

Matanzas Celsa stepped out from the mist. He overlooked the city of Delaware, capital of Eleinoch. From where he stood on the clifftop he could see right across to the other side of the city. A low cloud rushed through him and he stood upright, a smile began to form on his scar-covered face. From his backpack he took a rope and grapple, he tied the grapple end of the rope around a sturdy tree and hurdled himself over the cliff, beginning to absail down it.

Palmyra, the Prince of Delaware, was sitting in a magic book of spells in the palace, muttering strange words. He was in an old dusty room with networks of cobwebs in each corner. Scrolls covered a large desk where he sat and huge bookshelves covered the walls, all the books with red spines and green labels. Behind him was a large window nearly covering the whole wall. Heavy maroon curtains were draped on either side. The muttering ceased abruptly as the door to the room swung open with a creak.

"Sorry to disturb you your Highness," a richly dressed man said, "but his Majesty wishes to speak to you urgently."

"Tell him I will be along soon" Palmyra responded. The man left immediately and the door creaked shut. Palmyra got up and looked out of the window. He sighed. It had been years since he had visited his old friend, Matanzas the dwarf. Although it was considered improper for a dwarf and elf to mix, there seemed to be some sort of bonding between the two. The two of them had met during Palmyra's days of adventuring. Palmyra felt a sharp pang of an unexplainable emotion in his stomach, ever since he had stopped adventuring and started studying there had been something missing. Palmyra's thoughts were broken as a bird smashed into the window. He watched as the dead bird dribbled down the window. Shutting his eyes, he murmured some strange flowing words. The once dead bird flew off as if nothing had ever happened. Palmyra blew out the candles and left the room; his long, thick white robes making the only noise. The repetitive ringing of John Smith's hammer filled the air. The large figure was bending over a metal object, on an anvil. He wore a shirt with the words 'The Happy Blacksmith' embroidered into it. He paused for a while and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Taking a sip from a glass of water, he continued to work away at the object.

"Hey, John!" came a cry from across the road. It was Flip Armstrong.

"Flip!" John shouted back, lifting his head from his work. Flip ran up to John and took him a huge bear hug. John tried all he could to get a breath, but Flip had him in such a tight hold that he seemed helpless.

"What have you been doing all these years" Flip asked pushing himself out of the hug.

"Well," began John, "I never got married to Emelda after all." He sighed and stared into space "We had a fight after we got engaged and I got a bit out of control. So here I am, working as a smithy, like I've always wanted to." He looked at Flip with sorrow in his eyes, Flip looked away "Well, what have you been doing with yourself" John tried to sound happy, but failed.

"Oh, nothing much, just killing a few dragons" he said in the indifferent tone that reminded John of all the adventure's he had had with him. He remembered ten years ago, when they first met, when Flip would walk into battle with his helmet on backwards, the same man who fallen in love with a gully dwarf. A lot had happened since then. "Let's go get drunk!" he smiled at John. A broad grin crept across John's face.

Chapter 1

Matanzas hit the bottom of the cliff with a thud, his fat belly wobbling on the strain, he rubbed it and headed towards the centre of the city. The streets he walked on were made of a rich granite and were obviously well worn. Should he have glanced sideways he would have seen the hidden parts of Delaware, the side-alleys, containing the peasants, beggars, and serfs. One particular beggar was sitting next to a shop door holding a bowl tightly in his hand, offering it to anybody who happened to walk past. The owner of the shop stepped out of the glass door and kicked the beggar, telling him to scram. The frightened beggar crawled quickly back into a small alleyway and put his head in his hands.

What Matanzas saw was quite different. He saw the clean streets and richly dressed people, the sparkling houses, and the decorated shops. He continued walking down the street and passed a small pub called 'The Golden Ogre'. He stopped and looked at it. Its letters were written in large gold designs across the top the building, it had an open archway and two small doors on either side as an entrance, that began swinging wildly as a tall human entered. The wood that it was made from was brown, and in some places burnt, some of the windows had tape across them and above the entrance was a sign that said 'All races welcome'

Matanzas started towards the pub, and tripping over a crack in the granite road, he entered the pub. From outside he heard a loud bird singing.

The moment he entered the pub he was hit by the loud chatter of the people talking, inside it was very clean, and people from every sort of race Matanzas could imagine were there, he saw dwarves, elves, gnomes, and even kender! He was about to step up to the bar and order a beer when there came a loud burst from the roof above them. The ceiling ripped apart and two huge claws appeared through the gap. The claws pulled the gap wider and wider until it had pulled the whole roof off. It was a griffon. The massive figure dropped from the sky and landed in the middle of the pub, squashing several people under its claws.

The griffon's huge beak opened as it swung its head down and picked up a small kender, with one gulp it swallowed the kender and looked around for more. People were running everywhere, there was screaming and yelling coming from all four corners of the room. The griffon lifted itself off its feet and hovered in the air, its enormous wings supported its lion body quite easily. The beast flew down to the other end of the pub and landed on the bar, where Matanzas Celsa sat. The gigantic body of the creature stood snarling and staring at Matanzas, it took a swipe at him and knocked him to the floor. Matanzas looked up at the creature from where he was. He suddenly went berserk and jumped to his feet, drawing his battle-axe from behind his back, ready for action. His armour was made from plate and he wore a helmet, studded with red rubies. He launched himself at the griffon, holding his battle-axe above his head, but the griffon jumped over him and landed on the other side of him, once again, crushing some tables as it came down, leaving Matanzas flying through the air at nothing. He landed flat on his face. When he got up his face was red with fury, he was joined by two people, both with war-hammers, it was Flip, and John. Together they approached the griffon cautiously. It took a step back and hissed at them, Matanzas sprung at the griffon and sunk his battle-axe into the side of the griffons leg. Yellow blood sprayed from the cut and the griffon let out a cry of pain. Without even stopping to think, John crashed his war-hammer into the griffon's lion body and Flip jumped onto a table, then bravely onto the beasts back. He held on with all his might to the griffons fur as it tried to shake him off. Being attacked by three people seemed to confuse the griffon and it forgot to try to defend itself.

Piercing claws shot from the griffons paw and it swiped them at John. The claw ran down his body, causing warm blood to spring from his face, body and legs. John dropped to the ground screaming in pain. He crept under a near table and the griffon brought its foot ontop of the table, leaving him stuck under the table.

Matanzas swung his battle-axe again at the griffon and this time sliced into its back, producing another spray of yellow blood. The griffon screeched and threw back its head, throwing Flip from its back and against the back wall, where he stayed for a while, and then trickled down the wall. He sat at the bottom of the wall stunned.

Matanzas had already made another attack on the griffon and was raging. The griffon spun around in pain when Matanzas sliced through its tail, leaving it lying on the floor in front of him. The griffon was enraged now. It made a powerful attack on Matanzas, but was deflected by his armour. Matanzas took another chunk from the griffons body and swung again, but missed. Flip got up from where he was and knelt on the ground. From a quiver he drew a silver quarrel and loaded it into his heavy crossbow. Holding it to his face, taking aim for the griffons chest, he stretched the string back, and held it there. He let go and the silver quarrel went speeding through the air, aimed directly at the griffons chest, then with a sudden thud it sunk into the griffon body, and through to the heart. The griffon felt it pierce his heart, and his body shuddered and burst. It wailed and began to fall, dead, ontop of Matanzas.

Palmyra had not seen the griffon attack because he was talking to his father, but when he returned to his study he knew that something was wrong. Looking out the window he saw the huge hole in the roof of the pub. He immediately sprang into action. Opening the window up wide he jumped out, muttered a few words and floated safely down one floor of the palace and onto the grass, from there he ran down the streets to get to the pub. Many people knelt to him as he ran, but he ignored them and ran on. When he arrived at the pub he saw the dead griffon lying over the squirming Matanzas.

"Nice of you to come" Matanzas spluttered. Palmyra laughed and sprinkled some dust over the griffon. He held his hand up and began to raise it, with it the griffon rose off the floor and into the air. Matanzas rolled out from underneath and Palmyra let the griffon down.

"Long time no see hey Matanzas!" he exclaimed approaching the small dwarf with his arms open. "Whatever" the dwarf said ignorantly, breaking out of the embrace and brushing himself down. He sat down on a stool as if not even noticing his old friend that he hadn't seen for decades, but inside him he was eagerly awaiting the time when the two could get together and catch up on what each other have been doing.

"A beer thanks" He asked the barkeeper who was still standing there, stunned, staring at the griffon. Matanzas thumped the desk with his fist and shouted "A beer thanks!"

"Ah, yeh, a beer" the barkeeper said, not taking his eyes off the dead body as if it could come alive again at any moment. He rushed off around the corner but appeared again quickly, going this time, in the right direction, towards the beer barrels. Matanzas groaned and turned around, looking at Flip.

"Don't you think that you had better get John out?" he asked. Flips eyes suddenly widened as he remembered his friends fall.

"Whoops" he mumbled and with apparent ease he lifted the table John was under and dragged the groaning figure out.

"He doesn't look so well" Matanzas commented dryly, "You really shouldn't have treated him the way you did Flip."

"But - "

"The best thing you could do for him is to take him home right now you know."

"Look, if you'd - "

"Now Flip,"

Palmyra was trying his hardest to conceal a large grin across his face, although he was very unsuccessful.

"All right" grumbled Flip and he flung John over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Gently, Flip" Matanzas said pointedly. Flip left the pub cursing under his breath.

"A beer please!" Matanzas yelled at the barkeeper who had seemed to have lost his way again. The barkeeper murmured something and got a mug from above him.

Palmyra, Flip, Matanzas and John, were sitting at a large table in the palace.

"There's always the possibility of the Blazer-Clan being involved" Palmyra was saying

"No," Flip disagreed, "they lost power eons ago."

"Well this is real great!" exclaimed Matanzas, "We have no idea of what or who was controlling the griffon, where he comes from, how he did it, or even why he did it".

There came a knock on the door and Matanzas slumped back into his chair disapprovingly.

"There are two strange bodiless people waiting for you outside, your Highness." the guard at the door said when he entered. Palmyra shot a look at Matanzas, who simply shrugged.

"Let them in." Palmyra said.

"As you wish, Most Wise One." the guard said with a bow. He left the room and two dark figures entered through the door. They both wore red robes interlaced with gold around the edges, the hoods covering their heads made it difficult to see their faces. Matanzas strained his eyes to see, but saw only shadows where faces should belong. He whipped his battle-axe out from behind him and stood ready for a fight.

"Sit down Matanzas," Palmyra said calmly, "these people are our friends, and they cannot harm us even if they wanted, because it is their shadows that we see in front of us". The larger of the two shadows began to speak

"We do not have time to waste," It said in a low, crackly voice, "Evil has once more made its way to the world of Galador. The Doom Bird, has found a mystical article and is using it to concentrate attacks everywhere through Galador. She must be stopped!"

"Who is this Doom Bird?" John asked quickly, rising to his feet.

"The Doom Bird is a product of the Evil God Hasturi." The other soulless figure said, "It has been redeemed into this world using the power of the gem, that it now bears. But be warned, for the gem is full of evil, and should any of the innocent be touched by it, he shall be twisted and bent towards evil.

"We have chosen you, The Elven Mage of the White, The Human Bodyguard, the Honest Blacksmith, and the Dwarf Berserker, to travel and destroy this evil artifact, for should the Doom Bird prevail the world will be consumed in its own evil and will not return. You will be joined in your adventure by others, but we are not premised to foretell your future. Good luck, we must leave now." The figures began to glow a faint blue and shimmered, fading away

"Wait!" Matanzas roared, "Who is this Doom Bird, where does he live -"

"Good-bye" the voice said as it disappeared.

"Great!" Matanzas complained, "That makes things a whole lot better, some idiot Doom Bird is using a gem to kill everyone! And he want's us to find the Doom Bird, get the gem and destroy it! Tough chance Ghost Man, I'm not going a suicide mission in search of someone I haven't even heard of." But Palmyra's eyes were distant, his brain in deep thought. He had heard of the Doom Bird before, and he had seen then Ghost Men before, although he could not pick exactly where and when.

"It was in a dream," he mumbled, speaking his thoughts out loud.

"What?!" Matanzas bellowed at him. Palmyra jumped.

"I've seen the Ghost Men before" He said

"So?"

"They came to me in a dream," Palmyra began, "I'm sure, 'We have a destiny for you, young one. Keep studying your magic for you shall need it one day when the Doom Bird returns' they said."

"So how do they know what your destiny is? And they said that they can not reveal to us our future. Who are these hypocrites who claim to be able to see the future?"

"They were not speaking from their own mind, They are not even speaking from this plane." Palmyra was still staring out the window, deep in thought, he looked at Matanzas, "There have been scriptures that say 'The day the Ghost Men appear to the Party, the evil will awaken'"

"So what's that meant to mean?" Matanzas groaned

"If I may say something, your Highness," John asked politely

"Of course" Palmyra said.

"I believe that I too have seen the Ghost Men before." John said, "When I was about five or six, I remember playing a game of tag with some friends in the fields of Delaware, where I grew up, anyway, I was 'up' as we called it, and ran after a small child I saw running into the forests.-"

"Get to the point John" Matanzas commented, spitting out the seed of a grape that he was eating.

"Yes, I was in the forest, when I felt a strange awareness watching me. I turned around and saw the same ghost man standing in front of me. It was not the first time I had seen him, It felt like he had been watching me my whole life and that he was like my father. He spoke to me telling me something about 'when the evil returns' I would have to perform a duty for him in order to save the world. Then he disappeared."

"Mmm," Palmyra pondered, "You say that you had seen him before, and it felt like he was watching over you every minute of your life."

"Yes,"

"Well, it's quite possible that he was taking the place of your father, ever since he died in the flaming village of Soultri, so as to protect you from any danger." Palmyra's focus went to the sky as his thoughts drifted out. "I remember reading about this once before," he continued, "It was written in one of the Holy Books of the Good God Aesryn. There is a segment in the book that prophesies the return of evil."

"Why does everyone talk about the return of evil?" Matanzas demanded, "There has never been any evil on Galador, and there never will be." Matanzas crossed his arms, stubbornly insisting.

"I'm afraid that there is already, friend" Palmyra said sadly, "What do you take the attack on the pub as? An accident on the griffons behalf? No, sorry Matanzas, the Evil God Hasturi has returned."

"You're just as bad!" Matanzas shouted, "Look, could someone just explain why everyone keeps saying 'returning' and 'coming back' I mean there has never been any evil on Galador or for that matter, and evil god!" He threw his arms up in disgust, waiting for a response.

"Long before you were born," Palmyra responded eventually, "There were three gods, the Good God, Aesryn, the Neutral God, Santen-Mara, and the Evil God, Hasturi.-"

"Impossible," Matanzas interrupted, "There has never been an evil god."

"If you would kindly listen" Palmyra snapped, "During a particular time of goodness, Hasturi looked upon the world with disgust. He was jealous of Aesryn, and fled with the Gem of Power. Using the gem he destroyed the forces of Good, and imbalance the world. The forces of Neutral, however remained. They made war against the Evil forces and won. When they found the Gem of Power, it had turned black, and was corrupt, useless to Good and Neutral. Santen-Mara took it upon himself to forge another Gem, he made this gem red and used its power to re-kindle the Good forces.

"Once the Good forces had returned and driven out the Evil forces, they too made a Gem of Power, making it a white colour and it represents the forces of Good."

"Evil had been driven out of the land, but the Evil Gem of Power still remained, waiting for a master to return."

"How did what's-his-name kill the Evil forces but?" Matanzas inquired, determined to find a hole in Palmyra's story.

"There was a huge battle on the Glenock fields where the two forces met. Aesryn met Hasturi in a mighty battle, where Hasturi was defeated with a sword through his body. The last thing he saw was a white gem on the end of the sword going through his body. I suppose Aesryn had the advantage anyway, since Hasturi had just lost a battle against Santen-Mara"

"Maybe," Matanzas argued, "but there is no-one alive now to prove that it really did happen is there?" Palmyra simply winked at him and grinned. He stood up.
"We had better pack then" He said, and left the room leaving Matanzas dumbfounded.

Chapter 2

In someways Palmyra was grateful that his friend Matanzas did not treat him like a prince, actually he hadn't even recalled hearing Matanzas call him 'your highness' once in his whole life. The two of them were sitting in Palmyra's living quarters and discussing the task that the gods had set them.

"No Ghost Man ever came to me." Matanzas objected, "So therefore I see no reason why I should go on some crazy quest to save the world."

"Matanzas," Palmyra said, on the verge of giving up completely, "the gods have sent us on this mission, and you know that you cannot even resist the gods. And anyway, if you refuse to go I'll turn you into a toad." Palmyra said finally, "Well?". There was no response. "Well I'm glad that's settled then" Palmyra said, and he stood up and headed across to the other side of the room

"Flip never said that he saw any ghost's either" Matanzas tried.

"So?"

"Well, I thought, that, well," Matanzas searched for the word, "Nothing"

"So you'd better get your horse ready, we're leaving tomorrow morning."

"So soon?"

"You heard the Ghost Men, the sooner we can find this Doom Bird, the better chance we have. Oh and would you be able to get my horse ready as well? I have to study up about the Doom Bird."

"Why horses? You know that I hate horses!"

Palmyra glared at him.

"OK, OK," Matanzas gave up, "But don't blame me when I keep falling off, my feet can't even reach those stupid things that you have them in."

"Do you have to complain about everything?" Palmyra asked. Matanzas thought about that one.

"Yes." he mocked with a large grin on his face.

"Now go." Palmyra commanded. Matanzas headed towards the door, but stopped half way, and looked back.

"By the way, why did the Ghost Men call Flip 'The Bodyguard'?" he asked.

"I have no idea" Palmyra responded honestly.

The next morning the sun rose early, and as usual Matanzas was up first. He got up quietly so as not to disturb anybody else, and left the palace to enter the royal gardens. He was soon joined by Flip.

"I did see a Ghost Man," Flip said. Matanzas nearly jumped out of his seat.

"What?!"

"I did see a Ghost Man"

"Yes, I know, but when, how, why - "

"It was but a few weeks ago," Flip began, "when I was at the pub with a few friends. There was this strange, old man, sitting down, his back bent over and he was staring right in the flames of the fireplace. We payed little attention to him, but then he ~~swing~~ his head around and looked straight at me. It was then when I realised that he wasn't staring into the fire - he had no face! Anyway, He signalled to me to go and sit beside him, so I obeyed, without even thinking, still staring at the place where his face was meant to be.

"He told me to look deeply into his hood," Flip continued, "When I did, I could see a swirl of blue, red, and purple, slowly the colours began to take shape, and I saw myself, along with you, Palmyra, John, a dwarven woman, and an elven woman, sitting around a campfire in a magical forest. The vision swirled again and then I saw a great eagle flying through a huge mountain. The picture kept swirling, and I saw three gems, A white, a red, and a black one, only the black one was bulging, getting bigger and bigger. Then I saw, a mage wearing a blue robe. I gave him something and in return he gave me a white cloak. Then the image changed again, I saw a confused dwarf giving me a red helm, the last image I saw was a black ring lying on a cloud. I saw a hand beginning to pick it up but then it disappeared and I was once again was looking at the old man. 'Your destiny has been shown to you, remember me as the Ghost Man' the old man said then he vanished."

Matanzas jumped on his feet "Why didn't you tell us?" he yelled at him.

"He cast a spell on me I think," Flip said, "Somehow I knew that I should only tell you today. He must have lifted the spell". Palmyra came into the gardens, rubbing his eyes wearily.

"What's all the noise about?" He asked, letting out a yawn.

"Tell him Flip." Matanzas said bluntly, and he sat back onto the log he was sitting on and crossed his arms.

"It seems that I have seen the Ghost Men before." Flip began. He explained his story to Palmyra and sat back to watch his reaction.

"Mmm," Palmyra pondered, rubbing his long white beard, "It seems as though the Ghost Men have revealed the three artifacts we must retrieve to defeat the Doom Bird"

"What?" Matanzas looked puzzled

"I've found this book about the Doom Bird", He produced a book from his robe, it was a worn, dirty book entitled 'Doom'

"Doom?"

"It reveals all form of evil" Palmyra explained, "Of course it is very ancient, and speaks of the evil before the defeat of Hasturi. Listen to this - " He opened the book to a marked page and began to read, "'The Bird of Doom - It is this bird that shall be the return of the shadow. Should the Evil Gem of Power remain to grow, the Bird of Doom will find it from its hiding place and use it to terrorise. The Doom Bird will have ultimate power, and it will come upon a Party to collect three articles of the alignments. These will be revealed to the Party and when the articles are all collected, the Bird of Doom will cower back, for he will be matched...' The rest is illegible."

John came into the gardens leading the horses. "When do we leave?" he asked.

Flip stood up "Ah, John - " he began, "We haven't found out where we have to go yet."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that."

"Easy," Palmyra said, they all looked at him in amazement, "We leave for the Tower Of Spirits, my tower, were I will consult with my master."

"Master?" Matanzas asked

"Aesryn" Palmyra said quietly, his thoughts, once again, going distant.

They rode in pairs, Matanzas and Palmyra riding ahead, and Flip and John behind. It was not hard riding across the hills but the wind was roaring. Palmyra's white robes flapped furiously in the wind. They had to stop every four or five minutes to help Matanzas back onto his horse as he kept getting blown off it. Neither John nor Flip complained, they were happily having a shouted conversation that was swallowed up by the wind.

For two days they had been travelling and the wind had slowly picked up. Matanzas was constantly grumbling and the land was becoming more and more barren. They could no longer pitch their tents, because they refused to stand up in the wind. The harsh winds made their throats dry and conditions were constantly getting worse.

After the first day, they had crossed the Dusk river. A thunderstorm was brewing ahead of them. From the hill top where they were standing they could see the black clouds rolling over the hills, towards them and the small mining town at the bottom of the hill.

"Why isn't there any thunder?" John asked no-one in particular, "and why do I hear the sounds of armour?" He whipped his war hammer from behind his back with an expert flick of the wrist. Matanzas drew his battle-axe and Flip prepared his weapon, a war hammer similar to John's. Palmyra dipped his hand into his pocket and the words of a sleep spell on his lips. The experienced adventurers knew their positions.

"Flip," John barked the orders, "Size 'em up". Flip galloped hastily down the hill, the small army was now all but a few hundred metres away. In only a few minutes the unprotected town would be destroyed.

"Palmyra, find somewhere safe to cast your spells," the now different John said.

"Matanzas, you come from the left, and I'll be at the right." Matanzas made his way across the hill, though his going was slow thanks to his heavy armour and fat belly. John went left and posted himself at the top of the valley leading into the small town. Palmyra went straight down the hill and into the valley, disappearing into the town. A bright light flashed in the sky. The army was small, Flip signalled.

The army was close enough to see now. They appeared to be a group of fifty or so human mercenaries using rusty swords and the main wearing badly worn chainmail vests. They were now within 50 metres of the town and began to go into a run, shouting war cries as they went. There were several screams from terrified citizens in the town.

John gave the signal.

Matanzas galloped down the hill and met up with Flip, who emerged from the front of the city. John came from the other side and stood firmly facing the oncoming army. Palmyra appeared from somewhere in the city and stood behind the shield of Matanzas, Flip and John.

"Split" Palmyra whispered. Somehow Flip and Matanzas heard against the raging winds. They slowly stepped apart and Palmyra cast his spell. He picked up an ordinary rock from the ground and threw into the army. Flip saw a man look up at it and catch it, then he saw a look of extreme horror on the man's face, but what everyone saw was a massive explosion that left about five men lying dead on the ground. The explosion was so immense that several old villagers were made deaf by the sound. Matanzas and Flip closed up again, not the slightest trace of surprise on their face. There were cheers from the villagers as the mercenaries visibly faltered.

The three fighters waited not a second longer. Dismounting, they ran to meet the humans and immediately attacked. John rose his war hammer above his head and brought it down on his first victim. Blood dribbled from the mercenary's mouth as his skull cracked and he dropped limply to the ground. Matanzas, who was still catching up, grunted at John's attempt and as if in competition, he stepped beside John, and neatly sliced the head from another human. But when he did so, one of the mercenary's came up beside him and swung his sword at the Dwarf. The rusty sword crumbled slightly as it hit Matanzas' heavy plate armour. Meanwhile, Flip had conveniently crushed the body of one mercenary and was beating another with his war-hammer.

Some mercenaries had surrounded them by now and the three fought back to back. Palmyra managed to keep most of the mercenaries out of the city by using a combination of weather control and wall of fire spells and the few people who made it through the wall of flame were quickly cut down by newly-spirited citizens. Palmyra's weather control spell kept the fire from burning down the town.

It had been a while since Flip had last fought and he foolishly let a mercenary creep up behind him. The mercenary wielded a bastard sword. He swung it widely and crushed it into Flip's side. It sunk into Flip's body and Flip spun around in rage, swinging his war-hammer. The speed of the hammer head, combined with Flip's skill caused the hammer to demolish the mercenary's head. His head splintered and bone went flying everywhere. His eyeballs dribbled from their sockets and his brain oozed from the cracks in the other side of his skull. Flip's face showed no pain - only madness. Flip kicked the still standing body and it fell to the ground with a thud. Mercenaries all around took one look at Flip and fled.

The army was down to about 35 by now, and the first ranks had been diminished. It was no longer possible to kill with one stroke. The mercenary's they were up against now had decent armour and some had good weapons. But still they were no competition for the three warriors and the mage. Few hits were made on the warriors and they chopped their way slowly through the ranks.

As the mercenaries realised that they had no chance they slowly started to retreat, first the men at the back turned and fled, then as their numbers fell to about 15 their came a cry to flee and the army broke up running in all directions.

The villas all stood, stunned, watching the heroes leave. Their backpacks bobbing up and down in the sunlight. The dead bodies lay scattered over the grass, a few looters had already started scanning what was left of them.

One villa yelled out to the Party but they payed no attention and continued riding.

A good fight always made Matanzas feel good. "What do you think the meaning of that was?" Matanzas asked no-one in particular.

"Mercenaries don't even deserve to be thought about" Flip said in a disgusted tone.

"All the same," Matanzas continued, "nothing like that has happened for decades."

"The last organised mercenary army was organised by a warrior" Palmyra mumbled

"What's that meant to mean?" John asked

"They were serving a magic-user" Palmyra explained.

"How do you know?" Matanzas asked. Palmyra patted his spell-component pocket.

"Stupid question really" Flip said under his breath to Matanzas.

"Well, let's not worry about that now." Palmyra said. They new better than to argue.

They camped that night under the stars.

Chapter 3

Matanzas rose early. The fire still burned steadily, he stared into the flames recalling the events of the past few days. It had happened so quickly that it seemed just like a haze of incomprehensible information

His thoughts were interrupted by the awareness of someone else sitting next to him. It was John.

"Funny how we all ended up together like this" John commented. He wriggled his toes closer to the fire.

"I was just thinking the same" said Matanzas, "It was just three days ago when I arrived in Delaware to visit Palmyra and already we're miles from there."

"Three days ago I was still working in the smithy" John said.

"Speaking of the smithy, who's looking after it while you're away?"

"I've hired an apprentice."

Matanzas stood up and looked in the distance. They were camped on top of a hill and he could see for miles in each direction. On the horizon Matanzas could just make out their destination, the Tower of Spirits. Before them lay hilly land with patches of trees here and there. There were no clouds in the sky and sun had already started to shine. Beyond the hills, the land became more dense. A forest stretched across the horizon. There was no road going over the hills, and the grass was very long. The birds were whistling loudly and the trees swayed slightly in the wind.

John started to prepare breakfast.

"Eggs for breakfast" He said.

"Boiled or fried?" Matanzas asked, his eyes still on the horizon.

"Boiled"

Palmyra and Flip woke soon after the eggs were ready. They eat breakfast, recalling previous adventures.

Their horses panted heavily. They had been travelling for 6 hours and it was nearing the hottest part of the day. The hills seemed to go on forever. Matanzas wiped the sweat from his brow, he squinted in the sunlight. The rivers were flowing from recent rain, and the sunlight reflected off them into the eyes of the party.

Soon they came to Aropch river. The water was flowing quickly and it was deep, since they were not following a road there was no bridge to cross the gushing river.

"I hadn't realised how much the water level had risen" confessed Flip.

"I say we camp here tonight and cross tomorrow" John suggested.

"Very good idea" Matanzas said with a heavy breath of relief as he dismounted his horse, "The horses look like they need the rest."

So they set up camp for the night. The day went quickly. The river provided a good swimming hole and the horses were able to quench their thirst. Tall trees lined the banks of the river were the ground was firmer. Several of the trees were dead, and looked on the verge of toppling off. The site they had chosen to pitch tents was a flat area just near the river where the grass was shorter. Their tents were protected from the wind by several tall shrubs that circled around their tents. Slowly night fell. Palmyra lay in his sleeping bag listening to the sounds of nature, the frogs clicked rhythmically, the wind whistled over his tent, the campfire crackled outside, and the bushes around them rustled. He looked out of his tent and lay on his back staring at the stars. His thoughts went to the time when the Gems of Power were created. He pondered on how so much power could be contained in one small gem. He thought of all the things he could do with that power. Soon his thoughts were so engrossed with power that he lost consciousness of everything around him. A deep voice in his mind brought him back.

"You are more corruptible than you think Palmyra" it said. Palmyra shut all thoughts out of his mind and tried to go to sleep. Something was preventing him from drifting off, a nagging feeling in the back of his mind. Eventually he became so irritated with himself that he cast a sleep on himself.

During the night the winds started to pick up. The winds blew heavy rain clouds above the party. The clouds burst open suddenly and the wind stopped, leaving the clouds above them, and the rain pouring down on them. A clap of thunder sent the horses berserk, lighting pierced through the thick clouds and engulfed a dead tree in flames. The tree cracked straight down the middle and swayed slightly before in toppled over and hit the ground with a massive thud.

Matanzas sat bolt upright, hit his on the roof of his tent, causing the tent pegs to come out and the tent to flop all over him. He thrashed his arms yelling "I've been struck blind!" Flip lifted the tent from Matanzas and he froze, realising what a fool he had made of himself.

"I'll check on the horses." Flip said, dropping the tent on Matanzas. Matanzas grumbled something about not knowing what it's like to be blind, then got back up to put the tent up.

Like Palmyra, Matanzas couldn't get back to sleep. He stoked up the fire and sat in the rain, next to the fire. A thought crossed his mind as he sat listening to the thunder. It's not very often that a clear night turns into a thunderstorm. He jumped in fright as another lightning bolt burst from the sky. He watched the bolt pierce through the sky and hit a tall tree about 250 meters in front of him. As the tree split a deafening crack of thunder filled the air. Matanzas knew little about storms, but he knew that at the moment he was right in the middle of one, and a big one. Another bolt came crashing down behind him. He spun around in fright. The bolt had landed only about 150 meters away. Now Matanzas was starting to feel frightened. He went into his tent and crouched under it. He felt like a small child, scared, in hiding.

John, too, was awake. From his tent he had watched Matanzas shiver next to the fire. He had heard the thunder and seen the lightning, but he was gripped by no fear.

Staring at the sky he could see the thick clouds. We're in the eye of the storm, he thought. He watched as sheet lightning covered the sky, it descended upon a tall, thick tree. The tree shook violently before it was swamped in flames.

Palmyra was sleeping.

A tremendous clap of thunder made Flip awaken. Light exploded into the campsite and the party were blown backwards in all directions. The lightning had struck the campfire with a blinding light and a deafening roar. The lightning gave off such heat that the bushes surrounding them burst into flames. Matanzas, Flip and John were blown into the bushes and Palmyra down the bank, next to the river.

Flip tried to get up but failed. The fire was spreading to where he lay. He struggled in vain to move his legs. Meanwhile, Matanzas had crawled out of the bushes, his hair and beard on ends. The grass that he crawled onto was scorched. His eyes were still adjusting and his ears were ringing tremendously. He could make out the figure of the horses tied to a tree thrashing violently in fright. His eyes went to John, who was lying face down, his legs stuck in the bushes. Matanzas tried to stand on his short stumpy legs, but found it impossible.

Palmyra was still sleeping.

Forcing himself to his knees, Matanzas scuttled over to where John lay in pain. John screamed in pain as Matanzas try to cut him free. In all the confusion Matanzas felt like a drunk trying to throw darts, carefully he cut the vines around John's legs off.

Lightning struck again. A blistering bolt flashed in the corner of Matanzas' eye, followed by a low belch of pain as a horse was blown across the river, the lightning striking it straight in the back.

On the verge of insanity, Matanzas yelled for the Gods, but there came no reply.

Meanwhile, Flip dragged himself helplessly to the safety of a nearby tree. He felt no movement in his legs, but what he saw was worse. His legs were burnt to a crisp and the blood was beginning to boil. He lay in a pool of hot blood clutching his back crying for help. Help was not what he got though, instead another bolt of lightning went flying through the sky - straight down the tree he was under. The tree groaned and swayed and came crashing down onto of Flip.

Palmyra awoke. In total confusion he prepared a spell and released it at Flip. The tree that was inches from crushing the life from Flip suddenly disintegrated into shreds of nothingness. In the darkness Flip was ready to give up on life and let the horrible pain of death grip him, but Palmyra would not allow it. Mustering as much strength as he could, Palmyra released one of his most powerful spells upon Flip. Holding his hands high, Palmyra unchelched his fists and a blue ball of energy formed in each of his palms. The balls swelled and twisted, all the time slowly getting brighter. Finally, the now two huge balls of blue, went shooting through the black sky at a tremendous speed towards Flip. A lightning bolt lit the scene and Matanzas could see the two bright balls screaming towards Flip, Palmyra was standing less than 10 metres away from him with his arms above his head and his face contorted with concentration. Flip lay waiting for death to come, in a dark pool of his own blood. As the bolt of energy hit Flip a lightning bolt simultaneously cracked a tree in the distance, which caused a tremendous echo in the valley. Flip was engulfed in blue light, his body still visible. Slowly he felt his energy returning. His limbs regained feeling, and that was the most pain of all. Suddenly all the pain in his legs hit him. He rose his head and howled in agony, his scream echoing in the valley.

All went quiet but Flip's echoing scream. He sat bolt upright, his mouth wide open, frozen in pain. The blue field around him slowly withered away and Flip began to move once more. He crawled away from the burning bushes. The storm had ended.

Chapter 4

Palmyra woke first. His head throbbed with pain and his vision was blurred. Slowly, and painfully he rose off the ground. His once white robes were stiff and black, scorched by last night's fire. The fire! Slowly Palmyra began to remember the previous night. Vivid pictures of lightning, fire, and Flip flashed in his mind's eye. In panic he looked for Flip, who he found face down in the burnt ground. His clothes were blackened by the fires. His back moved slightly up and down indicating the rhythmic pattern of breathing. Black lines covered his dark legs. His brown arms were sprawled across the ground, various cuts and grazes covered them. Palmyra scanned the area for John and Matanzas. All he saw was rubble and charred ground. John and Matanzas were gone.

Matanzas began to get up, but his dreary head was knocked back to the ground. As his vision focused he saw the tip of a spear pointed at him. At the other end of the spear stood a beautiful female dwarf, an axe buckled to her side. She wore chain-mail and bore a shield with the scales on them. Matanzas rolled his head to the side and saw John lying next to him, asleep. Matanzas opened his mouth to say something but the spear point pressed threateningly against his throat. Matanzas suddenly got mad. He reached up and snatched the spear in her hands with a lightning fast move. He jumped to his feet and tried to punch the dwarf in the head, but she blocked the blow with her shield and drew her axe. She rose it above her head threateningly. With no armour or weapon, Matanzas stepped back, his arms in the air.

"Who are you? What do you want? Where am I? Where are my friends?" Matanzas asked in a rough tone.

"You are in no position to speak like that" the dwarf had a very stern voice for a female. She was obviously fairly experienced. She strolled around Matanzas as she spoke "I am Monica Galway, Dwarves champion of the Goldthirst clan" she spoke with pride "I want you off my land, which answers where you are. And as for your friends -" She turned away from Matanzas to face the view from the top of the hill "They are down there" She pointed down the hill to the edge of a river. Matanzas moved closer and looked over.

Below him he saw Palmyra and Flip lying next to a campfire, he thought he could smell fish frying on the fire.

"Palmyra!" He called. The call echoed throughout the hills and seemed to come from every direction. Matanzas saw Palmyra jump up and look around, trying to see where the call came from. Matanzas waved madly, but Palmyra was looking in the other direction. Monica laughed and turned her back on them.

"We have our breakfast," she said and took something from a backpack lying on the ground, "Wild boar!". Matanzas' eyes nearly popped.

"Wild boar?" he exclaimed, "There are wild boar out here?"

"Sure" came the response, "Don't you like wild boar?"

"Like it?" Matanzas choked, "I love it!!"

"Wake your friend and follow me then"

Matanzas shook John awake and explained to him what happened. When John heard about the wild boar he refused to believe - that is, until he smelt roasting boar from below them. Monica took them across the river to where she was cooking the boar. Their horses were tied to a nearby tree. John counted them -

"Five" he said, "Where's Herman?"

"Herman was roasted by the lightning" Matanzas said with sorrow. Herman was given to Flip when he was knighted. He had been their best and most reliable horse.

"Not a problem" said Monica, she gave a loud shrill whistle which cut the air and echoed through the valley. Soon the sound of galloping horses drifted down the valley.

Matanzas saw two horses running down the hill, one was grey, with a white mane and had a sturdy build. The other was slightly younger and bore a shiny chestnut coat.

His long black tail swished behind him as he hurdled a bush. They neighed as they came to a halt near Monica. She brushed them down and introduced them.

"This is The Advocate" She said as she brushed down the muscular grey one, "and this - is Hook" Hook neighed as if in recognition.

Palmyra was stumped as to where the call came from. He walked a few hundred metres in every direction, but nothing he could not find them. As he returned Flip suddenly jumped up.

"I smell wild boar!" He exclaimed. Palmyra looked at him strangely, then went to him, patted him on the back and told him to sit down.

"Yes Flip, I can smell the wild boar too, why don't you have a rest and I'll finish cooking the fish" he said to Flip in a comforting voice. But Flip was not impressed.

"I know wild boar when I smell it" He insisted, "It's coming from over the river -". There came the sound of horses galloping down the hill. Palmyra was beginning to get suspicious.

"I'll be back in a sec" he said, and walked to the edge of the river. He followed the river for a few minutes and came to a creaky bridge. Carefully, he crossed the bridge. Now he could definitely smell the boar. He walked to the top of a hill and looked across the horizon. He saw smoke rising from a valley nearby. He navigated his way to the top of the next hill and saw Matanzas, John and another dwarf sitting around a campfire. A boar was roasting above the flames.

"Matanzas!" Palmyra called. Matanzas got the echo effect, but managed to find Palmyra and beckoned for him to come down.

When Palmyra reached the bottom of the valley, he was introduced to Monica, who in turn, proudly introduced The Advocate and Hook.

"I'll go and get our stuff" Palmyra said and left for Flip and the equipment.

When he came back the boar was ready and the two dwarves were engrossed in conversation. Flip was introduced and informed about Herman. He took it well, although it was obvious what he felt inside.

Monica had been out from Dwarf City on Axe Island to do a regular check on her land. She brought her equipment and tents with her and was able to set up a good camp sight. She had good knowledge of the bush and utilised everything available. There was no way they were going anywhere that day, so instead they spent the day resting and swimming. Palmyra assisted in the healing of Flip and healed the wounds of the others.

Matanzas and Flip spent most of the day outside practising fighting and hunting. There was little in the way of wildlife in this area, but Matanzas managed to knock off a rabbit. Not long after that Monica came after him carrying a dead wild boar by its hooves. She tossed it on the ground next to Matanzas' rabbit and stood back in comparison. Matanzas red with anger more than embarrassment. He grabbed a spear and ran off towards the river

An hour or two he came back with a whopper taylor. An excellent catch it was. Matanzas spent the rest of the day boasting about his catch and how he speared it straight through the back. Until Flip came along with a bigger whiting that is. They filled in the day with these petty competitions.

With a little help of Palmyra's and two days rest, they were ready to leave and continue their trek across Eleinoch.

Matanzas went to Monica to bid her farewell but he was bluntly asked "Who's leaving?"

Matanzas, not being smart enough to take the hint, responded "You - who else?"

"I'm not going anywhere" came the response

"You can't come with us" Matanzas said with shock.

"Why not?"

"Well - , um, you're a girl!" Matanzas said in disgust. That was a big mistake. Monica took a flying punch and knocked Matanzas to the ground.

"Not good enough hey?" She said, placing her foot on Matanzas' chest.

"Flip!!" called Matanzas. But Flip just laughed. "Ok, Ok. You can come - If Palmyra lets you that is."

"Oh, he will" she said with confidence, "He will".

So it was decided. The Female Champion would join their party.

Chapter 5

For the next 3 days all Matanzas did was whinge. Monica ended up doing most of the work. On the fourth day since the river they finally saw the tower ahead of them. It loomed tall and white in the distance. A misty grey cloud surrounded the top of the tower. They stood for a while and stared, it was magnificent, although only small in the distance, its white brick-like surface seemed to shine in the sunlight.

It was midday before they reached the tower, a single tall white spiral reaching up into the lonely cloud. The tower was only about 20 foot in diameter, yet once inside there seemed to be plenty of room. It was dark, a staircase could be made out, spiraling up around the outside of the 'room'. Several desks were randomly scattered across the room, all were covered with books and dust. Strangely shaped wands hung from hooks under the staircase.

Flip heard Palmyra whisper something and the room filled with light. Squeals came from rats, blinded by the light, as they scurried into darker places. Once lit, the room revealed it was thick with cobwebs. Spiders the size of chariot wheels cringed in the corners of the room.

"Been a long time since I've been here" Palmyra said flippantly

"It shows" John said as he drew his war-hammer and crashed it into one of the spiders. A short, high shrill came from the spider as it collapsed.

"I'll be back," Palmyra said, "Make yourself comfortable." He disappeared up the staircase, clearing the cobwebs as he went.

Monica wandered around the room aimlessly. She had been with the group only four days and already she was making many of the decisions. She reached for a jet black wand shaped like a ram's horn, the moment she touched the wand she felt the flesh on her hand begin to burn. She pulled away quickly and looked at her hand - clean, not a mark. Something nagged at her about the wand, although she couldn't quite grasp it.

"Amazing" Flip commented, "The light comes from all directions, or rather, nowhere. Nothing has a shadow"

"Wizard stuff" Matanzas grunted.

John had found a brush and was systematically brushing away the cobwebs to the annoyance of Matanzas.

Meanwhile, Palmyra teleported to the top floor of his tower. Here it was crystal clean, not a speck of dust or cobwebs. He was in a plain white circular room, with glass walls and a sort of alter in the centre. He turned his back from the alter and stared in the distance, he could almost see the coast from here.

"Aesryn" he said quietly. No response came. "Aesryn! Answer me. You promised!" Palmyra spun around, his face crimson, his eyes locked on the alter. A shimmering figure stood in the alter, wrapped in white clothes, his hands folded.

"I have kept that promise Palmyra" It said, "It is the world that failed you. Hasturi lives"

"Impossible!" Palmyra screamed, he broke out into a sweat. The news he had heard tore at his mind. "How?" he breathed, incomprehensibly

"Hasturi's frail body lay in the volcano for eons. When the volcano erupted, his weak body was engulfed in lava. The ash set and his body was encased in rock, black rock, magical rock. The rock breathed life into him and let him free of the laws he was bound to. He rose from the volcano and pored his remaining power into a fragment of the rock he had kept. Now, he orders his minions to wreak havoc. I am yet to confront him, as he is still a lesser God." Palmyra's legs shook, slowly he went to his knees, his head in his hands.

"Not again" he cried in vain.

"This is what I want you to do" Aesryn said emotionlessly, "Hasturi cannot be targeted just yet for reasons I cannot explain, however, on of his so called earthly agents can be controlled. A creature, re-encarnated by Hasturi and modified has been put at the head of his followers. The creature is called a Blazerter, I have yet to find about it yet, although I know it dwells in Lancia, a newly built temple, shaped as a tree. Seek it out and destroy. I shall see you at the Tower of Eternal Spirits."

"No problem" Palmyra mumbled, still trying to gather his thoughts. Slowly Palmyra walked down all 2139 steps, to where his friends awaited him. He stood on the last step and stared at them. "Is there something on my face?" Matanzas asked, seeing Palmyra didn't find it funny he crouched back into the corner. "Hasturi lives" Palmyra said. "Big deal." Flip said, "We'll just track him down and kill him" he patted his war-hammer. "Ah." Palmyra paused, "Hasturi's a god. An evil god." "Evil God?" Matanzas came out from the corner. "Sit down" Palmyra said seriously, "There are some things that need explaining." "On what?" Matanzas grunted. "Come upstairs" Palmyra invited, ignoring Matanzas' comment. Once more comfortable Palmyra began the story.

"Long ago, only humans populated the world. The country of Galador was one with great turmoil and divisions, it was inevitable that the humans would fight, and seek power. Some did so with good intentions, others with evil. A few wizards sought out this power and discovered true magic, a combination of words and symbols which let off huge amounts of energy. A group of these mages attempted to combine their power and exalt themselves above other humans, they were successful. Nine of them became gods.

"Aesryn, Santen-mara, Hasturi, Minei, Perin, Kalin, Quesor, Branfus, and Glidsins. The Gods became jealous of each other and were locked in a battle for more power. Aesryn realized Hasturi was gaining to much power. So he did something incredible. For years Aesryn was not seen or heard for years. When he returned to the world he was bathed in a worldly glow that emitted a bright white light. Only few people could see through this bright protective shield. Aesryn always carried with him a blade by his side. On the pommel of the sword rested the source of the light, a white gem, perfectly round. He called it Laficitra - The White Gem.

"Aesryn had created the first Gem Of Power, he was now a higher God. The most powerful God with the exception of the mother of Gods. Santen-mara and Hasturi, the most daring of the lesser Gods managed to find the secrets to the gem. Their ways separated, and in a similar fashion to Aesryn, Santen-mara disappeared for years. When he returned he was bathed in red light, in his hand he clutched a red crystal carved from a ruby. He called it Iminitra - The Red Gem.

"For some reason Hasturi could not find a subject to unlock the secrets with. Enraged, he resorted to war, his only chance to become a Higher God was to steal Laficitra or Iminitra, so he waged war with Aesryn.

"Aesryn, however was prepared for this. The two teams battled for days before their leaders finally met. Aesryn stood, ready to sink his blade into Hasturi. The two fought with no rest for a little over half a day, all the time Aesryn having a slight edge on Hasturi. In a burst of final strength Aesryn sunk his blade into Hasturi's body and called upon the power of the gem. Hasturi was killed, his body disappearing. Aesryn collapsed under pure exhaustion.

"Until now Aesryn and Santen-mara have ruled as Greater Gods and evil was wiped from the face of the world."

Matanzas interrupted "What about wars? Aren't they evil?"

"No," Palmyra explained, "Wars are not controlled by Gods, nor by any one single person who uses it as a means of gaining power or earthly possessions."

"Anyway," Palmyra continued, "I'm not quite sure how it happened, but Hasturi has returned. His body was sent to lie in a volcano, during an eruption his body was encased in magical black ash which breathed life back into him. It seems this was the perfect medium to make a Gem of Power. Now there is a third Greater God, and a third gem - Blaxitria, The Black Gem.

The horror of what they had on their hands had not sunk into the Party. An evil God, reincarnated by a freak of nature. Armed with Blaxitria, Hasturi poses the biggest threat in the history of the world.

"We will rest for now" Palmyra said.

The next morning, when Matanzas woke he found himself alone. Walking to the window he saw the other four outside talking around a campfire, it was late. He rushed downstairs and immediately went towards the food.

"What now?" Matanzas mumbled as he scuffed down some sausages. "Burnt." He commented.

"We're going to Lancia" Monica said calmly. Matanzas nearly choked.

"Lancia?" Matanzas exclaimed, "That's on the other side of Galador!"

"Correct" Monica said.

"How do you plan on getting there?"

"Look at this map" Monica explained. A map of Galador was pinned to a small wooden bench near the fire. Matanzas looked over her shoulder as she explained their intended route.

"We travel to Piywobootz and then go by sail across the dividing sea to Kinno. From there it's all horses. We will be leaving tomorrow morning, for today we will rest the horses and ourselves, and Palmyra has some cleaning to catch up with." She gave Palmyra a hard stare. He just laughed.

To Palmyra the news had been tragic, an unknown enemy is the worst according to him. All he could do was follow the direction of his God, which he didn't like to much. For once in his life Palmyra felt helpless, just a pawn of the Gods, in a game he wanted to play no part in.

There was little game around the hills so the men entertained themselves by gambling with a collection of strange ornaments they had found in one of the chests. Palmyra was not seen for most of the day. Monica insisted on cleaning up the room in which they were playing cards. Matanzas had start to notice Monica, he also noticed that she was a little annoying at times.

It was soon getting late and preparations had to be made. Food was running low, waterskins needed filling. Everything was attended to at the tower.

The sun rose early the next morning, it was a fresh day, dew covered the grass and a cool fog rose off the valleys. They ate a silent breakfast, Palmyra still had said barely a word since the previous day. It did not take long for them to saddle their horses, all except for Matanzas that is, who had a little trouble putting on the saddle. As the Party left, Matanzas was still trying to get onto the horse.

When Matanzas was finally on his horse he turned to leave. Out of the corner of his eye he sensed movement. Quickly, he looked again - nothing. Staring into the darkness of the corner, he thought he saw two glowing eyes staring back. "Wizard stuff" he convinced himself as he galloped from the stable.

A hooded human stepped out of the corner of the room and watched Matanzas gallop off. The human was on a raven horse, covered in feather armour. He watched Matanzas for a while and turned, heading in the opposite direction. The horse galloped at lightning pace down the hill and into the distance.

Chapter 6

T

he weather began to turn miserable the very day they left. Already they had been travelling slowly. Heavy rains and high winds weren't very welcome. Surprisingly Matanzas didn't say much, although he made his thoughts known his actions. Thunder shook the skies and lightning bolts flashed in the distance. It was a dark midday, the sky covered with thick clouds. Travelling across the hills, there was little shelter, only the odd dead tree.

The lightning reminded Palmyra of the Aproch river where they had been trapped in the eye of a storm. There was something strange about that night, and the storm. It was sudden, as if the Gods didn't have enough power to keep it going. It occurred to Palmyra that perhaps the storm was deliberate, but surely no-one could have the power to call upon a storm so great. His thoughts were interrupted by another clap of thunder. He tried to scream something at John, who was leading the party, but it was useless. He could barely hear himself over the rain. Trotting up beside him, he tugged on Johns cloak and signalled to stop. They had to find shelter.

They found it at the bottom of a valley. The surrounding mountains were rocky and kept out rain and wind. A few leafy trees hung over the valley and there was a small stream slowly meandering through it. Once dry they managed to get a small campfire going to warm themselves.

"It began as such a beautiful day" Flip commented.

The storm was short lived but prevented them from going any further that day. The night was clear and passed quickly.

The next day was spent travelling. It seemed ages since they had had a full day of travel, but this day the weather was with them and they travelled a good 50 miles. They found a nice, protected valley and set up camp for the night.

It was a little before sunset when the howling started. It seemed to echo all throughout the valley, a long low moaning sound. Each howl would be countered by another on the other side of the valley. Not before long the howling filled the air. It was a clear night, the valley lit by a full moon. It seemed that the howling was getting louder. Matanzas had been in a situation like this before.

"You realize that they will be on us soon" He said to Flip as they ate their dinner.

"Who?" Flip said over a mouthful of rice.

"The wolves." Matanzas explained, "We have little more than two hours of firewood left to scare them away."

"Terrified"

"But surely..."

"There's not much food for them around here" Matanzas interrupted "They will attack anything once they pick up their scent"

"So what do we do?" Flip asked, sounding rather nervous. Matanzas laughed a little and patted Flip on the back.

"I'll look after them" This is where Matanzas' great experience helped him out. "Collect some more firewood" he commanded. Matanzas lay back on the ground and looked to the sky.

On a hill in front of him he saw the silhouette of a wolf howling against the moonlight.

The was a low belch from one of the horses. Matanzas jumped and immediately drew his battle-axe. He knew the wolves had already started to attack. The horses were outside the radius of the firelight. Another belch came from the horses. The others came from their tents.

"Is he alright?" John asked frantically.

"Shh." Matanzas whispered. Slowly he crept towards the horses. He could just make out a wolf within five feet from the horse, crouched, ready to pounce on the horse. But Matanzas struck first. With an accurate blow, he brought his battle-axe down onto the wolf's spine. The wolf writhed in pain, but got to its feet and turned to Matanzas, it was injured, but not maimed. Almost immediately, the wolf pounced at Matanzas, catching him off guard. The sharp fangs of the wolf flashed for little more than a second and sunk into Matanzas' face. His face bled, but Matanzas paid little attention to the injury, and slowly stalked the wolf.

Meanwhile Flip and John watched the battle through squinted eyes from inside the firelight. They saw Matanzas take another shot at the wolf, but miss. The second blow came successfully and the wolf slumped to the ground, a battle-axe sunken deep into his side.

Matanzas walked the horses back into firelight looking serious.

"There must be a whole pack out there" He said, "I hope you got some decent firewood."

"It's all there" Flip said, pointing to a pile of wood near the fire.

"Not enough" Matanzas said "Palmyra," he looked around, "Can you do something about the light?"

"Mmm" Palmyra pondered. A moment later the area within 15 feet was filled with light. Nothing from the wolves.

"They aren't bothered with magical lights it seems" Matanzas said. The light went out. "Is there anything else you can do?"

"Not that I can think of" Palmyra said. "I looks like we'll have to handle this the hard way." A daring wolf jumped into the firelight and attacked Palmyra. A piece of his robe was torn away, but Palmyra was unharmed. With a flick of a wrist, Palmyra drew his dagger and slashed it backhanded across the wolf's face. It pouted as it bailed back into the safety of their darkness.

Monica was watching the wolves carefully. There were about a dozen of them slowly circling the rim of the firelights. They made no noise and kept their noses low. Another leapt out of the darkness, this time at John. He had his war-hammer drawn and was ready. As it leapt he crushed his war-hammer into the side of the wolf's head. It fell to the ground in mid flight and didn't get up.

Flip crept back into his tent and got his heavy crossbow. He sat to the side of his tent and cocked the string. Directly in front of him he could see the dim outline of wolf. Aiming carefully he let the bolt fly. A direct hit, the arrow sunk deeply into the wolf's side. The wolf howled in pain and began rolling on the ground in a vain attempt to remove the crossbow bolt.

For half an hour the wolves circled the camp. The fire was getting low and more wolves were attracted by the noise. Matanzas and Flip both sat with their crossbows, firing towards the wolves in warning, but it was ignored. Matanzas took a piece of cloth and wrapped it around the head of the crossbow. He lit the cloth from the fire and loaded it into his crossbow. The cloth unbalanced the crossbow considerably, but Matanzas managed to take aim at one of the wolves. He let the bolt fly and thumped into the bank next to the wolf. The wolf jumped in fright, then almost as quickly he jumped into the campfire light. Matanzas dropped his crossbow and picked up his battle-axe.

The wolf snared threateningly at Matanzas, it bore a slash across its face where Palmyra had injured it previously. Matanzas swung his battle-axe, but the wolf was too quick, it dodged out the way and went to bite Matanzas' leg. Its fangs had no effect on the heavy plate armour that Matanzas wore. Seeing the wolf in a vulnerable position Matanzas smashed his battle-axe into the wolf's back, which crumbled into a limp pile.

This went on for a while, every now and then one wolf would dare to attack. It was nearly always defeated immediately. As the fire got lower the wolves became more daring. It was amazing. The party just stood and watched as one of the wolves began to grow. The hair on its body diminished and it began to stand upright. It took a while before they realized exactly what was happening. In front of them stood a werewolf.

John was the first to react. His war-hammer ready he stood to confront the werewolf which showed no fear of the light. With the werewolf came four wolves. Slowly stalking the party. Suddenly the werewolf jumped with great agility to the other side of the camp. The party span around. Matanzas and John stood in the front, with Flip and Monica at their backs ready to take on the wolves. Palmyra stood near the campfire preparing a spell.

The wolves began to attack Flip and Monica. The larger wolf leapt at Flip but was brought to the ground by Flip's armour-protected arm. Monica simultaneously struck the other wolf with her short sword. A bolt of energy came from where Palmyra stood and burnt into another. It yelped in pain, but soon after charged to bite Monica. It bit into her leg, but no blood was drawn. She reacted quickly and shoved her short sword through the back of the wolf's throat. She twisted it a little as the wolf fell to her feet. Flip rose his war-hammer above his head and brought it down onto the nearest wolf. Its legs gave way and it fell to the ground, quickly recovering though. A second attack by Flip brought the wolf to its death, its body crushed by a similar blow.

Some of the onlooking wolves were frightened by the blow and ran off into the darkness, others watched the party carefully and some ran into the firelight to attack.

The werewolf took a swipe at John, but he was too fast he ducked and brought his war-hammer up under the werewolf's chest. The werewolf bent over a bit in pain.

Matanzas took advantage of this opportunity and smashed his battle-axe into the werewolf's back. The werewolf took the blows well, even without showing pain.

Palmyra's heart jumped as he remembered - werewolves can only be hurt with magical weapons. He looked to his dagger, he knew it was magical, but what good is a dagger against a werewolf.

Meanwhile, wolves constantly were attacking Flip and Monica. They had killed four by this time, but still the wolves were coming at them. Flip was injured by the claw of one wolf, but suffered little pain. He proceeded to smash the life from the wolf. Monica put another away before being bitten on her upper sword arm. She nearly dropped her sword, but clutching her wound she continued to fight. Six wolves now lay dead before them, and five were stalking them nearby.

Palmyra yelled for Matanzas. Matanzas heard him faintly in the background over the noise of the fighting, he turned his head. The werewolf immediately lunged at Matanzas and scratched deeply into the back of his neck. The werewolf's claws dripped with blood. Without turning around, Matanzas grasped his neck and fell to his knees. While Matanzas was down Palmyra built up a fireball in his palms. He released it and it headed straight for the target. The fireball hit the wolf dead set in its chest. The wolf howled and flung its head back in pain, as the fireball diminished the scarred chest of the wolf showed. Matanzas crouched low and ran to Palmyra who handed him his dagger. Matanzas aimed carefully and flung the dagger at the werewolf's chest. The werewolf collapsed as the dagger embedded itself into its torso. It lay still on the ground.

John turned around to help fend off the wolves. Monica had killed another. John went to the side and attacked from there. He managed to prevent an attack on Monica, but the wolf did not die, it simply turned to attack John. The attack did not last long as John immediately brought his heavy war-hammer down onto the wolf, who was crushed under the strength.

Suddenly, as Flip was about to crush another with his war-hammer, the wolves turned and ran, not a single wolf stayed. They ran with their tails between their legs. Flip looked around. They had slaughtered nine wolves and one werewolf. He let his war-hammer down.

"Not a bad job" He commented. He was only minorly wounded, but Matanzas had a fair scratch to his name. "You alright Mat?"

"Fine" Matanzas said. Palmyra went to attend to his wound. Palmyra knew that if the werewolf was a true lycanthrope, in about 24 hours, so would Matanzas. From a pouch Palmyra took a strange smelling herb, he sprinkled it on the wound. Matanzas jumped in pain.

"Good" Palmyra said.

"Good?" Matanzas screamed "Good?! It kills!"

"It means you won't turn into a werewolf" Palmyra explained.

"A werewolf?" Matanzas calmed down.

"If that had have been a true lycanthrope within a few days you could have been turned into a werewolf"

"What's a lycanthrope?"

"Haven't you ever fought a lycanthrope before?" Palmyra sounded surprised.

"How do I know if I don't know what one is?" Matanzas was getting impatient.

"It's a human that has the ability to resemble an animal or human"

"Oh them." Matanzas said "Yeh, I've killed tons of them before."

"Get to bed you two" Flip ordered. It was late, and the campfire was truly running out.

"Shouldn't we do something about the dead bodies?" Matanzas suggested.

"No," Flip said "The wolves won't be back tonight."

The next day provided another for good travelling. Everyone had been looked after, and the horses tended to. They departed at mid-morning and travelled a full ten hours. They arrived in Piywobootz that night and found a good inn to sleep the night. Tomorrow they would be sailing up the dividing sea to Kinmo. Palmyra prayed for good weather. The more speed they can get the better.

Chapter 7

Piywobootz was a small, friendly fishing town. It provided places as far as Archeded with its fish. It sat right on the sea. The streets smelt of fish and the salty scent of the sea rushed through the air with the wind. John, who had never before seen the sea, sat on the beach watching the waves roll in. There where a few fishing trawlers out early. He watched some kids playing in the sea. They had developed a way of riding the waves. When the wave came they would paddle wildly and slide hands first down the front of the wave. The fresh sea breeze blew through Johns hair. He immediately fell in love with the sea. For a moment he completely forgot the importance of his quest, and just wanted to stay. It was so peaceful, the seagulls circling the trawlers, the kids playing, and the odd early morning fisherman. Palmyra came and sat next to him.

"Beautiful isn't it?" Palmyra said. John mumbled something, and stared into the sea.