up the hill.

Arnanor closed his eyes and did not see the elf-knight leave his side, nor would he have approved of Geil leaving Muron unattended. Geil's sight thinned into tunnel vision as he stalked away to give Yindraken his well-deserved doom. But as he reached the hilltop he noticed two more streaming comets blazing down to earth. The bright glow of the magic reflected in his eyes and then was gone as each light blew through the chest of

a Mazazuken minion, sending the blazing carcasses backward into the shadowy night. Geil noticed Gildan's blade raised at the werewolf's head.

Blood ran down the elf-knight's pale face, and Yindraken, smelling it, knew that it was his kinsmen's. Yindraken sat motionless beneath Gildan's blade, watching Geil lick the shiny debris from his mouth as he began to approach.

"I will rip off your head and drink the blood that will flow from your dead veins!" Geil declared, pointing his sword forward.

Yindraken shook his head and replied, "You can never destroy me, weak elf of the North. Upon the next moon I will return to your barren homeland and rid this world of your kind!"

"You'll have to kill me first!" Geil drew back his sword and let out a hellish war cry, charging ahead in a suicidal fit.

* * *

Watching his splendid magic fly across the night sky, Randor saw the three projectiles hit their marks. He crossed his arms and rested briefly, for his labor was far from over. Only one werewolf still drew breath: a white-furred beast apparently at the mercy of Gildan's blade. Seeing a faint light flicker behind the hill, Randor glanced over his shoulder and found Seth still lying as before, moaning in his daze.

I have wasted far too great a time here, said Randor to himself. And readjusting his wildly flowing cloak, he set off, passing by Highbinder one last time. "One of us will return for you when order is restored in full," he said to Seth. Then, like an agile cat, Randor sprang from his position and disappeared into the darkness, toward the campfire.

He found no difficulty in returning. There were no signs of life, which worried the wizard. Where had they gone? Prisoners, or dead at the hands--and fangs--of the enemy? Neither idea was a pleasant one, and he relegated them to a secluded corner of his mind. There was ample evidence of a struggle--branches ripped from trees, a long slide in the mud, and a mound of dead flesh and fur covered in blood. Many sets of footprints were jumbled in the muddy ground, none granting a clear picture of where their makers had gone. The fire Randor had created hours ago continued to burn. Running his hand over the flames one last time, he made a fist. The fire died in a magical choke, and complete darkness reigned.

Randor was gifted with the ability to see through the shrouds of darkness. On his way from the clearing, he sniffed his way about the thorn bushes: the foul stench of werewolves united with the not unpleasant scent of elves.

Following the light of his spent magic against the Mazazuken upon the distant hill, Randor raced down a path that he hoped would lead to the others. He no longer felt evil in his presence. From the corner of his eye he saw a small shadow moving about in the forest. He stopped and shifted his eyes--still he detected no negative energy. "I wonder what this could be," he whispered as the form came from hiding and stood before him.

"Randor!" It was Lorn.

"What are you doing out here? Are you alone?"

"Yes," the dwarf replied, relieved. "I went looking for Seth. I hate the dark! Have you seen him?"

"Come with me," Randor answered, and he grabbed Lorn by the arm and continued in the direction of the fires.

"But have you seen Seth?"

"No more questions now." Lorn's eyes were filled with the orange glow as he was led in confusion to the hill.

Muron and Arnanor were still at the base of the steep incline, with Muron trying to comfort his brother. "Can you stand yet?" he asked Arnanor.

"I told you to keep your hands off me! I do not need your help! I am fine!"

"Tell me what happened here," Randor asked on his arrival. Arnanor looked up to the wizard with eyes wanting to deny the truth. He sat slumped in humiliation born of the defeat that had been his this night.

"He was attacked!" Muron answered for him. "Those monsters..."

"Enough from you!" Arnanor spoke sharply.

The sounds of battle echoed faintly as Geil, Gildan, and Malander continued in combat against the lone Yindraken.

"They need your help, Randor!" Muron cried. He was worried, mostly for his closest friend, who had let anger control his judgment, leaving him and his brother alone. Arnanor had made it clear many times that leaving Muron undefended would be a grave breach of the knight's code of honor, but rage and long-brewing hatred followed its own regulations.

"My magic will heal you, Arnanor, but I must attend to the others first."

"Grant me my strength now! Let me finish this!" Arnanor demanded.

"That is something I cannot do. Lorn, stay here with the elves."

"Randor!" Arnanor cried as the wizard strolled away. His emotions poured outward. "Please do not do this to me!"

"I am sorry," he said.

Arnanor reached out for Randor as if seeking something that had fallen from his grasp. His fingers were numb, and he fell back on the grass. He could not find the reason why a mere kick had sent him into such a downward spiral of sickness. "This armor has failed me," the prince whispered.

* * *

Yindraken was completely surrounded. As Geil went after him, the werewolf lashed out in defense. Only Geil attacked, while Gildan took gradual steps away from the confrontation in order to entrap the enemy, allowing Geil to try his fortune against this particular enemy. As Malander rejoined Gildan, Randor approached undetected.

Geil's fatigue shone through after a long combination of rapid sword attacks, and his once fluent and crisp technique grew sloppy. Luckily, he was still able to keep Yindraken at bay. The sword grew heavy in his sweaty hands as he slashed and parried, drawing sustenance from the never-ending fire of his hatred. Killing this evil figure of the North would exalt his status greatly--a lifelong dream. It was a secret goal he strived for: never to be forgotten after he passed to the next world.

Victory grew nearer as Geil broke through the werewolf's defense and sliced into Yindraken's knee. The wolf lord fell without uttering a sound, the pain already greater than he could bear. Geil bit down on his lip in anger. Yindraken, accepting his fate, shut his red eyes.

"Thus, you perish from this world!" Geil proclaimed. "I will be known as the one who set the elves free of you!"

Yindraken murmured something unclear--perhaps a prayer or a spell. Geil seemed

to grow delirious as the blood from his fallen foes dripped into his eyes. This was no time to lower his weapon in order to clear his sight, for he had the Mazazuken exactly where he wanted him.

Suddenly, the wounded beast began to laugh uncontrollably, raising his head to meet Geil's baffled expression. All who stood on the hill were confused--including Randor. A suicidal end was Yindraken's main thought now, as his own demise was apparent. Malander and Gildan backed away with swords held ready, remaining cautious. Geil's mind and muscles tensed; his heart desired bloodshed.

You're losing control, Geil spoke to himself. Then the elf's entire being began to crumble as he shook violently from fear. His sword hung loose in his hand.

"He is failing," Randor whispered.

Geil's weariness was showing, as even Yindraken, with his poor eyesight, noticed. The courageous knight fell to a knee.

"Farewell, weakling," Yindraken growled, and with a mighty leap, he was gone into the night.

Randor moved to where Geil knelt, gazing in the direction the wolf lord had gone.

"I cannot let him go." Geil struggled to stand once more. "We must hurry, Randor."

"He has fled into the shadows. We will never find him before he heals."

"No!" Geil screamed, and started off, but before he had gone two steps, Randor stopped him. "Let me finish."

"Another day," replied Randor.

"I cannot go on if he lives! I will not be a failure!"

"You are not a failure, Geil," Gildan said. "You fought well...I am very impressed--you have raised my confidence in Northern sword wielders."

"It will not be long before we must set out," Randor advised. Looking at the stars' wheeling pattern, he could see that sunrise was only a few hours away. The journey back to the camp, and caring for the wounded Seth and Arnanor, would consume time that they needed for resting. Randor looked at the devastated Geil, paused, and gently lifted his chin. The knight's eyes were glazed, and tears mixed with blood ran down his face. His chapped lips trembled from the coldness of defeat. As difficult as Randor found it to deny Geil the chance to redeem himself, he stood firm in his command and nudged the elf's shoulder toward the fallen prince. "Come."

Muron and Lorn sat on the ground next to Arnanor, while Malander remained on the hill and stared off into night, still wanting to wage war. He knew that the Mazazuken were out there and that he need only wander about the forest for a short while to encounter them.

Seeing Geil, Muron embraced his longtime friend and inspected his condition. Wiping away the blood from his eyes, he adjusted his guardian's chest plate, now dented with new scars of battle.

Lorn looked around for Seth, wondering whether he would ever return. The idea of his friend's death preyed on his mind. Then, seeing Geil, the dwarf took the borrowed dirk from his belt. "Here," he said, returning the weapon.

"No, no," Muron said. "You keep that. It will help you in later situations."

Lorn looked at the gleaming dagger and smiled; never had he received such a great gift. "Thank you, Prince Muron. I will cherish this always."

"You are welcome, my friend. I can show you how to use it when we find the time and a safe place."

"I already have just the place to put it in my home." Lorn paused. "That is, if I ever make it home."

"You will," Randor reassured him. "Do not worry about Seth." Lorn perked up. "He is resting near the camp, not badly hurt."

Everyone was deeply tired and yearned for a few hours' rest by the fire. Trouble seemed far away for now, and Randor set off into the forest, guiding the company with a faint magical light. The path proved easy, and they journeyed in silence until the smell of smoldering fire and the nickering of the horses alerted them that they had arrived.

Waving his hand once more, Randor resurrected the fire, and the party basked in its welcomed warmth. Geil looked around for the beasts he had killed, but all that remained of his trophies was blood littering the ground.

"Where did they go?" Lorn inquired.

"What?" Randor replied. "The werewolves? They returned to the earth....Everyone wait here. I am going for Seth."

"Can I go with you?" asked Lorn.

"Stay close to me, then." Randor turned toward the path. "Gildan, watch over the company until I return."

"With pleasure."

"If anything arises in my absence, do not hesitate to retrieve me. Whatever you do, though, do not disappear on me again."

"It shall be done," Gildan answered with a bow. "I do believe the worst is over."

Randor nodded and took Lorn onto the path. The Northern elves saw to their horses and attended selfishly to their own needs while Gildan kept a close eye on the three--he needed no more trouble from the royalty. Malander, meanwhile, plopped down and sat in a meditating position, cracked his stiff joints, and began cleaning his blade with the hem of his jacket. Though the thick blood settled into the dark fabric, he seemed to enjoy its presence, as if it were a badge or battle ribbon. Thinking back on his accomplishments this night, he was frustrated that the pleasurable experience of killing was over for now, though overall he was pleased to see another day, in which perhaps to end his misery.

The Northern elves stood by their horses in deep conversation. "I wonder what they are saying," Gildan whispered.

"Hell if I care," Malander replied. "Just keep well clear of people's business, hmm?"

"I am responsible for keeping the peace here. We cannot afford any conspiracy against our cause....Perhaps they plan to leave us."

"Let them. All they are is trouble anyway."

* * *

Randor reappeared with Seth and Lorn at his side, and the three sat across from Malander, who still burned with irritation. After looking over Seth's wounds, Lorn found none of them too serious, and seeing this, Randor finally relaxed and pulled out his pipe. Gildan gave into temptation and smoked his pipe as well.

"Could you blow that poisonous smoke somewhere else?" Malander grumbled, shifting away to avoid the bothersome fumes. "Damned pipes."

The Northern elves returned to the fire, keeping plain expressions as if nothing had occurred while they were away, drawing a suspicious look from Gildan.

After enjoying his smoke, Randor decided it was time to begin healing the injured. Placing his hands on Arnanor, he could feel his stamina decline even further, but he concealed his fatigue and pain so as not to worry the others. *No one must know*, he said to himself, and walked away from the company with his back turned. Clutching his chest, he asked the gods to relieve his burning anguish.

Gildan grew concerned. "Are you well?"

Randor managed a deep breath and replied, "Yes, Gildan. All is well with me." It was a lie, but at least the journey would continue, even if the wizard should lose all his strength. Time would heal him--so he hoped. *Return me to balance soon, Master*, he prayed. The breeze felt soothing against his skin and seemed somehow to rejuvenate him.

Seth placed his arm around Lorn, grateful to have such a devoted friend. Indeed, Highbinder esteemed Lorn as a greater healing agent even than Randor's magic.

Arnanor caught Seth's attention, and he nodded to the prince. "I am glad to see you alive," said Seth. And he meant it--he never wanted to see a fellow Mudalfaen ally defeated, and moreover, the consequences would be severe for Highbinder if the Council were to know of the princes' presence here. Since the two princes had not an official battalion at their command, he had to fulfill the law of protecting royalty, even though Arnanor had made it clear that Seth's service was in no way welcome.

"Spare me your small talk, knight!" Arnanor replied as he found some comfort beside the log. Muron took this as a cue to do the same, and placed his arms behind his head and watched the heavens until he fell into a deep slumber.

"I suggest all of you gather your strength for tomorrow," said Randor. "Sunrise will be here sooner than you think, and we have a long road ahead of us--too long even to contemplate its end. The Oracle awaits our arrival tomorrow evening." Randor patted Gildan on the shoulder and smiled. All lay down to sleep but Malander, who sat like a statue in his meditation. Randor said gently to the grim knight, "Replenish yourself, my friend. Our journey is not through."

"I am not tired," Malander answered sharply. "The only way I'll rest is by you casting one of your ridiculous spells on me. Otherwise, do not order me to rest."

"Then I will leave you be," Randor replied, ending it there.

Malandar turned his back to the wizard. Although he was not in command of the company, he would keep to himself as much as possible and follow in the shadows for as long as it took. There was bound to be more bloodshed along this dark road, and this thought alone cheered his clouded mind.

Taking one last glance around, Randor finally felt enough at ease to surrender to sleep. He slept only rarely, but now his eyes grew heavy as he looked into the fire. Taking off his hat and placing it at his side, the wizard sank to the ground and was soon asleep.

Chapter Eight: Prophecies in the Snow

Dawn found all the traveling companions yearning for more sleep. Malander was first up, stretching his sore muscles and taking a swing or two with his sword as the elves of the North fed their horses the little grain they had left in their pouches. Lorn, Gildan, and Randor lit their pipes and sat around the fire.

"What is today's plan?" Seth asked, eager to begin.

"We reach the Oracle in the late afternoon or just before sunset." He paused to blow out a great cloud of smoke. "It is imperative we make it before nightfall. Otherwise, we must pass another night like the last."

"May I never spend another night outdoors in these woods again!" Seth exclaimed with a shiver.

"Hopefully this Oracle friend of yours will give us a much needed clue," said Gildan.

"Trust me, Gildan, all of our questions will be answered."

"Yet your wisdom and insight cannot help us?" Seth asked. Knowing that Randor had thousands of years' experience, he was puzzled why the wizard should be unable to help them.

"This burden is perhaps greater anyone can bear," Randor replied. "Any who claims he can undo this evil is lying both to the world and to himself."

Gildan, nodding in agreement, said, "No doubt this will be my ultimate quest."

* * *

The eight mounted their steeds and fell into single file on the dim path. Seth thought the wood looked healthier than it had the night before, as if a great evil had left it. Memories of the night's battles came back to haunt the travelers as they reached the top of the hill, which appeared untouched and fresh. Randor stopped and gazed to the south, seeing faintly their destination on the hazy horizon.

Abruptly and without a word, Arnanor dismounted, with sword drawn and a serious look on his face. He strode a few steps away, with Muron and Geil quickly following, and the three stared into the rising sun. "*Montah!*" they said in unison, and after pronouncing the elvish word, they knelt with their blades to the ground before them. Randor and Gildan, knowing this ritual, sat in respectful silence, while Lorn looked to Seth in wonder, not knowing what to make of the elven ritual of praise to Ethindar for granting another day of life. After they moved their lips in quiet prayer, Arnanor stood first, took in a deep breath, and again mounted his horse, soon followed by Geil and Muron. Randor pointed to the thick forest ahead, and the party set off again.

* * *

By midday the company had put many miles behind them. The forest came alive with the calls of birds and the drone of insects, measured by the never-ending clomp of hooves along the path. To entertain his royal charge, Geil recited many verses and told stories, sometimes breaking into song. Arnanor, meanwhile, said nothing, glowering at Gildan and Randor, who, he supposed, were scheming some grand idea without his help. Finally, unable to hold his peace, he lightly spurred his horse and broke free from his brother and Geil's side. With his head raised in pride, he galloped along the edge of the path, reining in beside the wizard but keeping his eyes straight ahead.

"Yes?" Randor asked.

"Don't mind me," Arnanor answered. "Just a change in position is all."

Gildan shook his head, not believing the prince for one moment.

"Think I am up to something?" the prince asked offhandedly.

"I can feel some of your emotions, young prince," Randor said, wishing the elf would return to his brethren.

"And what do you sense?"

"I would rather not say yet....There are more pressing things at the moment."

Arnanor laughed, drawing a strange look from Randor, who knew not what brought on this amusement. "It is odd indeed that not even you, Perfect Child of Ethindar, have the slightest idea of what happened to Beldas," said Arnanor, as if to show that he was not intimidated by Randor or anyone else. He would always let his mind speak aloud. "Eight thousand years upon Londor shows you nothing?"

"I am not as perfect as perhaps you would like me to be," Randor replied. "Do you come to belittle my wisdom? For if that is your goal, then a fruitless one it is." He kept his eyes on the road, preferring not to goad Arnanor on in his folly. "Perhaps I should allow you to lead this company."

"If you renounce your role among us, then I will gladly accept."

"So you intend a double meaning when you speak of a change in position?"

"Not originally," the prince lied.

"After you reveal your master plan," Randor began, "then the quest is yours to deal with."

"Splendid."

"History shall be written: Prince Arnanor's flawless leadership was the key in restoring the world to balance once again. His bravery was unmatched, and his skills with the sword were those of a god." Listening, Arnanor imagined the stories as if they were already true and written in the scrolls. Randor went on, fueling the arrogant prince's imagination further before putting him back in his place. "Failure, on the other hand, could ruin your family name and the fortunes of your precious Northern Kingdom." Chuckling, Randor continued, "I can see it all clearly."

Arnanor's smile was gone as he quickly turned his head to the unwatching Randor; he had to know what the wizard meant by those cryptic words. "What are you saying? What do you see?"

"I speak of failure. If I allow you to command this quest, it will be your name the world will remember. Yes, the world will never rebalance, and our quest for Beldas will end in tragedy. You and your kindred will ride back to the North, if you survive this journey, and go about your lives--what remains of them. Stories will reach to every corner of the earth, and they will blame you for their bitter and horrific end. Armies will rise and take up arms against your father, and you will be crushed. The Council will not aid your kingdom, for you are now traitors to the Great Tree of Mudalfaen." Arnanor slowed his pace and fell gradually behind Randor, and still the wizard spoke of what he saw. "I see brilliant fires burning atop the mountains of snow. No structure will stand after your countless enemies come. Your family's banner will be ripped apart and paraded in every Mudalfaen kingdom for the remaining days on end!" Randor finally turned around and saw Arnanor's flushed complexion, then pleaded, "So please, my good elf, come take my position."

"Yes," Gildan added, laughing, "I beg of you, lead me."

"Have it your way, wizard!" Arnanor blasted, gritting his teeth as he at last fell back to ride next to his brother.

"That is that," Gildan commented. "I suppose it will be a while before he wishes to sound off again."

"His temper will be the end of us all," Seth said softly to Lorn. Much relieved now, they both had thought Randor serious at first about the leadership change, with Seth especially worried. "Thankfully, it has ended well."

"I worry about that one," Lorn huffed.

Muron could be heard in the back, trying to converse with Arnanor, but his elder brother did not speak, boiling in his anger. Malander rode behind the princes, and Seth thought he caught the faint wisp of a smile from Malander due to the Arnanor's folly. This was the first time, away from battle, that anyone had seen this mysterious knight show any sign of gladness. Malander straightened his lips and resumed his stern, cold expression.

* * *

As the sky began to turn orange, the company reached a high cliff above the trees, and there they stopped to rest. Across the vale, some two miles away, on another cliff top, perched a black mansion, dark as night and as magnificent as a castle. Steps carved in the stone cliff side led downward from the company's position. The steps reentered the last of the forest, and beyond that, another high flight led upward to the front of the Oracle's cliff-top fastness. The mighty structure had many lit windows, and smoke billowed from five chimneys. Though Gildan had caught a glimpse of this place the night before, he had had no idea it would be so enormous. The dark dwelling gave an eerie feeling to any who looked upon it. Above the mansion's highest peak, a flock of blackbirds soared like dead leaves in a whirlwind.

Randor dismounted and knelt to the ground, resting his hand on a rough place in the road--something had caught his eye.

"What is it?" Seth asked.

"Footprints," Randor answered. "Three days old, I would say."

"Mazazuken?" Arnanor suggested anxiously.

"They appear to be, but the weather has distorted them a great deal," Randor said as he rose, wiping his hands free of the soft dirt. "Let us proceed with caution."

Letting the horses pick their way, they descended the cliff, taking the long, curved flight of ancient steps without mishap as the forest loomed ever closer in view. The darkening forest stood before them, looking very unwelcoming as the sun sank through the trees, with no sign yet of the higher path to the mansion. Failure to reach their destination would result in another night of fighting Mazazuken, who would use the darkness to finish the company off. Randor's energy was still low after his use of magic the night before, and it would be two or three days before his full strength returned--what was left of it, anyway.

"If we make it," Seth said, "a much needed rest awaits us."

"I can already feel the warmth of a bed!" Lorn added. Both were optimistic, though they remained well in the middle of the riders. "I just hope he does have such comforts."

"Follow me!" Randor called out, encouraging his companions.

"There it is!" Muron gasped as they cleared the cover of the forest. There stood

the stone staircase, beyond a final declining hill. The steps were wide, yet their horses would not be able to carry them on their backs up the steep incline, for cracks and erosion over the ages had weakened the structure. Thin clouds of wispy fog snaked down the stairs, growing thicker as the travelers rose higher.

Randor looked high above and put his mind on the obstacles ahead. Very little light remained in the sky, and this place held great evil--Randor alone was the only one who could hold this gathering together. He doubted that Arnanor could control himself; a constant watch over the prince would be necessary.

The air seemed to grow thinner with every step, and soon the forest disappeared beneath the low-hanging clouds, causing Lorn and Seth to abandon their thoughts of warmth and rest. Then a great, invisible power seemed to grip their chests, relentless in its hold.

"What is happening, Randor?" Seth managed to speak.

Not only Seth and Lorn felt it, for all seemed to struggle as they continued doggedly ahead. Only the horses seemed unaffected by this mysterious force. The elves of the North could feel their armor weighing down on them and heard the faint sounds of their fine metals giving in to the strain.

"A magic barrier," Randor replied. He had forgotten just how the Oracle protected his grounds from those outside. "Everyone stop now. A few more steps might be fatal to us all."

"Nonsense," Arnanor said, unwilling to trust this wizard's advice. "What are you hiding from us?" He shoved Lorn out of the way, almost knocking the dwarf off the steps and to the depths below, and drew his sword as he took the steps two at a time. He felt pleased with himself until the moment came when the barrier slowed him down almost completely, crushing his body without mercy. His head throbbed under the weight, yet Arnanor still ignored the warnings. Geil finally took it upon himself to stop the madness but was halted by Randor's hand. The prince raised his sword higher into the magic barrier and charged ahead in vain, feeling his armor pressing harder against his bones. Though wanting to scream, Arnanor held his tongue. Sweat poured from his brow and stung his squinting eyes, and all reasoning was lost. Finally, having had more than enough, Arnanor sank back in defeat, his sword clanging against the steps as he made his way back to the others.

"Are you all right?" Muron asked.

"I am alive," Arnanor answered, ashamed.

"Let me attempt a better solution," Randor said, turning around. "Stand back." Facing ahead, he raised his hands, hoping that some of his powers still remained in reserve.

Arnanor resheathed his sword with a shaky hand and bent over, elbows on knees, trying to reclaim his breath.

"Now, listen closely," Randor spoke. "After I cast this spell I want all of you to move as quickly as can be until you stand before the mansion's front gate."

"What are you going to do?" Seth asked.

"I will lower the barrier for a brief time." Randor had the attention of all--even Malander, who seemed to be enjoying entirely too much the pain that gripped him. "When I give the word, you now know what to do." He focused and aligned himself with the steps. "*Whei lon nara mir nara tugath!*"

A flash of green light flickered for a few moments, then faded with a loud buzzing sound. "Forward!" A hundred steps remained as the company hurried upward, pulling their horses behind them. Lorn had difficulty as he tugged on the reins of his balking horse. Panicked, he stumbled backward on a cracked step, but Seth caught him before he could fall, then grabbed the dwarf's horse's reins, pulling on both steeds as they hurried upward. The barrier was gone, and so was the pain. A flat stone floor greeted them at last. As soon as Lorn arrived with Seth, Randor spun sharply around and waved his hand to reseal the magic, igniting the green flash of light once more.

Many white statues of winged angels, dragons, and hooded figures were scattered about the small courtyard, standing tall and magnificent. Their age was unknown, for they showed none of the signs of weathering displayed by the ancient steps. A sea of thick clouds with no break covered the view below. Randor strolled to the front doors of his ally's house and awaited the group. "Leave the horses here," he ordered.

"Should we tie them first?" Muron asked.

"We must not disturb too greatly what is around us," the wizard advised, "lest the Oracle grow angry."

"I will leave most of my belongings behind," Arnanor spoke, grabbing his sword. "But I will not go anywhere without my blade."

"Be forewarned now when I say that some things we may encounter inside might be bizarre and alarming, but do not be frightened. I also ask that you show the greatest reverence to the Oracle and upset him not. His powers far exceed mine, and I will be of no help to you if he retaliates."

"I'd rather stay outside," Lorn mumbled to Seth. "This doesn't sound good at all."

"Have no fear, Lorn," Seth comforted. "You think he would bring us this way if he thought it too dangerous?"

Arnanor overheard the question and answered sharply, "Just as the resting ground last night was safe! I doubt this mansion is secure at all!"

"That was an odd chance, 'tis all," Lorn replied.

"Don't fool yourself, dwarf."

"The supernatural is about," Randor spoke as he grabbed the silver rings of the doors, pulling them gently to open the way ahead.

The stale air within the mansion slithered over them with a bold scent of flowered incense. It was very humid inside, and Seth felt his clothing cling to his damp body. After closing the doors, Randor returned to the lead position. Sweat began to pour down the travelers' backs and arms, and every breath was uncomfortable.

"Do not make any sudden movements," Randor whispered. "We cannot afford to send the Oracle into seclusion."

"Is he scared easily?" Lorn asked.

"Protective is the term I would use."

"Where is he?" Gildan asked, peering behind the many dark columns that extended in a long row.

They found themselves in a large room with a gray ceiling and walls, dulled by the many fixtures of lighted torches. Long, thick banners of blood red lay draped over each narrow window, allowing no outside light to enter this room. At the farthest wall, a curved staircase invited them forth, and at the top was a lone red door. Many closed wooden doors lined the wall beneath the staircase.

Gildan needed answers to his multiple questions. His main focus was the moon, naturally, but the appearance of the Mazazuken also baffled him. Time would reveal all--even, perhaps, some small insight into his future. *I can scarcely imagine the amount of gold the Oracle will predict for me in my lifetime*, Gildan said to himself.

"The door atop the stairs is where the Oracle awaits," Randor spoke, pointing ahead.

"Well, what holds us here?" Arnanor replied impatiently. "This prophet has much explaining to do!" The barrier angered him, and his anger was augmented by the rage he still felt from the night before. He double-timed his strides, Muron keeping pace with him. Geil naturally fell in behind them, keeping a hand on Muron's shoulder, followed at some distance by Randor and the others.

"No sudden movements, I said," Randor called out.

But Arnanor, heeding nothing that Randor had said, remained stubbornly focused on the door ahead--and it was open. Up the carpeted steps he stomped, when the door began to close. His eyes shot wide in disbelief, and he hurried to catch the fading opportunity.

"What have they done?" Seth yelled. "The Oracle is sealing us out! We must stop them!"

"From what?" Randor asked. "They have already placed a dark cloud upon our invitation."

Reaching the top of the steps, Arnanor dove with all his strength, reaching out as far as he could. His fingers barely graced the slippery metal ring of the door as a loud boom echoed throughout the room. The prince's heart sank as he landed on the stone floor, unsuccessful. He stood and turned to his brother as if nothing had happened.

Muron raised his eyebrows, clearly disappointed. *This could be the end of the quest*, the young elf-prince thought.

"Don't you ever listen?" Malander said, furious. Slowly he approached the Northern elves with shoulders bowed back and hands tightened into fists. A deep look of exasperation molded his face.

"Mind your own business," Arnanor snapped back.

"Not when it comes to victory!"

"You overreact."

"I am far from that, elf-prince." Malander ran his hand along the marble frame of the door. The metal ring of the door gleamed in his eyes and beckoned his fingers downward. But before he could reach the cold metal, his effort was stopped by Randor's voice.

"That will be enough." Randor parted the crowd of onlookers. Malander stepped aside without confrontation and allowed Randor to grasp the ring that would hopefully allow them forward. Shooting a quick glance over his shoulder to Arnanor, he said, "I will have no more acts of idiocy from you, Prince. There will be dire consequences if any should fail to obey my commands again--I do not care who the perpetrator is."

Arnanor stood silent.

"Do I speak clearly enough for you?"

"Yes," he replied softly.

"I do not want to harm you. That is not an intention of mine, but if you continue to cross me I will not hesitate." Satisfied that his stern reprimand had been heard, Randor

pulled open the door and allowed everyone through. Very little light shone as the door closed on their new surroundings. All they could see was a lone pool of light, swirling upward from the ground. A robed figure stood alone with its feet at the light's base.

The Oracle's face was lowered as he glared into the floor's luminous rays. All present found themselves in a great space without walls or ceiling. It seemed as if the door led them to another plane of existence, but Randor knew this was not so. "Step closer," the Oracle beckoned warmly. "I have been awaiting your arrival for some time now."

"We had difficulties in your forest, my friend," Randor replied.

"So my troubles are yours as well."

"This explains the barrier," Seth whispered.

Gathering around the pool of light, the company tried to witness what the Oracle was viewing, but not even Randor could see what lay within the swirling light.

Malander quickly tired of this useless concentration and stared at the white-haired Oracle instead. The ancient being was tall and slender, covered in full by a tattered blue cloak that gathered at his feet. From what little could be seen of his face, his eyes appeared dark, and underneath these a shimmering paint of blue, black, and white curled down to his jaw. His snow-colored hair was short, in a style similar to Malander's own.

"Return your concentration to the light...", the Oracle whispered, "...Sir Malander of Muldane."

Amazed that the stranger knew his name, the knight feared what he might know. Malander tried to clear his mind, wanting to conceal his deep, dark secret--this had to remain safe at all costs. *I must hide my misery*, he spoke to himself. Closing his weary eyes, he lowered his head to turn the attention away and prayed for secrecy of his mind. Suspicion would rise in the company if Malander should be found out.

"Such a short distance you have come to seek me out, yet the turmoil suffered is great. I can see the separation in your ranks, my wizard friend."

Arnanor looked up at the Oracle, knowing that it was he that the Oracle spoke of. Shaking his head in disagreement, he shut out the wise figure's words.

"I have many questions for you," Gildan spoke.

"In time all of your answers will be had, and the many roads intended for you shall be laid down." The Oracle looked upward at last, welcoming them to his inner circle. "If you truly desire to see your fate, I will do the necessary."

"We seek your guidance," Randor said, removing his hat in respect.

"You seek the moon. None of you have the slightest notion of its fate. Stolen, destroyed, or hexed--none of you know."

"I knew you could aid us in healing this tragedy."

"Indeed," the Oracle answered. "I knew of it long before it arose."

"Why did you not warn Mudalfaen or me?" Randor asked. "This could have been prevented."

"I dare not leave my safe haven. Leaving would throw off other balances of this world--there are worse things than Beldas's disappearance. And withal, Randor, our Master would not grant my freedom."

"Your carelessness has given the entire elven population much suffering!"

Arnanor cried, daring anyone to silence him on this matter. "My people die needlessly! Even my great and powerful father has fallen ill from your lack of enlightenment!"

"Much temper in such a strong soul," the Oracle observed. "You must understand that my place is here with the spirits. Without my presence here the entire supernatural world would unravel. This is why I remain."

"Then help my people," Arnanor pleaded. "Help us all, I beg you!" Acting for once like a true leader of his kingdom, the prince showed compassion for his subjects and for all elves across the lands. "Grace this company with your powers."

Randor was pleased with Arnanor's quick turn in attitude, and he could see the anger slip away from the stern, youthful face.

"I will look into my source of light and await a sign that will reveal a guide in your cause." As the Oracle held his hands closer to the floor, his robes shifted from the small gust of wind that rose upward. "For this to truly work, you all must concentrate and clear your minds. Any outside troubles will alter what I see, and the powers granted will fall to ruin." He loosened his posture and stretched his long, pale fingers outward. "Keep your eyes fixed to the ground, and see for yourselves what will come to be." Closing his eyes activated the swirling of the environment, encasing the nine inside a tornado-like cage of cold air. The pure radiance danced in all directions like a raging sea of waves crashing on a rocky shore. Randor kept his sight mobile, peering outward to the very rim of the supernatural, desperately seeking the answer to his direst problem. Still nothing came as long moments passed--grueling moments that seemed an eternity.

The sound of howling winds began to soften as the light's intensity calmed. Randor thought that the Oracle had been unable to grant them passage to the next phase of the journey.

But the Oracle reopened his eyes and dove deeper than ever into his trance, losing all sense of time and space. His entire body ached in agony, and every muscle cried for him to retreat to the normal haunts of humankind. In the midst his pain, he saw a black shape forming in the middle of the whirlpool of light. The image was not yet clear. The dark shape grew immense as it spun slowly toward clarity. Not only the Oracle, but all who peered inward, saw this. The company locked their curiosity onto the black symbol. As the pool of light smoothed to a state of calmness, what seemed like a jagged "S" showed itself to all who watched.

"This is all I can give you," the Oracle admitted. Despite all his divine powers, the gods showed no mercy in assisting him further. "Wondrous magic is at work if this is all my strength can give. Something powerful, indeed, does not want the fate of Beldas known."

"What does this figure mean?" Arnanor asked, puzzled. "Never have I seen such a symbol." The prince turned to Randor for once, seeking whether the wizard might know. "Tell me about this symbol we have just seen."

Randor thought upon the question briefly and searched every corner of his knowledge for a response. Adjusting his glasses, he frowned; no answer presented itself. Randor could see in everyone's eyes that they depended on him to lead them to victory. Neither sword nor magic would bring back the moon--only wisdom. "In all my existence, never have I encountered a sign such as this. It is unclear to me at the present." Randor leaned forward and took a long look at the symbol.

"Indeed it does," the Oracle added. "I have seen this icon in my visions, but I am never able to see its bearer."

"What advice could you give us?" Randor asked, feeling disappointment settle

into his spirit. Rare it was that Randor sought the counsel of others. Generally he had advised the likes of kings and councils of many lands throughout every age of Londor. Now came the time when he was the one asking the questions. "Where do you think we should go next?"

"My intuitions tell me southward, Randor, though I cannot say why. Place this symbol in your minds, and journey south to the many cities and peoples you encounter."

"Well spoken," Randor replied. "I thought south as a general direction, but I did not know exactly where, or what to begin with."

"So these dark times have clouded your wisdom as well," the Oracle said softly.

"As soon as Beldas disappeared, I immediately felt a decline in all my powers." Randor paused and tucked the precise image of the jagged "S" into his memory. "I have not seen much of Londor the past seventy-eight years; the last three of which I was alongside the Obinoth elves in midst their struggles with the Rhingar. Before that, I was at Ethindar's side for seventy-five years. This symbol had to have come about during my absence."

"Allow me to draw this down," Lorn offered. It would be no bother to the dwarf, since his charcoal and parchments were with him.

"This may prove worthy," Arnanor added.

Lorn quickly reached into his pouch and withdrew a small nub of charcoal and a single sheet of paper, rushing as if the symbol might disappear before he could copy it, quickly sketching the curved symbol and poking two dots within the jagged form before rolling the paper up and stuffing it back into his bag. "A lead to this mystery at last!" he said, wiping the charcoal dust from his hands.

"Victory draws nearer!" Seth declared with a smile.

"But the road is long," Gildan added.

"At least now we will not wander aimlessly across the continent," Arnanor replied.

The Oracle now began to feel the draining effects of his effort, and his once tall and rigid form slumped. His forehead glistened with sweat. "Please find comfort in my home, for it is now yours as well. Your quarters are shown for you just outside the door you entered. Go and rest."

The company had started toward the door when Arnanor, suddenly remembering his struggle on the stone steps, turned to the exhausted Oracle. "Your barrier almost killed me. I would like an explanation why it is necessary," said the prince, determined to stand fast until he got a satisfactory response. "And do not try to trick me."

The Oracle hesitated before he answered. "My magic bars the way inside for those wishing to do my kind harm. A dire threat lingers in my forest, and now it is unable to penetrate to my safe house. This threat undoubtedly comes to rob me of spiritual essence." Arnanor's first thought fell to the Mazazuken, who had spoken of an unfinished task in this region.

Closer Arnanor approached the weakened Oracle and gave him a serious look. The two locked eyes as the Oracle read the elf's mind and responded with an unclear expression. Arnanor knew that the ancient sage could see his thoughts. "You aren't through with us just yet, that much is clear." It was a bold comment that made Randor rejoin the prince. Then all the company was back at the side of their leader.

"These visions you care not to know about." The Oracle turned back to his pool of

light and gazed into its brilliance once more.

"What have you seen that threatens our very lives?" the prince asked.

"It is not wise to ask that. I would prefer to keep your minds open to the journey before you, unclouded by any prophecy."

"Then think of me as foolish!" Arnanor blasted. "I will risk this knowledge!"

The Oracle sighed and replied, "As you wish, young elf." He gathered his concentration, taking for granted that these visions would be easier to see, for he had already seen them long before the travelers' arrival. This ceremony did not require the harmony brought about by having the collection meditate on the pool of light. The visions would come to him again easily, without the added clarity of his visitors' focus. Again everyone gathered and looked to the Oracle, awaiting the crucial words he was about to speak.

"Much evil lies along your path." He paused, struck deeply by the horrid images that flitted before him. "I see...many lives lost and very few gains in this journey. Tragedy lies in every corner, and victories are scarce, with many leagues between. Deception is in your company, Randor--even at this very moment." All eyes shot around the circle of companions, each trying to assess who might be untrue to the purpose. "A spy is among you--one whose only goal is to frustrate the very efforts you put forth." Still their minds turned like clocks, overwhelmed by suspicion. "One of you shall fall by the hands of evil, while two more will slip into the shadows, hopeless of returning."

Lorn gulped, certain that it was he who would die before this journey ended.

"This is quite the vision I feared," Randor said quietly. "Is this all you see?"

"The light grows dim," the Oracle replied. "I will give you no more prophecy this day." The radiance dulled to a normal level of light.

"You have given us a much heavier burden," Arnanor said, not knowing how to deal with what he had heard. "Perhaps I should not have asked after all."

"Will all of this happen?" Muron asked.

"They are mere visions, not all certain to pass," answered the Oracle. "Foresight can always be changed. All of you have the ability to change what has been set before you. If you wish something to be altered, just believe in yourself, and you will find the future flexible. Nothing is paved for any of us, not even me."

Seth grew upset and wanted to forget it all. Walking away from the circle and nearing the door, he said, "I have had enough." Lorn immediately followed, needing his friend's comfort. "We will be resting in our quarters if you need us."

"Yes, indeed," the dwarf added with a rush. "Good night, gentlemen."

Malander and Gildan took this as a cue to depart as well. After a couple of moments, only Randor and the Oracle remained. The wizard turned to his old companion and bowed in respect. "I thank you for your guidance."

"It was no trouble in the least. You serve Ethindar well, bearing wisdom that benefits many. All will return to us upon your victory."

"Once I find this symbol, I know it will not be long before we discover the fate of the lost moon."

"Use great caution, Randor. Always watch your companions. I know that at least one of them may let his rage overrule his logic."

"I pray these visions are false. Deception and death are things I care not for."

Randor paused, then continued, "What you say about a spy bothers me. If this is so, then

your showing of this symbol will quicken his leaving, to report these tidings to his masters."

"Keep your eyes on your seven companions at all times. If one does leave, you know he is untrue. Then it is your duty to exact punishment for the act of treason at once." He shifted his focus and mood. "What is the world truly like outside my walls? I have not seen Londor with my own eyes for two thousand years. All I see comes through this device of magic, and much of the truth is distorted." He pulled his robes closer to his frail body and grew silent.

"Much has deformed, and kingdoms fall further from grace," the wizard replied. "Prayers fill my ears all the day long, as it now seems I find myself unable to help those in need. Prosperity is no more in the elven world, and war brews in many fields from shore to shore."

"Great pain runs through my soul as I attempt to gather my conjuring powers," said the Oracle. "In all my time, never have I been drained of life after visions come to me. For the first time in my existence I desire rest, and this is not my usual behavior." The Oracle shook his head in disgust. "Such an inferior way to regain one's self, is it not?"

"I do not rest as much as one should, but I enjoy it when it comes," the wizard replied.

"So be it," the Oracle laughed without humor.

"I must succeed," Randor spoke determinedly. "If you and I both dissolve from this evil, the world will surely die in vain."

"Do not be concerned for me," the Oracle replied, caring not for himself.

"Strength remains in me and my spirits. Despair will not take me down for a great while."

"I pray that it does not."

"The night moves on, my friend. Join your company and prepare them for the quest ahead."

Randor left the Oracle and made his way to the door. Before he passed through, he glanced over his shoulder and smiled, not wanting to disappoint the one who had taught him so much in this world.

Through the recently opened door in the vast chamber of their host, the company found a long and dimly lit hallway. Of the three corridors that branched off to their right, Gildan felt the second one best. A single door lay ahead, which the elf-mercenary pushed open without thought, finding a lush, comfortable space of rest. Eight beds lined the wall--an odd number, Gildan reflected, for it was just enough to accommodate the party. Two flames of yellow floated in the farthest corners. Each took a bed, beginning with those nearest the fires. After leaving Randor and the Oracle, they spoke hardly a word, all wanting rest before the new day came. Suspicion played in their minds, the Oracle's voice still burning on about spies and despair. Trust was essential if they were to succeed, but the single word "spy" brought all their hopes low.

Arnanor suspected Malander, convinced by the knight's silence and his overly dark presence. Malander's mask tore at the elf's curiosity, and he wanted nothing more than to rip it off the human's pale skin before it drove him mad. Seth and Lorn had an understanding without words about Malander, for they thought the same as the prince.

Malandar, however, paid no attention to the many eyes that were fixed on him. He remained at peace in the corner. The Oracle's words were already forgotten to him, and

this entire incident would be erased with the rising of the sun. All he wished was the return of his strength, so that he might give his absolute effort to his cause. The final half of the forest was yet to be crossed, and Malander had to be prepared for its uncertain outcome.

Randor came through the door, finding his way to the soft bed next to Gildan's. The elf removed his sword from his lap and leaned over to the wizard. "What do you say of all this?" he whispered.

"A heavy weight, to be sure," said Randor, his voice filled with fatigue. "I am not yet able to express myself fully."

"Will you comply with his words?"

"I have no choice, Gildan. If, by chance, we find another source that is more likely, then I will take it upon myself to do what is right."

"I would not rely too greatly on the visions of spies and death. The company is still unfamiliar with one another, but we are strong and possess many talents."

"Indeed," the wizard replied.

"I have never seen a prophet who was true in his magical abilities at all times." Gildan knew he had a point, as did Randor, who nodded in agreement. "You saw how his powers were slipping away. Even before our very eyes he grew weak. This evil has clouded his gift, and it will not ensure our immediate victory." Gildan glanced to his sword and sighed. "Time snakes through our grasp like sand, and time is what we most need."

"The Oracle has never led me astray in my journeys, and I will still hold his words to be true until I see they are wrong."

"All he has done is place an unneeded fear in our hearts," whispered the mercenary. "I fear not what he says, but the others of our company do not need greater stress than what is already dealt to us." He looked to those around him with a deep concern and asked aloud, "Will the hope and trust that was present before we entered these doors remain now?" Gildan grew frustrated, but his soul was full of passion for good and for progress. "Don't you see what he has done?"

No one responded.

"By telling these ludicrous ideas, the Oracle has poisoned your minds." Gildan changed his tone. "I admit that the symbol we saw gave us hope, but as soon as his tide turned and words of despair flowed forth, I saw your spirits sink into darkness."

"Gildan, please," Randor spoke gently. He did not want this to continue, knowing that if the elf continued in this vein a confrontation would arise. "Calm yourself."

"That is difficult to do when passion hits my chest! Unity of this company is the only way we can see our way through this. If we crumble, then so does the entire world!" He slammed his clenched hand against the bed frame, startling Lorn. Gildan took a deep breath and tried to lower his temper. "I am not ready for the world to end, and neither should any of you be." Weariness settled in, and he relaxed his tensed muscles.

"If the world fails," Malander began grimly, "then fate has laid it upon us. You cannot remove the words of the Oracle. They will forever replay in your minds, and I am sure it will bring very uncomfortable dreams." He laughed softly in his ill delight and fell silent again.

"We just have to be careful where we journey, and keep one another from danger," Seth said as he lay down. "If there is a spy among us, it will not take long for that person

to arise, now that our way has been given. The Council will deal with this traitor and his masters later." Then, placing his sword at the foot of his bed, he yawned from pure exhaustion. "I will see you all in the morning, refreshed." He turned over and was still. "Good night, Lorn."

"Sleep well, my friend," Lorn said as he continued his artistic rendition of the symbol. He bolded the edges and finely defined the smaller detail. Even though it was not a drawing of joy, the task made him feel important. No one saw the wide smile beneath his woolly beard. The charcoal flowed nicely in his small hands and covered his fingers with its black debris. Lorn noticed he had not much paper left, for he had not anticipated a long journey ahead. His purpose was becoming clearer to him: the cooking and drawing as commissioned was enough to be respected by his fellows.

"Do not lose that paper," Gildan said, seeing the dwarf place his tools back into his pouch.

"You need not worry about that."

"Looks like what we saw," Randor remarked.

"I am fairly decent at mimicking things I see," Lorn replied happily. Then he, too, lay down and felt the comfort of the bed's soft sheets. Glancing over, he saw that Seth was already fast asleep.

"So," Gildan began as he pondered the future, "south leads us to the moon."

"Perhaps," Randor answered.

Many ranges of mountains, dense forests, winding rivers, and great cities filled the southern region of the continent. Their current surroundings were of forests and valleys; the nearest city in their intended direction was some two days away if they made haste. Randor planned to lead the company to Nar-Fhandon, a metropolis that provided a large market for the trade of spices, meats, jewels, woodcraft, well-made weapons--and ancient secrets. Randor hoped another sign would reveal itself to narrow the search.

"Have you been to Nar-Fhandon, Gildan?" he asked casually.

"Thirty years ago," the elf replied, not thinking much about the question. "Can't say I cared for that place at all." The memories of the city were not close to his heart, and a sour look crossed his face as he tried not to dwell on them. Suddenly realizing the reason for the question, he turned quickly to meet Randor's curious face. "Don't tell me this is where your strategy falls."

"Precisely."

"What would those vermin know of this? I'll wager a thousand gold pieces that they haven't even noticed the moon being gone!" He sank his face into his cool leather gloves and shook his head. Gildan despised the entire region--his standard of living far exceeded the crude comforts of Nar-Fhandon.

"Let us not be so negative about all of this," Randor replied, hoping to change his companion's attitude. "I cannot risk your dislike of these folk dampening our efforts when we arrive. I do respect you and your opinions, but please contain your feelings while you are there."

"Of course," Gildan answered. "Generally I do keep these thoughts to myself, but I am sitting here with you and with no one I might offend. Perhaps I am wrong to admit my views aloud, but I will never jeopardize our quest." His pride ran deep, and it was only natural for him to look down on those beneath his ways. "I would follow you anywhere in the world, Randor, even beyond the Four Gates of Ethindar."

"I know you would, and one day you may have to."

Gildan was curious about what the wizard might know. "How long do you think the world can last without healing?"

Randor thought quickly on the question. "Six months more, I would say." It was not a long time by any reckoning, but it was what he saw as a probable conclusion. "The moon has been gone for two months, and already much is lost. I can only imagine what will come about in half a year."

"Londor will surely die if we fail," said Gildan.

"True enough--but we will not fail, my friend."

"I will perish before that happens. This world has been too good to me." Though much adversity had been laid before him in his years, he overcame it every time, and indeed, many times Gildan had been the linchpin ensuring victory. In these mercenary jobs he had made abundant wealth in the process. The riches he earned had blessed him with the finest clothes, lodgings, and foods and allowed him to travel the globe many times over. "There is still much wealth left in Londor for me."

"Indeed," Randor laughed. "That aside," he continued, "just concentrate on the present."

Gildan nodded in agreement and lay down, placing his hands behind his head. He found the bed to his liking as slumber rushed over him like a wind-filled storm.

After a while only the wizard remained awake, unable to sleep. He was surprised that the restless Malander found rest here, though his hand clutched tightly the hilt of his sword. Randor leaned back against the wall and removed his hat and glasses. The thought of famine came to his mind as he relaxed his guard--the relentless storms, the sicknesses of the elves of Londor, wizards bereft of magic, and the death of vegetation. Randor knew that not even he could overcome the ultimate fate of the world if this persisted. His soul was directly connected to the spirit of the earth, and if Londor died, he would die with her. Not even the god of creation could intervene--nor did Ethindar choose to. Although it was His creation, diverting the course of the future was one thing He would not do.

Randor realized that this task was his greatest challenge. Looking over his companions, he was ever grateful to be surrounded by others who would sacrifice their lives to lift the burden of the world.

Chapter Nine: A Narrow Passage

"Wake up, Seth!" a voice cried out in the sleeping knight's ears. He thought he was still in the middle of the dream that had played in his mind all night long. The voice that rang loud was not at first recognizable, but as he opened his heavy eyelids a blurred Muron fell into view. The prince shook Seth's shoulder hard, jolting him upright. Highbinder pushed his damp hair from his forehead and noticed everyone wide awake, standing at the steel door with weapons drawn. The armed company leaned toward the hallway, their ears alert to what lay outside.

"What is happening?" Seth asked, confused.

"Lower your voice," Muron advised. "Strange noises are all about us."

"Noises?"

"We do not know what they are," the prince replied, his voice betraying an edge of panic. "They are still too far away to be determined." He pulled on Seth's arm and dragged him out of bed.

Randor stood closest to the door, his hands pressed firmly against the cold steel. Seth stumbled over to the gathering and took his place next to Lorn, as he always would. Everyone seemed composed except Lorn and Muron, who were obviously frightened. Though trembling in fear, the dwarf held his small weapon out just as the others did. It was not long before Seth heard the sounds of scratching and short, rapid hissing coming from his left side and from under the stone floor. His eyes widened, and the sleepy feeling was gone as he looked to the floor in disbelief. Through his boots he felt a slight rumble, and it was confirmed when he saw the expressions of the company, who felt it as well.

"Did you feel that?" Lorn asked.

"Earthquake?" Arnanor suggested, it being the only logical explanation he could think of. "Surely this place is safe from any attack."

"The barrier guards us," Seth added, needing to relieve his nerves.

Another tremor came, stronger than the first, and particles of dust floated down from the high ceiling, clouding the air with a light brown haze. The beds shifted slightly as the wooden posts slid from side to side with each tremor thereafter. As the pace of unsure movement created more dust, making Muron cough, Geil clasped his free hand over the prince's mouth to prevent any cough that might betray their whereabouts. The knight had a feeling that this was no earthquake, and given the choice, he preferred to escape this place without a fight, though the quarters were too small and the hallways too narrow to afford an easy flight.

"This is no earthquake," Randor said. "The tremors are rhythmic and can only be caused by someone or something." Gathering his company's attention by a snap of his fingers, he was now ready to give his command. "The Oracle is under attack." Seven pairs of eyes stared at him. "We must find our host and flee together. Keep close to me and remain focused." Cracking the door gently open, he peered out into the corridor--no apparent sign of threat yet, though whatever it might be was closer than he liked. "We will head back down this hall, turn left, and return to the mansion's main room. I will give further orders at that time." The door was fully opened as Randor stepped out. "Be ready for anything, my friends," he whispered, and with a wave of his hand the escape began.

The company moved swiftly into the dim passageway, and a foul stench greeted their nostrils. Pressing their backs against the wall, they sidestepped slowly toward the

intersection just ahead. The smell grew stronger as an intense blue light flickered around the corner. Randor stretched back his hand and halted the movement. Not a sound was spoken. With the lights that moved across the wall, a great snarling echoed louder with every second. Whatever was coming seemed to be taking its time.

Arnanor and Geil shared the same assumption: that the Mazazuken had entered to finish whatever evil business they had planned. Geil tensed, gripping his sword tighter. The image of Yindraken was forever lodged in his mind--the hill of battle, the Northern Kingdom's battlements, the rivers of blood, and the everlasting demonic words the monster spoke. "*Weakling*," Geil whispered to himself, feeling his hatred for the word grow.

Arnanor, suppressing his own emotions, could literally feel Geil's throbbing anger and placed his hand on the knight's chest to caution against any unwise actions. Muron squeezed closer to his guardian's side, reassured by the weight of Geil's hand on his shoulder.

Randor looked back on Gildan and smiled, knowing that the mercenary sensed the plan that was to unfold. The wizard's smile left as footsteps shuffled across the floor, coming in their direction.

An unrecognizable figure, enveloped in shadow, moved slowly through the intersection, looking straight ahead of itself, and all held their breath as it passed. From what they could see, it looked like a Mazazuken. Randor risked a glance around the corner. The werewolf was gone and the halls were clear. From where they stood, the stairway leading upward was barely visible; they could ill afford to become trapped. Randor turned and whispered, "Hurry, while secrecy lasts." With one hand stretched out to feel the rough bricks ahead, he slipped around the corner. Every ten feet they passed beneath a faintly burning torch that helped guide them to the door.

Setting foot on the first step, the foulest sort of odor engulfed them--the undiluted stench of death, making where they had been smell like fields of sweet flowers by comparison. Seth, feeling sick at his stomach, wanted to retreat to a pocket of fresher air but knew it was impossible. The door atop the stairs was broken into three pieces, two of them still hanging onto the hinges. What laid beyond the door was visible through the breaks in the once fine wood.

Randor took each step slowly. Nearing the top, he saw numerous Mazazuken in the pillared room, ransacking and destroying every marble pillar and statue they could find.

"Do you see something?" Arnanor asked.

"Silence," Randor replied. "Say nothing." He gestured, and everyone readied their weapons. The much-needed rest they had hoped for was over, and battle was unavoidable. Seeing no sign of the Oracle, Randor feared the worst. His solid plans had now proved unfeasible. *I wonder where he is*, thought the wizard. There were far too many doors to search. Backing down three steps, he said, "There is an amendment to my plan, I am afraid."

"What is going on out there?" Gildan asked.

Randor hesitated, not wanting to alarm the Northern elves. "The room has been overrun by Mazazuken."

Geil and Arnanor perked up and grew impatient with their motionless status. Frowning, Geil shook his head, feeling his old hatred rekindle as his weariness fell away

along with the pain in his muscles.

"We are heavily outnumbered," Randor admitted.

"Good," murmured Malander.

"What is your command?" Seth asked.

"Guard the staircase just outside this door while I go in search of the Oracle. I will try his chambers first."

Arnanor slapped his hand across Geil's chest and grabbed the elf-knight's full attention. "Don't you leave my brother again! This is your only function!"

"Yes, my liege," Geil replied humbly.

"I will kill you if you fail me!" His expression showed Geil that he was not fooling. "I won't hesitate--not even for you, my old friend."

Bowing in respect, Geil took the words to heart. "You have my word, my lord."

"And if the Oracle is not there?" Seth wondered.

"Then follow me wherever I lead." Randor started up the steps again and pushed down a large piece of the door leaning against the pieces still attached to the frame and sprinted ahead. "Forth!" he shouted. A great howling instantaneously erupted, filling the mansion with its wretched sound, as all Mazazuken eyes focused on the company.

Malander finished off the broken door and sent it skidding across the ground toward the first line of oncoming werewolves, who jumped easily over the projectile.

Geil stood as close to Muron as he could without unbalancing the prince. In Geil's mind it seemed that all the Mazazuken were heading his way, and his excitement grew with each step the enemy took. Geil truly desired to charge into the very heart of the Mazazuken offense and exterminate as many as he could. Arnanor kept a close eye on his knight, making sure he did not leave his brother's side.

"I have missed you greatly!" Malander shouted to his foes, grinning. "Come and meet your deaths!" He would be cured once again as the battle began, allowing him to forget his life of misery in the heat of conflict.

Lorn, who was at the edge of the group, was soon pushed to the middle. As the oncoming threat came howling into range, the company spread outward, giving themselves fighting room.

The beginning of the fray favored Randor's company, as they struck down the first beasts to come within blade's range. Thus far, Randor would be safe from harm in his search for the Oracle. The howls filled his ears, and he didn't bother to guess the number of Mazazuken. He had one goal in mind; he would leave the secondary task to his followers. Moving quickly up the carpeted flight of stairs, his cloak flying behind him, he reached for the closed door and looked back briefly at the pursuit. The wizard took leave into the chambers as the seven maintained their half-circle in front of the staircase. Still the Mazazuken warriors advanced from all directions.

* * *

Randor was submerged by the darkness of the void. No pool of radiant light greeted him this time. The Oracle was not here, and he lowered his head in disappointment as he ran toward the center of the great room, hoping his old friend would reveal himself. "You must come with me!" Randor yelled, his voice echoing through the chamber. "Your home has fallen under attack! Hurry while we still have time!" Spinning about, he found nothing, and as he stopped, a small beam of light shot up from beneath his feet. It was the pool of light, and his eyes were instantly drawn inward. Visions came,

rapid and unclear. He stepped to the edge and watched in wonderment: indistinguishable lands and wars, then a vision of his seven companions just outside the door. They were in the midst of a great battle against the werewolves. The company looked to have the advantage, but dozens of the enemy were finding their way to the staircase, and he could see the worry and stress on each of his companions' faces. The vision soon faded, replaced with a horrifying spectacle of the company being overwhelmed and falling slain at the bloodied, clawed hands of the Mazazuken. Randor did not know which to believe as the random visions of nonsense returned. He wanted to break free from the pool but was deeply compelled to stay, his curiosity not yet content. Surely what he saw was not real, yet doubt clouded his thoughts. He did not know which to believe about what might be happening just outside. No sounds penetrated the Oracle's void, and Randor strained to listen.

Taking his eyes off the door, he turned back to the swirling images within. What was this? From an eagle's point of view he saw a great valley set between two mountain ranges, a large, snake-shaped wilted forest filling the otherwise green landscape. *What are you showing me?* he asked the vision. Then his vantage point rose dramatically out of the valley and into the sky, a strange blending of day and night. The twin moons were brightly there--blood red. Randor heard screaming, though he could not tell whether it came from outside the room or from the vision. The screams intensified as the moons grew larger. Beldas began to crumble and glowed orange, burning away from the heavens, and in a gigantic flash, the moon was gone, along with the demonic cries.

"Permission was not given to you," the Oracle spoke, startling Randor as he came from behind. "I thought I could trust you. Now I find you in my inner chambers, hoarding for yourself visions that only I am blessed to see."

"I came to set you free," Randor replied sharply.

"Why?"

"Your mansion is not safe anymore."

"Impossible," the Oracle laughed.

"Are you not aware of this?"

"I am all-knowing, my wizard."

"Quickly, we must flee together!" Randor turned and started away, but looking over his shoulder, he found that he was alone in his escape. The Oracle remained at his radiant light, unwilling to move. "Are you staying?"

"What did you see, Randor?" he asked, disregarding the urgency.

"We have not the time to discuss this now."

"The door is sealed. We will not leave until I receive my answers." He looked at Randor with a serious expression.

Randor kept his attention on the door, wanting to break down the way to his company in need. The Oracle boiled with eagerness, not caring what happened to his home. Stretching forth his arm, he said softly, "Come, my friend."

"Why are you doing this?" asked Randor, not understanding. Hoping to humor the Oracle into letting him escape, he returned and stood beside the light, feigning cooperation.

"What visions of mine did you see?"

"It showed what might well be happening just outside your chambers. Two scenarios played for me, and I do not know which is truth--if either is."

"Please continue."

Randor did not wish to think upon the other vision he saw, for it was too disturbing. Never had he felt such despair and hopelessness before. He attempted to place a name on the land he saw, but it was destroyed beyond all recognition. "The light showed me a long valley lying between two snowcapped mountain ranges. Within the valley lay a dead and wilted forest of pine that stretched beyond the horizon."

"This is interesting."

"Just as I was about to figure what it meant, the sky captured the image and revealed both moons." Randor began to sweat, his cloak growing heavier from the humidity. "Beldas shone bright orange and was consumed by leaping pillars of fire as it began to split open in all directions."

"I have seen this as well."

"Then it vanished in a great flash of blue light." Further detail flooded his mind. "I heard the sounds of screams."

"Your senses serve you well."

"What did you gather from this?"

The Oracle shook his head as he probed into his collection of visions. "If I had known this, your quest would have had a superior beginning." He paused. "But you begin in a way that I find not apt."

"It certainly has given me less hope in my quest. From what it seems, the moon has been destroyed in the heavens." The theory had not yet crossed his logic--then again, nothing was etched in stone.

"It is likely," the Oracle admitted.

"Perhaps it is," Randor replied. "For the time being I will not think it so. I believe Beldas is here on Londor...somewhere." The pool of light faded as the Oracle made haste for the door. It was Randor now who hesitated, but only for a split instant; then both hurried back to join the battle.

"How did they break through my barrier?" asked the Oracle as they reached the door to his chambers. "I become emptier as time marches along. My magic is vanishing."

"I had to lower it, I am afraid. The company could not progress with it raised."

"And all this time I thought it had allowed you through and kept out only evil. Ethindar is punishing me for some reason."

"He would never do that," Randor comforted. "It is not His way." And swinging the door wide, he said, "Lead us out of here."

The Oracle nodded and steeled himself to leave his chambers. Two thousand years of solitude would now be undone, and he did not look forward to this. Randor took a deep breath and sprinted forward.

* * *

Despite the ranks of snarling, slavering Mazazuken relentlessly driving in at the company, no injuries had come to the seven yet. Piles of fallen werewolves lay at their feet and beyond, and their swords slung blood against the walls and onto one another's armor and clothing. The Northern elves were guided by a blind madness of revenge against their ancient foes, and Gildan and Malander took pleasure in the howls of the dying as the never-ending legions of Yindraken's army poured through the mansion's front door. How lucky that this countless clan wasn't in full number the night before, or things would have gone much differently for the little company of fighters. There was no

sign of the Mazazuken leader anywhere, though Geil searched the crowd many times over between slashes of his sword.

"Keep close together!" Gildan yelled out, noticing a small opening in the formation. "None shall get past us!" In the back of his mind Gildan worried for Randor, who had disappeared many minutes ago and should be back by now.

Seth, too, was worried, knowing nothing of the turmoil behind the door to the Oracle's chambers. "We should go after Randor!" he shouted as he pulled his blade from between the ribs of a dying werewolf. "His magic could annihilate this entire horde!"

"We have orders to stand fast!" Geil replied.

As if in answer, the door to the chambers burst open, spilling out Randor and the Oracle. After two steps, Randor halted his charge and stared in disbelief at the hundreds of foul creatures before him.

The Oracle stood frozen behind the wizard, dismayed that he had been unable to perceive the attack. In all its thousands of years, his mansion had never been invaded. There was nothing here of any real material worth, and no one of any importance dwelled with the Oracle. He did not hold himself highly, and the thought that anyone should want him was ludicrous. "This I do not understand," he said softly, his strength and willpower ebbing away at the horrid sight.

"They seek you out," Randor informed him, grabbing the Oracle's frail arm. "This is why you must escape with us at once!"

"There is no way clear to get out--all my doors are blocked by these...creatures."

"Then let us *make* a way," Randor replied with an unexpected smile. He felt ready to wield his magic--a very uncommon feeling. "Are your offensive spells functional?"

"I should guess they are," the Oracle answered uncertainly. Not all his gifts were completely gone, but the collection of offensive spells he knew were long unpracticed. Nevertheless, he would try to harness what he could. "We shall soon find out together."

The company did not notice Randor and the Oracle until they heard Randor calling out, "*Nara sen mothor lei nara!*" The seven knew that it was a spell, and kept their senses sharp to watch where the magic would strike. Calling out the spell, Randor conjured four small flames of a brilliant blue, each hovering around his hand. He scoured the room for a major weakness and soon found it, in the center of the room. There stood the two largest pillars of the Oracle's mansion, not yet destroyed by the Mazazuken pillaging, and also the heart of the Mazazuken pack. This was the chance he needed, and the outcome would surely benefit the cause. Placing his hands one atop the other, he took the projectiles of blue light and reached back for momentum. Then Randor squinted his eyes in concentration and let loose his talent with a fierce outstretching of the right hand. The four orbs of streaking fire roared across the room, and in three seconds the magic hit its mark perfectly. As the two mighty columns crumbled atop the doomed werewolves, fire and stone ripped through the evil horde, annihilating all it consumed. Severed and burned body parts scattered in all directions, flying over the heads of the still untouched clan minions, who continued to charge inward.

The Oracle, meanwhile, conjured a wordless enchantment, striking rapid beams of the purest light from his fingers from one end of the room to the other. As his magic hit the marble floor it shredded the polished surface into jagged boulders that served as weaponry. The Mazazuken juggernaut seemed to grow weak, and what resolve they had trailed away to nothing.

"They are scattered!" Seth cried with excitement.

The once thick lines of beasts wilted into handfuls of condemned victims for the company's blades. Randor escorted the Oracle carefully down the stairs and asked quickly, "Which way to the southernmost door?"

"South?" Arnanor replied, shocked. "Our horses and supplies lie outside the northern gate. We must retrieve them before we escape!"

"They are either dead or captured by now," Randor answered grimly. The prince did not wish to hear this. "With all the werewolves that passed our steeds, you honestly believe they remain untouched?"

"Well..."

"Nonsense, foolish elf!" Randor pressed his way through the company and asked again, "Which way to the south entrance?" The Oracle could only point to a door to his immediate left, and Randor shouted, "Follow me!"

The Oracle opened the way with a slight gesture of his freed hand. Down they went into dim passage. The air smelled sweeter, and the path was narrow, obliging them to move in single file. As Malander entered last, he turned about and slammed the door, hoping it would hold out the remaining enemy. He had had a fair share of killing, more than enough to quench his desires for the moment.

"What next?" Randor demanded. Not receiving an answer from the rattled Oracle, he shouted, "Tell me!" The Oracle caught his wind and pointed straight into the corridor ahead. "Are you certain?"

"It curves a bit, but trust me, you shall see the steps to freedom in little time."

"Will that door behind us hold?" Seth asked as he looked over his shoulder.

"It will hold long enough for our purposes. Magic does not keep us alone, but all we need are a few seconds."

"Seconds!" Seth shouted, wishing they could move faster. Panic gnawed at the young knight, and he felt exhausted. But life was at stake, and rest would have to wait. Growing up in the long era of peace under the Council, Seth lacked the experience of warfare, and fatigue came too easily. Under these new circumstances, though, his training came fast, and the lessons would never be forgotten. "We must hurry! I can feel their breath against our necks!"

Randor refused to acknowledge the absurd remark and kept his brisk walk. The farther the company pressed, the less the torches of the hallway availed them. The wizard finally felt the curving corridor and was relieved to know they would soon be outside, though what lay outside could only be guessed--but he would deal with whatever came. "How much farther?" All courtesy was gone from his speech.

"Three hundred steps more, I would say."

"Attention, everyone," Randor commanded. "As we come to the door you will make your way down a hill, where a large river snakes around its base. Chances are, we will become separated in the dense forest. Meet the Oracle and me at the wooden bridge that spans the river's narrowest point." He paused and gave them enough time to let the order sink in. "Am I clear on this?"

"Yes, sir!" was the complete consensus by all except Malander.

Randor took a deep breath. "Good luck, my friends," he said, meaning it, knowing that these might be the last words he spoke to any of them. He picked up his speed and barely saw the door ahead.

The air grew crisp and cooler as they approached, and a faint glimmer of light shone through the narrow gap under the doorway. The path behind them was still clear, but more than once the company imagined noises at their heels. The mere thought of pursuers certainly kept Seth's and Lorn's feet moving as quickly as they might. Strong winds wailed in the world outside, audible even through the thick boards of the door.

"Until we meet again," Randor spoke. His words trailed off as he opened the way at last.

"Werewolves!" shrieked the Oracle. "There must be hundreds more on my hill!"

"Count later!" Gildan laughed as he prepared himself anew for battle. "To war!" he cried, racing down the hill, weaving between the sharp-edged rocks that lay half-buried in the thin soil. The Mazazuken were in all directions and could not be avoided, which pleased the Northern elves to no end. As a sea of torches approached the mansion in no apparent formation from the werewolves, Gildan ran to greet the masses.

"What is he doing?" the Oracle asked, astonished at the elf's lust for battle.

"His job," Malander offered as he sprinted away to join the mercenary.

The two princes and Sir Geil followed in Malander's shadow down the way, wielding their swords at every step, yelling, "*Tu Trose!*"

As they moved farther away from the mansion, the tall evergreen trees grew closer together, their bases half obscured by a light fog. Geil kept his hand, as ever, on his young master's shoulder, leading Muron around with some difficulty. Arnanor led the way for his kindred, now disregarding the path taken by Gildan and Malander. The princes' path sent them up an incline that made for a harder escape to the unseen river below. Each direction they turned, they found dozens of their hated enemy. Sir Geil led Arnanor now, with sword raised high. All three joined in a premature victory cry as they stormed the hill.

Seth and Lorn accompanied Randor and the Oracle down a straight-shot path that disappeared into the thickening fog. The knight and the dwarf stood back to back as they maneuvered along, at first without incident. Then, as they passed a thick copse of trees, five large werewolves leaped down onto the road, hissing and snarling at the four escapees. Lorn began to lose his slowly regained composure when he looked up to see the silhouettes of the massive figures. Three of the five stood over him...yet did not attack. Lorn found it difficult to breathe as the glowing red eyes seemed to hypnotize him. Reaching behind him, he tried to gain Seth's attention, but Seth was occupied already with the other attackers. The Mazazuken seemed unfazed by the ferocity of Seth's looks and laughed at his effort.

Stepping forward, Randor stretched out his arm toward the wolves and saw a slight backstep--they knew exactly who he was. "Retreat or you shall feel pain like never before!" Under the tinted glasses and shadow of his brimmed hat, a quiet rage grew; unlike the Oracle, who slumped his shoulders in fatigue, Randor was not in the mood to hesitate.

Slowly the five attackers stepped back farther, then fled around the company and headed up the hill toward the mansion. Lorn clapped his hand to his chest, but his moment of relief was short-lived, ending as Seth nudged him forward along the path. Randor grabbed the Oracle once more and followed close behind the knight.

"They are running away without a fight!" said Seth, dumbfounded. His mouth dropped open as he saw the horde back away, leaving them unopposed. But he had little

time to think why.

"We are of no consequence to the Mazazuken now," Randor said. "They are not seeking us any further. What they are after is not with us." The Oracle looked to Randor with tired eyes, for even he was baffled by the comment. "Keep your current pace, Seth. The river is not far." He could see through the trees and guided purely from his memories of where the bridge was located.

* * *

"Brother!" Muron cried, still battling the wolves that rose up in their path. He and Geil had fought together since escaping the mansion, spilling much enemy blood, to their immense gratification. Arnanor led the way, though it was not the quickest or the straightest path toward the others, and they were forced to fight an uphill war until at last the numbers of the enemy thinned. As Muron flailed away, barely managing to stay on his feet, he could see exactly what was happening behind them, at the mansion. "Stop, Arnanor!"

But Arnanor kept moving, ignoring Muron's attempt to change his actions. He kept on in haste, trying to find the nearest way off the hill. Sniffing the brisk air, he began to doubt the wizard's assurance that this river actually existed at all.

"Prince Arnanor!" Geil gasped.

Arnanor peered over his fur-trimmed shoulder, still moving forward. Before he could reply, he saw. Dark smoke billowed from many broken windows of the once great mansion. After tossing dozens of torches inside, the Mazazuken roared in victory. Flames danced along the foundation of stone. Apparently, Yindraken had achieved his objective.

"We must return to see if everyone made it out all right!" Muron said, huffing.

"All have escaped," Arnanor replied, not knowing whether his words were true. He only knew that he did not want to backtrack, not even for his companions.

Not far away, the elves heard the faint sound of running water. Heartened by the sound, the three redoubled their efforts to reach the river. Down the hill they went, making easy progress. The trees thinned out, and they were moving through tall grass that covered the sloping hill. The fog was behind them now, and their destination lay dead ahead--but no bridge stood there. Across the wide, swift water, another dense band of woods ran the entire length of the river.

"No bridge," Arnanor said softly. Clambering atop a nearby boulder, he looked both ways, relishing the cool wind blowing across his sweaty face. The prince sheathed his sword and crossed his arms.

"Which way shall we go?" Geil asked.

Arnanor looked again and saw nothing. He knew they couldn't have been the first off the hill, nor could they be far from their mark. His body ached from the long, running fight, and the armor weighed him down. He could see his brother panting as he rested his hands on his knees, placing his blade at his side. Geil stepped back to give the young prince room to breathe. *East or west?* Arnanor thought. No sense of intuition was left in him, for the absence of the moon had stripped away what elvish abilities he had. It frustrated him that even the simplest powers were now beyond him. "Muron," he said as he came down from the rock. His brother looked up to him, his face worn with fatigue.

"I will be fine," Muron offered.

"I know you will," replied Arnanor. "Have you any intuition left?"

Muron lowered his head and closed his eyes in concentration. Dizziness

consumed him as he attempted to draw out his gift. But try as he may, all magic was void. The elf shook his head. "I am sorry, my brother, but mine is gone as well."

"Damn!" Arnanor yelled, spooking a nearby flock of birds into flight. He paced the ground and looked into the dawn sky. They could not afford to wait around. Arnanor did not want Randor finding the three lost; the embarrassment would be too great to bear. The prince had to decide quickly the way he would lead them. "We will make haste to the east." Arnanor turned and said, "Keep your guard up, especially you, Sir Geil."

"Yes, my lord."

Onward the three went, ducking between massive granite boulders, as the sun rose over the evergreen forest. The riverbank seemed clear of any threat, but as they crossed a long bank of dark sand, a shuffling of leaves startled them.

"What was--" But before Muron could finish his thought or draw his sword, Gildan and Malander emerged from the bushes. The startled Geil instinctively swung his toward the threat--directly at Malander, who pushed off the blade.

Wagging his finger, he said, "Don't try that again, elf."

"Where is Randor?" Gildan asked, cleaning off his sword in the river shallows. The three small jewels on his forehead gleamed in the morning rays.

"You don't know, either?" asked Muron.

"We'll find him," Arnanor replied. "Follow me, everyone." The prince led the charge as the delayed companions hastened away to find their leader.

* * *

As Arnanor came atop the last of the large hills of the Oracle's land, he saw the river curve drastically around the base of the hill, where the rapids grew stronger.

"There it is!" Muron exclaimed, relieved to see Randor, standing at the middle of the bridge with the rest of the company. "I'd thought we'd never see this."

"The elves!" Seth shouted, leaning over the bridge's heavy handrail. Glad that the battles were over for now, Seth realized how very tired he was, for he hadn't had a good, sound night's sleep in more than two weeks. And something told him that it would be a while longer yet before he could rest. Lorn was at his side, sitting down on the wooden planks with his back propped against a support beam.

Randor stood quietly alongside the Oracle, watching the smoke pour from the woods atop the hill.

"Look at that," Seth gasped, pointing to the north, his eyes wide with amazement. Lorn's sight followed the outstretched arm.

Randor lowered his head, not looking forward to the Oracle's reaction.

"My home," the Oracle managed to speak, aware for the first time that the mansion was no more. He longed to return, to attempt to save what was left. The people and spirits he had guarded these long ages needed his guidance, and all would be lost in the supernatural realm if he failed. "I must leave." He pushed off the handrail.

"It is folly," Seth said, shaking his head. He would not aid the Oracle. "Leave me out of this."

"I am with you, Seth," Lorn added.

"So are we all," Randor replied, to Seth's surprise. He placed his hand on the Oracle's shoulder, stopping his movement. The Oracle shrugged, releasing Randor's grip. "You cannot return, my friend. You are not well enough....There is nothing for you to save." He paused. "Save yourself."

"Nonsense."

"Your death is not an alternative."

"Death is always an alternative, Randor." The Oracle started down the bridge. Randor and the others watched the frail being limp along, supporting himself by the rail when needed.

Just then, Malander and the Northern elves arrived and stepped onto the bridge, unknowingly blocking the Oracle's way. Looking up, Malander took a few steps more, then stopped, puzzled at the Oracle's advance. He gripped his sword more tightly, unsure what to expect, as the Oracle looked at him strangely and staggered ahead.

"What are you doing?" Malander asked softly.

"Stand aside," the Oracle warned.

"Remain steadfast," Randor ordered. "Do not let him off this bridge. He has grown delirious."

"I don't want to harm you," said the Oracle as he raised his hands.

"I doubt you could!" Malander growled, his overconfidence showing itself.

"Do not tempt me."

"I believe I just did."

"What is going on here?" asked Arnanor.

The Oracle slumped against the handrail and said, "You leave me no choice." As he raised his hands, the wind kicked up suddenly, blowing Malander and the elves backward a few steps. The Oracle, unaffected by his magic, stared at the angered Malander and began to unfasten his long, fur-trimmed robe. As he unfastened it from his shoulders, it caught on the wind and was carried off, over the head of Malander and the others standing before him.

"Wings?" Seth gasped, staring at the Oracle's back. And indeed, a pair of long, white-feathered wings stretched out behind him to a more than eight-foot span.

The Oracle looked over his shoulder and smiled at Randor. The gods forbade the usage of wings by the Oracle and his kindred; the punishment could well be death.

"Do not do this!" Randor pleaded, not wanting to see his old friend come to grief. The absence of the Oracle would leave the world in emptiness.

"It is too late," he replied, uncaring of the consequences. He had lost his most cherished possession; losing his life meant little now. Malander still inched his way toward him, sword aimed directly at his chest. "Find the moon, Randor!" the Oracle cried, giving a great flap of his wings. The entire wooden structure swayed from the force. "Farewell." And with a mighty wing thrust, the Oracle shot straight up into the sky, where he hovered for a brief moment above the company. The smoke that rose in the distance held his eyes prisoner, calling him back to his burning abode. He felt strong once again as his remaining powers surged up in him. It had been ages since his wings were exposed, but never would he forget how to use them. The gentle flaps felt wonderful; it was a shame he had to hasten away to settle business just now.

"We must stop him, Randor!" Seth said. "You're the only one who can bring him down from there!"

"I am not one to bring intervention to his affairs. All I can do is offer my advice. It seems, though, his ears are closed to our voices."

And as the Oracle bolted off and soared high over the tall trees, soon falling from view, Randor said, "Come, we have a task to complete." Pointing across the river, he

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retook the lead. "To the south!"

Chapter Ten: Out of the Shadows

After their harrowing encounters within the Oracle's forest, the company endured three long days of marching. There were no signs of the Mazazuken on their heels since the werewolf clan's business laid only with the Oracle's mansion. Through the Hills of Magadon they saw no signs of civilization, nor any enemies--just never-ending green slopes. Food was rare along the way south, as was clean water, and the princes missed their horses, never having traveled without them. The days were filled with warm weather and silence, with no one feeling much in a mood for conversation. Randor and Gildan spoke from time to time but generally kept to themselves, and in the cool evenings Geil provided some diversion with elvish songs and tales while the wizard and the elf-mercenary filled the air with great clouds of pipe smoke, laughing now and again at the bawdy lyrics of Geil's songs.

Lorn used his free time drawing the hills around them, while Seth was content simply to relax and glance over the dwarf's shoulder at his work. All found it amusing that Malander sat away from the gathering, still cursing the Oracle for arousing his anger.

On the fourth day at dawn, while few citizens were on the streets, Randor led the company from the fields to the edge of Nar-Fhandon, lined with houses of rough brown stones and red shingled roofs.

"Lorn," Randor whispered. The dwarf approached and awaited his next word. "Show me the drawing of that symbol. I want everyone to have an exact idea of what to look for." Lorn removed the paper from his rolled collection of drawings and handed it over, to be passed around for all to commit afresh to memory.

"Your orders, sir?" Seth asked, standing at attention.

"Divide into two groups and search the area for any clues. Ask any local folk you deem trustworthy, and keep your composure. If this symbol is evil, I am sure it has spies everywhere." Separating the company at this point in time seemed the best plan to the wizard, for the diversity of Zelok's group might draw unwelcome curiosity in this region.

"That settles it," Arnanor, said, stepping away. "Muron, Geil, let us leave."

"Hold on, elf-prince," Randor said. "I am not through with you yet." Arnanor crossed his arms and waited impatiently for the conclusion. "I will be at the Green Hall Inn if you need me."

"Why will you be there? Are you not going with us?" Lorn asked.

"We need lodgings and supplies, do we not? I will be at this inn the day long. If you come across something of interest, inform me immediately." He paused. "Seth..."

"Yes, sir?"

"Go with the Northern elves, will you?"

Arnanor was insulted greatly. "What...?"

"It shall be done," Seth said with a salute.

"We don't need his aid, wizard!"

"He will keep a close eye on you for me. You do belong to the Council, after all, mind you."

"Yes, but--"

"I thank you for your cooperation." Randor was not of a mind to argue, and he expected the same from his companions. "Highbinder, if they fall out of line whatsoever, let me know at once." Seth nodded and took his place beside Arnanor, who looked at him

with disgust. "If you find nothing here, return by sunset." The company parted, and Lorn went to follow Seth, but he was halted by Randor's swift hand. "Where are you going?"

"With Seth," he replied meekly.

"I need you to go with Gildan and Malander."

"Must I?"

Seeing the despair on the dwarf's rough face, Randor patted him gently on the shoulder. "I will be forever at your service if you do this for me." Lorn smiled and felt important, proud to be in Randor's favor. "There may be a time when Seth is not at your side. You must build your tolerance and willpower. It will make you a stronger person in the end, I promise you."

"Do you really think so?"

"Would I ever tell you wrong?"

Lorn shook his head.

"Good." Randor pushed him forward. "Go on, then, before they leave you." Lorn shuffled down the road and around the first corner he passed, seeing the two warriors a few dozen paces ahead.

The wizard stood alone on the street, surveying the simple structures, and noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Hopefully his strategy would work. *Something is here*, he thought, *but what?*

* * *

Randor stepped out the front door of the Green Hall Inn and leaned on the steps, smoking his pipe as nightfall began to take over the world. With him stood Gildan, Malander, and Lorn, who had returned earlier with nothing to report. Gildan tried to set aside his loathing for the city's uncultured, coarse inhabitants. "Nothing has come of our visit here," the mercenary said as he loaded his pipe with fine tobacco he had just purchased. As he put a coal to the pipe, passersby gave him a strange look. He did not let it bother him, though, and merely puffed away. But stranger looks had been given him, and this was certainly nothing to fret over.

"There has been no word from Seth," Randor replied.

Lorn sat off to the side and watched the local citizens walk by. Across the busy street was a woodcarving work area, where buyers flocked to admire the craftsmanship. With his eye for fine detail, Lorn inspected the works through cracks in the crowd from where he rested, noting the flaws. "Seems the base is a bit off on that table," he mumbled. He had to keep busy somehow just to keep from worrying himself into a mess over Seth's departure. The dwarf thought he had handled the day quite well, although he did regret making Malander angry by talking too much. "I guess a little constructive criticism wouldn't hurt," Lorn chuckled as he crossed the cobblestone street.

The crowd thinned as Lorn drew near a table that stood almost to his height. The man behind the table, an old fellow with a full white beard on his weathered face, did not acknowledge him but continued speaking to a handful of people. His eyes were dark and close-set, and he wore a fluffed coat and baggy pants that were stuffed into his knee-high boots. A wide-brimmed hat sat atop his gray hair, set off with three colorful feathers.

"Good evening, sir," Lorn offered.

The vendor stroked his bristly beard, shocked to see a dwarf at his table. Though he spoke all day to complete strangers in order to sell his wares, in this moment he seemed at a loss for words. "Is there something I can do for you?" he said at last.

"I merely came to look at your works here."

"Oh?" replied the merchant. "And do you like what you see? These are the finest woodworks you will find anywhere!"

"I beg to differ," Lorn replied politely.

The merchant was taken back by the remark and couldn't help but laugh. "Who are you, dwarf? And what gives you the cheek to make such a bold statement?"

"I am Lorn Mardrof of the Beowulken Valley."

"Beowulken!" the merchant replied in a loud laugh. His laughter grew and rang through the marketplace, until his hands clasped his aching sides. Embarrassed, Lorn stepped away from the table. "That explains so much! You and your people in the 'valley' of Beowulken have no business in woodcarving or any other art! Go back to the caverns and mine some coal!"

"I only came to offer my advice," Lorn said. "I, myself, am skilled in the art of woodcarving."

"What could *you* possibly teach me?"

"I noticed a slight--"

"Be gone, 'valley' dweller! No one can teach me, Master Jerthom, the greatest craftsman of the South!"

As he spoke, Randor snuck in behind Lorn and gleamed into the eyes of Jerthom, who fell instantly mute in the presence of the wizard. Lorn fell back onto Randor and sank into his arms. "The company awaits your return," Randor said.

Jerthom smirked at Lorn, then returned to the gathering of patrons at his table.

"What was that all about?" Randor asked as they crossed the street.

"Nothing," Lorn answered, not wanting to talk of it anymore. The merchant had hurt his feelings, especially with the words about his homeland. He was proud of where he came from, and would not change his background for the entire world. The dwarves of Beowulken were unique among their kind, shunning cave dwelling and stonework, for they were a different class of artisans, much like the neighboring elves of the Xantilan Kingdom. "I was merely trying to enlighten that merchant with some of my knowledge."

"Some are not open to criticism, my friend."

"Only wanting to further his craft," Lorn said, throwing up his hands.

"Well, let him keep his follies--seems that he deserves them."

Seth smiled at his friend as he watched him draw closer to the steps. His day had been rather tedious, dealing with Arnanor, who fought with every decision he made. All day the elves had spoken in their native tongue, keeping the Council diplomat out of their conversations. They, too, had been unsuccessful as they canvassed the city and its outskirts. Many people had looked at the small group with suspicious eyes, rarely having seen any royalty here, let alone elvish princes. No one they spoke to had admitted to seeing the symbol before, and Seth began to wonder if such a thing existed anywhere in Londor.

"I trust you are well?" Seth asked as he greeted the dwarf.

"I've seen better times."

"What happened?"

Lorn pulled him aside from the group and told him of the encounter with Jerthom, then fell silent as he sat down on the steps. Seth, outraged by this, desired to have an earnest talk with the scornful craftsman. "What did you say in return?" Seth asked.

"I said little to him," Lorn admitted. "I had not the heart to speak up."

"Bolden yourself," Seth replied. "I've told you that you shouldn't let people belittle you." He shook his fist, then pounded it against his open hand, biting his lip to calm his emotions. "I wished I had been there to hear that."

"Let it go, Seth," Lorn said, shrugging his shoulders. "It is in the past."

"It's not that simple a thing to disregard."

"What news do you bring?" Rador asked of the princes.

"A day wasted," Arnanor answered. "I am ready to retire for the evening."

"I agree," Muron added.

"Are we supplied and ready for tomorrow's departure?" inquired Arnanor as he began to ascend the stairs toward the front door.

"Indeed we are," said Rador. "I have placed the supplies in our rooms within our lodgings for the night. The provisions should last a good week in the wilderness....But it is not time to retire for the evening just yet."

"No?" Arnanor asked.

"Nor is it time for sleep, either."

"Where do you turn us now?" Gildan asked.

Rador looked to the tavern diagonally across from the inn. "To Fallon's End."

"What's wrong with the tavern in this inn?" Arnanor asked. "Ale is the same wherever you go."

"I am on official business, my good elf," he replied, and started down the road, with the company in tow. "Let us hope she is still there."

Lorn grabbed his belongings and trotted off. To his relief, Jerthom was not present; his shop now covered by a blue satin cloth and vacant of people.

* * *

As darkness settled in completely, the stars appeared, twinkling brightly down on the troubled world. A trio of wind instruments could be heard in the distance, accompanied by a soft clapping of hands--a minor festival, apparently.

The streets began to clear as the people of Nar-Fhandon filled the many pubs, raising pint glasses in celebration of a hard day's labor. The trading day was over, and the crowded marketplace was now a scene of bare wooden carts, tables, and multicolored tents. The streets were littered with crumpled parchments, picked bones, and empty bottles of wine and ale. A faint stench of old meat and moldy grain accompanied the cold winds that came with the sunset.

The tavern, Fallon's End, was an old three-story building of red stone, with a single red door. Smallish windows bordered the door, the panes covered in a thick coat of dust. Below the grimy windows grew small, untrimmed shrubs set in cracked ancient clay pots. Above the door, a sign creaked in the wind, its faded white letters reading, FALLON'S END: FINE BREW & FELLOWSHIP. From the half-open door came shouts of stupor and raucous laughter--it was safe to guess that this was not a place where the elite came to relax and unwind.

"I'm not even inside and I do not like this place," Muron whispered to Geil.

"As long as I am alive you will be safe," Sir Geil reassured him. He rested his hand on the hilt of his sword, as if unsure just what to expect.

As they reached the door, Rador took a brief look around with an eye to the safety of his company. A blare of noise greeting them as they entered.

As anticipated, the large room was jammed from wall to wall with patrons, standing or seated at small round tables piled high with plates of scraps and empty pints. The long bar in the back of the pub was also lined with thirsty patrons.

"Do you see her?" Seth asked Randor.

"Not yet," replied Randor. "She was the owner of this tavern before I left to Ethindar this last time."

"That was almost eighty years ago, Randor," Gildan replied. "It would be remarkable if she were still alive."

"She is half elf and half human; thus her life span would be a bit longer than a typical woman's."

Gildan nodded. "Then we will go and find a place to sit."

Randor nodded in agreement as the elf waded into the crowd. All but Seth and Lorn entered into the sea of coarse talk and pipe smoke. Malander placed his hand over his mouth as he pushed through, disregarding the insults as he jostled and bulled his way past whoever stood in his way.

Lorn noticed someone he had hoped not to see. At a table near the far wall sat Jerthom, gleefully swilling a mug of beer, not caring that it spilled onto his beard. Around him were fellow merchants in similar states of inebriation.

"Can we just wait outside, Seth?" Lorn asked. "It is too stuffy in here for my taste....After all, it is a splendid night out."

"No, thank you," Seth replied quickly. "I could use a drink myself. You'll get your fill of the outdoors again tomorrow." He laughed. "Now, go on and have a pint of beer, hmm?"

It looked as though Lorn could not escape the uncomfortable situation, so he stomped forward with lowered head, looking the other way and hoping to go unnoticed amid the crowd. Snippets of many loud conversations rang in his tender ears.

Gildan, who already had a cup of wine, found them all a table that had just been vacated near the stone wall. The two elvish princes sat quietly in their high-backed chairs, clearly ill at ease to be surrounded by such low company. Gildan set his drink on the table and beckoned Lorn over, pulling out the chair next to him.

Only a few feet more, and he would be past the disagreeable woodworker. There was no sign of Randor or Seth. *What's the worst that could happen?* he asked himself, and swallowing the lump in his throat, he walked past the dreaded table.

"Wait a moment, friend," Jerthom snapped, grabbing Lorn by the arm. His grip was unforgiving, sending sharp pains from his shoulder to the tips of his fingers.

He gulped as the merchant pulled him nearer.

"Is that the *one*?" a man at Jerthom's table asked.

"Most certainly," Jerthom replied, his tone serious, downing the rest of his ale and slamming the mug down to the table. With a resounding belch, he purposely sloshed a bit of his neighbor's ale on Lorn's boots. "You hear that, dwarf?"

"H-hear what?"

"You're already famous in our fair city."

"I-I don't..." Lorn mumbled.

"Wait--just wait," Jerthom began, holding back his laughter. "Tell them where you're from," he said, leaning back in his chair, ready to laugh anew at the answer he loved so much.

Stammering because of the pain in his poor arm, Lorn gasped, "Beo-- Beowulken." As he had hoped, Jerthom released him and roared with mirth. Lorn caressed his arm as the entire table of merchants burst into deafening guffaws, drawing the entire pub's attention.

"Beowulken?" a merchant cried, tears of laughter rolling down his cheeks. "That place is a joke!" Others pounded on the table, unable to control themselves.

Looking up to see what brought on the commotion, Gildan and the princes found Lorn all but weeping at the hands of the merchants. Before Gildan could react, he caught a glimpse of Seth emerging from the snickering crowd.

"There's always something with this company," Malander grumbled.

Now Seth had his chance to settle with the merchant, and the words came easily as he stood before the table. "You are only a moment away from a thrashing if you do not mind your tongue!" he announced boldly. He parted his cloak to reveal his sword. Jerthom smiled and uncrossed his legs, showing his own blade.

"You waste my time, boy," Jerthom said. "This is a personal matter here, and no business of yours."

"His business is my own."

"Foolish knight."

"Apologize, and you may go without consequence." Seth stood firm, but the merchant would not have it. "Or perhaps you would like to have your bartering license banned by the Council."

"Nonsense," Jerthom answered. "Oh, sure--go and tell the Council. They have no control over what I do." Seth did not know how to counter now that his threat was useless. "I only trade in non-Mudalfaen-controlled kingdoms. The Council can go to hell!"

Seth's eyes narrowed as he twitched slightly, and he brought forth his blade from his sheath in one swift motion. Those nearby backed away, frightened at the sight of the gleaming steel as he said in an even tone, "How dare you speak of the Council thus! Watch where you tread--you'll get your payment sooner than you think!"

"The only payment I will ever receive will be gold!" Jerthom responded. "Leave my sight, boy, and take your little dwarf with you!" And turning his back to them, he grabbed a fresh pint of ale and raised it in salute to his friends.

"They are drunk, Lorn," Seth said as he escorted the shaken dwarf back to the company's table.

"Is there a problem, Seth?" Gildan asked as they sat.

"Nothing I cannot handle alone," muttered Seth. He left it at that, repressing the madness that flowed through his veins. Never had he heard anyone curse the Council that had brought the world such prosperity over the past eighty years. Rubbing his Mudalfaen badge with the tips of his shaking fingers, he breathed deeply to refocus his energy. The codes forbade him to reprimand Jerthom. After all, the merchant was ignorant and would not change even if threatened with violence. Highbinder placed his sword back in its sheath and rested his hands on the table.

"Where is Randor?" asked Arnanor, growing impatient with the tavern. The patrons here--the entire city, in fact--bothered him, and all he could think was how inferior these people were. The only elves within a day's ride were those at his table. "Humans disgust me," he mumbled.

Malander, who seemed to pay no attention to his surroundings, used his selective hearing to straighten the prince out once and for all. "What was that?" he asked, calm yet intense.

"Do not bother with it."

"You have my attention now--repeat what you just said."

Arnanor leaned over to Geil and said, "*Lontos mingha malfou ni ran ni-chaldrof.*"

"*Gah, min nu-dor, ghin bith tu ephthor,*" Geil replied.

Arnanor nodded with a mischievous smile. "*Tu rha-daga fon loda.*"

"*Sen ni ran conifen ah lonto,*" Muron replied defensively.

Standing up and leaning into Arnanor's face, Malander replied, "You cannot hide yourself in your native tongue, *nit rosev fhandor!*" Arnanor affected an expression of wounded innocence. "I speak your language..." He paused, leaning in closer. "Now do you speak mine?"

"Calm yourself, Malander," Seth interrupted. "Save your strength for the cause."

"I will not. He told his henchman here to kill me whenever he had the chance."

"Ridiculous!" Arnanor defended. "I said nothing of the kind!"

"Then what did you say?" Seth asked.

"I remarked only about this tavern. That is all."

"Is this true, Gildan?" Lorn inquired, assuming that the mercenary understood his northern brethren.

"I do not speak that dialect fluently." Sipping his wine, Gildan admitted, "Besides, I was not paying attention to what they said. My mind is occupied with greater matters."

Malander could only focus on the threat. "You go ahead and order that inexperienced warrior of yours to strike me down, and I will gladly show him my sword. I don't know what it is that threatens you so, but leave me as I am....Don't make me kill you. I have nothing to lose, after all--unlike you."

Arnanor said nothing, keeping his ideas to himself. *Who is this human to speak this way to me?* he thought. Malander had, in fact, deciphered the Northern tongue precisely, but he would never withdraw the remark.

Arnanor smiled to himself. The day Geil carried this act through would be another proud day for the elder prince. He tightened his gloves and flipped back the long, red hair that fell onto his armored shoulders. Muron, sitting next to him, felt ashamed to be somehow a part of this scheme. Arnanor locked eyes with Geil, both men nodding.

"I need a drink," Malander mumbled as he walked away. "Damned elves." He disappeared into the crowd, still shaking his head as he reached the bar. At the long wooden bar, Malander wedged himself uncomfortably between an old man in green clothing and a rugged gentleman in merchant's attire. The bartender approached, still wiping clean a glass with a small red cloth.

"Yes, sir?" the bartender said, pushing back her dirtied white sleeves.

"Two Dragonfires, quickly," Malander ordered, propping his elbows on the wet surface, uncaring that spilled beer soaked into his jacket sleeves. Feeling as though he was being watched, he glanced around him. Causing trouble was still on his mind, and Arnanor had only made it worse. Some eyes did look him over but were quickly lowered when he stared directly back. The bartender returned and placed two small, blue-tinted glasses by Malander's fingertips. They were filled to the brim with a deep red elixir, darker than any blood. Malander smiled and cracked his knuckles as he snatched one up.

Then, tossing his head back, he drained it to the bottom in one gulp. Slamming the glass down, he made as short work of the second. All who witnessed this incredible feat were astonished at the grim man's tolerance, for it generally took only one Dragonfire to knock a large man into an instant trance. But Malander appeared unfazed, as if the alcohol merely excited his senses. Wiping his mouth, he slid the glasses down the bar and said, "Two more," grinning like a madman all the while.

"Excuse me, sir?" the bartender asked in disbelief. "Did you just order two more?"

"Indeed I did--now, place them before me."

"No one can handle that much. In all my years of--"

"Just bring them and dispense with the advice, would you?"

"Very well," the bartender replied. Throughout the tavern, people whispered, dumbfounded by the stranger's suicidal request for another pair of Dragonfires.

Malander slipped his hand into one of his jacket pockets and placed three silver coins on the bar in an orderly stack. The bartender's eyes lit up at the sight as she set down the cups and seized the overly generous payment. "You are greatly appreciated, sir." She walked away and placed the three gleaming coins in her apron.

Those drinks, too, vanished soon, though not as fast as the first. The spirits burned his throat and set him afire. Pounding his chest four times like a wild animal, Malander marveled at the Dragonfires' ability to blunt his torment. "Brilliant," he laughed, slamming his fist on the counter. For no reason that he knew of, Malander glanced over his shoulder, curious to see what the company was engaged in. He saw Seth and Lorn with drinks of their own in pewter mugs.

The bartender went through the single door behind the bar and returned with a full crate of unopened wine bottles, which clanked together with each slow step she took. Standing directly in Malander's view at the crammed bar was Randor, smoking his pipe. The wizard acknowledged him, pushing his glasses up his nose.

"Goodness!" the bartender exclaimed, almost dropping her precious box. Then, laughing, she regripped the handles. "Miithra? Is that you?"

"Aye, Eina."

Approaching nearer, Eina set the wine box on the counter and extended her arm in friendship. Randor shook her hand warmly.

Eina said, "It has been ages since I have seen you. I am pleased to see you are still alive and have come to pay me a visit!"

"It is an honor to be within your walls once again. You look as beautiful as the last time I saw you."

Eina lowered her head and smiled, pushing back her long, dark hair, barely exposing the pointed tips of her ears. Her clothes were stained from the spirits and brew her establishment created and sold, yet the effects of labor upon her garb did not bother her.

"How go things here?" Randor asked.

"Never better," Eina laughed. "Ah, I miss the peaceful nights sometimes, you know, but I've grown accustomed to this wall-to-wall madness you see tonight." She grabbed a tall, clean glass and placed it before her old colleague. "What can I serve you this fine evening?"

"I need something from you," Randor whispered as he leaned closer, not wanting anyone to catch wind of his conversation.

Eina frowned and darted her blue eyes about the room. "All depends on what it is," she answered softly.

"Have you seen anything out of the ordinary within the past three months or more?"

"Why do you ask?"

"This concerns the..." Randor paused, spying for eavesdroppers. "The moon."

"Say on, my friend." Eina grew curious, wanting any new information on the event that had captivated the entire community. Gossip spread wildly, and anything worth hearing was welcome.

"I am looking for an S-shaped symbol, with jagged edges and two small circles within its curves." Eina bit her lower lip and tried to think whether she had seen such a thing. "Does this sound familiar to you?"

"An S-shaped symbol, jagged..." She trailed off in thought.

"This is crucial."

"Can't say that I have," Eina admitted. "I am sorry."

"Not your fault," Randor sighed. "It could be anywhere--if it even does truly exist on Londer."

"I will keep a lookout for it, I promise." Eina extracted an old dust-covered bottle of wine from beneath the counter and popped the cork. "Here you go..." She filled the glass to the silver brim with the sweet-smelling gold liquid and tucked the bottle away to prevent its sale to patrons. "Free of charge." After a quick nod, Eina smiled again and resumed her duties of taming the wild throng at the bar.

"Many thanks." Randor noticed Malander not far away and raised his glass in salute, receiving a nod in confirmation. He began to drink and caught Malander's full attention by pointing to the table. It was time to assemble everyone under his command. Malander acknowledged the gesture and pushed away from the bar, again shoving his way rudely through the crowd.

"Watch where you're going!" someone shouted at him.

"Petty fools," Malander said under his breath.

"There's Randor," Seth announced happily, saluting him with his half mug of ale.

"A toast to our leader!"

"Here, here!" Lorn added, both laughing as they drank more.

Randor set his glass on the table as he took his chair. "Still nothing," he said ruefully.

"Your contact could not help?" Seth asked, disappointed. "Where do we turn from here?" Hope dimmed in the knight, for he still had no solid time frame for his journey's end. He was too attached to having a set plan, and this perpetual uncertainty was new to him--it was not a feeling he enjoyed.

"South is still the way of our quest--at least, this is what I sense."

"We will not rest until the moon is returned to the heavens," Arnanor declared, and Muron and Geil placed their hands over their chests in the Northern way of agreement.

Without the company's knowing, a group of five tall, pale men wearing long, dark overcoats had entered the tavern, keeping along the wall near the entrance. Each had dark, short hair combed forward, and a tattoo under his left eye: four thin lines of black running down the cheek. The shortest line was nearest the nose, and they grew longer as

they reached the outside corner of the men's gray-colored eyes. Their presence was unfelt as they sat at a cleaned table in the corner farthest from Randor and company.

"What tidings do you bring from the Fatherland?" Randor asked Seth.

"I wasn't there very long, I am afraid--just three days." Seth readjusted his cloak and leaned back in his chair. "It is always an honor to be within the Council's walls. Their hospitality far exceeds any other in the world."

"I find it odd the Council has not acted to resolve this issue of the moon's demise," Arnanor volunteered. It had been much on his mind of late and had made his faith in the great leaders falter. "Two months, and all they can do is sit within their halls within the Great Tree and debate other issues."

"The Council was forming a method, I believe," Seth said uncertainly.

"And the greatest insult I find here is that they sent *one* of their servants away, without any knowledge of where to begin. Why could they not send an entire legion?" Arnanor shook his head and crossed his arms. "Their magic has turned ill."

"If there is one region that is safe from illness, it would be Mudalfaen," Randor said. "If we are unlucky in our search and things grow worse, we will have no choice but to retreat there."

"Except the princes, of course," Seth added in his own defense. "I dare not march into Mudalfaen with elvish royalty at my side. It would be the end of me."

One of the dark-garbed men stood and moved slowly along the edge of the crowd, surveying the room, while the other four quaffed their ale. With the great diversity of patrons in the place, the silent young man attracted no particular attention. He was not yet close enough to Randor to be detected. Fortunately, however, Seth's eyes were fixated on the red band on the figure's right arm as it passed amid the earth-toned colors of the throng. The red band was fastened securely on his sleeve--with a black emblem at its middle. Seth rubbed his eyes and stared in disbelief. "My mind plays with me," he said softly. His statue-like posture drew the interest of his companions.

Arnanor shot from his seat and leaned his full weight on the table. "There it is," he said, gritting his teeth. His hand went immediately to his sword's hilt, halted only by a slight gesture from Randor.

"Patience," Randor said softly. He could sense the tension around the table--and indeed, how could he blame them? Randor wanted answers, too. The figure blended back into the crowd, and the symbol was no longer in view.

"Did you see who was wearing it?" Lorn asked.

"No," Seth replied, on the edge of his chair.

"Let me have a closer look, Randor," Arnanor pleaded.

"Your wish is granted, brother," Muron said, leaning in toward Arnanor as they saw the young man appear from amidst the crowd again.

"Remain calm," Randor whispered sharply.

Sitting back down, Arnanor smoothed his expression to one of blandness.

The dark figure strolled rigidly across the floor, his gray eyes scanning every table he passed. His black overcoat was of fine quality, with long lapels trimmed in red. Underneath this was a long, dark jacket, and pants tucked tightly into knee-high boots of black leather. Randor glanced casually to see if a sword was hidden beneath the coat, but saw none.

All three Northern elves sat very still, hands on their sword hilts. Randor then

leaned forward in his chair and smoked the last bit of tobacco left in his pipe. The complete silence of the company was uncomfortable and a little too obvious, should anyone question their true business here. No one spoke, for they were too heavily focused on the symbol.

Gildan gazed closest at the man as he walked past the table, looking directly into his eyes. The elf raised his glass, easing the tense situation somewhat. And the symbol was gone once more. "He is returned to the opposite corner of the tavern now," Gildan remarked.

"Let one of us mime his actions and scour the room," Arnanor suggested, clearly volunteering for the task.

"That will do us no good," Gildan objected. "You're asking for trouble."

"That is your opinion."

"He is not alone, I can promise you that," said Gildan.

"How are you so sure?" Arnanor wanted to know.

"Soldiers like that do not travel solo."

"A soldier?" Seth said, surprised.

"Very much so, and an extremist at that." Gildan turned to Highbinder, who did not comprehend the statement. "Haven't you learned the appearances of soldiers?"

"Yes," he replied, "But never have I seen one quite like that. Very oddly dressed-- nothing like a typical military man."

"You do have a point," Gildan said, "but you must look at the poise and the eyes. These are common traits."

Randor formed a plan while Gildan and Highbinder discussed the matter further. "Seth," he began, "take yourself and..." Randor looked each companion over and finished, "...take Malander and wait outside. Follow the symbol to wherever it may go locally. Once you find a point of investigation, one of you return to me and report your findings."

"Yes, sir," Seth replied without deliberation.

"You two are dismissed."

"Ready, Malander?" Seth asked as he rose.

Malander grumbled something sounding like "Nonsense!" as he followed the knight outside.

"Do be careful," Lorn whispered to himself.

"We are gaining steady ground on our quest," Gildan said excitedly.

* * *

The two paced the stone walkway in front of the tavern for what seemed like three hours. Malander grew impatient at being confined to this area with Seth. Keeping his arms crossed, he looked down at his feet, placing them one in front of the other. Boredom came quickly as darkness filled their surroundings with the chirr of crickets and occasional bursts of laughter from within the tavern. Leaning on the window that was closest to their targets, Seth saw that five soldiers of the symbol sat at a table. To avoid suspicion, he only peered in every so often. From what he could see, the five sat very close together, engaged in deep conversation. Many pints were placed before them and refilled as soon as they became empty, all the while making great clouds of smoke from their long, white pipes.

"This is a waste of time," Malander snarled. "I need another drink."

"We're on a specific task," Seth replied.

"Task?" Malander replied, laughing deeply. "I hate to inform you that this is no formal task, my good knight. We are mercenaries now."

"Perhaps you are, but I was assigned to this journey by--"

"Yes, yes," Malander interrupted. "No need to repeat yourself. Must you keep mentioning Mudalfaen? I'm rather upset with them right now."

"I am proud of my position beneath them."

"Just keep it to yourself." Malander turned away and gazed out at the dark, drab street--even that was more interesting than hearing another yawner about the importance of the Great Tree. "Bloody Council."

Seth decided not to pester him any more for a while, though it disturbed him that anyone would ask not to hear the praises of Mudalfaen. If his memory served him right, Malander's homeland of Muldane first pledged to the Order of the Great Tree after the Dark War of the Fourth Age. Perhaps the people of Muldane had had enough of the Council. Mudalfaen was mostly populated by elves, though the surrounding kingdoms were not. Seth could sense a resentment of elves in Malander.

"If I have to wait any longer," Malander growled, "I will shred the next person I see."

"Hopefully it will not be much longer," Seth replied confidently.

Apparently, it was the wrong thing to say, for Malander strode over to him, pointing his finger at Highbinder's chest, and said, "I've just about had my fill of you, boy. A word or two with those ne'er-do-wells who did this to the moon would end this entire problem! Then I can rid myself of you and those elves!"

"Randor would not approve."

"You think I care? He is not my master."

"He is your rightful leader under order of King Zelok."

"Why did I ever agree to this?" Malander repented aloud.

Seth faced the window again, sliding his hands into the warm, deep pockets of his jacket. Time made his thoughts fly away hundreds of miles to the Realm of Dan, which he sorely missed. He longed to cross again the winding rivers between the hills and attend the lavish parades with pipers and with banners raised high above the streets. How he longed to smell the flower petals that rained from the tall buildings; he even missed the way they felt brushing against his face. But these thoughts only made him miserable now. Shaking off the images of home, he then noticed that the five soldiers were gone. "We have movement--yet I do not know when it happened." He pressed up against the window to see where they went.

"You've lost them?" Malander griped. "Excellent work."

"No, wait," Seth replied with a relieved sigh. "They are coming out."

As the door opened, revealing the five men they had been watching, Seth's heart raced at the sight of the symbol, and he felt almost sick at how close it was to him. He couldn't help but watch as the soldiers marched out, all five looking precisely alike in every way. *Remarkable!* he reflected. When the leader met his eyes with a mistrustful gaze, Seth began to cough violently. This only drew more attention to him as the five looked on along with Malander, who wanted only to strangle his companion for being so conspicuous.

Next to Fallon's End, the soldiers turned down a narrow, dim alleyway, where

they vanished, with only their footsteps to attest to their whereabouts. Malander stood before Seth and shoved him upright, but he could not control the dry coughs that beset him.

"Are you trying to get us killed?" Malander blasted.

"I do not know what came over me."

"If we are to follow these devils down the alley, I don't want you to make a sound, or I will silence you for good! Understand?" His expression could have killed weeds. Seth did not want to fall further afoul of Malander, knowing he was no match for the grim warrior.

"Clear as a Mu--I mean, clear as morning."

"Hurry before we lose their trail." Malander grabbed him roughly by his shoulder armor and dragged him down to the alley's entrance.

Inside they trod softly so as not to repeat the mistake of the soldiers' loud footfalls. The path ahead was littered with broken crates, pot shards, and some wooden wheels once used on merchant carts, and foul smells assailed them as they stepped nimbly around puddles of water and filth. Seth kept one hand over his mouth and leaned with the other hand on the slimy exterior wall of the tavern. He could taste again the ale he had drunk earlier as it tried to make its way back out.

Finally letting go of him, Malander drew several steps ahead. There was no sign of the soldiers, but no other outlet presented itself--thus, the five had to be hereabouts.

"Surely they have not flown over these high walls," Malander whispered, stopping his progress to make sense of it all.

"Why have we stopped?" Seth whispered on catching up with him. He saw nothing down the path except the furtive shadows of rodents prowling for scraps among the crates. "Did the soldiers slip away?"

"Quiet," Malander replied. "You're ruining my train of thought." Sniffing the air, he smelled a strange fragrance--it reminded him of a rare flower that grew in Muldane. But a mixture of molten ash from a volcano corrupted the sweet smell of the flower. *Why would anyone want to smell that way?* he wondered. "Let us go."

As the two followed at a safe distance, the five soldiers reached the end of the long corridor and stood in a stone courtyard, near a large castle with many high towers. The leader clapped his hands for attention while Malander and Seth watched from the alleyway, crouched behind some rotten barrels. It seemed that few people ever came this way and that the castle was abandoned, as if the citizens of Nar-Fhandon had disowned it ages ago and preferred not to speak of it.

"What do you make of it?" Seth whispered.

"I am still debating."

"I wonder if a clue to the moon's downfall lies in that castle."

"Don't be too optimistic. It looks like no one has set foot across that threshold in years."

They remained huddled against the wall for many long minutes as the leader of the five soldiers continued his speech. Tired of waiting, Malander decided on his own to make a move, and he rose and came around the crates, in plain view for all to see. In a panic, Seth crawled forward, peering around the barrels. "What are you doing?"

Malander flicked down with his arm behind him, trying to silence his companion, but Seth stood up, wiping the debris from his knees. At once the four soldiers with their

backs to Malander, in perfect unison, spun around and drew the swords concealed beneath their cloaks. Their speed proved worthy, catching the two by surprise. Outraged at the appearance of the intruders, the leader broke through the ranks.

"Who are you, and why do you shadow us?"

Neither replied as they stepped backward and tried to look harmless. Malander very much wanted to draw his sword and act, leaving the questions for afterward. His hand itched to move to his weapon, but something inexplicable held him at bay.

The leader strode toward the alley, bearing down on Malander, whom he no doubt deemed the primary threat. "Why do you shadow us? I demand a response!"

"You have us all wrong," Seth answered.

"Then you will hasten to tell me of your intrusion."

"My friend and I are mere travelers, on an item of business. That is all."

"I think not," replied the leader. "By your badge I trust you not. What is your name, Council follower?"

"I am Sir Seth Highbinder, son of Master Jansonot."

The leader looked at both men closely and came to a quick conclusion. "Since when does a brainwashed servant of Mudalfaen travel alone with a high knight of Muldane? Explain your business thoroughly if you wish to live."

"The details of our business are secret, known only to the Council and to us."

"Indeed." Still, the leader was obviously not satisfied. Crossing his arms, he stepped even closer to Malander and tilted his head back in a haughty manner. He stood toe to toe with Malander, towering over him by a good five inches. "Who are you, pray tell?"

"I am the nightmare of my enemies and the secret misery of my people," Malander boasted. Seeing the leader occupied in thought, he placed his fingertips on the pommel of his sword. One slash of his weapon would rid him permanently of this arrogant person who stood too close for his liking. Never did he let anyone not proven to be friend or ally this near. He could feel the warm exhalations from the inquisitive soldier who loomed over him. "You will call me nothing, for that is what you are to me."

"Brave words for such a small man," the leader sneered. "The feeling is mutual, I assure you."

"Why are you here, stranger?" Malander wanted to know. "This is not your kingdom, nor have I seen such a ridiculous symbol as the one you wear so proudly."

Outraged, the man took four steps back and lifted one side of his coat, revealing his sword. "I do not tolerate slander against my master's crest of power!"

Seth doubted that he and Malander could fend off these apparently skilled fighters long enough for help to come. It was a difficult situation, in which neither fighting nor running was wise. How he wished he could summon Randor to his side.

"You need to heed my advice, knight, or whatever you might be." Malander was not intimidated in the least; on the contrary, he rather enjoyed matching words with the stranger. He stood as tall as he could, shoulders back, aching for the man to brandish his weapon. *At least three will fall before death finds me*, he thought.

"Your fate stands before you," the leader laughed, drawing his blade.

"Malandar, please...", Seth begged.

"Malandar is your name?" The leader lowered his weapon and, smiling, returned through the line of soldiers. "I will remember that for our next meeting. My generosity

will not extend so far next time." And at a wave of his arm, the soldiers sheathed their swords and followed him toward the castle.

"Next time I will kill you," Malander said as he rubbed his mask's dark fabric.

"We must return to Randor at once!" Seth entreated.

"Go on ahead." Malander wished to calm himself before seeing the others, and he did not want to hint of a struggle in their absence from the tavern. Watching the soldiers disappear into the castle, he turned to Seth, whose back was to him. "What are you waiting for? I will remain here. They might leave after losing sight of us."

"Sound design, Malander. In a moment I will return with the others." His nerves still shaken by the encounter, Seth hesitated as if not knowing where to turn. Malander pointed to the alleyway, and the knight soon disappeared.

It was a rough passage back to the tavern, and Seth stumbled many times before reaching Fallon's End. His senses were still rattled as he entered, and the smoke stung his eyes. He reached Randor and related the story.

* * *

In very little time, Seth stood with Randor and the company before the immense castle. He told of Malander remaining within the courtyard, but there was no sign of him now. The winds died down, and all was quiet in the vicinity. Randor scanned the area to better his understanding of the situation; Seth's details had been too scattered and not well put in speech. Only after slowing the knight's excited babbling did Randor finally learn of the soldiers entering the castle. The wizard looked up at the castle that none in the city wished to recall, though he knew that it had spawned many myths and legends of war--of a great battle of men and elves against an evil whose name no one remembered. According to the stories passed down, few had survived the struggle against a powerful magic that still lay within the gates. Randor had once been curious of this place when he was younger, and now came the long-awaited chance to venture within.

"Are you sure this is where they went?" Arnanor asked, doubting Seth's claim.

"Malandar is not here." He approached Randor and leaned in to whisper, "I have known this since the beginning."

"What is that?" Randor asked, half listening.

"He is with them as we speak--a spy indeed, that human is."

"I would reconsider, my lord," Seth said, overhearing the prince, and was surprised to find himself defending his angry colleague. "You had to witness his exchange of words with those men. I can confirm that they were not friendly. Thank goodness everything turned out all right."

"It was all an act, I tell you!" Arnanor countered, trying to convince those around him that the traitor prophesied by the Oracle was among them. "Surely, Randor, you think as I do."

"I think nothing of it. If he is with those soldiers, there is nothing any of us can do now. Time will show the truth."

Chapter Eleven: The Past Returned

Gildan stared at the castle, his green eyes wide with enthusiasm for a bit of treasure hunting. There had to be something of great worth inside, and a long time had passed since his hands touched plunder. Images ran riot through his mind, of mountains of gold and jewels. "What are we standing here for? I have riches to seek!"

"More important items lie within," Randor said.

"Perhaps, but I have an empty pouch that needs filling." He bowed his head and extended his arm. "After you, Randor."

"Shouldn't we wait for Malander?" Seth asked, not believing that the knight was inside among the soldiers who wore the symbol.

"He shall arrive when he does," Randor answered. "We are strong without him still."

Gildan rubbed his hands together with delight, a broad smile on his face. Flipping his cape over his right arm, he walked to the door with his head held high. Randor paused as he stood at the enormous door. Fear, anxiety, and confusion looked him in the eyes through his companions, but thus far at least, he could detect nothing of the legendary evil of this place, which gave him hope.

"Are we going in?" Seth asked, praying the answer was no. The entire venture was much to his disliking. He felt that observation from afar was the much better idea, though he kept these ideas to himself, knowing that no one would consider them.

"Indeed we are, Highbinder," Randor stated. "This is our greatest and only clue. I would be a fool to turn around now. Let your senses become alive and active, and stray not. Keep reserved, and act only when I say." He opened the door. "There is no telling what we will encounter."

"Five moon-thieves and a traitor," Arnanor muttered, still firm in his opinion. Making his way to the front of the gathering, he was determined to walk through the door, unwilling to remain calm. "If you will not lead the way, I will."

Randor pushed the prince aside, and Arnanor bristled, appalled that someone should touch him in such a manner. "Must I bind your hands behind you and lead you inward like a disobedient child?"

"Unnecessary precaution, wizard," the prince replied.

The lone moon sank behind the buildings across the courtyard. Knowing that dawn would break upon the world soon, Randor was first to enter the castle. Seth and Lorn gasped as they looked across a chamber that was void of flooring except for a narrow bridge of wood that spanned to the far side of the room, where a door led to places unknown. Gildan and Randor parted the gathering and stood at the edge of the bridge, devising a course of action.

"This place is barren--not one trace of neither war nor treasure," Gildan said, disappointed. "Perhaps there is more beyond this room." He leaned on the bridge railing. "What do you make of it?"

"I am puzzled, to be sure. If a great battle had occurred, evidence would be left behind."

"I am feeling odd since we set foot inside this place," said Gildan. I do not know what it is, but a great evil is at work."

"I do not perceive anything," the wizard replied.

"Don't think ill of me, Randor, but I grow tired of Malander and Arnanor's ways. They bring tension and disorder to our efforts. We need to keep them under stricter discipline."

"Rest your fears, my friend."

"I am not afraid," said Gildan boldly. "Failure is not yet known to me."

Randor laughed gently and replied, "I have seen many things fall to ruin. Must we forget the Second Age?"

"Grim of an end that was, indeed, but that was not your fault."

"But I was deeply involved with the outcome. I try not to think much of it anymore." Randor's head sank as he was filled with ancient memories. Even after three thousand years the images were as clear as yesterday. This portion of his life was the hardest of all--trying to forget the millions of people who died in that tragedy. "Just have faith, Gildan."

"*Faith?*" The elf was repulsed by the word and threw up his hands. "Faith is for the weak and ignorant."

"For most it is what motivates them forward in life."

"The power of my skills and wealth are all I rely on in this world. They have given me more than I could ever glean from faith."

"Do not place your entire trust in these earthly talents. One day they might fail you, although I hope this never happens."

"It will never come to pass, I assure you."

"I think the company has had enough time to rest," Randor said, wiping away the sweat that beaded on his brow. The stale air inside the castle was surprisingly dank and stuffy. Even Randor's vision suffered from the heat that swelled in his head, causing the bridge to waver in and out of focus repeatedly until he pressed his fingers to his temples to quell the throbbing.

Gildan laid his hand on Randor's shoulder and asked, "Are you well enough to continue?"

"Yes," he answered softly, cloaking his pain. "I will be fine."

"You don't have to fool me. If it is time you need to regenerate, then we shall wait."

"As if we could afford to let these men wearing this clue slip from our grasp," Randor murmured. As he slowly pulled himself forward by the railing, Gildan came up behind and turned the wizard around, seeing the agony on his friend's face. Randor's breaths were short and rapid, and his lips were chapped and splitting.

"You need to rest," Gildan said, his words edged with worry.

"What is going on over there?" Arnanor asked.

"Nothing." Gildan had to shield the others from this sight or risk disrupting what morale was left. Though Randor was becoming dead weight, Gildan had the strength to keep him on his feet, for he did not trust the bridge rails enough to prop the feeble wizard against them.

"Do not look upon me as this," Randor said. "I have not been myself the past two months." His soul and lifeline were directly linked to Londor, each affecting the other with any pain it felt. The magical spirits that dwelled in his ancient body had all but fled.

"Does our quest end here?" Arnanor asked, pacing restlessly along the platform.

"I certainly hope not," Muron replied. Still optimistic about his first true

adventure, he said, "I am not ready to return homeward just yet." There was not much there for him, just roaming the palace grounds and being tutored by the many scholars brought in by his father. It was his father who dominated all business of the kingdom, while his brother spent his every waking moment perfecting his swordsmanship. And when he wasn't fencing, Arnanor paraded around the kingdom for weeks on end to satisfy his pampered, egotistical lifestyle. Whenever there was not war with the Mazazuken, Muron spent his days in the beautiful northern climate with typical elvish festivals of song, food, and fellowship.

Naturally, Arnanor had wanted a true escape from the North, and on learning of the quest in Dunane, he had taken Muron and Geil secretly away to join in. "You will not return home soon, but we three shall all return as heroes only to ourselves. No one must ever know of our being here," Arnanor whispered.

"This secrecy is a burden, Arnanor, but it will not leave my lips," Muron assured him.

"Randor," Arnanor said loudly, "should we linger so?"

"Give him a moment," Gildan replied.

"What for?" the prince demanded. "He has had all this day and night to rest and think. We have work to do."

Gildan did not want to alarm anyone over Randor's temporary lack of equilibrium. They did not need to know that world's suffering was consuming him whole.

With any luck there was only one entrance to the castle; thus, anyone wishing to leave would have to cross paths with the company. "Decisions still lay unattended," he told the others. "Stand by for further direction." Gildan's nerves began to crumble under Arnanor's verbal onslaught. "Is that clear enough for you?"

"Unfortunately so," Arnanor said under his breath. "Yes, yes, very clear, sir," he replied, full of sarcasm.

Lorn leaned over as far as he could bear and squinted into the endless chasm beneath them. "I wonder where it ends. More importantly, I wonder what lies at its bottom."

"I would not know," Seth retorted. This place was frightening. "I try not to think of evil festering in this castle."

"Honestly, I do not want to know anything, either. I'd like to leave right now. Even sitting at Jerthom's table sounds much more pleasant."

Seth laughed. "I wouldn't go as far as that, my old friend. You should favor adventures and excitement over ridicule and depression."

"I am not one for adventure. The sooner this is said and done, the better." Shuffling his feet, Lorn cast a few small stones down into the darkness. The rocks fell and made not a sound.

"Nor any of us, I should imagine," Seth said. "Randor and Gildan are excluded, of course."

"Why just those two?"

"They are wanderers. It is sad, if you want my thoughts, having no place to call your own."

"I would be lost if I didn't have Beowulken."

"I know." Seth followed outward to meet Gildan and Randor out on the bridge, as did Lorn, looking melancholy.

Randor stood upright as best he could, and Gildan, glad to see that the journey would continue, readjusted his sheathed sword on his back. He motioned the rest of the company forth, and the bridge swayed slightly from the moving weight as they crossed delicately in a single line. The support beams were thinner than expected. After crossing the bridge's midpoint, Randor noticed the first sign of the fabled ancient battle: the handrails were splintered badly and its wood was discolored by old blood.

"So the legends are true," Gildan said, inspecting the bridge's scars.

"Where are the slain?" Seth asked. He was bound for life to a baffled curiosity.

"Down there, no doubt," Gildan offered.

Kneeling next to a support beam, Arnanor noticed an etching halfway down. The texture was smooth but of an undeniably elvish symbol. "Geil, come and look," he said excitedly.

"What did you find?" Randor asked as he slowly turned to greet the exuberant face of Arnanor.

"A mark of some sort, and it appears to be one from our own people. The meaning is yet determined." Geil knelt and looked over Arnanor's shoulder, recognizing it promptly. "What do you make of it?"

"It is bizarre, my liege," he admitted. "This is a very old symbol, not used these days."

"The mark says..." Arnanor paused to recall its meaning. "'Doom,' correct?" he asked softly. He wished now that he had paid closer attention during his studies when he was younger. Deciphering symbols was not his strong point.

"You are correct, master."

"Then...my people were once here?" Arnanor gasped. "How can this be?"

"Northern elves waging war *here*?" Gildan murmured. "Randor, remind me to seek the history of this later."

"As you wish."

"What does it say?" Gildan demanded.

"'Doom,'" the prince said, rising to his feet. "It says 'doom.' A tragic end it was for the one who scribed that final word."

"Maybe they escaped," Muron said. "After all, the entrance is mere feet away."

"We must not think of it now," Randor replied, wanting to press on. "A clouded mind serves our purposes not, nor shall it bring us victory." He looked to Gildan and asked, "Ready?"

"Always."

"Are there any more symbols, Arnanor?" Randor asked, not wanting to miss any clues of this castle. The elf searched and saw nothing. "Then I suggest we move."

A steel door barred the way ahead, and thick cobwebs covered it as if it had never been opened. Randor ran his hands down the cold surface, leaving behind ten spaced marks, these being the only fresh inscriptions in the dust coating it. Finding nothing on the door that might serve as a latch or knob to give them entry, he pushed lightly against the steel, but it did not yield.

"They must have traveled this direction," Seth said, "for there is no possibility that their passage took them into the chasm. Shall we all push?"

"Yes," Randor agreed.

The door was not wide enough for the entire party to find purchase against it, so

Randor appointed Gildan, Seth, Sir Geil, and Arnanor to pit their combined strength against the obstacle. Lowering their shoulders against the steel, they widened their stances as Randor backed away and brought along young Muron and Lorn to the foot of the bridge. Gildan wiped a large spot free of dust, not wanting to ruin his fine clothes.

"Are we all set?" Randor asked.

"On your word," Seth answered.

"Now!"

With all their might they pressed until their muscles burned, but the door did not budge.

"This is pointless!" Seth cried. "This door must be made with at least two tons of steel!"

"That will be enough," Randor said. "We will find a way beyond."

"Bound with magic," said Gildan, readjusting his cape and gloves, mightily displeased with the dust that clung there. "Your turn, Randor."

Arnanor had enough; he would not let something simple as this overpower his mind and spirit. "Make way!" he called out. Approaching his impervious target, he unleashed a mighty kick into the center of the door. The steel vibrated as a muffled clang filled the room, but the way ahead remained closed, as ever. "Impossible!" Arnanor continued to kick and punch the thick steel to no avail.

"Has he gone mad?" Lorn asked.

"Apparently," Seth replied in disbelief.

"My goodness." The dwarf crossed his arms, unable to take his eyes off the fuming, cursing prince. "Full of surprises, he is, if you ask me."

Arnanor stopped his tantrum and stepped away. His cheeks glowed and not one word flowed from his lips. Squaring his crown on his head, he glared at the door.

"Are you quite done?" Randor asked, unamused.

"Please calm yourself, brother," Muron said.

"I will not!" He threw his cape back over his shoulders and paced like an animal in close confinement. "Now that it comes to it, why am I holding back?"

No one knew exactly what he meant by this, and they were shocked to see him suddenly charge the door again, with head lowered. "I will prove my true strength this time!" he shouted, and with a loud cry, he ran full tilt at the door. As he reached it, it swung open unexpectedly, and he tumbled through the entryway, coming to rest in a large pile of ash. After a fit of coughing, he looked up into the darkness. "By the gods, what was that?"

"Prince Arnanor, are you all right?" Geil called out.

Before he could answer, a large, shadowed figure stood over him. In panic, Arnanor reached for his sword, but a hand restrained him. "Who...who are you?"

"So glad you could join me," said the shadowy figure. Though Arnanor thought the voice familiar, he could not place it. "So it appears I have you defenseless."

"Hand over Beldas, you moon-stealer!"

The figure reached down and grabbed Arnanor violently by his armor and stood him up. "I can see you haven't lost that tongue of yours...yet." He laughed, releasing the prince. "Where are the others?"

"Malandar...?" the prince asked, still unsure.

"Indeed."

"Where have you been?" He still was skeptical of the man and did not expect to believe what he would hear.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"It has been almost an hour, so no, it is not clear."

"I have been here in the dark--so peaceful it is....Any trouble getting inside?"

"A little, yes." Wanting more detail from him, the prince asked, "How is it that you passed through this door? Four of us pushed with all our might, and it would not budge."

"A simple push was all it took." His voice was dark and not reassuring to the prince's ears. "Must have been left open by these 'moon-stealers', as you so lovingly call them."

"Where are they now?"

"Beyond our reach, I assure you. I was on their heels until I was consumed by this wonderful darkness. I could remain here for the rest of my days." Rador slipped into the room with the company and stood behind Arnanor. "Greetings, master magician," Malander welcomed bleakly.

"You have much to explain, Sir Malander," Rador said gravely. The Oracle's prophecy was still firm in his mind, and even Arnanor's wild assumptions seemed to have merit.

"I grew tired of waiting. A mixture of anger and curiosity plagued me. Once inside, I proceeded across that joke of a bridge and then through this door."

"With no difficulty?" Rador asked.

Malander laughed. "One of the easiest infiltrations I've ever done!"

"Where are these soldiers?"

"Through the door at the end of this room, I would imagine."

"Could you illuminate us a way across?" Seth asked of Rador. "Knowing this place, more pitfalls surely await us." He could see the door Malander spoke of, yet the light from the next room did not spill over any into their location--strange Seth thought.

"Just keep straight steps toward the door, and we shall all be well." Rador beckoned his friends forth.

Malander was the first to disappear around the corner, not waiting for anyone else to follow. Sir Geil tightened his hand on Muron's shoulder, knowing that the light from the door was their only means of direction, not knowing what lay at their feet or in the blackness surrounding them. It was silent as a tomb, and excess sound might stir unwanted evil.

"I wonder if this room is vacant, or littered with skulls of elves," Gildan pondered as he tried to pierce the darkness with his eyes. "Treasure could be right before me, and I wouldn't know."

"Malander?" Seth's voice called out.

"Hasten to me," the grim warrior called. Through the entrance the eight were met with a fully lit room. It was a tower with a grand spiral stairway of brick. Up and up it went, farther than they could see. Thick vines with green and yellow leaves covered the walls, spilling over onto many of the steps and threatening to trip the unwary. Malander had already begun climbing toward an objective yet unknown. Looking down, he had his sword drawn at his side. His posture suggested impatience and a craving for more bloodshed.

"Do you know the way ahead, Malander?" Randor asked.

"This step is as far as I have gone--looks as though we will learn together."

For a moment the company stood admiring the architecture and purity of the high tower's interior. The shiny stones of the floor left traces of an old circular pattern made of colored tiles. They resembled an elvish pattern, though it was too damaged to know for certain.

Randor brought out his pipe, which emitted smoke immediately on touching his lips.

"And now you *smoke*?" Arnanor said, offended. Randor simply shook his head and continued his beloved craft.

Malander slowly came down the fifty steps he had ascended. The idea of idling was not acceptable to him. He felt held back from the fight he desired. His spirits had begun to rise when he set off up the stairs and now it began to decline as his sword scraped the steps in a rhythmic pattern of stone against metal.

"What say you now, Randor?" Gildan asked. Idly he strolled around the edge of the floor's artwork, wanting to discover its meaning. "Could it be a forewarning about this castle?" He knelt down and wiped away the dirt at his feet but found nothing except blackened ground. "A pointless riddle." He had just cleaned his gloves and stood again in his usual proud stance when a long and terrible shriek echoed its way down the tower, coming from somewhere high above. Malander spun around in renewed excitement, raising his sword as if he were under attack, as Randor and the others looked skyward.

"Looks as though we will have to go on now!" Malander shouted in a wicked tone, a mad grin on his face.

"No one move!" Randor said sharply.

"That obviously was not one of those who eluded us earlier," Gildan concluded.

"I agree," Randor replied. "They are close, and that serves us well."

"Oh, dear," Lorn whispered.

"Something wrong?" Seth asked as he leaned down to the dwarf's level.

"I just feel that it is futile."

"Do not worry," Seth said with a smile.

Overhearing their remarks, Geil approached the shivering Lorn. "Where is your confidence, soldier?"

"Soldier?" Lorn answered, baffled. "Me? No, no, you've got me confused here."

"Have I?" Geil laughed, looking around them. "Tell me, where do you find yourself right now?"

"In location or state of mind?"

"Just answer the question."

"I find myself in a monstrous tower. Is this the answer you are looking for?"

Geil ignored the question directed to him and continued, "If it has not occurred to you, dwarf, you are on the greatest journey any of us will ever see. This is Londer's hour of need. You are apart of this just as much as the rest of us are. You carry a sword, do you not?"

"Indeed, I do carry this...sword, as you call it, but I do not carry it freely. You told me to keep it on my person, and that I have done for you. I am an artist, not a warrior."

Lorn reached for the hilt and continued, "Have it back if you so wish it. I care not to keep it if it defines me as a soldier." He presented the dirk before the elf in a manner befitting a

royal knight's sense of decorum. "Here, Sir Geil."

Geil took hold of the blade and looked it over, debating whether to take back his old weapon. "I thank you for this as well as for your views." He twirled the blade and suddenly thrust it downward into Lorn's belt, bringing a gasp from the startled dwarf. But Geil's hand and eye were sure--not one thread of his jacket had been cut. "I would be more at ease knowing that you carry it. Keep it well, and use it with honor."

"I will, sir, but please note that I am not a warrior." He nodded decisively, as if that settled the matter.

Randor gave the order to ascend, and up they went. All kept their hands close to the wall, stepping carefully. The stairs seemed endless as they trekked higher. At last, reaching what must be about the midpoint, Randor spotted an open door in the tower wall not much farther ahead. Taking a long breath, he paused to look over his companions.

"Finally, a door to the inner chambers," Seth said, relieved.

"This cannot be the door," Gildan objected. "We seek an even higher entrance."

"You feel this, as well?" Randor asked.

"Without any doubt."

"How can you be so sure?" Arnanor asked, positive that both were wrong.

"I have my doubts," Randor replied, tipping up the brim of his hat. "My judgment is clouded, and I despise this temporary lassitude I find myself in. Can any of you see a higher path within the tower?"

The four elves immediately scanned the spiral staircase as far as they could, finding nothing with their once sharp senses. Gildan, too, peered upward, but his vision grew blurred and so did his concentration.

"It is pointless to try," Arnanor said, surprising Gildan with his caring tone. "Save yourself. The--"

"There!" Gildan said, pointing to a ledge far above them. "There's another spot where the steps level out for a second time--another door to higher opportunities." Reflecting a moment, he said, "In fact, I *know* it is there." And he lowered his head and rubbed his burning eyes.

"Splendid find!" Randor said, smiling feebly.

"So which doorway do we take?" Seth asked, ready to embark at once.

"We have to keep together," Arnanor suggested.

"Then we risk allowing their escape," Gildan retorted. "Our chances are split directly in half."

"We will divide ourselves once again," Randor answered. "Although you know I dislike separating our strength, this particular case involves a great chance for mishap. Should we stay together, our path may not cross with our pleasant friends. Thus, two parties would prove much more effective. In respect to all, though, let us have a vote."

"Separate," Gildan spoke first.

"Together," said Lorn.

"Separate," Seth said, surprising Lorn.

"I speak for three when I cast my vote for a separate venture," Prince Arnanor declared.

Randor looked to last of the company who had not voted. "Malandor, what say you on this matter?" He stood as still and emotionless as a statue. "Very well, I will take your silence as--"

"My choice is neither," Malander interrupted. "If it were my decision, I would go alone."

"You are not in a leadership role, so your vote of solitude is invalid," Arnanor said.

"It is my option," Malander replied in kind. "I just want to kill the one who spoke so rudely to me earlier." He trailed off into an unclear sentence that none could make out. "Just choose so that we can go on."

"Gildan."

"Yes, Randor?"

"I want you to lead the elves down this lower corridor. Hopefully, our paths will conjoin."

"I will not fail you," Gildan said with a bow.

"I know you will not." Randor patted his shoulder and smiled. "If you are led into nothingness and find them not, make haste to me above." Gildan nodded with confidence filling his soul. "And do be careful."

Gildan waved his hand. "Come, then, princes, let us leave."

Arnanor muttered incoherently and followed. Climbing carefully, they gained the few remaining steps and maneuvered around Seth and Lorn, who stood in front of them.

"Behave yourselves," Randor advised as the princes and Geil filed past him. "Follow Gildan as if he were I." As the last steps were taken by the four elves, they reached the doorway, then were gone.

Turning to the remainder of the party, Randor clasped his hands together, fingers interlocking, and surveyed their morale. He could see the heavy stress and tension that consumed them. "Shall we go on?"

"How much more is there?" Lorn asked sadly.

"Worry not about the distance," Randor answered.

"It is the least of your worries," Seth added, meaning to comfort him but only adding to his fears.

Gildan reached the lower of the two doorways first and with a wicked grin, he was gone.

As Seth and Lorn followed Randor upward, the vines that covered the walls began to thin out, revealing the pale brown stones. All looked closely, hoping to find some clue to what had occurred here those many centuries ago. Randor would now be their link to the elvish symbols if any more was to be found; hopefully he could decipher them.

"It is remarkable that no trace was left of this mythical battle of yore," Seth said as he pondered the idea. "What great magic erased the horror?"

"Vanishing the dead is not such a difficult task," Randor replied. "'Would only take half a moment at the most.'"

"It appears that the master of this castle prefers to keep it vacant at all times. I would hate to see its face now that we and the symbol are here." Seth shrugged his shoulders, not wanting to visualize the outcome.

* * *

The door Gildan had spotted for Randor high above was in clear view now. With a grand ledge at its front, the opening stood ten feet high and four feet wide, revealing a long and declining corridor. A warm draft poured from the hall. The company led by the wizard paused at the ledge, not liking the warmth. The sweat on their faces spoke their

discomfort more clearly than words ever could.

"Dragon's breath," Seth muttered.

Lorn stopped in mid stride and opened his mouth in horror. "Why do you say such things, Seth?"

"It is only a guess," he replied, trying to soothe his friend. "I have felt a foul dragon's lingering before, and this is what it made me think of."

"Not hot enough," Malander added. "Besides, do you smell sulfur?"

Seth sniffed the air more thoroughly, as did the others. Lorn could vaguely remember the offensive smell, for he had worked with the substance some years before. "What relief!" Lorn exclaimed, patting his chest to calm his heart. "I do not smell it at all." He laughed to shake off his fright, with little success.

"Perhaps it is just a fire up ahead," Seth suggested. Then, looking up toward the stained-glass dome, he puzzled, "It is not daybreak yet, and the room is full of radiant light. I wonder where it comes from."

"Magic is afoot, Seth," Randor said. "Simple magic, really."

Through the door all light was gone, and they were forced to feel their way down the steep path. Still, Randor knew this would be safer than using his illuminating orbs. Each breath they took was hot, and sweat stung their eyes, growing thicker as they pressed down the tunnel. Malander began to breathe deeper, enjoying the inhospitable air.

"We are walking into a great unknown," Seth whispered. Though he spoke softly, his voice carried and echoed as if he had shouted. His cloak felt heavy and oppressive on his burning body as the humidity overloaded his motivation to almost nothingness.

At last, a small, flickering blue light came into faint view in the distance--a sign of the corridor's end. Randor slowed his already crawling pace, extending his arm outward so that none could pass. Drawing to the corridor's end, the four stood before a large blue flame, burning in the center of a low-ceiling, dome-shaped room.

"No one here," Randor whispered. "The way is clear."

Stepping into the room, he strolled to the fire. Placing his hand above the flames, he said, "As I knew it would be," running his fingers from side to side through the arms of blue light.

"Doesn't that hurt?" Seth asked with a pained expression.

"This is a fire of magic."

"A well of power or just a magical fire?"

Randor removed his hand and studied his fingers. "It is not a source of power, as you would say, for I would receive its sustenance." Sadly he concluded, "It is a mere blue flame of magic that will burn until ordered extinguished. It serves only as a source of light to see by."

Looking beyond the room's center, Seth noticed three doors. Lorn tugged on his cloak and beckoned him down as Malander and Randor studied the doors. "Something wrong?" Seth asked, concerned. He rested his hands on his knees, prepared to listen.

"The road has grown more puzzling--and now three choices lie before us," said Lorn.

"Randor will know which to take," Seth assured him.

"But what if he divides the group further? We will not stand a chance!" Lorn looked around Seth to see what was happening.

Randor paced in front of the three doorways. The middle path, with cracks and

brown moss lining the entryway, appeared to be the oldest, and the path to the left the newest and least flawed. At his right was a wooden door with metal bars that were rusted and loosely secured. The two open paths were pitch dark and felt and smelled no different from the vestibule where they now stood.

"You know the correct way...right, Randor?" Seth asked.

"The problem, Highbinder, is that there is no correct way anymore."

"Do we just choose one at random?" Seth did not understand Randor's meaning.

"Three paths, three men to travel them," Malander murmured. "Well, the dwarf can go with Seth."

"As you can see, these doorways are all different in their own right," said Randor. "The middle door clearly is the oldest--probably as ancient as this place." He stood before the entrance covered by the door. "A door such as this tells me that someone or something wants to lure the curious down this path to meet their doom." Turning to the middle doorway, he said, "This is the direction we go."

"Are you sure of this?" Seth asked, skeptical.

"Of course."

And so the four entered yet another dimly lit tunnel, unaware of the dangers ahead. At the far end glimmered a pure white light, reminding Randor of his journeys back through the Gate of Ethindar. He closed his eyes and sighed, longing in the deepest recesses of his heart to return to the planet Ethindos and regain his powers. A faint chanting began in the distance, growing louder as they moved toward the light that allowed more of the corridor to be seen.

"Mutee nen de morgen non feng lok shetag mar," a ghastly, demonic-sounding voice uttered.

"What's going on down there?" Seth gasped.

"Let's turn back," Lorn stammered.

"I am curious now," said Malander.

"As am I," Randor added. He slid along the wall to gain a closer view of the activity ahead. "Monks," he said. "The likes of whom I have not seen for centuries."

"What?" Seth replied. "What do you see?"

"Black-robed figures--about forty or fifty."

"Doing what, Randor?"

"Prayer, it seems."

"Is there an idol? Perhaps it lives here in the depths."

"No, just a figure clad in red, upon a platform in front of the robed figures. Its arms are raised."

The room was lined with multiple candles on grand silver candelabras that branched out in snakelike curves. On the back wall, a large black drape hung over the dismal gray bricks, and before it stood the platform where the apparent leader conducted the ritual. His head was lowered, and a mysterious shadow covered his face. Randor could feel the inner power of the monks as he leaned against the wall.

Gathering his courage, Seth gently crept forward, keeping low to the floor. Never had he seen such a gathering of spiritual beings. "Are they of good or evil?"

"Judging from the feeling I am getting," Randor began, "I would say their intentions are not good. The aura is strong, and redolent of devilry."

"The five soldiers are not among them," Seth said. "What is your next order?"

"Let us watch. Who knows what we may learn."

"*Oenoth fugist dar reneeoth*," the monk bellowed darkly, and his followers repeated the phrase. He stretched out his arms, revealing long, thin, pale fingers with clawlike nails. "*Dargroth nos belahdith!*" Then the rows of disciples filed out into an exit on the right-hand side of the room, and only the red-cloaked figure remained. Chanting something unclear, he turned to the black drape and bowed in praise.

"Let us attack while his back is turned," Malander said with sword drawn. "He doesn't look that powerful."

"I still feel the evil he radiates," Randor said.

"Quick, while he is alone."

"I say we detain and question him," Seth suggested.

"Can't we just let him be?" Lorn asked, not liking the other choices. "He is not the one we are looking for."

"True," Randor replied. "But this monk could be a link to Beldas."

"Permission to proceed?" Malander asked nicely.

Randor thought half a moment, and then nodded. "Permission granted, my companions."

"I thank you for that," Malander laughed.

"But do not strike to kill. We need him alive." Randor looked over his companions one last time, and still Malander laughed quietly. He was the first to spring forth. The four ran quietly to catch the red-robed monk unaware, little knowing that he awaited the opportune moment to unleash his fury on the intruders.

Standing motionless, the monk smiled in pure delight.

Chapter Twelve: Twisted Roads

"Are you all right, Muron?" Geil asked, concerned.

"Yes," Muron replied cheerfully, "I am well."

"Will this darkness ever end?" Arnanor complained. "How could anyone walk through this?"

"The same way I do, Prince," Gildan replied, pressing on. Not bothered by the darkness, the mercenary smiled in amusement at his companions' grumbling. "I wonder how Rander is coming along."

"No doubt better than we are," Arnanor offered.

"I wish I were a wizard," Muron sighed.

"Be careful what you ask for. The burdens of his kind are heavy, even greater than I would wish upon myself," Gildan replied. "Just be thankful for what you are."

"I know I am proud of what I have become and what has been given to me," Arnanor added. "Never would I exchange my royalty for anything in this world or beyond!"

"Any break in this hall yet, Gildan?" Geil asked.

Only more darkness lay ahead, with no sign of light or crossing paths. A soft breeze wafted through the corridor, and a faint smell of an oak fire lingered in the air, growing stronger as they progressed.

"You will never find such a hall in my father's palace," Arnanor boasted. "This is utterly ridiculous!"

"Please lower your voice," Gildan warned him.

"We must be close," Geil announced. "The smoke fills my nose with its thick aroma."

"A horrid smell," Muron said, coughing.

"Keep your guard up," Gildan said, unsheathing his sword. Extending his free hand, he felt an obstacle that barred the way. "Alas, the door to yet another passage."

"Well, then open it!" Arnanor demanded.

Gildan moved his hand around, trying to discover a latch hidden in the darkness, and at last his fingers fumbled around an iron ring. As he pulled it back, a slit of light crept along the rough stone wall, growing larger until there was room for the princes to pass through--which they promptly did, leaving behind Gildan. With swords drawn, the Northern elves fanned out, scanning the large room of plain masonry.

"Anything at all?" Gildan asked casually.

"All that you see before you now," Arnanor responded.

"Then we must continue ahead."

"And haste into nothing? We squander our resources and time with this foolishness!"

Gildan turned his head away from the annoying princeling and strode over to a grand stairway of aging stones, snaking up the wall to a pair of steel doors. But before he could reach the first step, the doors began to open.

Gildan waved his hand to halt the company, his senses now fully aware. "Hold your positions," he whispered as one of the symbolized soldiers appeared. "Do not move!" the elf ordered of the black-clad man, startling him so that he quickly ducked behind the door and was gone before Gildan could react. "He will not escape us this time!"

"We shall stop them!" Arnanor shouted as he led the charge upward. Muron and Geil immediately followed with swords out.

* * *

Lowering his arms, the red-cloaked priest kept his ears tuned to the soft, rapid footfalls of his attackers. His pale lips crinkled into a sneer. Then, hearing the distinct sound of a sword being drawn, he spun around and parried Malander's slash with blinding speed, then drew away to the black drape behind him.

With a menacing grin, the priest pointed a clawed finger at the shocked Malander. "*Tu tagesh mont nonte loos. Eph lon ti eir!*"

Backing away from the platform, Malander whispered, "What the hell did he just say?"

"I do not know," Randor replied. "It is a strange tongue."

Malander shook his sword at the priest in frustration. "Speak in the common tongue, you devil!"

"*Ephf lon ti eir, lohs!*" The priest vanished in the air, leaving only a thin haze of black mist, which quickly faded.

"Damn!" Malander yelled, angrily driving his sword deep into the stone of the platform and leaving it there. "Just wait until I find that conjurer!" He turned around, outraged by the unfairness of it all, and sat on the platform. "Randor, what *was* that?"

"He is an ancient priest of the underworld spirits, I should guess. Something all but unheard of these days."

"You couldn't make out what he said?" Seth asked. Throughout the siege he had remained in the rear guard of the company in case Lorn needed help. "I heard that you are aware of all languages."

Randor laughed softly. "I wish it were so. I have been graced with many languages, but many are erased from my memory when I return to Ethindar. As time progresses, many things are forgotten in this world, and with some, it is just as well. My master has set it all according to plan, and I do not struggle with His grace." Randor put his hand on the damp hilt of Malander's sword and freed the blade. "I am blessed with every day I am given. Never would I have guessed those millennia ago that I would live to see this era," he said as he handed the sword to the seething knight. "Here. You may need this in the near future."

"You speak true," Malander answered as he returned the sword to its sheath. "Neither I nor my blade shall wait long."

"This must be their main place of worship," Lorn thought aloud. "Seems as if their belongings have been here for many ages."

"Victors of that ancient war against the men and elves," Seth offered, agreeing with Lorn's hypothesis. "But how could fifty monks create such damage?"

"By the hands of that red devil, no doubt," Malander answered. "I can be certain he handled the entire feat by himself."

"I may have to agree with you there," Randor said as he stood on the platform and studied the drape, which was void of any symbol. "A great evil dwells here in this room--far greater than those who serve it." He leaped down and strolled to the exit, where the lesser monks departed. "We must not stay here. Quickly, before the power destroys your souls! I can stand its temptations a bit longer than you, but I fear for us all."

"I do not fear this evil!" Malander proclaimed.

"Your proof is not necessary, Malander," Randor replied. "This way." He vanished through the door with Malander, returning to the deep shadows, but Lorn and Seth lingered behind under the grip of the room's powerful magic.

"I already begin to feel what he spoke of," Lorn said, and began to sink to the ground, his knees giving under a sudden great pressure. "It lies heavy on my heart." His face cringed as sweat dripped from his brow.

"It is because you are smaller than the rest of us," Seth replied. "Once we are free of this castle it will diminish--I know it will."

"Keep up, would you?" Malander's voice echoed from the corridor.

"Come, Lorn, let us go."

"No," the dwarf replied. "Let me just rest a moment."

"No!" Seth yelled. "I will not!"

"Please, Seth."

"You cannot rest here! This place is evil!" He grabbed Lorn by his jacket and yanked him down the narrow hall after the other two. The dwarf was heavy, though, and did not cooperate with Seth's efforts to escape. He did not want to be left behind in this unfamiliar territory. After many laborious steps through the blackness, only a short distance remained through the passage that led into another chamber, and soon Seth found Randor, already at work on a green door that glowed radiantly. Ten black banners with no decor hung loosely upon the stone walls. The wizard knelt with his hands pressed to the surface, studying the structure as his ears were filled with the same faint chanting he had heard earlier. To counter the enchantment of the voices, Randor began to speak softly, randomly selecting any mantra that entered his mind, hoping one might release the spell.

"If I had the power," Malander grumbled, "I would ban all of this foolish magic and send it back to Ethindar so that he might make use of it!" With sword now in hand, again he swung his blade through the air several times over, letting loose his aggression. His footsteps grew heavier and stiff, echoing through the once quiet chamber.

The glow from the sealed door reflected in Randor's dark glasses, making it harder to see his work at hand. Frowning, he stood back and tried to figure a way in.

"Do you feel any better?" Seth asked Lorn as they stumbled into the room.

"What does he feel?" Randor inquired. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't know what came over me," Lorn answered. "I hurt all over, particularly in the chest. My will to live is slipping away."

"Is the sensation still strong?"

"It has varied its grip on me."

"I have not the power to heal you now. Can you bear the priest's magic a bit longer?"

"Yes," Lorn replied. "Though I do not show it, I have strength left somewhere deep inside me."

"He is as tough as any dwarf warrior anywhere to be found!" Seth added proudly. Lorn smiled and took the compliment, then leaned against the jagged wall.

"Magic failed you?" Malander asked Randor haughtily. "What great shame this makes for us." He laughed quietly to himself.

Ignoring the knight's insolence, Randor said, "The door is marked in that strange tongue, it seems. It will take some time to figure this out."

"And how much time do you think we have, hmm?" Malander asked, resuming his pacing, this time keeping his eyes on the wizard. He raised his arms and opened them outward. "The world is dying all around us, and our chance to end its illness lies right behind this door! You want us to wait?!"

Randor replied, "Please, if you can do better, do so."

Malander did not rise to the challenge. His mind was too agitated to ponder such things, so he dropped the matter.

Randor closed his eyes and lowered his head as he began to pray. "Master, please show me Your divinity and provide a passage through this. Grant me the power to free this world of Yours from its suffering."

After a few moments the glowing passage began to flicker, and the green light died.

"So the gods do answer prayers," Malander added gruffly. "What a change that must be for them."

"Watch your tongue, Knight!" Seth warned.

"Watch yours, boy."

"Lorn?" Randor said. "Are you well enough to continue?"

"I would be disappointed if we had to stop on my account. Do lead us on."

"Very well."

The door swung open. At once Malander darted through the entrance. Finding nothing unusual, he shrugged his shoulders and turned away from the dark tunnel, and before he could respond, a chain wrapped around his thick neck. Desperately he tried to free himself, but it closed faster on him by the second. His pale skin flushed red, and every vein in his forehead and neck stood out.

"The priest has a magical chain, Randor!" Seth yelled. "Do something!"

The mysterious attack soon brought the brave knight to his knees, though he fought on gamely. Randor promptly started to assist the fading Malander by pitting his own strength against the chain, yet still it did not yield.

"Try to hold on," Randor said, receiving no response from his strangling companion. "Seth, do help me, would you?"

But before Highbinder could reach the door, the chain released itself, though not from anyone's doing, and vanished back into the hallway. Malander fell at Randor's feet, gasping for air as, slowly, his red-tinted skin returned to its usual pale complexion. Randor grabbed the stricken knight by his arm and pulled him away to a safer distance. Again the strange chanting began to creep through the corridors, growing stronger. Where would this threat come from?

"We shall be outnumbered soon," Randor said. "They are coming here, no doubt."

"What must we do?" Seth asked. "Remain or retreat?"

"I will never retreat!" Malander spoke his first words since nearly being stifled. Though he rubbed his chafed neck, his sword was ready to strike as he glanced into the dark hall.

"Neither will I," said Randor. "If they come, we must be ready for them. They will not be as powerful as their master."

The chanting grew louder with each repetition, drumming the room full of demonic mantras, the very noise making the four companions' hearts beat faster with anticipation. The banners that hung on the wall flapped violently and then fluttered down

to the cold floor.

"What trickery is this?" Seth asked, horrified. Slowly the black cloths began to rise, forming into figures of dark-robed men. A small ball of light glowed in the middle of each shape and faded, revealing partial portions of faces, heads shadowed by hoods, and bodies enveloped in darkness.

"Not as powerful, you say?" Malander growled. "So they come after all!"

The ten cloaked monks turned to the small company, chanting, connecting and combining their strength as they spoke in unison. Rander search his mind for a memory of this language, but not one syllable could he translate.

"Silence your rubbish and come forth!" Malander taunted them, waving his sword to beckon them to him. All he could dwell on was vengeance, thinking how blissful it would be to cut them clean in two.

The chanting stopped as the ten monks lowered their heads, then drew slowly inward. "Attack on my command," Rander whispered. As soon as he spoke these words, the monks rushed at them, their clawed hands reaching out, craving destruction.

* * *

"Come back, you thief!" Arnanor demanded as he reached the door first. Drawing his sword back beyond his head, he opened the door, and in no time his three companions were at his side, Geil now leading the way ahead with sword in one hand and Muron's arm in the other, literally dragging the young prince up the steps. When the four were inside, to their surprise they found no one.

"Do you hear that?" Muron asked, his long ears alerted to an unrecognizable sound. "It is close by, too."

"Yes," Geil agreed, "Sounds like metal clashing against metal--a battle, perhaps."

"Rander?" Muron said, concerned. "It could be the others in peril! We must help them!"

"Come, then!" Arnanor urged. "Let us waste no more precious time!" The elf prince dashed through the chamber, weaving in between columns of crumbled marble, kicking up dust and bits of gravel as he charged ahead.

"Foolish elf!" Gildan cried. "You do not know what may lurk there!"

By now the Northern elves had dashed to the far reaches of the chamber, leaving Gildan by himself, shaking his head, torn by the actions of his kindred. Throwing his cape back, he sprinted to join them. The clanging of weapons became extremely loud as Gildan crossed the vast room--only to find an astonishing scene.

Twelve monks clad in black were locked in combat against the five soldiers of the symbol, and to Gildan's left, the princes and Geil fended off whoever came near, not knowing whether the monks were friend or foe. The five dark soldiers fought bravely against the unarmed monks, though swordsmanship seemed to gain them no advantage. Even with their great skill, they were unable to stop the relentlessly attacking monks. For many long minutes the battle waged in a continuous stalemate, with the soldiers fighting separately from the elves, each having two or three foes to deal with, maneuvering around great pits of swirling fires. Swords were swung true, only to be deflected by clawed hands, which seemed impervious to the relentless assaults, as if made of metal.

Arnanor and Geil still fought bravely, keeping their many opponents checked, yet they could not inflict a single injury. Muron remained in Geil's shadow, making little use of his still unblooded blade, though he felt alive and important now within the ranks of

Randor's company.

The battle came toward the three from all sides, with the entire room in utter chaos. Then, just as Gildan made his way toward his embattled companions, a red-robed monk glided into the rear of the room, hovering several inches above the floor. His followers, without glancing at him, began to retreat, fading before the eyes of all who opposed them, growing almost transparent, only taking solid form as they stood humbly against the walls. The five soldiers, two princes, and Sir Geil remained in the chamber's center, standing together, their differences forgotten for the moment.

Gildan strolled inward and stood next to Arnanor, who did not take his eyes away from the newest guest. "What is he?" Arnanor asked. "An apparition?"

"A monk, more or less, though I have never seen his like before."

"Well, look upon him now, for these shadows will soon fall slain," Arnanor declared.

The priest landed gracefully before the motley group and, pointing his finger at the five soldiers, snarled with a deep hatred, "*Hep ahten mos, ei oph--ghest.*"

"Who are you?" the leader of the symbolized soldiers demanded. "Where have you hidden the Banner of Aldrenos?"

"The Banner of Aldrenos?" Gildan replied, shocked. The appearance of the soldiers in this city was now clear to him. For years he had wondered about this ancient relic. "That is one of the most precious treasures in the entire world."

"Give us the banner and I might spare you!" the leader said clearly.

The priest laughed and replied, "*Sen tuh Nugalas.*" Drifting backward, floating barely above the ground, he beckoned any brave enough to enter the doorway behind him. "*Xontos meh cosdar costot len Aldrena.*"

"Is Nugalas your name?" the leader asked, receiving only a nod as a reply. "Very well, Nugalas, you will lead me to the banner at once!"

"Why are you in search of this relic?" Gildan asked.

The leader held out his sword as his soldiers moved away from the company, not frightened by Nugalas's invitation to journey farther into his castle. Eyeing Gildan, he said, "Don't meddle in our business. You have no right to know, nor could you understand."

"I have an idea of what you plan to do with it." Gildan was well versed in the lore of the Banner of Aldrenos, for he had been commissioned long ago to capture it for a king in a distant land, though he had never found its elusive hiding place--until now. The princes looked on, baffled, not knowing what was spoken of.

"What could an elf know?" the leader laughed, "especially one of your nature, outlandish sword wielder!"

"I far exceed your skills," Gildan remarked boldly.

The lead soldier turned his attention back to Nugalas but saw that he and his monks were gone, having vanished in silence during the short exchange of words. Remarkably, no one had seen them leave. "Believe me, mercenary, your time will come sooner than you think."

"I await that moment," Gildan replied.

The leader left through the door with his companions just at his coattail. Somehow he seemed to know that the banner he was after lay in this direction. Failure to return the relic to his master would probably result in great punishment--something none

of the five would want.

"Tell me about this Banner of Ald--" Arnanor paused, trying to remember the name. "Whatever it is, Gildan, you know what I speak of. Do not offend me and make me say a word I do not recall. Inform us if you will--that is, if you truly know of this item."

Gildan said, "The Banner of Aldrenos was once exposed to the world, flying high in honor above the castle where it once resided. In its long service it changed hands many times, finally falling out of view over one hundred years ago."

"What was so impressive about it?" Arnanor asked impatiently, thinking the story was taking entirely too long to explain.

"Whoever bore it was granted prosperity beyond your wildest imagination. It gave a kingdom and its people unfailing health; no one died or fell into sickness. The Banner of Aldrenos was greatly desired during the Dark War between the two continents of Dunith and Argos."

"I am guessing the victor of the war possessed it," Muron said.

"Strangely enough, the collective armies of Dunith did not," Gildan replied. "It disappeared before the war ended, or that is what I heard. Randor would know exactly how it all came to pass."

He walked slowly away from the group in contemplation as the others looked to him for the next move. "So this is the famous place of the banner after all these years of search." He smiled, thinking of the reward that was promised to him before. Then an even wider smile crept to his pale face at the thought of selling it to whoever offered the most money.

"Are you in search of it, Gildan?" Muron asked, puzzled.

"Yes," he answered happily. "I was once upon a quest to retrieve this banner. The incentive offered to me would have taken many decades to spend...even to earn, really." His eyes glazed over.

"How much was that?" Arnanor asked curiously.

"Four million gold pieces."

"What?!" replied the three, shocked at the huge sum.

"That makes me sick," Arnanor declared, shaking his head. "That kind of money could last my people for eons."

"Four million is a small price to pay for a kingdom's undying health and prosperity."

"That is robbery, mercenary."

"It is a fair and honest trade."

Arnanor began to conjure a grand idea and approached Gildan alone. "So this banner, carried into battle, would bring victory?"

"Who owns it is victorious in all his pursuits."

Arnanor spun away from Gildan's sight and grinned with an underlying purpose, his ideas one step closer to a solid solution. Dreams of glory filled his soul as he thought of the greatness he could achieve with the banner under his control. But he shared the plan with no one, not even his own brother or Geil, for he did not want to risk its exposure.

Muron could see him daydreaming and wanted to know what he was thinking.

"What is it, my brother?"

"Nothing, Muron. Nothing at all."

"Are you sure? You can always talk to me, you know."

"Just ready yourself, all right?"

"I am ready."

"And I am ready whenever you are, my lord," Geil added.

"Gildan?" Arnanor said.

"Yes?"

"We are ready on your word."

Chapter Thirteen: New Smoke Rises

"Do not attack yet! Let them come to us," Randor advised as the enemy closed on them fast.

"If we don't act now, we will not see another battle!" Malander replied, trying to contain the impulse to charge.

"What are we doing?" Seth asked. "We will surely die if we wait!"

"Not true," Randor said in a calming tone as he thrust out his arms and bent his knees. The first monk reached them, only to be repelled by a powerful kick from Malander. Strangely, although the robed figure fell back, Malander felt no contact with his foot, as if he had kicked only air. The downed monk rose fast and renewed the assault. "I didn't even touch him!" Malander said, bewildered.

"Beware of these monks," Randor said. "Do now what you must to survive."

"Oh, with great pleasure!" Malander replied, diving into the enemy host. With fierce kicks and great, arcing slashes of his sword, he fought with all the strength he had left, though he could not prevent half the enemy's numbers from spilling around him and advancing on Randor.

As Seth and Lorn moved behind the wizard to guard his flank, Seth noticed that Randor's strength seemed to be slowly returning to him. The notion to use magic had indeed occurred to Randor, but the confined space would make things risky. Moreover, his magical powers would wreak havoc on the ancient castle structure, which went against his code of preserving the antiquities of the world. "Do not take shelter behind me, you two," he said, nudging them away. "Spread out to reinforce our powers!"

Seth raised his sword and inched away from his leader, ready to engage the monks, as Lorn drew his weapon and faced two attackers who had turned in his direction. Seeing them approach, the dwarf trembled and almost dropped the dirk to the floor.

"Keep calm, Lorn," said Seth.

"So it begins," Randor whispered as he thrust his hand at his attackers, stabbing only air. It became clear to him that an ancient spell protected these monks and that everything he and his companions tried would be in vain--yet they must try nonetheless.

"Magic keeps you well!" Malander shouted as he continued to press his assault, disregarding the outcome that he knew would follow. "It is all that allows you to live!"

Randor had to find a proper spell that would allow his companions to counter the enemy and bring victory--without his gift of magic, the battle would linger in a stalemate. During the heat of the conflict, he allowed a small corner of his mind to slip away to his subconscious, there to draw on the inner powers he yet possessed. Even as he parried the clawed blows of his assailants, he heard himself say, "*Nara tugas ei randa ben!*" As his hands blazed with a luminous white light, the two monks nearest him backed away. Then, before they realized the meaning of this event, Randor lunged forward, striking with his palm the chest of a monk and paralyzing him where he stood. Smoke poured from the monk's torso as he looked down in horror and attempted to retreat, but it was too late--his body convulsed violently, and Lorn could hear the sound of breaking bones as the robed figure sank to the stone floor. There the body lay for a moment before bursting into blue flames, leaving only black smoke as a reminder. Lorn's stomach almost heaved at the horrid sight.

"To me!" Randor shouted, and the three closed ranks, buoyed by a new sense of

hope. Randor's hands blazed white, beckoning any who dared to oppose him. "I know your weakness," he boasted. "Go and tell your master this news, for I am sure he wishes to see my powers!"

"Yes," Malander snarled, "go and fetch that devil at once!"

As the monks fled the chamber, their chanting again filled the halls, fading with their retreat. When at last all was quiet in the chamber, Randor lowered his hands and released the magical glow.

"I am glad they are gone," said Lorn.

"But for how long?" Seth wondered.

"They will return sooner than you think," said Malander. Though he had been unable to visit his vengeful wrath upon the monks, he had still greatly enjoyed honing his techniques on them, and now his blood coursed through his veins with the vibrant exuberance of battle. It would be some time before his mood calmed back to its usual surly darkness.

"I have a feeling we are about to follow them," said Seth.

"I think you already know the answer to that," Randor replied.

"Indeed," Seth laughed. Then, seeing Lorn looking somewhat back to normal, he said, "Found your courage after all, it seems."

"I suppose I did," the dwarf answered meekly.

"I am proud of you, old chum. You will see your valley again and return to all the delights you once knew."

Lorn chuckled. "I certainly hope you are right."

"Of course he is," Randor added. "Now, if we are all ready, let us pass through the door ahead and see where it leads. But stay vigilant--danger is not yet far enough away for us to grow careless. Let us continue ahead." Randor waved his hand and the four ventured through the newly opened path.

* * *

Before Gildan knew what was happening, the chase after the soldiers began once again, taking him and the Northern elves through many dimly lit corridors and across bridges spanning pits of darkness, doggedly at their enemy's heels. Finally they paused before a large bridge with a sizable gap in its middle--destroyed ages ago by causes unknown, and with no apparent way across.

Gildan edged out onto the decrepit span and looked down into the chasm, gauging the momentum needed to get safely across. Then, without even a running start, he pushed off with his left foot at the gap's edge and soared through the air. Clearing the gap with room to spare, he rolled shoulder-first onto the stone and stood upright and looked back to the others' progress. To his surprise, his three companions remained on the opposite side of the bridge, staring uneasily into the darkness below, astonished at the mercenary's feat.

"What are you doing?" Gildan yelled. "If you allow me to lose their trail I will never forgive your folly!"

Arnanor pushed back both his brother and Sir Geil, far enough to allow him a short sprint to the gap. Peering ahead and calculating the necessary steps, he said to Geil, "I will go first. Then make sure that Muron follows next."

"Understood, my lord."

"See you shortly." Arnanor looked ahead and took a deep breath. Sheathing his

sword, he glanced to his brother, seeing despair written on the younger prince's face. Arnanor lowered his stance and broke into a dead run for the gap, cape and long hair flying behind him, and nearing the jagged edge, he leaped. Eyes wide, the elf-prince flew across with arms and legs still pumping. As Gildan stepped back, not wanting to collide with the prince as he landed, Arnanor fell hard onto the bridge, hitting with his knees. He moaned, planting his scuffed hands to the floor, and Gildan reached down to help him up but was shrugged away.

"How great the distance?" Muron's voice echoed.

"Twenty feet," Arnanor replied as he dusted off his armor and his hands.

"Smaller than I calculated," Geil said. "Go on, Prince Muron--your turn."

"Twenty feet?" Muron whispered doubtfully. "I...I don't know--"

Grabbing the timid prince by the shoulders, Geil looked him in the eyes and said, "Yes, you can! Do what you have learned."

"But this I have not--"

"Yes, you have. I was there, remember?"

"But not so great a distance, Geil. I have never cleared twenty feet..."

Gildan and Arnanor stood impatiently waiting on the other side, unaware of Muron's problem. "What are they doing?" Gildan asked as he paced anxiously, afraid of losing the trail of the mysterious soldiers.

"I do not know," Arnanor answered. "Sir Geil, what is the delay?"

"It is Prince Muron, my liege. He tells me he is unable to clear such a jump."

Arnanor shouted at his brother, "Discard your fear and get over here, for Ethindar's sake! Do it now!" Walking back toward Gildan, he lowered his head, ashamed that someone of his family should show such weakness. "In all my years I have never been so humiliated."

"You must do as he asks, younger master; I cannot protect you from your own bloodline," Geil advised. "Clear your mind and think only of the goal."

"I am, and it is what scares me. I wish my brother thought as you--having such faith in me."

"He does--deep inside."

"Still you dally!" Arnanor yelled.

"Very well," Muron decided at last, "I will do it...I don't know how, but I must."

"Now, set yourself just as you have practiced. Run forward with all your might and reach out as far as you can toward your brother. Believe you will clear this farther even than he did."

Muron gave a small smile and nodded as he mimicked Arnanor's technique, loosening his tensed muscles and taking a deep breath. Geil stood back, observing the prince's preparation, and prayed for a positive outcome. Without Muron, his existence would lie in ruin, plagued with an endless misery that would never heal--if he could even bear the thought of living. Indeed, death seemed an easier solution.

Off Muron ran, his eyes shifting fast between his brother and the gap in the bridge. As he raced ahead, he felt a sudden shift in his confidence, a feeling he had never known before. Suddenly, doubt no longer plagued his mind, which was given over to complete faith in an ability he did not readily possess. Then the moment came, and he summoned every ounce of his failing strength into his legs and sprang. The three onlookers gasped as they watched Muron soar like a dragon, letting out a great cry of

self-encouragement. At first it seemed that victory was his, but halfway through the arc of his jump, Arnanor could see the odds leaning against him.

Instinctively he ran to the edge of the bridge and reached out his arms. "Lean forward!" he cried out, but Muron did not obey. It suddenly occurred to him that his brother would fall to his death, and that there was nothing he could do to save him.

Muron's foot grazed the rough stone, though not enough to gain a purchase...but Arnanor had positioned himself perfectly and hauled his struggling brother up into his strong arms. Safe for the moment, Muron clutched his brother and sobbed. Normally Arnanor would have pushed him away, not being one for deep emotions of this sort, but this situation was somehow different.

"I thought I was going to die," Muron said, his voice cracking. "Thank Ethindar for you, my brother."

Arnanor drew back from Muron, holding him by the shoulders, and pierced him with his narrowed eyes. "I told you to lean forward! Do you have any idea of the torment you have just put me through?! I could have lost you! Father would have killed Geil and me both!

"But he will not, for I live. All is well, Arnanor."

"Yes...for now."

Geil watched as Arnanor led his brother away from the ledge, giving the knight permission to cross the gap. Without difficulty Geil jumped and landed, falling into a trot, for the others had already taken off after the soldiers.

Bursting through one last door of thick red wood, the four found themselves again among the soldiers. One soldier stood far away from his companions at the left-hand side of a vast room while two stood together at the opposite end. The leader and the remaining soldier stood back, watching expectantly. The leader acknowledged Gildan and the Northern elves' arrival but took no immediate action against them. "Welcome once again."

Arnanor saw the Banner of Aldrenos fixed high upon the wall to his right, and knew at once that he had to stop the soldiers from getting it. Suddenly, the soldier to their left dashed across the room at astonishing speed, quicker even than any elf could move, directly toward the narrow space between his two cohorts. Leaping ahead, he thrust his dark boot into the interlocked hands of the two waiting soldiers, who threw him skyward with great power. As he reached the height of the banner, he grasped it at its top, yanked it down, tucked it under his arm, and pushed off the wall, touching down on the stone without difficulty.

"We have what we came for," said the leader. "Let's move out!" Turning, he said, "Tell this Randor of yours that this world will fail, bringing all your efforts to naught!"

"So you do have the moon!" Arnanor said. "What have you done with it?" Yet all he received as an answer was laughter as the soldiers fled through the far side of the room.

"We must find Randor at once," Gildan said. "Though I hate to admit it, we cannot do this without his help."

"I must agree with you there," Arnanor replied. "But surely we will not venture back over our path to track our allies down."

"No," said the mercenary. "Our best chance, I feel, is still to follow the symbol....They might yet cross paths with our friends."

* * *

As Randor's group rested after the battle with the monks, Malander paced the floor as usual while Seth and Lorn sat with the wizard on the floor. Randor stared off into nothingness as he puffed on his long pipe, hardly noticing the grand rings of smoke he blew. He had no solid lead, and the monks could be anywhere within this castle. Three stairwells presented themselves to the wizard and company, but Randor did not wish to venture through any of them just yet.

"What are we waiting for?" Seth finally said. "Is this part of your plan, sir?"

"Everything that I do is apart of the master plan, Highbinder."

"I...meant no disrespect."

"I know, young one. Your inquisitiveness is strong, but sometimes you must wait for things to progress, without pushing them. Events will unfold without any effort from you. We are weary, and it is pointless to expend our remaining energy on puzzles. I grow tired of this maze."

"Well said," Seth agreed. "This is why you are appointed to lead us--wisdom is our greatest ally."

"And also my greatest weapon against evil," Randor added with a smile.

"We shouldn't be here," Malander said quietly.

"Why do you speak thus?" Randor asked.

"I have a deep feeling of unease, one that I cannot shake from my heart."

"What do you see? Do inform me, for it may help our cause."

"How can you expect me to explain a feeling like this?" His emotions were cloaked, so that others might not see his true nature.

"All I ask is for you to try," the wizard calmly replied.

Malandar raised his arms and yelled, "Well, I cannot! Just let me be with it, and disregard my feelings, would you?!"

"As you wish."

A small commotion began in the corridor to their left: the distinct sound of many feet moving in haste, bringing Randor and the others instantly to their feet. As louder and much more rapid footsteps rang down the tunnel, their anticipation grew.

Seth tried to believe it was only Gildan's squad charging this way, but Malander seemed to think the very opposite and readied himself for battle. "I do hope it is Gildan," said Seth.

"As do I," Lorn added. "I can't take much more of this dangerous business."

"Do not let hope deceive you," Randor told Lorn. "This goes for all of you."

Shadows loomed on the wall of this stairwell, and the sound of metal skimming across the stones grew louder with each moment the company waited. Now the forms appeared that Lorn hoped not to see, though Malander was more than pleased with the prospect of battle. He spun his sword in his hands, unable to hold it still. Redemption, long overdue, would be his at last. "You come back at an opportune time!" he yelled. "Now I will exact my payment!"

"Not with the Banner of Aldrenos in my possession," the leader of the dark-clad soldiers boasted. "Your payment, as you call it, is void!" And so saying, he brought his followers around to the far door, though which none had yet ventured, and turned to the wizard in the dark blue cloak and hat. "Randor, I presume."

Astonished at having been identified, Randor nodded. "You have assumed

correctly, sir. Who are you?"

"I am General Bharot of the High Order."

Slightly out of breath, the elves emerged on the heels of the soldiers and, seeing Randor, ran to his side. Bharot merely shook his head in disgust.

"They have the banner, which has been in this place," Muron reported, assuming that Randor knew nothing of this turn of events.

"Aldrenos?" Randor said, puzzled.

"Yes, sir. But...how did you know?"

"I have already found it, Muron."

"Oh."

"Leave the banner here," Randor ordered to Bharot.

"And if I refuse?" Bharot asked, amused that anyone could presume to take the banner from him. Snapping his fingers, he reached back his hand, and a soldier gave him the tightly furled banner. Bharot looked at the banner, then at Randor. "I will make you an offer."

"Offer?" Randor replied. "What could you possibly bargain for?"

"I didn't say bargain, wizard. I said an offer. It is clear that you do not listen."

"Well, make this 'offer' of yours, then."

"If you can take this precious relic from my hands, then it is yours." He smiled.

"If you cannot, then it shall travel with us."

"A simple task," Arnanor laughed. "You are not only a thief but a fool as well. You are outnumbered."

Bharot shook his head and said, "I merely said take it from me--not us. So come, one of you. Who would dare take it from me, a master swordsman? You will die under my blade." He unsheathed his sword, holding it outward. "Choose your champion."

"I will go," Malander said eagerly. "He is mine alone."

"I had hoped it would be you," Bharot said with obvious delight. "Step forward and meet your doom." Holding the banner, he strolled forward menacingly and smiled. "To even the bout, I will keep only one hand on my sword."

"You will need both to contend with me," Malander said, laughing to himself.

"Oh, devil take it--I'll keep this fair by using my weaker hand," he added as he switched his weapon to his right hand, swinging it about with grace.

Mimicking Malander, Bharot flourished his own blade with splendid technique. "Is this all you have for me?" With a multiple twirl, Bharot swung his sword in an arabesque the company had never seen before. It was highly unorthodox yet blindingly fast and appeared effective. Unexpectedly, Malander mimed precisely the general's movement, then added personal touches of his own.

"Enough of this pointless exhibition," Bharot snarled.

"Yes," Malander goaded him, "enough. For I grow tired of outperforming you. This needs to brew directly to the point: determining who is superior."

Approaching the center of the chamber, neither man could hold back any longer his loathing for the other, and they raised their swords and went at it. After the first clash and parry, Malander wasted no time centering himself again and charged inward with a wicked cry, wanting only to silence the insolent general for good. His enemy did the same, swirling his blade high above his head. As they met for the second time the standoff began. The general's soldiers stood at ease, appearing not even to focus on the

battle before them, but Randor kept a close watch, ready to overthrow Bharot if it seemed that he might dispose of Malander. Malander, using all his skill, began to take control of the duel, but the general soon closed the gap. With a fixed grin on his face, he toyed with Malander, fighting only well enough to avoid being pinked.

"I can see this lasting for a good while," Gildan commented. "One of us should relieve him."

"Not just yet," Randor replied smoothly, his faith still with the grim knight. "As a precaution, though, decide among yourselves who is to be next."

"No!" Malander cried out, overhearing the conversation. Bharot's sword ground against Malander's, and the two glared at each other. "No! Don't even think about it, wizard!" Bharot laughed at his opponent's imprudence.

Suddenly, from the darkened stairwell behind Randor and company, a chain like the one that had nearly ended Malander's life shot through the air from behind the company, grazing Randor's hair in passing. Caught up in their mutual hatred, neither Malander nor Bharot heard or saw it come directly toward them, then divert its path, curving slightly as it wrapped itself around both men's weapons and held them fast.

Uncharacteristically, Bharot froze, at a loss what to do. His many long years of training had never prepared him for this. Malander saw the general's confusion and took advantage, driving a deep knee thrust into his enemy's unprotected midsection. Bharot fell backward and let go his entangled sword. Malander, also unable to free his weapon from the chain, let go as well, leaving both blades caught in the hovering chain.

The general, clenching his stomach, slowly straightened and, tossing the rolled banner back to his soldiers, shouted, "Give me another blade!" The soldier who caught the relic opened the front of his coat, drew his sword, and tossed it to Bharot. The new weapon was slightly lighter and thinner than his customary choice of weapon, but it would have to do.

Malander backed away from his inaccessible sword, frustrated that he could not hold his greatest possession and only friend. He knew that asking Randor for aid would prove unhelpful, for he had been unable to do anything about the chain earlier. Seeing Bharot approaching, Malander clenched his fists. He would have to trust to his swift kicks and punches, which were just as honed as his skills with the sword. In fact, Malander enjoyed hand-to-hand combat, for he could better feel the blows he inflicted on his unfortunate enemies.

Bharot moved forward nonchalantly, knowing now was the moment to rid himself of this foe.

"Give him your blade, Seth!" Lorn cried as Bharot approached to within only a few steps of Malander.

But before Seth could process what was asked of him, Malander shouted, "See what I can do without a crafted weapon. I will show him my diverse skills as a warrior!"

"Hand combat is inferior to our ways," Bharot explained. "Your trust in your hands will be the end of you."

"Your narrow mind will be your undoing."

The chain began to tremble and quickly retracted whence it came, sending the two blades end over end deep into a crevice in the stone wall, far from the combatants' reach. Randor stared at the door behind him and turned to the Northern elves. "Arnanor?"

"I am listening."

"You and yours keep watch of the rear entrance."

"So be it," Arnanor replied.

"We can ill afford an ambush." The Northern elves turned about and kept close watch, mind and body on guard. "I have a feeling this will grow worse."

Bharot pressed the attack, directing his new blade in every way possible. At first Malander simply parried the attacks, dodging from side to side, moving like a mighty cat ready to pounce on its prey. Though the general's blade cut through the air with tremendous speed, Malander found that avoiding the blows was easier than he imagined. He could sense the confusion of his opponent that still lingered after the chain's inexplicable appearance, and after an ill-timed lunge from Bharot, he began his assault. Fists, hand edges, and open palms struck Bharot on all the vulnerable points of his body, taking a vicious toll on his neck, ribs, and internal organs. Knocking him farther back, the grim knight finished with a kick that lifted Bharot and dropped him violently on floor. Blood flowed from his mouth as Malander stood ready to deliver more. It was the best Malander had felt since the fight with the Mazazuken.

"I--I don't understand," Bharot cried, wiping the blood from his face. "This banner is powerless!"

"Randor," Arnanor whispered, "I can see movement within the shadows--those monks again, no doubt."

"Do we hold our ground?" Seth asked.

"Yes," Randor ordered, "Let them in. It is time we finished this."

In that instant Nugalas soared into the room to hover above Randor and the others. All turned their attention to the laughing evil that floated above them. Nugalas appeared to be alone. *"Xen mouten grust fon grentoh."*

Malandor and Bharot, their fight interrupted, retired to their respective sides, the general falling back first. Seeing that the center of the chamber was cleared, Nugalas descended, touching down as softly as a dropped feather, and turned toward Randor. But by focusing on Randor, he allowed Bharot to gather his men and flee down the corridor nearest them. Randor moved Malander aside, desiring to further his understanding of the dark priest.

"Ghen-ahros tah." Nugalas formed a rectangle of his hands, then made tight fists, which he shook violently. *"Ahros tah!"*

"What do you guess he means or wants?" Muron asked, baffled.

"The banner," Arnanor answered.

"You are correct," Randor added. "The soldiers have escaped with Aldrenos."

"Where did they go?" Seth asked, surprised he had missed their exit. "Did you see them leave, Lorn?"

"No, I was not paying attention to them."

Nugalas turned sharply and snarled, finding the burglars gone from his sight. Enraged, he ran to the door and peered down into the stairway, seeing no trace of the banner. With a blood-curdling howl, he turned to face the company with fangs exposed, gleaming in the pale light. Randor gathered his companions closer to him and prepared for another encounter with the wily priest. Slowly the wizard directed the throng backward.

Overcome with rage, Nugalas could no longer hold back his powers, and with a withering glare, he shouted, *"Einxs oenfex aui-uthinah!"* Raising his hands, he released

his infamous chain from out of his long sleeves. In no time at all it would be within the middle of the company.

"We won't make it!" Seth gasped as he tried to hurry those in his way out the door.

As the iron weapon of Nugalas crossed the midpoint of the chamber, a sword shot through the air from the doorway off to their left, catching Nugalas unaware as it passed through a chain link and veered it from its intended path, wedging it deep into a crack in the stone wall, next to Malander's sword. Still Nugalas tried to control his power, struggling to free the chain by the force of his mind.

"Did you see that, Randor?" Arnanor asked.

"I am afraid not."

The eight stopped their helter-skelter flight because the threat had ended. They turned and faced Nugalas, unsure just what he planned next, but guessing that the priest had more than one attack up his sleeve.

Randor looked to the stairwell to his left where the blade shot from, but all that he could see was smoke, rolling off the top of the archway of the door. The gray smoke brought with it a wondrous aroma of flowers, a smell that made Randor crave his own pipe. Then, in a dramatic entrance, a highly decorated soldier of the symbol strode in. With a long, red pipe in his mouth, he darted his cold eyes about the room; then, looking to Nugalas, he laughed and shook his head in pity for the priest, who turned and, with a cry of rage, fled down the stairs after the banner, caring no more for Randor or anyone else.

Malander, who wanted only to finish his fight, said, "Bharot!"

The soldier blew out a great cloud of smoke and sighed as he lowered his beautiful pipe to his side, as one might lower a sword. "Do not insult me again. How could you possibly cross me with that amateur?"

"Then who are you?" Malander wanted to know.

"General Helfare."

"Are you a member of this High Order?" Gildan asked.

"No, I am no longer a part of this order you speak of."

"So you are not with them?" Malander asked, distrusting Helfare's words. Already he knew that these soldiers had no honor, and this one seemed no different. "I find this information hard to believe." He crossed his arms and awaited the real answer.

"You must believe me, my friends."

"I am not your friend," Malander was quick to say. "Know this now and keep my words in your brainwashed head!"

Helfare slowly approached the others, who raised their guard, unsure of his motives. He brought up his hands, showed only his pipe, and indicated that he would not attempt any sudden aggressive movements. "I mean you no harm. I am unarmed." Opening his dark jacket, he exposed the empty sheath of his sword, still lodged in the wall, where it held the priest's chain.

The members of Randor's company were torn at the thought of siding with this tall, young, obviously accomplished swordsman. "See here, dear sirs, I am utterly incapable of doing you physical harm." And though Randor thought Helfare a well-spoken gentleman, he was still skeptical.

"But you still possess the forked tongue common to all your kind. Slice it from your mouth, and then the eight of us shall be kinder in dealing with you!" Malander

exchanged evil glares with Helfare, not yielding to his speech.

"What has brought the eight of you here to a place such as this?" Helfare was very sly and graceful with his question. "It is dangerous here for such a...small squad of folk."

Malander, who had enough of the newcomer, spoke up. "Now, you listen to..."

"Calm yourself," Helfare advised. "I do wish to know the outline of your business. I can clearly see you all do not work together well."

"You are wrong, sir," Seth protested.

"Not to mention that none of you don similar armor or symbol--royal party excluded, of course." The Northern elves looked mutely at one another. "All I do know at this point is that the eight of you must be on some sort of quest benefiting each of your kind: man, elf, and dwarf." Helfare studied the company a moment longer and turned to the leader. "You, my good wizard, must be a Randor of Ethindar."

"Indeed," the wizard answered.

"But which Randor you are, I cannot guess. I have not heard of a Randor attired in blue." Helfare puffed on his pipe. "Perhaps you are new to this world."

"I am Randor Miithra, and no, there has not been a new Randor in many Ages."

"What are your tidings, Miithra?"

"My tidings are great and far too deep to give in any detail. You, General Helfare, can just call me Randor, for this is what people simply refer to me as these days."

"One of the Seven Wielders of Ethindar going only by his title? Tidings are strange." Helfare looked the other seven over. "Surely you can share your adventure with me. Perhaps I can assist you along the way." He still could not gain their trust, but he pressed on. "By the Mighty Hand of Ethindar, I swear to you that I intend no ill toward you." He bowed humbly before Randor. "You have my solemn oath."

"On your oath to my Master," Randor began, "I, for one, will take your trust sincerely."

"You cannot be serious!" an incredulous Arnanor said.

"For once I agree with the elf-prince," said Malander. "We cannot afford him in our circle."

"This decision is mine alone," Randor announced, brooking no argument. "We have the symbol within our grasp now. Have you no wish to heal this world?"

"If the world is a concern, then my aid to you is in sore demand." Helfare spoke as one in tune with their mission. "I have guessed your secrecy," he said confidently. "Is Beldas a spark in your emotions?"

Arnanor stepped forward and pointed at Helfare. "What did I tell you? These men did in fact steal our beloved moon--and I will wager that this particular one did the stealing."

"I am sorry to report that my powers do pass into the realm of magic, but only my former master could perform such a feat of evil. Not even Randor could conjure such magic, I would say."

"I could pull the moon from the heavens if I only wished to sacrifice both myself and Londor in the act. Never, though, would I destroy this wonderful planet that has given me such wisdom and life." Randor was drawn back in reflection, but suddenly one of Helfare's words struck him. "*Former* master, you say?"

"Yes, sir, he is former, and that how it will remain," Helfare replied, the disgust evident in his voice. "I still find it hard to believe that he was actually strong enough to

do this."

"Take me to him at once!" Malander shouted.

"Never do I wish to return there. I can tell you anything that you wish to know to further your cause and perhaps lead you close to his realm, but I will never return to him. Already have I wasted fifteen years of my life in his kingdom, and that was quite enough!"

Randor intervened and reminded the general, "You swore your oath to me, and I will not let you break it, nor shall you depart from my side as long as I deem you under my service." Helfare hung his head at the wizard's strong words, for he knew the ones that would follow. "Your trust is bound with guiding us into your former homeland."

"As it is, Randor, you are correct on this account," Helfare replied. "Though it pains me greatly, and I know that the pain will increase on our arrival there..." He paused. "I will show you the path into Valadure, for I will never break an oath, not even to you. I should have known you would ask this of me."

"Precisely what I expected to hear," Randor smiled.

"On with your tidings," Gildan urged.

"Very well..." Helfare straightened his clothing and maintained the elegant appearance of an officer of Valadure. "I am a former general of Lord Adian in his vast realm far to the south of here. Six months ago he summoned me, his closest officials, and his high priests to his innermost keep and revealed to us his horrid plot of taking the moon from the heavens."

"Reason?" Arnanor asked impatiently. "There has to be one."

"He told us of a grand offer he received from the Enchantress. Though I have never seen her, I have heard many tales of her peerless powers and beauty that surpasses all that one could hope to understand." He saw that all were intrigued and shocked at his story, but more lay ahead to be told. "This offer would exchange Beldas for the enchantress's land, which Adian desired badly."

"And this Adian agreed?" Randor asked. "This is the most extreme barter I have ever heard."

"At first he did not agree," Helfare remarked. "Only after the enchantress offered Adian immortality and her hand to him in marriage did he so agree. The power promised to him only made the task easier to do."

"So now Londor suffers for his gain? What a selfish fool!" Malander laughed darkly.

"Did he not care how it would affect those outside his grasp of magic?" Seth asked, being the first voice of reason.

"No," the general replied. "All that concerns Adian are his armies and his citizens. The world could lie in ruin, but as long as he reigns on his throne, he would feel divine."

"Now the Banner of Aldrenos makes way to Valadure in the hands of Bharot," Randor said. "It appears that Adian's bane has caught the tail of his realm, and the banner will cure any illness that creeps in. He will now be invulnerable." He started toward the exit, followed by the company and Helfare. "We must reach Bharot before he can return to his master's side. I now regret our delay here."

"They will not escape us, even with our small respite," Gildan said.

"You may be correct," replied Randor.

"I know the very road they take, and by your grace I will lead you to a cutoff

point," Helfare offered, and without a word, he sidestepped over to the wall and retrieved both his and Malander's swords. The chain fell to the ground and dissolved into smoke and was no more. "These steps ahead will take us outside this castle. Ready yourselves."

"Helfare!" a strong voice yelled from behind the company, still at a distance. All turned to see who spoke. "Helfare!" it called again.

"Who is calling you?" Seth asked the puzzled general. "Do you have a squad with you?"

"No. I came alone."

"I wonder who that is," Malander hissed. "Maybe it is Bharot, returning to play."

"I think not, but I will remain here and see," Helfare assured him.

Running toward them at great speed was a man clad in black, his shoulder-length hair whipping behind him. With sword drawn back, he locked eyes with Helfare, who brought his sword upward to greet him. "Lord Adian sends his greetings in my blade!" As he completed his declaration, he slashed with all his might at Helfare's head but was parried by the general's quick reflexes. Helfare managed to drive him back to the center of the chamber, where the attacker spun his sword by the long hilt as if it were a staff, thrusting and slashing at the general. But Helfare bided his time, putting forth only enough effort to keep from being struck.

"Give yourself into my custody!" the wild man demanded. "Give yourself to Master Ghelok!" Helfare suddenly came alive, unleashing his reserve in one swift upswing of his blade, but Ghelok blocked it easily with mind and sword working as one. Ghelok laughed, "You shall fetch me quite a reward from Lord Adian. He will bless me with a promotion to high general and an undeclared amount of the enchantress's land! I will not allow you to escape and deprive me of my rightful earnings!"

"Then kill me if you can," Helfare taunted him.

"You will regret those words!" Again they closed in battle, and Bharot's lead on the company grew ever longer as time went on. Randor muttered a spell quietly to himself and held his magic inside, waiting for a clean shot at Ghelok. With the intruder in his sight, he let fly a little ball of blue flame, which streaked toward Helfare's unknowing back. Sensing the stealthy magic, Helfare leaped high into the air, over the path of Randor's projectile, which hit Ghelok full in the chest. Dropping his sword, Ghelok fell backward over a body length from where he was struck, skidding along his back for many feet. Giving one last look at his fallen foe, Helfare was the last to follow his new company out of the tunnel, and before Ghelok realized his situation, he was left alone, ravaged by pain.

Chapter Fourteen: Among the Granite Tombs

Determined to succeed, Bharot had escaped the traps and snares of the castle and prepared himself to return to Valadure--a journey long overdue. The light of the morning scattered high in the wispy clouds as the sun crept over the distant mountains. "Mount up and ride onward!" Bharot commanded, taking the reins of his steed.

As the squadron rode away, suddenly eleven horsemen crested the nearby hills to either side and bore down on Bharot and his remaining four. But seeing their own coat of arms on Bharot's men, they quickly broke off the attack and instead greeted him in Valadure fashion. Bharot, ever in control of the situation, rode forward. "One of you, I don't care who, explain to me what brings you here."

"Lord Adian dispatched us, sir, to aid Master Ghelok in his task of retrieving General Helfare," one spoke before silencing himself again.

Bharot was amused by this news, relishing the thought that these two men he despised were both in the vicinity. His hatred for Helfare had begun many years ago, during their many uncomfortable years in training together. It was a jealousy that ran deep in his cold veins, and the mere thought of his rival drove him into a quiet rage. He had always hated being considered second best to Helfare, and wanted only one chance to prove his superiority. "Lord Adian has blessed me this day," he proclaimed. "Not only do I get to humiliate the former general Helfare, but I can put the posturing Ghelok in his place as well. Finally will I receive my due." He surveyed the newly arrived soldiers under Ghelok's command, only recognizing three, though apparently they all knew who he was, detecting fear and respect in their bearing. "How many days have you traveled?"

"Seven days, General."

"Superb timing, my brothers," Bharot congratulated them. "You glorify what we have taught you these many arduous years." The distance from Valadure to Nar-Fhandon was far greater than seven days, but Of-Adians were hardy enough to travel far and fast under the most grueling conditions.

"Thank you, sir!" the eleven replied in unison. No one could ask for a better or more disciplined company of men.

"I cannot wait much longer for those two foolish souls to appear before me," Bharot said. "Perhaps I should wait a moment in hopes of one appearing."

"Permission to speak, General?" one of his own men asked respectfully.

"Go on."

"Lord Adian would not be pleased with our lack of haste. I, for one, do not wish to see harm come to you or any of us."

Another of the general's men spoke up without permission. "If these two have come after you, we shall meet them on the Kaidren road ahead. Make them follow after us despite their weariness."

"My dear sirs, you speak true," Bharot answered with his head lowered in admiration. Though he longed for the downfall of his enemies, it would have to wait. "In my anger I had forgotten strategy, for my wrath had captured my sense." He turned his horse to the road ahead. "All who wish to follow me to Valadure are welcome. Those who are received by Lord Adian, bringing the Banner of Aldrenos to its new eternal home, shall be rewarded."

To his surprise, only the four men of his party came to his side. He took one last

look at his compatriots and shook his head. "Very well. I respect your binding to Ghelok, since Lord Adian did command it so. I will not think differently of any of you, I promise." He paused. "Pray for us."

"Ride hard and ride well, General," one soldier called out as Bharot and his squadron hastened up the steep path before them.

"Eaen Ada ven maladen!" the five shouted as they disappeared over the hill, and the remaining soldiers echoed the call, an Of-Adian Brotherhood proverb of victory known to all who came to their way of life.

As the eleven soldiers watched their departing comrades disappear over the hill, their ears were suddenly filled with the grinding screech of the castle door swinging open. Randor stood in the open doorway, taken aback by the sight of almost a dozen drawn swords; the soldiers covered all avenues of escape except for the grim, ill-starred castle behind the company. In the corner of his eye, the wizard noticed Helfare drawing nearer to his old kindred. "I gather they are not with Bharot," Randor said.

"They are here for me," Helfare answered, "and led by Ghelok." Far enough away now from the rest of his new company, Helfare sought the full attention of the soldiers. "Why have you come?"

"We came for you, vile traitor to Lord Adian!"

"Following a mercenary?" Helfare asked, laughing. "What has come over your master? It looks as though he is slipping in his old age."

"Do not degrade my master again with your foul words! We follow Ghelok without question or regret. He is a superb leader, much more so than you."

"Your 'superb' leader now lies on the floor of the castle." His gray eyes glared coldly at them as he pressed on, "Not so mighty now, is he? Ghelok is a foolish man."

"What have you done with him?" cried the soldier, obviously distraught.

"Let us pass," Helfare demanded. "I do not wish to harm you. Though I am no longer of your brotherhood, I still care for those within its ranks."

"We cannot let you pass." Sympathy from an outsider of Lord Adian was never welcome. The only things mattering to Adian were the affluence of his beloved Valadure and of his High Order, now and continuing into the next age of the world. "Our orders are to arrest you at once."

"You will have to overthrow us first," Randor added. "Helfare is in my service, and I fight dearly my companions--which now include him."

"Let him remain here, Randor," Malander advised. "Prolonging this only creates a colder trail for Aldrenos. We do not need a traitor."

"I will not let Helfare out of my service, and this, Malander, is final."

Helfare surreptitiously scanned the area, looking for a weakness in the surroundings. There, to his far right, along the castle wall, he could just make out a smaller path through the deep pines. "I will only ask you once more to stand aside," Helfare spoke to his captors--none responding to his sincere threat. "You are leaving me little choice," he said as he reached into his jacket.

But before he could grab firm hold of his weapon, Helfare and the rest of his new companions were shoved forward by an abrupt force coming from the castle's exit. As the company found their balance once again, they looked upon Nugalas, who now stood between the mounted soldiers and Zelok's party. The monk snarled, turning his attention to the soldiers first, thinking these were the same ones who had infiltrated his home.

Randor kept watch on Nugalas, who moved away from him, and in this moment, Randor slowly led the company towards the castle once more. "This is our chance to flee," the wizard whispered as he slid his hands and back against the dark, rough stones of the castle.

"That is one sneaky priest," Gildan said. "Looks like he waited for everyone to leave before showing his ugly face again."

Nugalas lashed forward against the eleven horsemen, and rage consumed him like never before. As the priest dove into the middle of the dark collection of soldiers, he clawed the air, dividing their ranks. Quickly he drove back six of the horsemen onto the path where Bharot recently departed. At first the soldiers hesitated in their own attack, never before having seen a creature like this--though it was not much longer before they began to fend off Nugalas.

The remaining five soldiers met Nugalas' back and, they too, began battle with the red-cloaked devil. Nugalas controlled the clash with his mighty attacks, and the evil radiance he generated caused the steeds to grow unsteady.

Without so much as a sign to his companions, Helfare darted away, making a desperate bid for freedom. Along with the rest of the company, they slipped away from the soldiers, soon finding themselves on the path seen earlier by Helfare--free of obstacles. In great strides Helfare sprinted on ahead, the company following hard on his heels. In the near distance, to the south of Nar-Fhandon, stood a small range of snow-capped mountains, Helfare's intended safe haven.

* * *

After many long, grueling moments of battle, Nugalas came to realize that these particular soldiers did not possess what he desired most. The priest released his chain into the air and swung it over his head in a circular motion, granting him a large space of safe ground. The eleven soldiers, now able to take hold control over their horses, kept well out of the way of the whirling metal, which showed no sign of slowing. Nugalas let out a hellish scream, and a bright flash of white light filled Nugalas' circle, forcing the soldiers to shield their eyes from the intense glare. The light faded, and as the soldiers attempted to spy Nugalas' next move--the priest was gone.

As the soldiers finally pieced together what, exactly, had gone wrong, they noticed right away that Helfare and his companions had fled.

"We must go after Helfare," one soldier spoke, frustrated.

"Seven of you take out after him, then," another soldier replied. He pointed to the three soldiers nearest him and continued, "You three will go with me into the castle. We must find Master Ghelok at once." He and the other he appointed for Ghelok's extraction all dismounted their steeds and held swords out at the ready. With haste, the four passed through the threshold of the castle and were gone.

The remaining seven bolted away to the south on horseback, galloping after Helfare and the fleeing company.

* * *

"Where are you taking us, Helfare?" Seth gasped as he ran.

"Far from the reaches of Adian," was his response as he surged onward toward the line of mountains. "I cannot let them apprehend me or any of you now that you have parleyed with a traitor."

"I leave the escape in your hands," Randor panted. The grand, green fields of

Cenara rolled past under their swift feet as they endured almost a solid hour of running.

Lorn looked over his shoulder to see the soldiers coming over the last hill just as the company finally took refuge in the deep woods. Luckily for Randor and his followers, the soldiers were still at some distance, but it would not take them long to close the gap.

The trees were thick and plentiful at the foot of the three mountains that reached high into the sky, and the morning fog rolling down the mountainside enveloped the travelers. Seth, exhausted from the race across Cenara, wanted to sit down for a brief moment while Randor and Helfare decided the next action, but all he found were sharp stones scattered about the dark forest floor. This strange, inhospitable place was called Eln-Radah, or "Elven Spikes," by the elves.

Helfare watched his one-time friends barrel down the last half league of Cenara with no sign of slowing; the seven riders from Ghelok's squad would stop at nothing to have him in custody and escort him back to Valadure. He well knew that Lord Adian's soldiers were among the finest in the world and that no other military force on Londor could defeat them--and he knew it from experience. Glancing about, Helfare realized there was no other place they could now turn. In frustration, he pounded his fist into his open hand.

"Is there a problem?" Muron asked.

"None to be spoken of," Helfare replied quickly, not wanting to break his concentration.

"Remaining here is not safe," said Seth. "We need to take cover in the mountains. I don't think it matters where, just as long as we can avoid this evil."

"Correct," Helfare replied. "Let us head forth." Something within him took over as he led the company along the base of the mountain, careful so as to not disturb their surroundings. "I feel a way coming to me very soon," he whispered, throwing himself open to his intuition. Although Beldas was gone, the gifted young warrior felt the power of insight still strong within him, and he would use it until it ran dry.

"Is this the way that will supposedly spare us?" Malander asked, not believing in the general's powers.

As luck would have it, around the next large bend in the black rocks a section of the mountain face slid open like a door, some ten feet wide and twenty feet high. Dust boiled up in thick gray clouds, and massive boulders plummeted to the ground from the tremors. Without even considering what might meet them through the unexpected passage, Helfare darted through the opening.

"The soldiers are upon us!" Lorn shrieked.

Arnanor, Geil, and Muron remained behind as the rest of the company fled into Eln-Radah; the Northern elves were prepared to fend off the attacking swordsmen, who began the assault immediately. Geil sensed disorder among the frustrated soldiers, who were unable to line themselves for a proper attack against the elves. The three trod carefully against the great steeds, giving the horsemen almost no room to maneuver. Arnanor cleverly began to lead his brethren through a thick patch of fractured boulders, making it nearly impossible for the soldiers to pursue. Working his way toward the passage into the mountains, he managed to stall them, keeping the pathway clear of threat as Geil and Muron kept the horsemen occupied from atop the mounds of rocks. Geil swung his blade from side to side, angering the horsemen, who were fast losing their chances of apprehending their quarry.

"Now, Arnanor!" Randor shouted from the passage. The wizard swung down his left arm at the thick, smooth standing stones that framed Eln-Radah's gate, cracking the hard stones with his fingertips. The mountain began to rumble once more with a noise that fairly deafened everyone's ears as the Northern elves approached the gateway, not yet free of the Of-Adians' pursuit. As the three elves fled toward Randor, great splinters of rock dislodged from the side of the mountain, tumbling end over end, striking the ground like fearsome giant arrows and piercing into the forest floor, barely missing the brave elf-warriors as the horsemen clambered in after them. The ground shifted unsteadily, rumbling all the while, and though the soldiers' horses were highly trained, none were impervious to the earth's rage, which began to send each steed into a panic. And as the Of-Adians attempted to master their animals, they lost what ground they had gained on the Northern elves, who at last found themselves at Randor's side within the newfound cavern. Randor's shadow loomed in the closing doorway as he looked for the last time at the stunned soldiers' faces, nodding in a gesture of farewell. Inexplicably, the earthquake stopped as quickly as it had begun, and the seven soldiers made for the doorway of the mountain, spurring their steeds without remorse.

"Seal the door, Randor!" Helfare cried. "It is our only chance!"

"Nara en san-rah-doa!" Randor chanted as he brought his hands together.

Obedying the magic, the heavy door slammed shut in the twinkling of an eye, making the mountain tremble one last time.

They were safe.

The cave gave off a foul, sulfurous smell and in the utter darkness, no one could see his hand before his eyes. Feeling his way through the crowd, Randor soon released a small light orb to see by and was greeted by the long, dank cavern of Eln-Radah's innards. Then, as the company turned away from the gate, they were met with something terrifying.

Hundreds of torches poured forth from the farthest depths of the cave, growing rapidly brighter and closer. Less than three-hundred strides now separated the collection of floating fires from Randor and the company. The torch bearers' footsteps echoed in a clamorous din. Elves, hundreds dressed in armor and carrying spears, ran toward the company.

"We are trapped!" Helfare yelled, drawing his sword.

The front-runner of the elven army shouted a command in her native tongue and halted the battalion at once. The flickering flames bounced wildly off the cavern walls, illuminating the army's weary postures and faces. The apparent leader strode away from her kindred, inspecting Randor as he approached. "Quite a selection of the great races I see in your little collection during these final stages of my journey," the leader said. Gripping her long, blue spear tighter, she placed her free hand behind her. The spear's blade was long and slender, ground thin by apparent sharpening during the years. Her armor was dark in color, of the elaborate style of many years ago, though now it carried countless dents and a thick layer of soot. The maiden-warrior's hair was long and dark, also very dirtied from the strenuous caverns. With a frown on her smudged face, she said, "I ask that you move aside so that we might finish our escape from this horrid place. Trusting to my now-failing intuition, I gather this is the location of the door leading outward."

"Yes, you are correct, but you will not be able to escape this way," Randor said

firmly.

The elf leader bristled at the wizard's statement. "I am leading my soldiers through this gate, and there is nothing you can do to stop us! Now, let me pass!"

"The way is closed," Rador informed her softly.

"It is open," the leader replied, not believing him. "Now, make way."

"It would be impossible. My magic has sealed it tighter than you can imagine. You must take your army elsewhere."

The elf leader turned and strode with feet heavy back to the front rank of her army. With a yell, she declared, "*Eos ee-ehth forneith! Meith-lon Ran oenos oenthaik!*" And twirling her spear with great skill, she planted the butt in the ground. "*Fength al trodus!*"

"Do you understand what she's saying, Rador?" Arnanor asked. "I can only translate a handful of words."

"She is telling her battalion they are still imprisoned by these dark and evil caverns for many long years to come--and that I am responsible for their doom." Rador paused. "*Fength al trodus*--the devil has snatched away victory."

"The devil?" Seth asked.

"It is just a saying," Rador explained.

"What are elves doing in such a place?" Arnanor asked.

"I do not rightly know offhand, but I do wish to be enlightened," Rador replied. He approached the rattled elf leader slowly so as to not prompt any unwanted reaction from the mysterious elf host. "Why have you come here, and how do account for your claim of imprisonment?"

"This burden is heavy upon me," the elf admitted, puzzling Rador even more. She grew silent for a moment, then continued. "I have prayed to Ethindar many times over to release me from my woes, but the gods only punish my kindred."

"What is your name, Commander?" Rador asked.

"I am Captain Cailen of the Darnoth Kingdom, and King Enxos's most trusted knight. Those who follow me are what remain of His Majesty's military from the Dark War." Her expression changed in the torchlight, and she said, "Do the Allies of the Light still hold strong against Argos? What news of Master Rodane? Is he well?"

Rador lowered his head and cringed, not wanting to inform Cailen of the many stories that any Darnoth would remember. Rador's unspoken guess of what these elves were had been correct, and he now understood Cailen's burden, for the Darnoth had not seen the daylight of Londor for more than eighty years. Cailen could easily see the shocked looks on the company's faces, and she could do little but wait for an answer as the wizard listened intently to Gildan murmuring in his ear.

"Did we fall defeated in the war?" Cailen asked. "Please, you must tell me."

Gildan pleaded further to Rador, not wanting him to expose the whole truth at once. "You cannot lay yet another burden onto their weary hearts. Let these tidings come from another," he whispered.

"You expect me to lie?" Rador said, recoiling from his friend. "I am surprised at you, Gildan." Shaking his head, he looked at Cailen who looked back at him with an intense yet curious expression--the elf captain had to know the outcome of the 'ongoing war'. "The Dark War is over," Rador finally spoke. "It ended more than eighty years ago."

Cailen leaned heavily on her spear as if she might fall to her knees. Her first reaction was a slight smile, thinking it a joke. With a weak laugh, she said, "Tell me this isn't true."

"It is, Cailen, and the Kingdom of Darnoth is no longer. I loathe being the one to tell you this, but Darnoth exists now only as a province of the Alliance of Mudalfaen. Since Darnoth neighbors Mudalfaen, it was annexed, expanding the borders."

"Darnoth is now controlled by Mudalfaen?"

"Precisely."

"So now the Great Tree rules the world?"

"They govern most of it, yes, in a sense. Anyone on Londor can see the faults of these rebel kingdoms. A diverse gathering now dwells within the Tree; it is known as the Council of Mudalfaen. Peace has spread its wings to all its boundaries, and the lineage of Darnoth share in this prosperity. You shall be proud and happy to return to your homeland, Captain Cailen." But Randor could see that Cailen was far from overjoyed to hear this news, and the wizard wished there were something he might do to raise her spirits. "I hope I have lifted the greatest of your burdens, Captain."

Cailen stood still, unable to speak. The news overwhelmed her thoughts, yet she seemed unable to shake the feeling that she would remain in these cavernous depths forever. "This you have told me--it is heavier than anything I expected."

"You are free of war now," Gildan said.

"Yet I am not free! I will never be free! Still we are pursued in these caverns by a larger host of elves of the Argos army."

"Argos still lives on this continent?" Seth asked. "Wait until the Council hears of this."

"This gate you have shut was our latest hope of escape. My elves have gained a ten-day marching advantage over the Argos--no doubt, they know we have gone this way. So you have exactly one day to get this gate open! I will not let your magic be the end of the Darnoth army!"

"No wonder the Argos fled into these enormous caverns," Randor said in reflection. "Dark elves can easily maintain their wits in the dimness." Though Randor knew all too well of the Argos, he could not fathom the battles of Darnoth during the Dark War, being at the opposite end of the Dunith Continent for many long decades of the grueling campaign. It was then that Randor had played a major role in establishing the Mudalfaen Council with the aid of Master Rodane. It had taken decades for the lands to heal from the massive bloodshed and ruin of so many cities, burned and destroyed from the battles waged around them. "I will tell you one last time: I cannot reopen this gate, nor would I wish to, had I the power."

Cailen glared with great anger deep into the wizard's bespectacled eyes. The elf breathed hard and long, attempting to remain sane. "Then you have just committed the murders of six hundred and eighty-nine elves--and of your companions. Tell me your name so that I may relay the killer's identity to my brethren." Randor introduced himself as well as the rest of his company. "By the hand of Ethindar! How could you possibly do this to your own kind, Miithra? This cannot be the wish of our god!"

"Neither is it my wish, Captain."

"You could not make me see otherwise."

"Listen to my reasoning," Randor suggested as he brought forth a hand in peace.

"Let my company and me aid you away from this place. I will find the way to the surface--I promise you."

"When you open this gate, I will cease thinking ill of you. Until then, you are my enemy." Cailen bowed one time in respect, making her last gesture of courtesy. "May your day be as miserable as our last eight decades. I will return for your heads soon." Cailen marched off, looking over her shoulder to the company as she sent her army back in the direction they had come. The torchlight faded away, the flickering glow crawling along the walls until the last rank of elves was gone.

There by the gate the company stood in silence.

Gildan was curious of Randor's determined stance. "Were you telling her the truth about the gate? I do not see how you couldn't simply cast a spell and have it done with. Then, at least when it was reopened we would have a great host to aid us against the soldiers of the symbol." He sighed, feeling some compassion for the Darnoth captain. "Dooming them certainly is a great price to pay for keeping us safe from our own problems."

"I never speak untruth, Gildan. Why would I subject them to such a fate? Seals upon a door--or anything else, for that matter--remain in place for months, maybe years in some cases. This gate may not be opened for a very long time. It is a consequence I must accept when magic is used. If I had know there was an army of elves ready to charge outward, I would have not sealed the way."

"What is your plan?" Gildan asked.

"Let me meditate on this for a while."

"Then I will establish camp here," replied Gildan.

"Yes," said Randor. "Rest, and I shall have the answer for you when you rise."

"Everyone, settle in," Gildan told the company. "Take rest shortly before we venture farther." Yet finding a suitable place to rest would be a tedious task for the travelers. The ground was littered with great rocks and jagged shards. Each cleared away what rubble he could, and took an uncomfortable rest within the dim and silent cave. The wizard's magic light faded away, and darkness enveloped them again.

"Randor?" Lorn asked softly.

"At your service, Lorn."

"Could we have a bit more of that light to sleep by? A nice, warm fire, perhaps, would be greatly appreciated." Lorn hated the dark confinement he found himself in. Though he had good companionship around him, the blackness made him feel utterly alone. "It wouldn't have to be much."

"No more magic tonight, Lorn. You shall be safe without it." Randor staggered over and lay down on a large flat rock, very much in pain. His chest burned constantly from the lack of rest between usages of magic. Sweat poured down his face, and his head felt as if the world were spinning out of control. He focused on breathing slowly to calm himself; his decision to have no fire came not out of a need for secrecy but rather so his companions could not see his current state. No one could stand to see him like this, and the morale of the company was the most important thing to the wizard. The deep pains he felt were his own to mend.

"But it's not a need for warmth," Lorn whispered. "I fear the dark."

"Try not to think of it," Seth told him. "You will have light around you before you know it. Meanwhile, stay close to me if you wish, and hold the hem of my cloak. If you

cannot shake your fears, then wake me up."

"I don't want to disturb you."

"Just remember that I am here. Now, try and sleep."

With that, Lorn found some comfort, and eventually he fell asleep with Seth's gentle words replaying in his mind as he drifted into a hazy dream. The dwarf was the first to sleep but was soon joined by the others, with only Randor and Malander remaining to stare into the darkness, each for his own reasons.

* * *

When the company awoke from their much-needed break in events, a floating orb of light high above their heads lit the cavern. Randor paced quietly a few feet from the company, in Cailen's direction, and looked up at his magic, pondering as he puffed on his pipe. The princes and Geil sat close together in silent anticipation.

"I trust you all slept well?" Randor asked. "Lorn, you did well in the darkness. I know it is difficult for Beowulken folk to dwell in such conditions."

"Thank you," Lorn replied, smiling. "I couldn't have done it without Seth here beside me."

Helfare rose to his feet and asked, "What have you decided, Randor?" He approached the pacing wizard. "I honestly cannot wait to hear this."

"I will inform you later, Helfare. I do not want to spoil the surprise in store."

"Surprise?" Helfare replied, not amused. "This is not a time for such games. Do we aid the Darnoth soldiers, or do we avoid them and find our own way out?"

"In a moment you shall see." This was all Randor would say of his plans. "We have much work to do." He moved forward, as did his orb of light, which began to leave Malander and the Northern elves, at the back of the company, in the shadows. Quickly everyone started after Randor, who led the way in silence.

After a little more than an hour had passed, they came to a high ridge, where they found a great sloping path plummeting down into the vast caverns below, where Randor's light was unable to pierce the blackness. As the company descended, so did the temperature. Far-off echoes of unrecognizable, eerie sounds greeted them, as did the horrid sound of rockslides. For five miles more they trekked without event before the magic light began to flicker, concerning Randor, who did not want anyone to fall over the edge of the narrow path.

"Our light is dying," Seth spoke. He held one hand on the wall to his left, and the other on Lorn's coat.

"I will try to keep it aloft, Seth," Randor replied. "What more can you tell us about Valadure, Helfare?"

"Valadure will not be as easy a goal as you would like, Randor," Helfare offered. He had to keep the company's perception about this realm as realistic as possible; he did not want his only allies against Adian to underestimate the warlock's powers. "His guard is never lowered, and he always has a legion of twenty thousand patrolling the palace and its environs. Not even a half-dozen mighty magicians could penetrate into his stronghold....What shame it brings me to know that our road ends at Adian's feet." Helfare kept his fast march as he bit his lip. "Why did I ever disagree with his terms?"

"Because you obviously have a mind of your own," Randor answered easily. "It is well to have a leader, but not if the person you trust and follow wishes to harm innocents."

"Curse that enchantress!" Helfare screamed, his voice echoing off the cavern walls. "Indeed, she will pay!"

"Do you know where she is?" Randor asked.

"I could lead you there blindfolded."

"If you ask me," Gildan remarked, holding up a finger, "we need to journey to her before we approach Valadure--get back the moon firsthand, and then we finish off Adian afterwards."

"I have already thought of this," replied Randor. "But we must take this one step at a time. No need to hasten with things that are too far ahead of us--that is, if we will even get near the enchantress or Valadure."

"Doubting our success, Randor?" Arnanor asked with a huff.

"Never," the wizard replied sharply. "I am only being analytical about this entire situation. You, Prince, should heed this notion above all others."

"Explain yourself," snapped Arnanor.

"You are the heir to the throne of the Northern Kingdom, are you not?"

"You well know that I am."

"Do you worry even now about the governance of the kingdom, though it is ruled by your father?"

"With every waking moment I do."

"Why?" Randor asked casually.

"*Why?*" Arnanor was insulted by the question. "If you do not know, I shall explain it to you more thoroughly." The prince took in a deep breath of the dank air and continued, "It is my duty to worry about the Northern lands and my people. I need to delve into the affairs of the kingdom each day to ensure its longevity."

"This should be your father's concern."

"Indeed it is, yet I must attend to the affairs as well."

"Do you have any sway in your father's politics? Does he ask for your counsel?"

Arnanor frowned. "Not yet...no."

"Then you should only make it your concern *if* you wear the crown in the future. You should not worry over something that is out of your hands and perhaps may never come to you. Then, unfortunately, you will have wasted all that time--on nothing." Randor did not look at the prince as he spoke, but concentrated on the passage ahead. "Focus on the here and now, Arnanor. Take your life in strides. If you look too far down the road at the horizon, you will not see the snake that crawls at your feet. And before you know what has happened, the nearer threat has struck you--and now you will never see what you spied in the distance, for you are unable to make it."

"So you'd rather me face uncertainty upon the throne?"

"Your knowledge and wisdom will prosper your kingdom once you are anointed. Learn what you can from your father and his nobles to become a great ruler, but do not stress yourself about the fortunes of the Northern Kingdom that you cannot control." He laughed and said, "If you need counsel, you can always call upon my aid."

"That will be the day."

"You will gain wisdom as the days move onward," Randor said.

Arnanor tried to ignore the sincere advice Randor spoke, not wanting it to make sense. Muron looked to his brother, agreeing with the wizard's wisdom. "What has this to do with the enchantress and Adian?" Arnanor asked peevishly.

"It deals only with living your life one step at a time. When we pass through these caves, then shall I worry about the next phase of the journey."

"I wonder where the Darnoth have gone," Helfare whispered.

By this time the company found themselves on a wide, level plain, which narrowed to a long tunnel before them. To their left lay a large pool of murky gray liquid that collected there as it streamed down the jagged rocks. Plagued by thirst, the travelers made way to the pool, but were stopped short by Randor before they could touch the mysterious matter. Randor knelt down, ran his hand through the unreflecting gray, and brought his damp fingers to his parched lips. Savoring it, he smiled. "This is indeed a great find--and the answer to a question I was pondering."

"What is it?" Seth asked.

"This is the substance known as lebe," Randor answered.

"Truly?" Gildan gasped in wonder as he knelt beside the wizard.

"It is safe to drink," Randor said as he scooped the cold liquid in his hand.

Drinking it slowly, he thought, *Perhaps this will ease my pain somewhat.*

"So what is lebe?" Seth asked as the rest of the company came to join the wizard.

"It is a magical substance that gives the drinker renewal and replenishment--the reason that the Darnoth were able to remain alive these many decades. If you have an abundant source of lebe, then you have no need for food."

"Then it is a valuable find," Gildan said, taking a drink. "It could fetch a few gold coins from those on the outside, that is for sure."

"Drink your fill quickly," Randor said sharply. "We must continue onward."

A faint song of mystery filled the air, and Helfare was first to his feet, moving briskly toward the sound. Randor wiped his mouth free of the drips of nourishment and turned to the general, who tried to distinguish the echoing verse.

"What do you hear?" Randor asked.

"I am yet too distant to catch its meaning," Helfare replied. "Yet I trust we shall see what causes this rift in the silence."

Randor led on after the brief rest at the pool of lebe, pressing the company on through the monstrous caverns. After several more miles were behind them, they saw flickering lights in the distance.

After their arduous journey back into the depths of Eln-Radah, the Darnoth had made camp near a long cliff's edge, where they sat in small huddles around their many fires created by a device of older times. Randor looked at the fires and noticed the Darnoth were fortunate to have small metal rods known as sanctens in their possession. Sanctens were not common these days and were capable of creating a strong and warm fire under any circumstance--yet without emitting smoke, which was ideal for these caverns. As Randor and his companions made their way past, the Darnoth watched them with mixed obvious mixed feelings. Two Darnoth soldiers quickly rose and sprinted toward Cailen, weaving through their brethren, no doubt to warn their commander of Randor, who maintained a steady pace, keeping his focus ahead.

The two soldiers entered Captain Cailen's circle and stood to attention. Rising, Cailen nodded and dismissed them. With the captain were her five advisors, wearing blue robes trimmed in gold over their armor. Randor could see an intense conversation taking place, with Cailen looking up as she spoke and making eye contact every so often with the approaching wizard.

Helfare came from the back of the group and, reaching Randor's side, said, "I hope you know what you are doing here, Randor. We are outnumbered a hundred to one, and their dislike for you does not help the rest of us much, either."

Randor did not respond, and Helfare unobtrusively slipped his hand into the inner lining of his coat, keeping his index finger on the hilt of his sword as a precaution.

"Captain Cailen," Randor announced loudly, "a moment of your time, if you please?" He halted at the rim of the circle and clasped his hands together in front of him.

"You are brave in coming here, Miithra," Cailen said. "I do hope you bring good tidings. It would be shameful to do away with you and your friends."

"I have come to a decision, if it would so please you."

"Then you shall tell this to me at once." Cailen crossed her arms and stood tall.

"Since my magic has foiled your immediate departure from Eln-Radah, we shall aid you against the last of the Argos. In time we will all emerge victorious to see the sun once more."

"So this is your great plan, Randor?" Helfare asked. It was not the decision he had hoped for. "What about *our* plans? Have you forgotten about those?"

Cailen brought her colleagues to silence, intrigued with Helfare's slip of the tongue. "What plan do you speak of? You have not told me of your business here, Miithra."

"I do not wish to burden you any further--not yet, anyway. It will only cloud your affairs," Randor said.

"Tell me or else," Cailen said boldly.

"Or else what?" Helfare replied, giving the elf captain a cold stare.

"Please, Helfare," Randor intervened. "Do not anger her so."

"Is it too important to share?" asked Cailen.

"The world is saddened by this loss. I ask you to withhold your questioning about its illness until it is truly necessary."

Cailen had no clue to Randor's meaning, and she was unable to look into the wizard's impenetrable mind. And yet, she had to know. "Do your absolute worst and explain what has happened to Londor. You have already grieved me enough. I am sure these added ill tidings won't be too much to bear."

Randor drew a long breath and told as much as he knew about the disappearance of the moon, and the adventures he and his company had endured to this point.

Cailen and her advisors were overtaken by a long and sad silence.

"Now we stand before you until we ascend from Eln-Radah and continue on our journey. Our paths lie together, and you have our alliance. Do not dismiss it lightly." Randor stepped back humbly into his line of companions.

"Beldas is gone?" Cailen whispered. "What evil did this Adian conspire with to lay death to the world?" She rubbed her weary golden-colored eyes, dismayed at hearing the wizard's stories. "I must see the sun once again. The Darnoth army will see to it that the moon is returned."

"After a short rest," Randor began, "I think we should move toward the Argos--and end this once and for all. The Argos were defeated in the Dark War, and we will defeat them again." He looked sternly at the captain. "My companions and I shall assist you whenever you are ready." Randor bowed in respect and then turned to the masses behind him. "Seth, would you and Lorn be kind enough to scout a campground for us?"

"It would be an honor."

"There will be no need for that," Cailen said, raising her hand. "Please join me here for the duration of our idling. I still desire your fellowship."

Randor smiled. "I will enjoy my time with you as long as we remain together."

"I would much like to hear some of the tales you have, but I pray you, speak only of happier times than these."

"Indeed, I will."

The company and Randor sat close to the fire. Cailen looked to the wizard, who pulled out his pipe, with Gildan joining him as usual. Cailen had not seen the likes of tobacco since the beginning of the war. Seeing the elf's longing expression, Lorn extracted the pipe from his pocket.

"Going to join us for a change?" Randor asked Lorn.

"No," the dwarf replied as he looked to the Darnoth commander. "Here you are, Captain," he said, and held the pipe out.

Cailen was amazed; never had a dwarf given her anything before. "Why do you give something of your own to someone...not of your own kind?"

"I am not using it at the moment, and I can see your look of longing for the taste of a pipe." He sat upright and stretched his arm as far as it could reach. "Here, Captain, please use it as your own."

One of the captain's advisors took the pipe from his hand with delicacy and placed it in Cailen's palm. The elf captain admired the briar's deep auburn color. "This means a great deal to me...It connects my soul with the olden days of Darnoth, sitting beneath the stars on a clear night as I rested my head upon the heathered hills of Montethen. Those were times of endless peace. I would always take leave after sunset and lie there beside a campfire, writing poetry and blowing smoke rings up toward the moons--it made my life splendid indeed." She laughed as images of her homeland came alive again. After drifting with her memories for a few moments, she said, "The flowers are in bloom--the sweet smell lingers in my nose...In the distance I can see mighty ships returning home from their voyages. The moonlight dances gracefully upon the ocean." She trailed off deeper in thought, and her words softened, becoming indistinguishable.

"Captain Cailen?" said Lorn, breaking the elf free of her reverie, "you will need tobacco before you begin."

"Indeed," Cailen said.

"How about a nice bowl of Goldtrine?" Gildan offered.

"You have *Goldtrine*?" Cailen asked, and Gildan nodded, grinning. "Bless my being, it still grows!"

"The finest you shall ever have."

"Very hard to get hold of, I would guess."

"Not if you know who to barter with," Gildan boasted, passing the pouch of tobacco to the elf captain.

"Then Goldtrine it shall be," Cailen said as she poured the shimmering leaves into her pipe. Lighting it with the fire, Cailen took a long draw and closed her eyes, almost falling backward from the overwhelming bliss that it brought her. "Very rich and soothing; it is just as I remember." She looked to Lorn and nodded. "I thank you, sir."

"You are more than welcome."

"It is good to see others of my kinship with you, Randor. Princes, more or less,

and I take the latter of the elves as a mercenary."

"Correct you are," Gildan replied, pleased. "The greatest mercenary in the world."

"Are times so horrific that royalty must leave the comfort of their palaces to aid those in need?" Cailen asked.

"We are here in defiance of the Council," Arnanor declared. "They completely forbid our being here, and great trouble would come to us and my kingdom should they catch wind of our being here. It is ultimately my choice to take this necessary journey."

"This Council has such laws?"

"The Council only mean well for their citizens," Seth said in defense of his masters. "Our numbers are small, and their help was much needed. I am confident the Council will never know."

Arnanor laughed in agreement.

"I have much to learn," Cailen admitted, thinking this new age had many strange laws.

The fellowship continued for a long while as all within Cailen's firelight told stories--except for Malander, who had no wish to communicate and left the confinements of Cailen's inner circle. Cailen enjoyed every story as she puffed away on Lorn's pipe, though she was particularly drawn to Lorn's tales of Beowulken. The elf captain hid her misery deep inside and somehow mustered a smile so as not to worry her companions, though she began to despair that Randor and his doughty little company could ever help her in her lifelong struggle. Cailen had not yet revealed to her newfound friends the greatest strength the Argos possessed--the one power that kept their numbers well above the Darnoth's. An ancient, powerful evil ruled Eln-Radah, and nothing thus far could bring the terror down.

Chapter Fifteen--Twisted Ways

Randor then began to think of Malander. Everyone around him slept in the warmth of the fire, but he preferred to sit up and let the constant radiating heat relieve the shivers that plagued his body. The wizard rose from the fire, tipped his hat to his sleeping companions, and set off in search. Weaving through the army, Randor scanned the area, finding no trace of the grim knight. As he continued steadily onward, his mind drifted to thoughts of the moon and how the outside world was enduring the great tribulation. Many days had passed since he was bonded to the winds, and he could not guess how many prayers filled them.

At the edge of the Darnoth battalion, where many soldiers patrolled the perimeter, Malander sat on a large rock with head lowered. Malander's sword rested against his leg, blade down, as he whetted its edges with a small, dark stone, making a rhythmic grinding sound. The knight's back was to Randor, and did not hear the wizard's approach.

"Malandar?" Randor said, receiving no response from his cohort. "Come and join me, would you?"

"I am a failure," Malander sighed. His pain radiated strongly, and Randor could feel it in his chest, amplifying his own torment. "How could Bharot contend with my abilities?"

"One cannot always be the victor," the wizard replied.

"Yes, one can. If it concerns physical prowess, then victory will always be mine."

"You fought well. Can you not see that?"

"It was not a victory for me. That fight was a complete loss!"

"Why are your skies so filled with gray?"

Malandar remained solemn.

"Will you not let me ease your mind?"

"Let me be empty," Malander replied.

Helfare appeared silently from behind the wizard, his pipe smoke the only clue to his presence. Randor turned around to see him strolling toward them in an easy manner. "You were quite foolish back there against Bharot, Malander," Helfare said. "I noticed two things wrong with your managing of the enemy."

"Let me handle this, Helfare," Randor said.

"I assure you, good sir, I will let you do your work here," Helfare replied. "I come only to enlighten our friend for future reference. I am sure we will see that wretched man again." He puffed on his pipe, studying Malander's sad form. It was only natural and habitual for Helfare to advise great warriors, and it was a hard habit to let go of. "Do you hear me, sir?"

"I have nothing to say to you," Malander snapped.

"Well, then, let me speak to you for a while." Helfare watched Malander twist his head around and glare at him with cold blue eyes. "How do you find it logical, Malander, for a soldier to take arms against a greater, more powerful foe? Did you not see he is a more diverse warrior than yourself? Are you suicidal?"

"Indeed I am."

"You are truly mad, and I think it wise that you withdraw from service in this company. As much as I'd like to deny it, we are facing a powerful enemy. Lord Adian and his army will be no easy match for us. You, sir, are most unpredictable. I can already see

this." Helfare continued puffing on his pipe as he strolled in circles around his unwilling pupil. "Perhaps it would be best for all if you left after we escape Eln-Radah." He stopped in front of Malander, knelt down, and blew a great cloud of smoke in the knight's face. Looming ever closer to Malander, Helfare smiled. "There is a small part of me, however, that wishes to see why you shroud yourself in such darkness and misery."

"You wouldn't understand," Malander replied. "Now, take yourself from me or pay for your trespass."

Helfare stood up, amused by the threat, and flipped back his jacket and brandished his sword, holding it at Malander's throat.

Malander's brow furrowed.

Randor quickly moved over and placed his hand firmly on Helfare's shoulder, pulling him back, and the sword drew back from Malander's neck. Then Malander shot to his feet like a coiled spring, with his own sword in hand, holding it toward Helfare, more than happy to return the intimidation.

"Pray that your blade does not fall in my direction again," said Malander. "I will not spare you; rather, I will run this sword so deep in your chest, it will take a team of oxen to pull it out."

Helfare persuaded Randor with a sincere look and was released from the wizard's grasp, laughing softly as he walked away in amusement. "I'd love to see that, really. As a matter of fact, I'd pay to see you try."

"Cross me again, and you truly will pay! This is your only warning."

Randor intervened once again and pointed in the direction of the camp. "I want both of you at the head of the battalion now! If either of you continues this nonsense, he will deal with me."

Malander sighed, shaking his head as he marched away, Helfare's words still ringing in his ears. When he reached the rest of his old company he drew dangerously near the edge of the cliff and stared outward into the abyss. Everyone around the elf-captain's fire was now wide awake, curious to see what the commotion was about.

Randor and Helfare reentered the circle, where the wizard resumed the spot where he had sat before leaving in search of Malander, but Helfare had no thought of rest. Rather, he grabbed Malander's shoulder and spun him around. In reflex, Malander swung his sword upward, barely missing Helfare. Also acting reflexively, Helfare kicked Malander in the chest, sending the knight tumbling backward over the cliff edge.

"By the gods, what have you done?" Cailen gasped as she shuffled to her feet. Everyone rushed to the edge and looked down. Helfare smirked, seeming not to care, and stepped away from the knot of searchers for any sign of Malander.

Randor got to his knees and looked about. "Someone give me a sancten." Seth grabbed the metal rod holding Cailen's fire from the pile of rocks and promptly put it in Randor's waiting hand. Waving the fiery rod below, the wizard was relieved to see Malander a little out of arm's reach, clinging to the hilt of his sword, which was stuck fast in the rocks. He hung limp as a rag, for the slightest movement might wrest free his precarious handhold and send him hurtling into the abyss.

"Your spear, Cailen," said Randor.

Cailen lowered her weapon, butt first, to Malander's free hand as Seth joined the elf-captain in grasping it just below the blade. Meanwhile, Lorn and three of Cailen's guard grasped the two rescuers at the waist to anchor them. As they slowly hauled him

upward, Malander's weight came off his sword and he was able to extricate the blade from the stone.

The moment his arms reached the cliff's edge, two more elves grasped him by the elbows and, with one last heave, hauled him up and over. Malander stumbled forward, heading for the arms of Helfare, who stepped aside, letting him fall face-first onto the rock floor. Rolling to his back, he was greeted by the point of Helfare's sword.

Cailen swung her spear low, knocking the sword away from Malander, who then managed to stand.

"I have already warned you!" Malander growled, brandishing his blade.

"Actions truly ring louder than words, I am afraid," Helfare replied haughtily.

"Stand down, both of you," Randor said sharply. "I have told you what will happen if you persist in this childishness."

"No worries, my good wizard," Helfare said as he gave a short bow. "I am just giving him a bout of words."

Arnanor's breath caught as he watched Malander and Helfare standing together. Struck by the sudden revelation, he said, "It is all clear to me now, for I know that Malander is the spy the Oracle spoke of."

"I am no spy, you wretched elf!"

"You have not proved to me otherwise. Still you take leave from the company whenever you feel, you disrespect Randor's wishes, and you cloak yourself in secrecy." The elf-prince thought his points were valid; surely they would be accepted by his companions. He continued his study of the two dark-clad men and continued, "Don't you see the connection between them?" All eyes looked at the prince, baffled. "Their choice of garments is suspiciously alike--this dark gear. Is this the fashion of many these days?" Both Malander and Helfare looked at Arnanor, each insulted at being associated with the other. "Have neither of you noticed the left side of their faces? We have seen the treacherous markings of Helfare, but never have any of us seen what lies beneath Malander's half-mask."

Malander backed to the edge of the cliff again, knowing full well what Arnanor desired.

The elf-prince pressed on, saying, "I'll wager that Malander bears the same markings as the soldiers of the symbol!"

"I do not have that accursed mark on my body!" Malander replied, seething with anger.

"Prove me wrong."

"I owe you proof of nothing."

Unexpectedly, Helfare sided with the prince and added, "I would have you prove me wrong, as well."

Malander held his weapon at the entire gathering, unsure whether anyone would try to overtake him. The cavern was filled with a new tension as the conflict drew to a stalemate. This was one question no one should ever have asked him. *It is no one's concern but mine. Nor shall any one of you ever plumb the secrets I guard*, Malander said to himself. *If they attack, I will plummet to the depths below. Some things are better if taken to the grave--even if by one's own hand.* Malander's heels rested at the very lip of the cliff.

"Are you Of-Adian?" Helfare asked.

"Don't you already know?" Arnanor replied.

"The army of Valadure is vast indeed, and I have never seen its every man."

Seth stepped forward from the crowd and asked, "How can you say they are of the same mold? They look nothing alike." Arnanor glared at Seth, irked at being gainsaid by a commoner. "Malandar is shorter, and they aren't even of the same build. Also, look at their eyes, Prince, for they are not of the same color. Of-Adians' eyes are gray, not blue."

"Nonsense, boy," Arnanor laughed. "Malandar had his eye color manipulated to fool us." It was clear he was not going to budge from his conviction. "Why don't you just leave this to me, Highbinder?"

Seth could no longer hold back, and his strong wish for concord moved him to stand before Helfare, only to be ignored by the man. He tapped Helfare on the arm and said, "You are ordered to cease this deliberation at once."

"How do you expect to stop me?" Helfare replied as he crossed his arms.

"I am a diplomat of the Council, and since I represent my masters on this quest--of which you are now a part--I order you to silence yourself on the topic of Malandar's loyalty. You are causing more harm than good to our mission."

"I do not answer to the Council," Helfare replied. "So what say you now?"

"If you fail to cooperate, I will have no choice but arrest you and let Mudalfaen handle the matter."

"So this entire mission is overseen by the Council of Mudalfaen?" Helfare asked.

"Yes," Seth was first to say.

"No," Gildan intervened. "It is not."

Seth looked to the mercenary, baffled. "You were there, Gildan, when I delivered the letter in Dunane. You heard King Zelok say it was the wish of the Council for me to be here."

"What did the letter say?" Helfare asked.

Seth shook his head. "I did not read it. The seal could not be broken by my hands." Seth turned to Randor for comfort. "I only speak the truth here."

"I read the letter," Gildan said. "I was fortunate enough to get a glance at it."

"You?" Seth answered. He was highly offended that the parchment meant only for Zelok's eyes had been spied by another. "How did you manage that?"

"You remember where I was sitting when you first saw me, don't you?"

Seth thought back to the scene from many days before. "You were beside Zelok; I recall that much."

Gildan approached Seth and noticed him looking back into his eyes with great worry. Gildan did not want to tell Seth about the letter, for he knew it would only bring discord to the company, but no longer would he lie to Seth.

"What did it say?" asked Seth.

"Dare I say? If you desire, I will hold my tongue. I don't want you to become discouraged."

"I entreat you with all my soul."

"Very well," Gildan said with lowered head. "In the letter, the Council told Zelok not to send forth his investigation party. Apparently, they caught word of his endeavor and had you rush the parchment to Dunane to stop him."

Seth's face blanched; he could not believe this revelation. He began to sway and fell heavily against Lorn, who caught him. As Seth's sword clanged to the ground, he

moaned, "This--this cannot be...All this time I thought I was pleasing my masters. But it has all been a lie."

"I am sorry I had to tell you in this way," Gildan said. "No longer will you be misled by distant authorities. Place your trust and devotion with Randor. He would never subvert our journey and ultimate calling."

"Why didn't you tell me in Dunane?" Seth asked as he regained his feet. "At least then I might have confronted Zelok and made sure he followed the wishes of Mudalfaen."

"My dear boy, without the mission, I wouldn't have acquired payment from Zelok."

"But your withheld silence until now has caused both Lorn and me much grief. You have placed my friend in the greatest pain and stress he has ever endured--and you do this only to line your pocket with gold? You had better pray that nothing happens to Lorn, or I will come after you--as a Council diplomat or not." Seth shook his head, disgusted with Gildan's selfish act. He wanted to say more to the mercenary, but his mind was a whirlwind of thoughts.

And as Seth's mind was ravaged by his personal maelstrom, he gradually became aware, just as everyone else now was, of a distant sound, coming from the direction Randor led he and his companions from some hours earlier. A faint creaking rolled through the caverns, growing subtly louder as it drew nearer to the Darnoth camp. Randor opened his tired eyes and wobbled to a standing position. The ground began to tremble, and the Darnoth elves were brought to an instant alert. A strange, frigid wind blasted down the tunnel, annihilating every fire in the camp as it passed. Though it lasted only a moment, it plunged all into utter darkness.

Seth gently nudged Lorn aside and moved in Randor's direction. "Does this happen often, Captain Cailen?"

"Too often," Cailen answered as she fumbled her spear. With weapon in hand, she left the edge of the cliff and stood next to her advisors. Quietly she said, "I thought we had a nine-or ten-day start on the Argos."

"That was our estimate," one advisor said, at a loss.

Randor made his way to the collection of officers. "I gather this wind is a present from the Argos host."

"They are capable of distant magic," Cailen said, readying herself for war. "They will be upon us soon. We must move inward so as not to let ourselves become pinned to this cliff." With a sancten in hand she tapped one end on her shoulder, the metal clanging softly against her dented armor. As it was pulled back and held in front of her, a small fire ignited.

"Lead the way, Captain," Randor said.

Cailen moved toward the rear of her army with her advisors at her heels. Randor led his own company behind the group of elves. The Darnoth elves readied themselves, shuffling to their feet and gathering weapons and equipment, falling into formation. Echoes of drums rumbled in the distance.

Peering into the darkened cavern ahead, Randor saw the faint red flicker of Argos torches creeping toward them.

"At last, a true battle," Gildan spoke with excitement. "It has been far too long for me."

"Give the order to charge," Malander said, licking his lips. "This is all I will ever

ask of you, Cailen. I need this badly."

"You know your orders, Sir Geil," Arnanor said.

"Yes, my liege."

Randor approached Geil, catching the elf-knight and Arnanor by surprise. He looked at Geil and said, "It is time for you to allow Muron to fight on his own. Although I am not telling you to leave his side, it is time to initiate the prince into battle."

"But, Randor--"

"Does Muron not possess the proper training?" the wizard asked, already knowing the answer and it was justified by Geil's silence. "Then he will aid us from now on." Seeing how this tore at Geil, Randor leaned in to whisper in his ear, "This will be of great benefit to Muron if you do this."

"Do not listen to him," Arnanor said, angered by the wizard's advice.

"But he shall," Randor said sternly. "You cannot protect him forever."

"Yes," Gildan added, "I've been wondering that for a while now. Why did you even bring him if you will not let him fight?"

"Both of us had to leave our father's side if this quest was to remain secret," Arnanor said. "It isn't that Muron doesn't know how to defend himself. You have to realize that our father has ordered Sir Geil to shadow every move Muron makes, and to defend him whenever necessary. I am responsible for his safekeeping."

"I will fight for you, Cailen," Muron said. "We will all fight for you."

"Then I accept the pledge, Your Highness."

The Argos drew nearer to the Darnoth's position as shouts of insult flooded the air, with both sides eager for a fight.

The approaching light of the Argos torches gave Randor his first glimpse of Cailen's curse, showing the mutilated and deformed shapes of the enemy, covered by rotting furs and armor that hung loosely on their gaunt bodies. And there, behind the many ranks of the Argos army, stood the greatest of their kind: an elf whom Cailen referred to only as "The Bane of Darnoth." The Argos leader stood tall and rigid behind his minions, who wanted nothing more than to slay the Darnoth and flee Eln-Radah, for they, too, wished to be victorious and return to their homeland.

"How many are there?" Randor asked Cailen.

"Around a thousand."

Helfare laughed to himself, having fought against worse odds before, winning even when many times outnumbered. In fact, the general had yet to lose a battle.

"Let me handle the fiercest of the lot," Malander mumbled. "I want to see how good he really is."

"Then so shall it be, my good man," Cailen responded. "None of us has ever laid hand or spear upon that spawn of the devil. I wish you luck, because I cannot advise you of any weakness he possesses--since we have never found one."

"I will find his weakness," the grim warrior said. "Hear me--none shall go near him, or they deal with me."

"I am glad to see that you have a plan, Malander," Randor said as he turned to the rest of his companions. "As for the rest of you, separate the army from its leader. Once we have done so, the Argos's line of communication will be broken. Keep in mind, we have not much space behind us to fall back on."

"It is time," Cailen declared.

Unexpectedly, and for the first time, the Argos leader spoke. "Surrender!" His voice, filled with arrogance and menace, shook the very mountain as the echo stirred throughout the cavern.

"We will not yield to you, elf of Argos!" Randor replied.

"Who dares speak to me?"

"The Darnoth army!"

"Foolish being! Do you think I do not already know who fight against my kindred? I have never heard your voice before."

"I am Randor Miithra, servant of Ethindar! I fight for the Darnoth as I would for any other who is allegiant to my master!"

The Argos began to laugh and hurl further insults, finding Randor's words absurd. Then the Bane of Darnoth laughed, his great bellows drowning out the voices of his army. He then raised a huge, muscled arm, sending his minions forward. And with shrieking war cries, the dark elves stormed down the tunnel, carrying torches, spears, axes, and swords, bent on destruction.

Cailen raised her spear and roared, "Charge!"

Malander was first away from the line, followed closely by Helfare and then the rest of Randor's company. Meanwhile, Cailen thrust her spear forward and led the way for her kind. The sounds of the Argos were matched in full by the Darnoth as they, too, sent war cries into the cavern. The gap between the two armies narrowed until only a few short moments remained before the inevitable clash.

Lorn and Seth slowed their charge, allowing the Darnoth to pass. Seth thought it best to allow more people between Lorn and the enemy. His main concern right now was the dwarf's well-being. They would fight, naturally, but Seth would let it come to them.

The Bane of Darnoth remained standing where he had been before loosing his army. He leaned on his heavy ax, still laughing, waiting for anyone imprudent enough to approach him.

Helfare and Malander remained in the vanguard of the Darnoth assault, with Helfare leading by only half a step.

With one strong slash of the sword, Helfare cleaved two soldiers of the Argos front line, who fell dead in their own blood.

Malander, outraged that he had not claimed the first kill, leaped over the fallen enemy and pursued his own quarry--at the back line of the Argos forces. Along his path he encountered many foolhardy enough to oppose his blade as he hacked, sliced, and hewed his way through, killing all he met. Deeper he drove into the heart of the Argos, now overtaking all others of the Darnoth--even Helfare, who was waylaid many paces behind, forced to contend with a troop of elite Argos fighters. Malander saw his prey come closer, almost within reach.

* * *

Consumed with pain and with no possibility of using magic, Randor had no choice but to arm himself with a discarded Argos blade. All within the cavern were caught up in the battle, with no one exempt. The wizard pressed on toward a great number of the enemy, against which the Darnoth were fighting bravely.

Arnanor, Geil, and now Muron, finding themselves separated from the rest of their party, fought valiantly--even Muron, who had by now felled three Argos fighters. They kept to the cavern walls so as not to be ambushed from behind. Ahead of the

Northern elves, a squadron of spear-bearing Argos charged toward them. Geil instinctively wanted to shield Muron from danger, but he resisted, remembering Randor's words.

Standing before his kindred with sword held out, Arnanor scanned the approaching squadron for a weakness. Blood ran down his face and into his eyes as he tried to focus; wiping it away, he thought his sight deceived him. *This cannot be!* he said to himself. Each of the evil elves advancing on them wore a metallic badge bearing the mark of the Northern Kingdom. *I will not be the one to bring them to their deaths.* "Move on!" the prince said to Muron and Geil, waving his sword away from the one-time members of his homeland's army. It pained Arnanor to see former Elves of the Light, the allies of Dunith in the Dark War, now manipulated and reformed under the Bane's evil. And so Arnanor led his companions into the thick of battle once more, allowing the spear-bearing phalanx of elves past them.

Carnage lay all around Gildan and Cailen as they fought side by side. Boulders shifted weight and rolled down the declining tunnel, and great stalactites rained down on the battle, their jagged splinters shooting in all directions, killing and maiming without bias. The mountain quaked ominously, as if angered at the war being fought in its belly. Wave after wave of Argos came at Cailen and Gildan with no letup.

"Press the Argos back!" Cailen yelled.

"Where is Randor?" Gildan asked as he looked through the chaos all around him. Dust swirled like a sandstorm about the battleground. "I'll wager he is leading the way."

"Let us join him," Cailen answered.

Yet it was not Randor at the forefront of the Darnoth, but Malander and Helfare, with the rest of the Darnoth filling the gap in their wake. Only a few more strides remained between Malander and the Bane of Darnoth, and now Malander could see his chosen enemy's glowing red eyes, which burned bright even though the rest of him was cloaked in deep shadow.

You are mine, Malander chanted to himself many times over as he hastened onward.

Leading a large brigade of Darnoth elves farther into the damp caverns, Randor, who still bore the blood-drenched enemy blade, shouted, "Keep them in retreat!" The Darnoth followed the wizard to another troop of Argos mere strides away, where, shouting and charging forth, they left Randor behind.

* * *

Through at last! Malander thought as he saw the way finally cleared of Argos soldiers. He had left behind nothing but the bodies of those he had killed. Only one Argos remained in his path. Grime, sweat, and blood covered Malander's face as he called up his inner reserves of strength. Watching from his perch, the Bane of Darnoth raised his ax and took two great steps toward the charging knight. He stood tall, towering a full two feet over the stout Malander. But the size of his enemy was scant concern to Malander, who could think only of how the mutant elf's blood would look spilled onto the ground.

Gaining the higher ground of a small boulder, Malander leaped through the air, yelling with all his being as his buried fury revealed itself once again. The Bane of Darnoth stood still, awaiting the attack.

Seeing Malander's bold assault, Helfare shook his head. He yanked his blade from the chest of a dying Argos and let the dying body slump to the ground. Then, wasting not

a moment more, he hurried to help his embattled comrade.

The Bane of Darnoth swung the blunt of his ax blade, knocking Malander out of the air and sending him skidding across the ground many feet away, with shards of small rocks having no mercy to his backside. Undiscouraged, the grim knight returned promptly to continue the fight. Not knowing where to begin, Malander swayed back and forth, taunting his enemy, as each studied the other for a weakness.

"Eager to die, I see," the Bane of Darnoth laughed. "You should have brought more allies, weak human."

"You underestimate me," Malander replied.

"I know now your weakness."

"Yes, it is known as 'none.'"

"It is there," the evil general spoke as he brought his blade close to his glowing eyes. "I can feel your anger."

"Your feelings betray you."

"Do they? Anger has ruined your soul. You have not embraced your past. Your suppression of anger has made you fragile!"

"Silence!" Malander rushed in, aiming a strike at his enemy's legs. His weapon hummed through the air but was blocked soundly by the Bane's ax, sending Malander spinning from his own momentum. The Argos leader's powerful downward swing was enough for Malander to realize he should not try such a tactic again.

* * *

"Arnanor!" Muron said as his brother began to lose them in the sea of soldiers.

The elder prince turned around and said, "Do not engage the Argos any longer!"

"My lord?" Geil asked, confused.

"We are killing our own kind!"

"These Argos are our brethren?"

"I have seen many wearing our kingdom's crest on their armor!"

"Are you sure?" Muron asked.

"Do not question me, Muron! I know what I saw."

"I shall never forgive myself," Geil replied somberly.

Randor appeared behind the Northern elves and said, "Let it pass, Sir Geil. They are mere vestiges of what they once were. Evil has consumed them for so many decades that what was once pure about them has passed. These turned soldiers are no longer your brothers." Motioning the three forward, he said, "We must keep moving. The Argos begin to flee."

All of Darnoth's enemies were disengaging from the battle and heading toward their leader, who still waged his own battle with Malander and, now, Helfare. The dark elves of Argos were now slipping past the Bane and fell behind him, vanishing into the open corridor and leaving their leader to stay and fight alone.

Angered by Helfare's unwanted aid, Malander shoved the general out of his way, knocking him down--and failing to see the latest attack of his foe.

The Bane of Darnoth drew his weapon behind his head and swung. But Malander, still glaring at Helfare, did not see the blade coming for his neck. The general, seeing the ax bearing down on Malander, reached out, grabbing the knight's ankle and hauling him down to the ground, so that the ax passed over the two and lodged deep in the cavern wall.

Malander and Helfare stood upright and retreated a few paces, whereupon the much offended Malander began shoving Helfare once more.

"What the hell are you doing?" Malander shouted, his nostrils flaring.

"Never touch me thus again!" Helfare replied.

The cavern shook as the Bane tried to free his blade from the cracking stone. The wall crumbled, and its rocks, combined with the collapsing ceiling, obstructed the path where the Argos had fled. The Bane of Darnoth was severed from his army, much to the delight of Cailen, who finally arrived with her elves.

"We have him now!" Cailen said with obvious glee.

"Fall back, Malander," Helfare ordered.

"I will not!"

Randor found his way to the front of the Darnoth throng, who all stood readied to attack the Bane on Cailen's command. The wizard stood alongside Cailen, and both looked to Malander, who stood away from the rest, wanting to continue his battle. More rocks slid down onto the barred path, fully containing the retreated Argos. The Bane lifted his ax for the last time and thrust the blade down with all his remaining force, piercing the floor of Eln-Radah. Dust rose in great, billowing whorls, shrouding him from his attackers, and he drew back, so that all that his enemies could see were the glowing red eyes, and then he was gone, leaving only his laughter echoing down the darkened corridor. Though he was detached from his minions, there was no doubt he had gone to seek them out.

"He is getting away!" Malander shouted in anguish.

"Not for long," said Cailen. "Follow me, and we will bring him down." The elf-captain sprinted down the corridor with Malander hard at her heels. The two charged off alone.

"I suppose we have no choice but to follow them," Gildan said.

"Exactly," Randor replied as he took command over the Darnoth. "We cannot afford to let those two become lost."

* * *

Through two miles of dimly lit caverns, Randor led his company and the Darnoth, with still no sign of the Bane or his two pursuers. He moved cautiously, for danger still lingered in the air, and the wizard was all but drained of energy. Along the way, the Darnoth searched for any traces of lebe or water. All were badly in need of replenishment. Randor, for his part, would let no one stop to rest until Cailen and Malander were found. The five advisors of the Darnoth clung near Randor, worried for the well-being of their commanding officer.

Seth and Lorn kept to the back of the formation, the dwarf not yet recovered from the previous battle. It was the first time Lorn ever fought with a weapon, and he did claim the lives of four Argos in the course of the melee. Now he carried the blooded dirk in his hand and walked with eyes locked forward in a daze. The act of killing another, evil or not, made him feel tainted. "I will never find the answers to why people must fight to survive," he confided to Seth. "The world should have the luxury of living peacefully, like Beowulken."

"I don't think it ever shall," Seth admitted. "The world will never be rid of this treacherous device. There will always be regimes of those who wish nothing more than for those around them to yield to their grandiose wishes. And there will also be those who

will resist and stand for what they feel is right. All that we can do, my friend, is cope--and lift ourselves above it."

"Once this is over, I am not leaving Beowulken again."

"Remember that your killing of these enemies is not your fault or your wish. You must defend your life when the occasion demands it. Now, come along; we should join Randor and see what his plan is," Seth said as he quickened his pace. The dwarf nodded and sheathed his blade.

Soon Randor led the masses to the end of the corridor, where Cailen and Malander stood at the edge of another cliff, looking into the darkness before them. As the captain's advisors rushed to her side, Malander paced like a caged animal, his sword lowered to the ground.

"Where did the Bane go?" an advisor asked.

"Somewhere down there, I'll wager," Cailen answered with disappointment.

"He might have slipped past us in the caverns, for all we know," Randor said. "There is a chance he is already rejoined with his army." Out in the darkness before them, they could hear a faint but constant rushing noise. "Sounds like a river." Randor drew closer to the edge and knelt down with his favored ear outward. "Have you been here before, Cailen?"

"I have seen many rivers throughout my trails in Eln-Radah, and this place does not speak to me in any way."

Randor strode over to the still furious Malander. "Where did the Argos leader vanish to?" he asked the knight.

"If I knew, Randor, I would still be after him, wouldn't I?" Malander looked into the wizard's dark spectacles and then turned around, consumed by the need to continue his battle with the demonic leader of the Argos. "Just leave me alone, would you?"

"Very well," Randor replied, "but keep your wits about you."

Cailen took a brief and secretive council with her advisors and asked hurriedly, "How many of our soldiers remain?"

"We have not an exact number, Captain," answered one.

"I don't require an exact figure at the moment," Cailen whispered. "All I want right now is a guess."

"Six hundred, perhaps less."

"And the Argos?"

"Perhaps seven hundred or a little more?"

"I will dignify the last battle as our victory," Cailen said. "We have greatly improved our numbers against the Argos. Now, go and give me an exact calculation of our forces." With this, the five elves melted into the Darnoth ranks to take a count.

Cailen returned to Randor. Facing all those with her, she said, "Take a short rest here, but stay alert. Set a patrol at the back of the battalion--we will not be ambushed." The Darnoth army came to attention and saluted, with Cailen returning the gesture. "Carry on."

Fifty of the Darnoth elves remained close by their commander, creating a semicircle for her protection, and the rest of the army spread out over an acre of ground, with a heavier concentration at the back. Randor and his party stayed within Cailen's encirclement and sat by the elf-captain's newly kindled fire.

The three elves of the North sat close together as usual, inspecting one another for

injury. Luckily, none of them had come to any real harm--not even Muron, after his first true experience with battle. Though not injured, he clenched a hand to his side and leaned forward in slight soreness. "My stomach pains me like never before," he said softly.

"Some of that lebe would be lovely right about now."

"We haven't any," Arnanor replied. "And we cannot risk sending anyone out in search of it, either."

"Do not worry, Master," Geil said, comforting the young prince. "You can hear the river that is near us. We will not go parched for much longer."

"Yet it is the sound that taunts me," Muron said.

"The Darnoth are ready to press on," Cailen said with assurance. "We will return to the area of our last encounter with the Argos army. There is nothing for us here; we must deliver the final blow to our enemy before they can regroup." Cailen turned her focus away from Randor and addressed the officers around her. "Be prepared for a vast search in the following days. There are still caverns and tunnels we have not yet ventured through."

"You haven't seen all of Eln-Radah?" Helfare asked, finding the elf's comments strange.

"Eln-Radah is one of the greatest labyrinths in Londor's entire belly," Cailen said. "There are many levels even below this one, which stretches far. After a while, they all begin to look alike." She shook her head, thinking back on being held prisoner in this accursed place for the past eighty years. "Our time has come now to be free of Eln-Radah. I have had my fill of life within its impenetrable walls and eternal gloom. It is my duty to the loyal soldiers of Darnoth to bring them into the clean air of the open world above." Cailen looked to Randor. "I will get you and your company out of here. Beldas must be recovered. I must help you and your companions in bringing peace and balance to the world once more. If setting you on the path toward Beldas is the last thing I do, so be it."

Randor surveyed his companions and could feel their weariness. Their trials in Eln-Radah had been overwhelming. And yet he felt a sense of hope, as if something yet unknown to him might aid his company and the Darnoth in this, the last battle of the Dark War.

THIS ENDS BOOK I of The White Shadow Saga trilogy

Epilogue

Ghelok's eyes flickered open. The castle room spun around him like a tornado of gray stone. He slowly rolled over, grimacing from the wizard's punishing magic, which still burned like coals in his chest.

Dimly aware of a rhythmic clicking, he focused on the sound and realized it was fast approaching footsteps. With only seconds before the unknown threat should burst in on him, Ghelok scanned the floor around him for his sword, only to find it lodged deeply between the mortared stones of the wall.

He tried to stand but fell back to the floor, wheezing in pain as the footsteps in his ears grew louder and then abruptly ceased. He was surrounded. Knowing he could do nothing in his present state, Ghelok rolled onto his back and put his hands in the air.

"Do your worst," he growled at the four shadowy figures surrounding him. "Your fortunes would be none so pleasant were we to meet under other circumstances."

"Master Ghelok . . .," one of them said.

"Who speaks my name?"

"We are the Of-Adian, who rode out of Valadure with you."

Ghelok laughed. "A happy turn of events. I thought perhaps the monks or that accursed wizard had returned to finish me off."

"The area is safe from threat, sir."

As two of the soldiers helped Ghelok to his feet, another freed his sword from the wall. Ghelok clutched his head and staggered over to retrieve the only worldly possession that mattered to him. Twirling it twice, he nodded his gratitude and sheathed it.

Leaning against the cold stones, Ghelok pushed back his sweat-drenched hair away from his face. "Where are our enemies?" he said.

"They fled south," replied the ranking soldier, a sergeant.

"Why have you returned to my side without them or their heads?"

"We could no longer follow them."

"Impossible!" Ghelok snapped. "You are the finest riders in the land--how could they elude you?"

"We had Helfare and his rabble surrounded in the foothills, but before we could apprehend them, the wizard used his powers to open the side of the mountain, and they escaped within."

"Then you should have followed them in."

"It was sealed shut," the sergeant explained. "We did scour the base of the mountain, but their tracks ended at a wall of solid stone."

"Lord Adian will be displeased," Ghelok said, and the soldiers bowed their heads, knowing it was true. "We must leave this place at once and overtake them."

Needing no further words of incitement, the soldiers hastened back to the stairway from which Randor and the others had fled the castle. Ghelok followed them down the stairs, keeping a shoulder against the rough stones with every painful step he took. The burning in his chest was starting to fade as he stepped out into the night, where the four soldiers waited in the dim torchlight, already mounted on their steeds.

With a swipe of his hand, Ghelok sent them back to the search. In time he would join the pursuit, but there was still one last item of business to attend.

As the men rode off, he noticed something unusual on the ground. Picking up the

small, dark lump, he saw that it was a piece of charcoal--undoubtedly one of Lorn's, dropped from his pouch during the escape. Ghelok brought the charcoal to his face and drew four bold lines from below his left eye down his cheek, copying the tattoo of the Of-Adian soldiers. Then, now bearing the mark of what he considered the highest honor and distinction on his pale face, he tucked the charcoal into his jacket pocket and strode to his horse.

Scanning the dark woods for lurking enemies or spies, he fumbled through one of the saddlebags and took out a small rolled square of blue yarn, and a gold canister. He stepped back from his horse, admiring the strange lettering engraved on the canister, and rolled out the rug on the ground, placing the metal container at the its edge.

The young warrior dreaded what must follow, knowing this would be the hardest task of his long journey, but prolonging the ritual would only weigh down his beleaguered spirit. And so, breathing in a deep draught of the cold night air, he took his place on the rug, kneeling before the canister.

Muttering a soft chant, Ghelok watched as the top of the canister began to glow with a strange blue light. He closed his eyes and sank into a trance as the chant continued to flow from his mouth. The pain from Randor's magical blow left him, replaced by a newfound comfort.

Speaking the last words of the chant, Ghelok opened his eyes and was greeted by a burst of flames rising from the canister. In the twisting blue tails of fire, an image began to form, and Ghelok lowered his head in respect.

Within the fire sat a man on an elaborate throne. "Who wishes to speak?" the flame-shrouded image asked.

"It is I, Ghelok, my lord."

"Have you captured the traitor?"

"We have Helfare within our reach and are closing on him."

"You let him escape."

"Only momentarily, my lord. We will have him soon enough and will return to Valadure."

"What marks your face?" the specter asked.

Ghelok held his silence, and without warning, a tail of the fire shot outward, striking him in the face and flinging him onto his back, seized by an unbearable pain, as if knives were flaying the skin from his face. And yet, he dare not scream or raise his hands in defense, for the punishment would only intensify.

"You will not place that sacred symbol upon your face unless I order it," the figure said. "Do such a thing again, and the consequences will be far graver."

Ghelok struggled back to his kneeling position. The pain was gone from his face, and so, he knew, were the charcoal lines.

"How did Helfare escape?"

"He was aided by an unknown host of nine, one of them a wizard."

"Does this wizard have a name?"

"I did not hear it."

"From which order of wizards?"

"I could not tell," Ghelok confessed. "All I can remember of him were his dark spectacles, blue hat, and blue cloak."

"And the Banner of Aldrenos?"

"Of-Adians are on their way to you with the banner. It will be in your grasp soon."

"I see you can provide at least one piece of good tidings," the specter said. "Now, return to your search for Helfare and this . . . this White Shadow."

"White Shadow, my lord?" Ghelok asked, befuddled.

"My new enemy," the figure replied from the flames. "This wizard and his secretive company."

"It shall be done, my lord."

"Fail me again, and you will suffer my displeasure."

"You can rely on me, Lord Adian."

And no sooner had Ghelok uttered the words than the flame faded away. Rising from the rug where he knelt, he gathered it and the canister and stowed them in the saddlebag, then swung up into the saddle. He would vanquish Helfare and his motley company or die in the effort.

And with a snap of the reins, he galloped into the darkness.